

From “Formalization” to “Effectiveness”: Exploration on Breaking Through the Dilemma of Social Work Experimental Teaching

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Abstract: *Social work experimental teaching is a key link in cultivating students' professional values, practical skills, and clinical thinking, and is the core path to achieving both professionalism and practicality in social work. However, there is a widespread tendency towards “formalization” in social work experimental teaching in Chinese universities. This paper first reviews the current research status of social work experimental teaching at home and abroad. It then sorts out the practical difficulties it faces, which mainly include: huge differences in experimental scene construction standards; disconnection between the experimental teaching system and management, and low operational efficiency; significant tension between the forward-looking teaching concept and the lagging supporting technology; unclear roles of laboratory administrators and lack of professional support. These structural difficulties have jointly led to the separation of experimental teaching in terms of “form” and “spirit”. To break through the difficulties and promote the transformation of experimental teaching from “formalization” to “effectiveness”, this paper proposes the following exploration paths: first, establish an experimental teaching scene and dynamic management mechanism with “efficiency as the core”; second, clarify the experimental teaching goals guided by professional core competencies and reshape the teaching evaluation system; third, reform the experimental teaching methods and give full play to students' subjectivity; fourth, strengthen the construction of experimental teaching resources and innovate the teaching resource library.*

Keywords: Social Work; Experimental Teaching; Dilemma Structure; Teaching Reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a profession encompassing both theoretical and practical skills, social work emphasizes the ability to reflect and develop specific service skills during practical work. This requires social work students to deeply understand the specific context and personal emotions of their clients and to provide services based on the values of respect, acceptance, and empathy. Social work education achieves this professional requirement through continuous role-playing, sharing, and communication in the laboratory. Therefore, experimental teaching provides a solid foundation for the professionalism and practicality of social work education. This can be demonstrated in the following aspects:

First, from the perspective of professional characteristics and values, social work professional values are not only the core essence and service soul of social work, but also the driving force and concrete embodiment of social workers' service capabilities [1]. The process of experimental teaching can better cultivate students' values such as empathy, respect, individualization, and non-judgment. These values are not only an important part of the social work profession, but also necessary for students to engage in social work in the future. Secondly, from the perspective of professional skills and methods, experimental teaching enables students to learn and master social work skills in practice by simulating real social work scenarios. This learning method allows students to understand and remember better than simple classroom teaching, thereby improving their practical ability. Thirdly, from the perspective of professional knowledge, experimental teaching can combine the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom with practical operations, so that students can better understand and apply the knowledge they have learned. During the experiment, students can intuitively see the application effect of theoretical knowledge in practice, thereby deepening their understanding of theoretical knowledge. Finally, from the perspective of personal growth, experimental teaching encourages students to think independently, innovate, and critically. During the experiment, students face a variety of complex problems and situations, and need to apply their knowledge to independent thinking and innovative solutions, which helps to enhance their thinking and creativity. The simulated scenarios and real-life cases in the experiment help students better understand the realities and demands of social work, thus preparing them for their future career development.

2. CURRENT STATUS OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL WORK EXPERIMENTAL TEACHING

As a highly practical discipline, social work has received significant attention in the field of teaching, and researchers have continuously discussed experimental teaching. A review of relevant literature reveals that research on experimental teaching systems for social work in universities primarily focuses on laboratory construction and experimental course development.

