BOOK REVIEW

Dave Lochtie, Emily McIntosh, Andrew Stork and Ben W. Walker (2018),
Effective Personal Tutoring in Higher Education

St. Albans: Critical Publishing, 222 pp., ISBN 978-1-910391-98-3

This book is relevant to all academic and professional staff who support undergraduates in UK higher education, but it is aimed particularly at new academics who are taking up the role of personal tutor for the first time. Being a UK-specific text limits its appeal to those working in other countries but enables the authors to go into considerable detail and depth.

The first two chapters define the purposes of personal tutoring and set out the core values and skills of the effective personal tutor. The next three chapters cover setting boundaries, supporting diverse student populations and what to do at different stages of the student lifecycle. The last four chapters are about solution-focused coaching, reflective practice and professional development, measuring impact and ideas for future reflection and action.

Each chapter begins with a list of the chapter's aims and moves on to an overview of the topic that draws on relevant academic literature and policy documents. All the concepts are clearly explained, and figures and tables are used to summarise important theories and models. Critical thinking activities follow next, interspersed with at least one case study of a personal tutor-student interaction. Each chapter ends with suggestions for further reflection, a self-assessment chart and a list of references. The reader is addressed directly, and the overall tone is developmental and reassuring.

This consistent and engaging approach is one of the real strengths of the book. Another is the way the authors set the role of the personal tutor within the context of the pressures on and within UK higher education institutions. They stress that the best way for personal tutors to contribute positively to the institutional imperatives of student retention, progression, satisfaction and 'employability' is to focus on the individual needs of the students they

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support. Mention is also made of the fact that institutional workload models may underestimate the time needed for effective personal tutoring.

Other important messages that I identified in the first five chapters include the need for readers to understand how the personal tutor system works in their institution. They also need to take the initiative in scheduling appointments with their students, be familiar with the specialist services to which they might need to refer their tutees and have a working knowledge of the degree regulations. They should not hesitate in seeking support from colleagues if they experience distress as a result of dealing with distressed students.

My enthusiasm for the book did waver when I read Chapter 6 on solution-focused coaching. It is right for the authors to point out that this approach is linked to cognitive behavioural therapy, but the association between the two could cause even experienced personal tutors to feel that adopting this form of coaching is too interventionist and would take them beyond the boundaries of their professional role.

In Chapter 7 on reflective practice and professional development, there is an excellent discussion of the former and useful material on the value of peer observation, personal tutor networks and action-learning sets to the latter.

Chapter 8 discusses measuring impact. The authors acknowledge that it is harder to identify the influence of personal tutors on the emotional well-being of students than on their intellectual and academic development. They encourage personal tutors to ask students how they are feeling and to observe their mood. Student focus groups (and I would add student representatives at course committees) can also be a source of feedback about the emotional climate among students.

The National Occupational Standards for Personal Tutoring (first mentioned in Chapter 5) are outlined again in Chapter 8. It is suggested that consideration of these benchmarks can contribute to assessing the effect of one's personal tutoring and that anyone who meets all the standards is likely to be having a positive impact on the students they support.

Self-assessment questions and action plans for both individual personal tutors and for institutions are dealt with in Chapter 9. The templates offered are somewhat daunting, but this is balanced by the first paragraph on p. 207 that states: 'The most effective personal tutors (and teachers) tend to be ... the ones who ask the most questions and are curious about how what they do at an individual level impacts students and learning more broadly within their institution'.

I would recommend that new personal tutors (and experienced ones who want to refresh their skills) read the first two chapters before the start of the academic year and the next three chapters during the first semester. The last four chapters would be useful to read before one's end of probation meeting or annual appraisal.

This is a splendid book, and I hope it will be regularly updated as research, policies and practices advance in this field. When the authors bring out the next edition, it would be good if they could be more explicit about what they mean by 'a holistic approach to personal tutoring'. Readers would also benefit from more case studies that show conflict between students and more extensive consideration of safeguarding issues.

Penny Welch
University of Wolverhampton