

Review

Studying for Your Social Work Degree

Hilary Walker

Exeter; Learning Matters, 2008, 188pp

ISBN 978 1 84445 174 6 (pbk.) £18.00

Many students starting on social work degree programmes struggle to grasp what is required of them. Many have difficulty in constructing a clear argument, organising their thoughts, reading effectively and critiquing ideas rather than simply repeating them. Later, when they go out on placements, many have difficulty making connections between the ideas they have been studying in the academic context and the messy, complicated world in which they find themselves. There are a range of reasons for these problems. Some students emerge from sixth-form with surprisingly limited basic writing skills. Some are returning to study after a long gap and feel deskilled and stuck. Some have a limited stock of life-experience against which to measure ideas.

In this book, Hilary Walker has made a gallant attempt to demystify the process of studying social work at degree level. The twelve chapters of this book include chapters on 'Writing academically', 'Understanding and using research', 'Applying college learning on your placement', 'Understanding and using concepts and principles'. In the now-familiar Learning Matters' style, the text consists of short chunks, with heavy use of bulleted lists, boxed activities and case studies, with the result that very few pages in this book (really only a handful) consist of continuous prose. The book would be a pretty indigestible read to work through from cover to cover: there are only so many bulleted lists one can plough through if they are not embedded in some sort of narrative. But the advice the author gives is sensible and it is clearly drawn on practical experience as a teacher. Students, and practice teachers, may well find it helpful as a work of reference. For example if you keep being told

you should be doing more ‘critical thinking’, you can turn to page 59 and receive an account, illustrated by actual examples. Not all students like the Learning Matters style; but many do, I think precisely because the material is broken down into chunks in this way. In the age of the internet, we are used to knowledge in bite-sized format.

I am very sympathetic with the intentions of this book but I do have some reservations about its actual content. One reservation is that I fear that the book is in danger, in some respects, of modelling the very problem that it is offered as a remedy for. One of the things that students often get wrong in their work is that they offer a kind of collage of bits and pieces, or a series of lists, without really homing in on the nub of what is being asked for (as would be necessary in practice if one was trying to write a convincing report arguing for a particular course of action). If we are going to get past ‘surface’ to ‘deep’ learning (to use the terms which the author herself uses), we need to show students how to make connections not just to make lists. Although everything in this book follows on in a coherent way from what preceded it, a huge number of topics are picked up, briefly discussed and put down again.

Another difficulty that students often have – as this book acknowledges – is in connecting abstract ideas to practical situations. Here too the book, whilst it offers advice, may sometimes inadvertently perpetuate the problem. There is something paradoxical about trying to explain ‘critical thinking’ (for instance) as a broad general concept in a few pages. Perhaps critical thinking can be learned, like many skills, only by trial and error in relation to specific questions? Perhaps we cannot really offer a short-cut? I accept that a brief explanation of what is meant by the term may have some use, but the thing itself cannot be learnt merely from explanations, any more than one could learn how to ride a bicycle simply by reading instructions in a book.

Another problem I see with this book is its breadth. It is addressed both to new students and to second- and third-year students and the advice it offers ranges from reminding the reader to eat a good diet to trying to help the reader promote reflection. For any given reader the book is likely to veer (a little like the instructions that come with flat-pack furniture) between sounding so obvious as to seem a bit patronising to being so broad and abstract that it is of little practical use. Take the chapter on relating theory to practice, for instance. This is a hugely complex question. There are whole books on this subject, not to mention whole books on *each* of the possible theoretical ideas.

I teach a module on it and I always make the point that the module is itself only an introduction to what is essentially the subject of the entire course. I am not convinced that a chapter of fifteen pages can do very much to make it clear, and there is a certain danger that such a brief account might even confuse things, by encouraging the notion that it *can* all be summed up in a few pages. One might make a similar point about the ten-page chapter on values and social work. Is it worth students' while spending time on working through this chapter rather than going straight to one of the texts on this subject?

I am inclined to think that the author might have done better to have been more specific in focus, looking at a smaller subset of students, or of skills. It could perhaps have steered away from trying to go into topics which are usually themselves the subject of entire modules and entire texts.

However, I think there is useful material in here and, as noted above, the advice it gives is sensible and grounded in teaching experience, so I suspect that despite my reservations, many students and practice teachers will find it useful.

Chris Beckett
Principal Lecturer in Social Work
Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.