2.1 Research on the Construction of Social Work Laboratories

In the study on the role of social work laboratory construction, Wen Rong believes that the current skill training of college students majoring in social work is mainly completed through classroom teaching, social practice and laboratory education [2], and the efforts of social work laboratories should be strengthened. Zang Qisheng believes that the construction of social work laboratories plays an indispensable role in the training of social work students. It has the characteristics of systematic teaching, targeted teaching, and controllable learning environment [3], and can promote the development of experimental teaching in social work majors. Miao Chunfeng believes that social work laboratories are conducive to improving professional construction, promoting professional development, and providing a practical platform for social work students [4]. In terms of laboratory management, Cai Lijiang believes that attention should be paid to the construction of laboratory management teams, increasing investment in laboratory management funds, and standardizing and improving laboratory management systems [5]. Xie Yu conducted research on the construction of social work laboratory identification and proposed that the unique and significant role of social work laboratories in image transmission, function identification, and information dissemination should be fully utilized [6]. In order to adapt to the development and changes of the Internet era, Liang Pan believes that an "Internet +" intelligent social work laboratory should be established, focusing on building an intelligent interactive space environment, equipping intelligent equipment customized for social work services, and intelligent support software that fits social work experiments [7]. In order to open up the situation of openness and sharing of social work and promote resource integration, Li Yi believes that building an open social work laboratory with the school-enterprise collaborative construction model as the starting point is a good strategy [8]. Ren Wenqi sorted out the development history of social work laboratories and proposed that the latest AR and AI technologies should be applied to them to form a new social work laboratory construction liquid [9]. It can be seen that the construction of social work laboratories is a long-term and necessary thing.

2.2 Research on the Construction of Social Work Experimental Courses

In the research on experimental course construction, most scholars have explored the teaching model and teaching system of social work experimental courses. Li Han believes that applying the "flipped classroom" teaching model to social work experimental courses can stimulate students' subjectivity and cultivate their independent learning ability [10]. Wang Dandan and Liu Binzhi proposed that in the implementation of the course, it is necessary to clarify the experimental goals and concepts, and do a good job in the allocation of experimental resources, arrangement of experimental class hours and content arrangement [11]. Lu Xingfu believes that social work experimental teaching should be based on talent training programs, comprehensively plan the teaching system, and consolidate it through practical training to form a "theory-experiment-practical training" three-in-one experimental teaching model [12]. In the social work method course system, case work, group work and community work should include a certain proportion of experimental courses. Huang Haiyan believes that in the organization of case experiments, it is necessary to carefully organize, pay attention to systematicity, integrity, closeness, selectivity and openness, and pay special attention to the application of social work values [13]. Wang Xiaohong explored the path of group work experimental courses and believed that when students conduct role simulation to improve their skills and techniques, they should also focus on improving their self-awareness and promoting their self-growth [14]. Yan Chunhe believes that in community work experiments, in addition to formulating community service plans, role-playing and situational simulation experiments such as community meeting planning, community conflict or crisis situation handling, and civil organization management can fully reflect students' active and efficient participation [15]. In addition, Bi Lanfeng believes that the humanistic education concept, the "student-centered" teaching concept and the meaningful teaching evaluation model should be implemented in social work experimental teaching [16].

3. DECONSTRUCTING THE DILEMMA OF SOCIAL WORK EXPERIMENTAL TEACHING

The social work profession should aim to cultivate interdisciplinary talents while adhering to the philosophy of “focusing on interest, ability, practice, and employment.” However, in actual teaching, teachers often focus on traditional knowledge indoctrination and neglect the cultivation of students’ practical abilities. Teaching designs fail to integrate students’ interests, abilities, needs, and career plans. Overall, the following problems still exist in social work experimental teaching in colleges and universities:

3.1 There are Large Differences in the Standards for Constructing Social Work Experimental Scenarios

At present, there are huge differences in the hardware construction of social work laboratories among various universities, showing a polarized trend, which directly leads to unfair starting points and huge differences in the process of experimental teaching.

Most experimental environments at ordinary undergraduate institutions are merely adequate, though not optimal. They typically consist of a simply decorated “multi-purpose” classroom equipped with basic multimedia equipment, movable tables and chairs, and a simple camera setup. While these facilities can generally meet the needs of conventional teaching, such as role-playing and group activities, they lack professionalism, immersion, and confidentiality. This makes it difficult for students to engage with “realistic” situations, leading to a sense of alienation and playful play, significantly reducing the effectiveness of experimental experiments.

