

# Review

*Experiencing Social Work: Learning from service users*

Mark Doel and Lesley Best

London, Sage, 2008, 168pp

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ISBN 9781412910224 (pbk.) £17.99

There is an increasing number of books on the market which relate to involving service users and carers in the processes of social work organisation, practice and education. This book, however, stands out as one of the best, and takes a rather different approach to the subject. It offers service users' own narratives on their own experiences of social work, and then looks to see what we as social workers, social work educators and student social workers can learn from those stories. Indeed, I think this book will also be a useful text for those in health, education and allied professions.

Each chapter takes an individual narrative, or a themed group of individual narratives such as 'Learning from Julia', 'Learning from Self-Advocates', 'Learning from Families'; and helps the reader to explore what she or he can learn from service user experiences. Following each individual narrative or group of narratives, the authors offer analysis of 'What we can learn' from them, and offer a key learning points summary at the end of each chapter. This analytical approach will assist and develop both students and practitioners in developing their reflection and practice. There, a double use for practice teachers and educators!

A really refreshing aspect of this book is that the authors haven't relied on critical, negative or cynical views of social workers or social work practices for material to learn from. No, they have drawn from positive experiences to enable the reader to build and develop from a received view of good practice. To me it echoes practitioners working from the strengths perspective rather than using a deficit model for assessment

and practice. What a refreshing change!

So, what kind of experiences are the service users recounting? I was struck by part of the final paragraph from Melissa's story in 'Learning from families':

Moira was our student social worker and we found her really helpful. She helped me on many occasions when she came and talked. She helped put me in contact with organisations that could help me. I still think there is not a lot of help for children who get missed out there. I feel when the social services do get brought in, it is usually at the very last minute and there are a lot of children out there still suffering. Though the preconception is that social workers will take a child away on any whim, in fact they don't. They sit and listen and that can help tremendously.' (p.105)

The stories are engaging, sometimes difficult, at times funny, and very human. They show how, with social work support, many people can regain dignity, self esteem and social capital. They show real growth in people's lives. These accounts are full of learning possibilities for students and professionals, ably guided by the authors, Mark Doel and Lesley Best, who are both very well respected in the field of social work practice education.

In my view, this is a book that practice teachers will be able to use and draw from again and again with students. It brings social work to life in a constructive and positive manner, and demonstrates a real involvement of service users in the process.

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*Nursing Care: An essential guide*  
Linda Field and Barbara Smith  
Harlow, Pearson Education, 2008, 336pp  
ISBN 978013-976528 (pbk.) £22.99

Although the title of this book may suggest that the contents are prescriptive in nature; one could argue what is essential to one nurse/

patient caring relationship may not be essential to another. However, do not let the title fool you. It is not a guide that attempts to lead the reader to the holy grail of nursing; but rather a map of the direction that journey should take, incorporating the destination of best practice.

The content is in ten chapters which can only be described as heart warming in their direct approach to the importance of nursing care skills, knowledge and professional practice. I am loath to refer to them as basic, as this may imply simplicity. In no way are the contents of this book simplistic, simple, or for that matter, basic.

The style of writing is in effect straightforward, readable and easily understood. The incorporation of recap questions, key points, summaries and case studies, enables the learner to contextualise the theoretical content, aiding the process of deep learning. The book combines empiric theory with holistic practice, enabling the reader to determine the gap between theory and practice. Utilising the revision sections with an appropriate reflective model will enable nursing care students and practitioners to develop their theoretical knowledge, extend skills and expand their professional approach. This will be most effective when compiling a portfolio of professional practice either for those undertaking vocational qualification, pre registration nursing programmes or for developing qualified practitioners.

The particular focus of this book is progression, and indeed as a format it manages to achieve a feel of progressiveness and moving forward. The ten chapters lead the reader from conceptual ideas of what caring is, through ethical and governmental direction, dignity and respect. Later chapters incorporate the practicalities of the role and the specific skill attributes; finally addressing issues of maintaining suitable records of care given.

A tall order conceptually and in practical terms, the all-encompassing nature of this book was a little daunting to me, as the idea of being able to capture all significant aspects in one volume is an alien one. However, that said, each chapter is sensitively approached, significantly based on evidence and relevant research and shows some in-depth investigation into what can be very confusing and elusive ideals.

