

*Understanding Social Work  
Preparing for practice, (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*

Neil Thompson

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*Reviewed by Paul McCafferty*

I really like the style of this new edition, which is very well laid out, engaging and very accessible. I particularly like the practice focus, service user and voice of experience boxes. They really bring the book into practice focus and make relating the content to real life very helpful. Neil's style maintains its appealing flair and he makes reading about social work very pleasing. For me the book is probably pitched at 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year social work degree level, which is fine as it is not intended to be anything other than an introductory text. Also, the use of bullet points and numbers works really well. It brings in to sharp focus the most important elements of the chapters. It also helps break down the chapters in to smaller sections. Students can then concentrate better, as each section is important but its essential message might be lost in a full chapter of prose.

This style works really well for me. As I teach the social work process, this book really lays this out. Having structured the book in such a fashion makes following the why, what, when, and how of social work very straightforward. Students often struggle to see the match between all the elements of social work as a process and at the same time think of the knowledge skills and values required to do the job. This book is such an easy fit with their requirements.

I particularly like the chapter on the legal and policy context. This is often not as well outlined in other introductory books but is an essential part of social work. Giving this legislative chapter such focus really helps students begin to understand the legislative basis of their work. One thing that could be improved here however is to remember that not all those that read this book will reside or practice in England where a lot of the focus is on. It would have been helpful to have included greater mention of the devolved nature of the four countries that make up the UK and to discuss the distinctive legislation unique to each country separately. I know this is a challenge but giving the distinctive features of each country greater focus may help to expand the readership of the book.

Other strengths of the book are the very straight forward nature of its contents. It really is written in a *'this is what you need to know starting off'* style which is attractive to students. For an introductory book, I think it pretty well covers all the areas that I would expect at this level. The layout is also very pleasing to the eye.

For me chapter 6 'Achieving good practice', doesn't work as well as maybe it could though. I would have preferred the chapter to begin by outlining how to actually achieve good practice before the subsection on 'avoiding dangerous practice' which surprisingly comes first. The chapter heading is 'achieving good practice' but immediately starts with avoiding dangerous practice. This doesn't work for me on two levels.

1. It is at odds with what I expect to see when I read the chapter heading. Therefore, an incongruity exists between the chapter heading and the chapter contents: and
2. It gives out a negative message straight away; as though the main emphasis of social work is to avoid dangerous practice instead of striving for good practice. It would have been more positive to give an empowering message first. This is important if one considers the audience. This book is pitched at entry level students and I think that whilst 'avoiding dangerous practice' is completely relevant, we don't want to frighten students by giving out the difficulties before they get the good news story first. In essence, give the good stuff first before giving the more challenging stuff. It is more encouraging to students.

Also, but perhaps not appropriate for an introductory book, have a separate chapter on critical social theory. Students often forget that they are operating within social structures that remain invisible unless studied. However, not studying them as a separate chapter in its own right, may unintentionally create a disconnect between practice and wider social forces and structures that impact on society and the job of social work. The social worker then becomes a functionary of the state as opposed to a critical, well informed agent of change. However, this may not be an appropriate book to have these debates in given its introductory nature.

Overall, the book is sound pedagogically. I like the combination of the practice focus, the voice of the service user and the voice of experience. This is a really nice addition to the book and increases the level of

engagement with the reading. It is well written, engaging and will be a good addition to introductory books on social work. I like the level of engagement and Neil's style is by now well polished and this book is no different. My only area for improvement would be with Chapter 6 which I have already outlined above.

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