Studying to be a social worker

Undertaking a course of study to become a qualified social worker differs from studying for an academic degree in several ways. One key element of the course is the blend of academic learning and practice. In social work education the practice element is an important part of the learning, and you will be assessed not only on your academic skills, but also on your ability to relate academic learning to practice in the placement setting. As a student social worker you will also be expected to demonstrate fitness to practise and a commitment to both the profession and your studies. Social work students are expected to behave in an ‘appropriate’ manner as trainee professionals in the academic setting as well as on placement.

The challenging nature of social work education means that there will be ongoing opportunities throughout the course to examine and question your personal values, beliefs and ways of perceiving the world. Social work courses encourage students to reflect on their thoughts and feelings in a way that leads to enhanced self-awareness. For this reason, former students have described undertaking the degree as being a ‘life-changing experience’.

Social work students come from diverse educational backgrounds, some joining the course straight from school, others via access courses or after having worked in the caring field for a number of years, bringing with them a wealth of practice experience in social care. Some students bring service user and carer perspectives through personal experience. Studying social work is therefore an excellent opportunity to forge relationships and get to know people from a variety of backgrounds, and through this interaction develop an appreciation of the richness and complexity of modern society.

Exercise

Take some time to reflect on your hopes and aspirations for the course. What do you hope to gain from it (in addition to a qualification)? What do you envisage it will be like to study for a social work degree? Now reflect on your strengths: what strengths do you have in relation to learning and studying, or
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in terms of experience in a relevant field, either paid or voluntary? What areas do you feel will need to be developed?

- Write down your expectations of the course.
- Write down the strengths and experience you bring to the course.
- Then add any areas in which you feel you will need to develop further.

**How adults learn best**

There has been a great deal of research into adult learning and the ways in which adults learn effectively. Based on this research, Moore *et al.* (2010) have devised a set of principles for effective adult learning, two of which relate particularly well to social work education.

The first is that **feelings matter**, and that it is valuable to pay attention to your emotional and psychological health because the way people feel has an effect on their ability to learn effectively. This is important for social work students because the nature of the work can evoke powerful feelings and emotions. Students are encouraged to manage the ‘emotional content’ of their learning in both the academic and practice settings. One way in which this can be supported is through the use of **reflective writing**, which we will explore later in this section.

**Pause for thought**

What are your feelings about starting out as a social work student? Feelings matter because past experiences of education can impact on how students perform in the academic setting. The feelings engendered by having had negative experiences in the past, perhaps struggling at school, or being given messages about not being very intelligent, can become barriers to successful learning in the present. If this resonates with you, you might find it helpful to reflect on both the negative and the positive experiences you have encountered on your learning journey. Positive experiences include being taught in a way which encouraged you to feel valued. Jenny Rogers (2001: 44) makes an important point when she says that ‘all good tutors convey their liking for their students and their longing for them to improve’. Perhaps you have been taught by such a person.
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**Exercise**

- Reflect on your experiences of education and write down all the positive and negative ones. Identify the effects these have had on you as a student.
- Think about how you might take steps to overcome the negative aspects and build on the positive ones.

The second principle devised by Moore *et al.* states that learning is a **social process** and that ‘personal relationships make a difference to how people behave and how they learn’ (2010: 6). These authors highlight the way in which companionship and peer support are useful in the learning environment, along with the exchange of ideas within a group. This matches the learning experience in social work education, which is largely interactive and engages students in collaborative activities. Study groups are a valuable way of including a social element in your learning, as we shall see later.

**Deep and active learning**

In addition to paying attention to your feelings and taking advantage of opportunities to integrate a social element into your learning, to be successful and gain the most from your course you will need to be a ‘deep’ as opposed to a ‘surface’ learner, and employ an ‘active’ approach to studying and learning. Fortunately, social work education tends to be structured in a way which enables this to happen. To be a ‘deep’ learner involves immersion in the topic, and actively engaging with the learning process. Deep learners develop an understanding of their subject and how the various aspects of it fit together and make sense (Cottrell 2001). This type of learning almost becomes a way of living – for example, deep learners seize every opportunity to develop their knowledge, skills and values out of a genuine love for the subject.

**Deep learning** is compatible with the expectation expressed in the *Code of Practice* for Social Care Workers and Employers (GSCC 2002) for social care workers about the need to take responsibility for continuing professional development. This is very different from the ‘surface’ approach, or just doing the bare minimum necessary to pass assessment tests and achieve the ‘piece of paper’ at the end. Surface learners can be quite shrewd about working out what is required to pass – what Cottrell (2001: 29) terms the ‘hidden curriculum’, and will channel their energy in a narrowly focused way. The problem with this approach is that it is not conducive to personal and professional development, and the knowledge acquired in this way is easily forgotten. Fortunately, this type of
approach is less likely in social work education, because the assessment tasks are varied and involve assessed and observed practice, and in the academic environment you may well deliver presentations and engage in group discussions and problem-solving activities.