This approach is fundamentally sound and throughout the journey through the chapters the use of diagrammatic representation, key points for revision and identified learning objectives encourages the reader to progress. More significantly, the book includes a guide to its use, and encourages utilization of its partner web site. This site identifies further

formative assessment questions and essay titles, encouraging the use of technology and establishing an electronic learning community - a useful tool for practice educators and learners to share.

The book addresses many essential skills of nursing care, although the list of skills is not restricted to the chapters outlined by the authors. As a learning resource, it will provide a spring board for further and deeper learning as the reader progresses through academic levels. For significant advancement in nursing practice, I would expect that this book would be used by educators and learners in conjunction with other texts that outline the more autonomous nature of nurses as practitioners, and as patient advocates.

However, that said, the book achieves its aims to an extremely high standard, and is well structured and logically thought out. The guide at the beginning of the book is well produced and the content will provide a sound knowledge base for developing practitioners, their educators, and those who wish to update their own knowledge. The authors are realistic and achieve their aim by producing a polished product that has a high readability factor and will undoubtedly be of benefit to those who choose to read it and include it in their learning library.

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*New Directions in Social Work Practice*

Kieron Hatton

Exeter, Learning Matters, 2008, 176pp

ISBN 9781844450794 (pbk.) £18.00

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This book is a recent publication in the Learning Matters Transforming Social Work Practice series. It is aimed at, and provides, a valuable learning tool for Social Work degree students; and additionally, in my view, is also relevant to Practice Educators and post qualifying and multi disciplinary students.

The book opens and closes with creative writing extracts from a Social Work Involvement Group (SWIG). The project is a partnership between service users, carers, staff and students from the Centre for Social Work

and the School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Portsmouth. The concluding chapter offers the following extract to help readers reflect on the issues and perspectives explored in the book:

**Method**

Take one Social Services department.

Add a good SWIG of service users and carers and a promising mix of students.

Mix well and brew slowly for three years.

Leave open for experience.

(Creative Writing Working Party, Summer 2006)

The book itself is not peppered with creative writing extracts, or quotes from service users and carers; but it does provide a sound framework for students to explore issues of creativity, inclusion and partnership within social work. In effect, it offers a more detailed guide for the 'brewing' process within social work learning and relates it directly to the practice 'experience.'

Each chapter starts with the sub heading 'Achieving a Social Work degree' and lists the National Occupational Standards for Social Work; thereby locating the learning directly within the qualification framework. There are case studies and integrated exercises throughout each of the chapters which link theories to practice within a diversity of social care and community work contexts. The book is equally valuable to individual self-directed learners, groups of students, practice educators and practice teachers in a range of academic and placement settings. There is a helpful summary at the end of each chapter with suggestions for further reading in addition to the extensive references and index at the end of the book.

In essence, the book explores new directions in social work practice from a national and international perspective. It offers a balanced and analytical critique of social work theories, principles and methods inviting the reader to reflect on a range of issues, including their own practice. The first chapter explores the historical, political, legislative and policy framework of social work developments within the wider social care agenda.

Chapter 2 explores the dichotomy of community work and social work offering a comprehensive overview of anti discriminatory and anti racist practice. Definitions of community and individual and collective

models of social work are considered within Chapter 3. Concepts of communitarianism, pluralism and the reconfiguration of welfare services in the statutory and voluntary sectors are linked directly to case studies in Chapter 4. The title of Chapter 5: 'Involving, integrating or ignoring? Service users, carers and social work', does just what it says on the tin. It provides an analysis of power within the user participation agenda in social work practice and education, supporting innovative and creative methods of practice. Professionalism, partnerships and pedagogic principles are explored within Chapter 6 and this links well to the reflections on European practice in Chapter 7, including preventative work in Denmark, services to Irish Travellers and social work with Roma ethnic groups in the Czech Republic.

I enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to social work degree, post qualifying and multi disciplinary students and practice educators. It provides an in depth critique of the developing agenda for social work, linking theories to practice and inviting the reader to reflect on risk and creativity within their own practice.

In my view, this book offers an essential guide to the 'brewing process' for practitioners at any stage of the 'learning recipe'.

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