

Book Review

Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring; a multiple perspectives approach

Edited by Tammy D. Allen and Lillian, T. Eby (2007), Oxford: Blackwell.

There have been few texts about mentoring that I have valued as much as the Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring. This book looks across three primary areas of mentoring: youth, student-faculty and workplace mentoring and as the inside cover proclaims this opens up the potential for understanding in a cross disciplinary manner by drawing on critical engagement with literatures relating to psychology, management, education, counselling, social work and sociology.

There are seven parts to the book:

Part I: Introduction (overview, definition and evolution of mentoring)

Part II: Theoretical Approaches and Methodological Issues

Part III: Naturally Occurring Mentoring Relationships

Part IV: Benefits of Mentoring

Part V: Diversity and Mentoring

Part VI: Best Practices for Formal Mentoring Programmes

Part VII: Integrating Multiple Mentoring Perspectives

Each of Parts II – VI comprises four sections; one each related directly to youth mentoring, student-faculty mentoring and workplace mentoring and a final and crucially important overview section entitled Reflections. This final part serves to bring together the commonalities and differences between the three areas of mentoring in question. Part VII entitled ‘Integrating Multiple Mentoring Perspectives’ comprises two sub sections: New Directions in Mentoring and Common Bonds; an Integrative View of Mentoring Relationships.

There are thirty-eight contributors ranging from doctoral students to executive coaches and management consultants, through professors and assistant professors of psychology, management and social work. Authors are united in being engaged in scholarly research into mentoring and this is no practical handbook in the sense of being a ‘How To’ guide. It is, by contrast, a critical compendium of what is known about mentoring in three areas and the editors, both professors of psychology have achieved a remarkable feat in terms of assembling a research focused text that remains throughout accessible and interesting.

The Introduction sets out the ambitious aims and objectives for this work. ‘One objective is to break down the disciplinary silos that exist in the field of mentoring. This is important because different areas of scholarship have unique perspectives and there is much to be learned by integrating existing knowledge across youth, student-faculty and

workplace mentoring. A second objective is to provide a single source for scholars interested in state-of-the-art reviews and critical analysis on mentoring.’

There is, inevitably perhaps, some degree of overlapping as each section and subsection unfolds in each part of the book. However, skilful editing has ensured that where there is overlap this is highlighted to show the areas of convergence in each Reflections chapter. To minimize overlap, authors were asked to refer to literature and findings relevant only to their specific form of mentoring. This was done to help readers discern what research is generalisable and what unique to a certain area of study. The audience for the volume is a wide range of scholars who are conducting research on all forms of mentoring relationships across a variety of contexts and disciplines. It is also carefully targeted at professionals designing formal mentoring programmes and policy makers working towards successful delivery of mentoring initiatives. There is no one definition of mentoring arrived at but instead the variety and diversity of definitions is clearly explained.

As a researcher in the field of mentoring, I cannot recommend this work more highly. Until I came across it my knowledge of student-faculty mentoring was rather limited to the on-line programmes accessible at US universities. Many universities in the UK are beginning to wake up to the need for and benefits of research mentoring and this volume provides essential discussion of and insights into the field of student-researcher induction. What is not present in the book and which surprised me at first view is any engagement with mentoring in relation to initial teacher training. Being a former mentor for teacher education I was not clear why such a major research focus was not included in the text. While I cannot think of any other text that has been so useful in developing my understandings about current knowledge through critical engagement with relevant literature I now sense a vacuum where there should be a related edited text about mentoring in schools. There is mention of mentoring research in a school workplace but a fourth perspective is needed.

If one is looking for a ‘handbook’ in the conventional sense for practitioners to use in their everyday work this might not be first choice. It is a dense text in places but as a researcher and external examiner for several mentoring programmes in universities I feel it should be on the reading list for anyone who might be involved in research in mentoring. The title might be a somewhat misleading in another sense too. Blackwell is well known as a publishing house in the UK, producing scholarly texts for the home and international market but this is very much an American publication. There is an engagement with key international texts but the authors are all US based and this shows up in the writing style. To my mind this is no disadvantage but terminology such as ‘student-faculty’ for example might not at first glance attract interest from those committed to understanding what happens in university workplace settings.

This is essentially a book about theoretical aspects of mentoring, a highly polished and original academic study, and criticism might be levelled that it could benefit from case studies where theory can be understood from the basis of practice rather than the reverse. To my mind, there are many practical handbooks and none that so extrapolate theories across different perspectives of mentoring and this book earns a unique place in a library. I would agree with the reviews on the back cover of this volume that this is indeed a groundbreaking piece of scholarship. It is time to look across mentoring from as many perspectives as we can so we can advance our understanding of mentoring relationships. Whether this is a handbook for all practitioners I would doubt but for those who are designing mentoring programmes and not only for youth, student-faculty and workplace contexts, I would say it is essential reading. I recommend it as book that I found I could not put down. I enjoyed reading it and will certainly recommend it to other researchers.

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