**Exercise**

- Identify some examples of employing deep and surface approaches to your learning. What was the outcome?
- If you were a service user, would you prefer to work with a student social worker who has a deep or surface approach to learning? Why?

**Active learning** helps to achieve deeply embedded knowledge because it means that you become proactive in taking responsibility for your learning and development, rather than expecting the tutors to teach you everything you need to know, which would in any case be an impossible task. Being an active learner can involve reading around the topic and researching areas of interest, taking advantage of learning opportunities when they arise, sometimes unexpectedly, and being active and engaged in class discussions and group work.

**Becoming a creative learner**

Creativity and active learning go hand in hand, and make learning rewarding, even fun at times. Therefore it is valuable to develop strategies to encourage creativity, and you may already be doing this. Creativity manifests itself in many guises. Some students are creative in their practice on placement – for example, in the way they interact with and engage service users and carers. Creative thinkers find it easier to develop innovative approaches to problem-solving or service provision, and creativity can be particularly useful in practice or when resources are scarce. Creativity can be encouraged and expressed through reflective writing and critical thinking.

**Pause for thought**

- Reflect on creativity and what it means for you in a personal or professional sense. How do you express creativity in your life – for example, through a hobby or interest, in the way you dress, or in your approach to being a parent?
There are all sorts of tools and methods to develop your creative thinking. Here are some suggestions.

- Developing resource folders either electronically or in hard copy to store useful information, articles, etc. linked to social work. Some students enjoy customizing their folders using bright colours. If you enjoy using coloured pens and notebooks, then this is a good way of making studying and learning a pleasurable experience rather than a chore, and is highly recommended, as you are more likely to be motivated if you enjoy the process of study.

- Because creative thinking often takes place outside formal learning situations when the mind is free to be expansive, it is useful to have a small notebook and pen handy to write down interesting thoughts as they arise and before they are forgotten.

- Conversely, some students find using the library encourages creative thinking and active learning as a consequence of being surrounded by books and learning resources and away from other distractions.

- Reading a good quality newspaper, watching the news or using the internet to access information and debates about what is happening in the world aid thinking and hence creativity. A good exercise is to read articles and consider whether you would write from a different perspective if you were the author. *Community Care* has up-to-date news features and articles giving opinions on topical issues, as well as occasional case studies and practice dilemmas where a panel of people, including service users and carers, give their views on what should be done in a given situation. These provide an excellent opportunity to think analytically and creatively about the situation and compare your ideas and solutions with those of the ‘experts’.

- The internet is a rich source of information about social work and social care – for example, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) website which, again, can spark your creativity by encouraging a reaction to the material presented.

- Books about creative thinking are very useful – for example, Tony Buzan’s work on mind maps (Buzan and Buzan 2010) and Edward de Bono’s books on creative thinking (e.g. de Bono 2009).

- Getting together with a small group of fellow students to form a study group or learning set, so that you can discuss issues, share books and support each other in your learning journey is a valuable creative exercise. Moral support
from other students can be particularly appreciated when you hit one of those fallow patches and begin to lose motivation or confidence in your ability to succeed in your studies.

**Exercise**

The above list provides just some examples of how you can start to become creative in your approach to studying and learning. Think about which ones you already employ.

- Which do you consider might be helpful for you?
- Can you identify any strategies which would enable you to develop creativity in your approach to learning?

**The transfer of learning**

The transfer of learning is another useful concept for social work students because it helps to address the loss of confidence people experience when they discover how much there is to learn about social work and the related knowledge base. Learning involves stepping out of our ‘comfort zones’ into new territory which can quickly become a ‘panic zone’ (Hawkins and Shohet 2006). The transfer of learning reminds us that we have available a store of experience, skills and knowledge, some of which can be applicable to becoming a social worker. It would be impossible to learn about every conceivable situation we might encounter in practice (Cree and Macaulay 2000), so at times we need to transfer existing skills and knowledge to new situations (an example of this would be the way we might adapt interpersonal skills for different service users to acknowledge their unique strengths and needs). In this way we can develop confidence by applying creative thinking and transferring knowledge and skills between situations, rather than approaching every situation as a novice.

**Exercise**

- Try to identify some existing knowledge, skills and experience which may be transferable into the social work degree setting. You may, for example, have relevant work or life experience, or experience of academic work.
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which will be transferable to the new situations you will encounter during the course of your studies.