Some social work programs at emerging universities or colleges, constrained by funding, space, and lack of attention, lack a fixed location for experimental teaching. Often, these are “makeshift” setups in ordinary classrooms or even conference rooms, with “social work labs” and “class meetings” sharing the same space. This casual environment fails to foster a professional atmosphere of helping others, severely undermining the seriousness and effectiveness of the experiments, making them merely formalistic and virtually incapable of achieving their educational objectives.

also, In addition to offline laboratory instruction, social work experimental teaching can also be integrated with the social work TPR integrated cloud platform. This platform can be built using VR virtual simulation technology to create an immersive, experiential, and interactive teaching model. However, due to differences in disciplinary development, many universities have not purchased this platform, and even those that have purchased it have not truly utilized it.

3.2 The Social Work Experimental Teaching System is Out of Sync with Experimental Scene Management

Most universities are unclear about which courses should include laboratory hours and how many hours should be allocated in their social work discipline planning. Furthermore, maximizing effectiveness and utilization are the overarching goals of university social work laboratory construction. Currently, social work laboratories only meet the daily teaching needs of the discipline, and various factors contribute to low utilization. As a service profession, university social work laboratories should also maximize their service effectiveness, serving students from other majors and the university. However, due to a lack of open sharing awareness among various stakeholders and a low level of resource integration, social work laboratories have failed to achieve their maximum effectiveness.

Overall, the experimental teaching system and laboratory construction in social work are not integrated, and even appear disconnected, with a focus on construction over teaching. Some universities have outdated social work laboratories that fail to keep up with the demands of experimental teaching, while others have comprehensive and advanced laboratories but underdeveloped experimental teaching systems. This not only limits the development of social work laboratories and hinders improvements in social work experimental teaching, but also leads to significant disparities in the quality of social work talent training.

3.3 There is a Significant Tension Between the Forward-looking Concept of Experimental Teaching and the Backwardness of Technology.

The use of social work laboratories requires teachers to have extensive practical experience, be able to arrange actual cases into experimental simulations, and have software operation skills such as audio and video acquisition and editing [17]. This also requires professional teachers to have certain operational capabilities, but the reality is

that most teachers do not have this skill, and instead selectively play relevant teaching videos. In addition, there is a lack of professional experimental instructors, and most teachers are from school to school and lack corresponding practical experience. The level of professionalism of teachers is insufficient, and there is no scientific guidance.

Furthermore, universities that prioritize students' practical skills development have fully utilized the social work laboratory platform, incorporating a certain number of experimental hours into core courses and handing over the classroom to students to hone their abilities and test their learning capabilities. This difference in teaching philosophy ultimately leads to differences in talent development.

3.4 Laboratory Managers' Management Responsibilities are Unclear and Professional Support is Lacking

The job responsibilities of social work laboratory management positions in many universities are vaguely defined, and are often held concurrently by administrative staff, teaching assistants, or new young teachers. Their work content is simply understood as basic administrative functions such as equipment storage, key distribution, and sanitation maintenance, rather than crucial teaching support functions. A qualified social work experimental teaching manager should play the role of a "teaching catalyst". As a technology enabler, they should be proficient in operating and guiding teachers and students in the use of professional equipment such as recording, playback, and monitoring to ensure smooth technical processes. They should also coordinate the use of laboratories and assist teachers in arranging differentiated scenarios based on different teaching topics, such as case interviews, early group sessions, and community meetings.

According to the relevant requirements of the Education Commission, laboratories should be integrated into the university-level management system for unified planning and management. However, many university social work laboratories are still managed at the college level, or even independently by individual social work teaching and research departments. This is because many universities combine laboratories and classrooms into one, sharing a single space without separate management and use. Problems can also arise during the borrowing process, such as irregular borrowing procedures, untimely equipment maintenance, and conflicts in usage time, all of which increase the challenges for laboratory managers.

