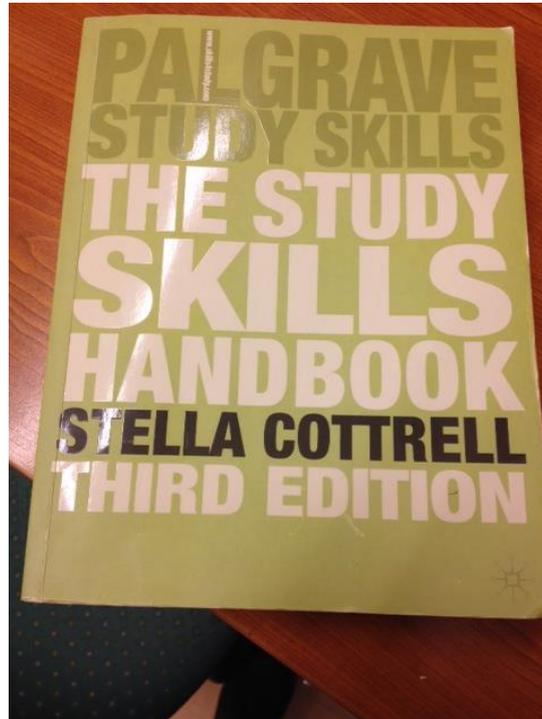


BOGNÁRNÉ, Szigeti Edit

LEARNING IS AN ADVENTURE
“THE STUDY SKILLS HANDBOOK”
Third edition, Stella Cottrell, 2008, Palgrave Macmillan



In the past few decades, in the era of Lifelong Learning, the question of how to learn effectively has become an issue of key importance. Developing successful learning strategies is especially vital for higher education students, i.e. both younger and older generations of adults, who participate in further training in order to improve their career prospects.

Stella Cottrell is the author of a number of study guides, including Skills for Success, “The Exam Skills Handbook”, “Critical Thinking Skills” and “The Palgrave Student Planner”.

Her wide educational experience, working for several years at the University of East London, UK, later becoming Director for Lifelong Learning at the University of Leeds and now back again at the University of East London, attracted her attention to helping students from diverse backgrounds with her essential handbooks on learning skills.

“The Study Skills Handbook” was first published in 1999 and since then three revised editions have followed it, in 2003, 2008 and 2013. The core version of the handbook developed out of practical work undertaken with hundreds of students over twenty years. (p. 1) Stella Cottrell expresses her acknowledgements for the suggestions and helpful comments of university staff and the feedback of students who were ready to discuss their individual difficulties with her during their studies. This practical experience is reflected in every aspect of the handbook: the clear, user-friendly structure, encouraging style, easy-to-follow explanations, eye-catching cartoons, symbols and illustrations.

In the introductory chapter, the author encourages all learners who might feel uncertain about their abilities by saying that “Study skills don’t hatch fully formed, any more than a grown hen pops from an egg. They

evolve and mature through practice, trial and error, feedback from others, and reflection as you move through the different stages of your course.” (p. 1) Visual images are a typical feature of the book.

The book starts with the description of seven approaches to learning (pp. 4-5):

1. Learning can be an adventure
2. Use several senses
3. Identify what attracts you
4. Use active learning strategies
5. Take responsibility for your own learning
6. Trust in your own intelligence
7. Recognise your own learning preferences

The first approach carries the most important message:

“Learning can be an adventure” or “fun” if we approach it in the right way. Therefore, we all need to find the best way to make learning enjoyable. We should not worry about failures because they are a natural part of the learning process. Stella Cottrell draws the vivid example of a child learning to walk, falling over several times and still getting up and moving again.

The author gives detailed guidance on the usage of the book for students.

Cartoons, symbols and the variety of layouts “act primarily as visual memory-joggers” and are meant to “encourage learning through different senses, too (p. 2). “ This feature, in addition to content and typography, makes the handbook particularly suitable for dyslexic students as well.

The book is well structured. Each chapter starts with an outline of the learning outcomes of the particular chapter, which makes it easy for the reader to decide whether to read or skip it. All chapters end with a review section summarizing the main issues dealt with and helping us look back and reflect on what we learnt.

The book offers a number of photocopiable resources, e.g. self-evaluations, checklists, planners and record sheets, which can be used either individually, or they can even be turned into a learning journal or portfolio, which is a recommended tool for orientation, reflection and regular self-evaluation. (p. 63)

The self-evaluation questionnaires are especially useful for identifying one’s strengths and weaknesses as well as monitoring progress from time to time.

The Index at the end of the book contains all the key words of specific topics with page references.

The 349-page handbook consists of 15 chapters covering the main areas higher education students should develop for. The titles of the chapters are the following:

1. Preparing for university
2. Identifying your skills
3. Intelligence and learning
4. The C.R.E.A.M strategy for learning – Creative, Reflective, Effective, Active, Motivated
5. Working with others
6. Research skills
7. E-learning, technology and personalised learning
8. Writing for university
9. Developing your writing
10. Confidence with numbers
11. Projects, dissertations, reports and case studies
12. Critical analytical thinking
13. Memory
14. Revision and exams
15. Planning your next move

The issues of practical and mental preparation for university are discussed in Chapter 1. Practical questions include: applying to university, teaching methods and time management. Mental preparation includes self-evaluation questionnaires like “Am I ready for Higher Education?” and “What are my personal resources?”

Chapter 2 intends to develop awareness of current skills and qualities and set priorities for developing one’s individual study skills. Stella Cottrell defines the term skill as “a learned activity – something you can develop through practice and reflection.” According to her, skills can be fine-tuned which “involves developing personal qualities”, e.g. commitment, determination, perseverance, and positive thinking (p. 25).

Chapter 3 explains the whole learning process and calls attention to the role of good study skills in achieving success both at school and in life. In her attempt to prove that intelligence is not the main cause of success in one’s career, Stella describes nine different views of intelligence and draws several examples from the field of psychology. She explains: “Self-belief and the right conditions for learning are both vital in developing as a learner” (p. 41).

Several conditions can make learning easier, e.g. being in the right physical state, confidence, a positive state of mind, etc. A number of practical ideas and tips are given under the heading “Optimal learning” on page 53.

The reason why Chapter 4 on the “C.R.E.A.M strategy for learning” is the longest is probably that it describes the essence of the author’s learning philosophy. According to her, four essential strategies are required in order to become conscious and successful learners, the so-called C.R.E.A.M strategies, i.e. being Creative, Reflective, Effective, Active and Motivated. Following these strategies will enable us to become autonomous and self-directed learners who are able to select and adapt new information, think creatively, take an active role in the learning process, solve problems, etc. Development is the result of a continued and persistent learning activity, which implies making mistakes, reflecting on experiences and correcting errors next time.

As we can see from the titles of the chapters, all the other issues discussed are highly relevant materials for academic life. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the long-term success of the handbook with future updates can be predictable.

The book can be recommended to teachers and students alike who can dip into the rich collection of resources and useful ideas any time they need advice on any particular aspect of study.

The key element of Stella Cottrell’s philosophy of learning is to develop a personalised approach to study. Her encouraging words echo all through the pages giving students confidence and helping them find their own “learning patterns”: “There are many avenues to successful study. Experiment. Explore. Be creative. Find what suits you best. (p. 3).”

References

Cottrell, Stella (2008): *The Study Skills Handbook*. Palgrave MacMillan

Biography: Internet website: Stella Cottrell *The Study Skills Handbook*, 2013, Palgrave MacMillan <https://he.palgrave.com/page/detail/?sf1=barcode&st1=9781137289254>