- Try to identify specific areas of knowledge and skills gained in this way.

I am often pleasantly surprised by the amount of knowledge and resourcefulness found in the student groups I teach, but this should not really be a surprise at all because if all the years of work and life experience contained within any student group were audited, it would add up to a considerable amount. When on placement you will discover that service users and carers also have reserves of skills and knowledge, in keeping with the strengths-based view that every individual, group, family and community has strengths (Saleebey 2009).

**Using study groups to promote learning**

Study groups are valuable for social work students because, as well as facilitating learning in the university setting, they offer an opportunity to develop skills which are transferable to the practice placement. These include skills in working collaboratively in partnership with others and working in groups, with opportunities to observe the stages that groups go through, as well as group dynamics. Working with students who come from different backgrounds can enhance your knowledge of diversity and enable you to accommodate and learn from different perspectives. Study groups are useful forums in which to share knowledge and experiences, and appreciate other people’s views and opinions. In this way they model some of the experience of working in teams on placement. Groups also provide a setting for you to practise effective communication, including the skills of listening, debating and advocating. Groups can help you learn how to construct an argument, use evidence to support your assertions and, when engaging in debate, to critique the other person’s ideas rather than the person themself.

Other benefits include experience of working towards group targets and goals, and modelling social work values through your use of ground rules related to respecting others. Finally, being involved in a study group may also help you develop skills in creative thinking, problem-solving and finding solutions.

When working in groups, be careful to avoid a specific form of plagiarism: ‘collusion without official approval between two or more students, with the result that identical, or near identical work, is presented by all those involved’ (Neville 2007: 28). So, for example, while it is acceptable to share ideas about how to tackle an assessment task, to share books and discuss lectures and teaching, assignments should be your own work, and written in your own words. Your
university will have specific guidance on plagiarism, and your tutor can be approached for advice on this.

**Developing a study group**

Study groups develop in a variety of ways, some informal and some more planned. You may find that a small study group spontaneously develops as you get to know other students; you may ‘gel’ with members of your tutor group, or already have links with people on the course from previous studies. Alternatively, you might put some thought into recruiting members more formally.

It is helpful to:

- have a clear set of aims and objectives for the group and to be clear about its purpose;
- develop a set of ground rules that govern behaviour within the group – boundaries are helpful in creating confidence (Bolton 2010);
- decide how often you will meet, a time and a suitable venue, taking into account the needs of the group members;
- decide how you will communicate with each other between meetings – for example, via email or messaging.

When setting up a study group, you need to be aware that it may take several meetings before the group starts to function efficiently, due to what is termed the **group process**. A number of models and explanations about group processes and stages of development have been produced. Preston-Shoot notes that there are some commonalities between the various models – for example, the early stage of group formation is characterized by uncertainty and members seeking to form bonds based on common ground. Once the group has established itself, it can begin to work towards a common purpose and roles and rules become established (Preston-Shoot 2007). This indicates that it is important to allow time for the group to settle down and the members to feel confident enough to work together.

**The student experience**

A group of four students Katie, Sarah, Jack and Emma, who joined the social work course from school, were placed in the same tutor group and decided that they would meet weekly as a study group. The fact that they had no commitments outside the course made it easier to meet up. A number of options
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were discussed about when and where they would meet. Eventually it was agreed that during term the group would bring lunch and meet in a quiet space at the university. A rough plan for the meetings was agreed and the agenda firmed up by email a few days before the first meeting. Priorities for discussion were identified and negotiated by the group members. These included:

- discussion and reflection on teaching during the preceding week and clarification of any areas which they had found unclear, and any questions which needed to be clarified in tutorials;
- discussion of assignments, particularly the ‘brief for the assignment’ and how they planned to address the topic, in broad terms;
- sharing resources and updating ideas from reading;
- meeting in the evening once a week during placements to share their experiences, offer support and discuss the application of theory to practice and ideas about evidence for inclusion in their practice portfolios.

The group also developed into a small friendship network, as the students had moved to the area to join the course and did not have family or friends locally. The group worked well and after a few months had expanded to include three more students.

Despite the potential benefits of study groups, they do not suit everyone and some students prefer to study on their own – they may find studying with others distracting, or prefer not to share their ideas. This demonstrates that everyone has their own style of learning and what suits one may not be helpful to another.

**Self-management in studying and learning**

**Time management**

Learning to manage your time effectively is an essential skill, not only for academic study and learning but also when you go on placement. Time management requires you to develop strategies to make the best use of time and also improves your attitude to time.