4. EXPLORATION ON BREAKING THROUGH THE DIFFICULTIES OF SOCIAL WORK EXPERIMENTAL TEACHING

Reform and innovation in social work experimental teaching in colleges and universities is a key link in improving the practical ability, innovation ability, and professional quality of social work students. The following is a discussion on the path of reform and innovation:

4.1 Establishing an Experimental Teaching Scenario and Dynamic Management Mechanism with "Efficiency as the Core"

In order to promote the high-quality development of social work experimental teaching, social work laboratories should also make the following improvements:

First, the decor should emphasize safety, comfort, and trust, creating a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere so that participants can be assured that they are in a safe environment and that their personal information is well protected. Furthermore, a variety of decorative elements should be provided to recreate realistic scenarios tailored to the specific client and service issues, enhancing the experience. Finally, regarding software, the laboratory should include, but not be limited to, software for practical casework training, group work training, and lab management to enrich practical skills training. Second, we should build an "Internet+" intelligent social work laboratory. We should enhance the laboratory's technological presence by incorporating intelligent elements into the spatial design, striving to address the low level of intelligent equipment. We should improve the development of online experimental teaching platforms, promptly update case resources, and enrich experimental teaching content. Third, we should standardize the management system of social work laboratories. This includes the laboratory's loan system, with strict requirements for who can borrow, how long to borrow, and the procedures for borrowing, and these should be implemented in accordance with standards. We should develop a laboratory user manual and improve management regulations. Management personnel should receive regular training to enhance awareness of safe electricity and water use, and develop emergency response plans to address emergencies. In addition, investment in laboratory management funds should be increased, including investment in managers and

investment in laboratory equipment maintenance, to extend the service life of laboratory equipment.

4.2 Clarify Experimental Teaching Objectives and Strengthen the Cultivation of Professional Core Abilities

While my country's social work education is booming, it is also facing the problem of theory being divorced from practice and teaching being divorced from society. Specifically, this is manifested in the following aspects: vague training objectives in the education process, similar curriculum settings, empty theoretical teaching, lack of depth in professional practice, and single professional skills [1].

First, clarify the teaching objectives. As a profession and occupation, social work is specifically embodied in the professional value ethics, knowledge theory and method technology. Therefore, the experimental teaching objectives of social work should also be defined from the three levels of value, knowledge and technology. Social work experimental teaching should focus on cultivating students' unique value concepts when facing different groups, such as the value concepts of child-centeredness, child welfare and child development in the field of child social work [18], as well as the principles of child priority, maximum benefit and minimum harm. Concepts such as respect and acceptance, strengths restoration and ecosystem perspective in the field of youth social work, concepts such as life positive aging thinking and whole-person health in the field of elderly social work, the pursuit of gender equality, gender-sensitive awareness and empowerment in the field of women's social work, and concepts such as social inclusion, whole-person rehabilitation and strength-based in the field of social work for people with disabilities. These value concepts should be strengthened in social experimental teaching, so that students can change from passive learning to active absorption. At the core knowledge level, experimental teaching should focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of the current characteristics of families, peer groups, schools, workplaces, communities, mass media, and cultural customs. This should explore the processes and theories of their impact on individual behavior, and analyze the reasons behind the behavior of different groups from a theoretical perspective. Third, at the core technical level, given the complex social environment and diverse personal problems and needs, there is an urgent need to cultivate social work students' case management capabilities. This includes developing project planning and design tailored to the needs of the general public, different groups, high-risk groups, and different organizations, and improving project design and management capabilities. Furthermore, it is necessary to cultivate students' professional caring attitudes, skilled techniques, standardized procedures, and strict standards, so that they can fully play their roles as service providers, emotional supporters, action advocates, and relationship coordinators.

Secondly, standardize the curriculum structure during the preparation phase. First, develop a scientific teaching plan. Social work experimental teaching is premised on and based on students' acquisition of relevant theoretical knowledge. Specifically, experimental teaching targets students who have already completed some foundational professional courses, such as Introduction to Social Work, Introduction to Sociology, and Introduction to Social Psychology, and are currently studying core professional courses, such as casework, group work, and community work. Therefore, the time for experimental teaching should be rationally arranged, integrating theoretical teaching of casework and group work with corresponding experimental teaching for value internalization and skill training. Regarding class time allocation, the experimental teaching hours for each core course should be no less than one-third of the total course hours, and the experimental teaching hours for specialized courses should be greater than one-third of the total course hours. Furthermore, interpersonal communication skills training can be arranged after freshmen enter the school, depending on their specific circumstances, to help them establish a good network of relationships. The second is to enrich the teaching content and arrange the teaching content according to the nature of the course. For example, in the case work course, the focus should be on strengthening the training of support skills such as "concentration, listening, empathy, and encouragement", leading skills such as "clarification, focus, and summary", and influencing skills such as "providing information, self-disclosure, suggestions, and advice". In addition, training should be conducted on how to maintain confidentiality, acceptance, and individualization. In the group work course, the focus should be on training group leadership skills, group promotion skills, group communication skills, and group motivation skills. The fourth is to compile an experimental manual. Experimental teaching should also have corresponding reference materials. You can refer to "The Application and Analysis of Communication Skills" in the basic skills textbook of social work of City University of Hong Kong, or you can develop situational teaching materials suitable for certain types of problems to strengthen the construction of practical courses [11].

Finally, establish a reasonable evaluation system for the evaluation phase. A scientific and rational evaluation system for experimental teaching should encompass multiple aspects, including lab reports, classroom performance, practical operations, and innovative capabilities, to comprehensively assess students' experimental

learning outcomes and practical abilities. First, construct multidimensional evaluation indicators to assess students' grasp of core social work professional knowledge, particularly theoretical understanding, from the perspectives of values, knowledge, and methods. Dynamic evaluation should also be conducted, with teachers monitoring students' experimental feedback and adjusting the experimental teaching model based on their learning abilities and on-site performance. Second, employ diverse assessment methods. First, have students conduct self-evaluations, describing their understanding and experience of the roles they played, the skills they employed, the concepts they implemented, and any areas of their abilities that require improvement. Furthermore, peer evaluation should be conducted, including both those performing in the same group and those observing on-site. As both service providers and service recipients, students in the same group performing can gain a deeper understanding of what went well and what needs improvement during the interactive process. Teachers will then evaluate and summarize, focusing on whether students have demonstrated relevant social work skills, such as consistency between verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy, strategic questioning, small acts of encouragement, reflecting feelings, supporting the client's strengths, providing positive feedback, and addressing the client's concerns. Third, students' performance during the experiment will be assessed at multiple levels, including skill level, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. Appropriate and positive evaluations will be provided, with an active focus on improving students' abilities after the experiment, emphasizing the importance of rewarding outcome evaluations.

4.3 Reforming Experimental Teaching Methods to Give Full Play to Students' Subjectivity

First, the teaching should be student-centered, encouraging students to actively participate in the experimental process, actively think and explore. Teaching methods such as group cooperation, role-playing, case analysis, and problem solving can be used to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning. The role of experiential teaching in social work experimental teaching should be brought into play. According to students' cognitive characteristics and behavioral laws, social work situations should be presented or reproduced so that students can understand and construct the values and knowledge of social work through their own experience, aiming to achieve the goal of "learning by doing" [19]. The teacher's personal charm should be used to influence students and enable them to better understand the art of helping others in social work. Seeking the meaning and value of life in daily life is not only conducive to promoting psychological recovery, but also conducive to maintaining an open mind and achieving self-transcendence [20].