There are a range of factors which impact on our ability to manage time; some people have more to deal with in their lives than others. We also need to be prepared for unexpected and unwelcome events. There are parallels here with social work practice, when the work diary is planned for the day or week and then something happens which requires a radical rescheduling of appointments and
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Tasks. Social workers and social work students seldom complain of boredom, or having too much time on their hands. **Pressure points** have a strong influence on time management. Pressure points may occur throughout the course when a number of assignments are due in around the same time, or assignments and placement-related work need to be balanced. To some extent pressure points can be planned for by being aware of deadlines and hand-in dates for work and trying to be proactive. However, it is not possible to plan for every eventuality and there may be times on the course when you experience a heavy workload. Getting into the habit of using a diary to record deadlines and identify pressure points is excellent practice for when you go out on placement and have to schedule appointments and prioritize work.

The student experience

Deciding to go back into education as a mature student with a young child was a difficult decision; but looking back now at how far I’ve come, I’ve realized that it was the right decision and although it has been a struggle, it has developed me as a person and as a social worker. My advice to any new student with a young child would be to ensure that you have full-time childcare from the start. At the interview stage it was made very clear that it was a full-time course, requiring full-time study; at the time I was so overwhelmed by everything that I didn’t realize that full time meant FULL TIME! In my opinion the key to surviving the social work degree is to be organized, with work and home life. I always allow as much time as possible to plan and write assignments and I ensure that they are completed two or three days before they are due in. This means that my work is not rushed and I often feel less stressed. It takes some time to find a way of managing your work-life balance and it is fine to have a weekend off now and again without feeling guilty! I would recommend considering how you can make things easier for yourself – for example, doing your food shopping online, rather than spending hours in the supermarket on a Saturday afternoon!

Laura

Exercise

Think about time management and note down your answers to these questions.

- What are the implications for you of becoming a student?
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- What time management skills do you already use?
- What lifestyle changes might you need to make to be successful on the course?

Use a chart to divide up your week and try to estimate how much waking time you use for essential and non-essential activities — i.e. attending university or placement, work, family activities, daily living, social and leisure activities. Remember that the chart is there to help you manage your time, *not* to encourage you to be too prescriptive and concerned with how you spend every minute of every day. Use it and amend it to suit your needs. An example is given below.

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Having completed your chart, try to identify any activities which are not essential and which could realistically be dispensed with. Is it possible to cut down on non-essential activities? Could members of your family take more
responsibility for domestic chores and keeping the house tidy? Be aware of the need to do a cost–benefit analysis: you may find that while saving time may have a cost, the benefit is greater in the long run. A good example of this is Laura, who does her shopping online. This can be a little more expensive but the time she saves is worth the cost.

Using time effectively
Using time effectively means being focused and not distracted from tasks which are a priority. It also helps to make use of time in a more intelligent way, using small pockets of time between activities for tasks that can be completed quickly. Neil Thompson (2010) has a valuable three-minute rule: if a task can be finished in three minutes, do it now, rather than allowing a backlog of small tasks to build up. Another effective strategy is to deal with certain tasks in batches. For example, check your emails three times a day rather than reading each one as it lands in your inbox. Activities which free up your mind, such as dog walking, using the gym or commuting by train, are valuable thinking time during which you can plan your assignments or reflect on your day.

Prioritizing tasks
As a student and a social worker you will find that prioritization is an essential part of effective time management. When you are on placement you will experience the need to complete work to specific timescales, which means managing your workload effectively. This will be much easier if you are able to prioritize tasks. Put simply, prioritization is about ranking tasks in order of importance with the aim of completing the highest priority tasks first, medium priority next and less urgent tasks at some point later in the future. Your priorities may well be dictated for you to a large extent by course deadlines and as a social worker by agency timescales – for example, those relating to the completion of assessments. This is where the effective use of a diary is invaluable for recording appointments and deadlines. You may also use a notebook to list tasks under high, medium and lower priority. Some students find it useful to list tasks under headings; others have separate pages for different levels of priority on the basis that it is useful to physically separate them, thus reducing the feeling of being overloaded. Large tasks can be broken down into smaller components and a deadline allocated for each element.

Although it is generally considered an effective strategy to deal with high priority tasks first, or even the least pleasant tasks first (‘the worst first rule’ – Thompson 2010: 18) there is merit in completing some small tasks, which can be dealt with quickly, first. This means that several tasks are completed early on, providing a sense of achievement. Conversely, tackling the important and/or
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urgent tasks first can reduce stress and make the remaining smaller tasks appear far less daunting.

Pause for thought

From those listed above, which strategy or strategies do you think would be helpful to you in managing your time? Do you prefer to deal with the high priority or most unpleasant tasks first, or do you like to get some small tasks out of the way before tackling the more demanding and time-consuming work?