Secondly, we foster student agency through experiential teaching in stages. The first phase involves a learning phase, where students role-play based on classic case studies. Through this process, they learn to understand the demands of the profession, appreciate and experience the power of the profession, and practice professional skills such as listening, empathy, and self-disclosure. The second phase involves an experiential phase, where students serve as the recipients of services and teachers as the service providers, acting as social workers. Teachers use professional knowledge and methods to address students' current challenges, helping them identify potential strengths based on their own stories, characteristics, and circumstances. Depending on the circumstances, teachers provide one-on-one support, small group support, or even collective support for the entire class. This process requires voluntary student participation, with students proactively analyzing their personal challenges and sharing them with their classmates and teachers. Observers are also required to strictly adhere to confidentiality, respecting the privacy of others and their understanding and interpretation of their experiences. The third is the ability demonstration stage. Students serve their classmates and carry out a complete service, from accepting a case to closing it. They actually experience the various skills of establishing professional relationships when accepting a case and dealing with parting emotions when closing a case, as well as ways to link resources. They train their abilities of cooperation with others, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and stress management in real situations.

4.4 Strengthen the Construction of Experimental Teaching Resources and Innovate the Teaching Resource Library

First, teaching staff should organize corresponding experimental course groups, strengthen interdisciplinary cooperation with various majors within the school, explore joint training with social work service agencies outside the school, find off-campus mentors, and enhance the teaching staff of experimental teaching. The so-called core competence refers to the various professional qualities and practical operation skills required for engaging in social work that are possessed by people in advantageous positions and cannot be acquired by other non-professionals through simple imitation in a short period of time [21]. Finally, information technology should be used to try to simulate social work scenes with the help of virtual interactive technology to provide students with more realistic

and vivid practical experience. For example, virtual reality technology, commonly known as VR technology, refers to the simulation of a physical space through three-dimensional technology, and the simulation of human eye, ear and body experience through virtual simulation technology, so that users have a strong immersive experience, as if they are in the real world, and can get the same experience in the real environment and the virtual environment [22]. Social work experimental teaching can use this technology to create a virtual situation, allowing students to immerse themselves in this situation to understand themselves, discover themselves, express their emotions, and more realistically experience the feelings of the service objects.

Second, we will strengthen practical teaching, enhance school-enterprise cooperation, and establish long-term, stable partnerships with social work organizations. This will provide students with more practical opportunities, help them understand the real needs of the social work field, and enhance their practical skills. We will extend experimental teaching from the classroom to social units, allowing students to directly participate in social work practice, such as casework and group work, and experience and learn professional social work skills and methods. For example, we will provide services such as needs assessments, service plan development, and implementation for individuals or families. We will organize groups with shared problems or needs for interaction and sharing, helping them build support systems. We will also organize and mobilize community resources to promote community development and improve the community environment.

The third is to strengthen the compilation of teaching materials, such as compiling experimental manuals. Experimental teaching should also have corresponding reference materials. You can refer to the "Application and Analysis of Communication Skills" in the basic skills textbook of social work of City University of Hong Kong, or develop situational teaching materials suitable for certain types of problems [11]. Alternatively, accumulate film and television teaching resources, and use CCTV's "Psychological Interview" and "News Investigation" series as appropriate case teaching materials to effectively train students to understand the field of social work practice and reflect on and understand the values of social work [23].

5. CONCLUSION

Social work experimental teaching is a crucial component of social work professional education. It plays a vital role in talent development, discipline construction, and professional development, and is a key force in promoting the localization of social work. Social work experimental teaching involves multiple tasks, including laboratory construction, laboratory management, experimental curriculum development, and the development of a dedicated experimental teaching team. This requires coordination among university departments, strong support from education associations, and collaboration among industry organizations. Within the current educational system, developing a dedicated experimental teaching team is a core task, and the concerted efforts of multiple stakeholders are contributing to the restructuring and innovation of university social work experimental teaching systems.

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