

# Constructivism-Guided Case-Based Teaching Design in “Introduction to Social Work”

Chunmei Huang<sup>1\*</sup>, Shihai Chen<sup>1</sup>, Ling Long<sup>1</sup>, Yong Deng<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Law and Public Administration, Yibin University, 644000 Yibin, China

\*Corresponding Author: [huangchunmei2020@gmail.com](mailto:huangchunmei2020@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *Within China's social work education system, the Introduction to Social Work course is an introductory and foundational course for undergraduate students in the discipline. Currently, passive learning is widely spread and the communication between students and teachers is insufficient. Besides, the old teaching cases are used in the course which makes the course lose its real-world value. What's more, the assessment system is shallow and single dimensional. This study takes the teaching reform based on constructivism into account and tries to solve these problems. The framework of teaching reform has three components: reconstructing curricular content, implementing innovative teaching methods and establishing a diversified evaluation system. This study constructs a teaching model which is "based on theory and focused on practice". The framework has a guiding significance for reforming the social work curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Constructivism, Introduction to Social Work, Case-Based Teaching, Teaching Reform

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2023, the Central Department of Social Work was established. In accordance with the new institution, it is also necessary to establish the departments of corresponding levels at the provincial, municipal and county levels. Under the new institutional environment, social work has begun to experience high-quality and innovative development. Therefore, it is necessary to make comprehensive reforms in terms of curriculum and instruction in higher education. Social work education faces some challenges: including improving curriculum structure, strengthening students' sense of professional identity and accomplishment, and optimizing the social environment that supports professional alignment and recognition (He & Liu, 2020). *Introduction to Social Work* is an introductory course in the social work education curriculum. Its tasks are to help students establish a systematic view of social work values, professional ethics, main professional methods and roles in the social service system; Besides knowledge learning, it is also the beginning of professional education, trying to build up a strong sense of professional identity and social responsibility in students. In current practice, the *Introduction to Social Work* encounters the following pedagogical issues: a lecture approach, a gap between the theory taught and its application, and low levels of engagement in the classroom. The traditional "teacher-cent red" lecture model positions students in a passive learning role and implies a linear transfer of knowledge. This model is not conducive to arouse students' intense interest in the essence of profession, hinders the formation of an understanding

of social work situation and development of professional competence further. Moreover, based on the old course content, the situation of theory and practice separation and diversified evaluation deficiency based on active learning have gradually emerged. Advanced teaching reform of this course has become increasingly important to meet the demand for more high-quality professionals and a coordinated national framework for social work. As an important theoretical basis for deepening teaching reform in higher education, constructivist learning theory focuses on learning being an active process of constructing meaning by learners through interaction in specific socio-cultural contexts. It takes learners as the center, emphasizes learning in certain contexts and strengthens cognition through interaction and reflection. It has important guiding significance in social work education by placing learners in the center and promoting the active participation of students. Constructivist ideas can promote students to better understand professional values and unify the logic of theory and practice.

This study attempts to conduct a constructivism view analysis on the design of teaching cases in the Introduction to Social Work course. The research purposes are: (1) to discuss the main problems in teaching the *Introduction to Social Work* course; (2) to construct a design model of case teaching based on the constructivism view; and (3) to discuss its innovation, feasibility and limitations. In brief, this study attempts to promote the reform of basic social work education.

Reform of the Introduction to Social Work course has a vital significance in the training of social work talents. The innovations of the study mainly reflect in two aspects. In the aspect of theory, constructivist learning theory is applied in social work education and a teaching design framework for initial social work education is constructed. In the aspect of method, case-based learning is adopted to construct an interactive learning situation and change the status of passive receivers into that of active constructors for students.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on Social Work Education

As far as the development of Chinese social work education is concerned, insufficient professionalisation and lack of connection between teaching and practice are two prominent features. Zhang and Xu (2023) pointed out that the degree of professional activity in Chinese social work education is still relatively low, and teaching activities in Chinese social work education are often disconnected from practice. Therefore, social work education has not been able to keep up with the trends and demands of the profession well enough. There is an overall lag of theory behind practice in social work education (Zhu, 2023), so it is crucial for educators to keep on conducting innovation in teaching content, contexts and methods continuously. Furthermore, there is still a lack of balance between education and practice (Zhang & Fei, 2023). Besides, scholars insisted that social work education should focus on everyday life practices (Zhang & Xu, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to build a teacher-student collaborative and interactive model in social work education for cultivating practitioners who can conduct reflective practice (Li & Wang, 2022).

### 2.2 Research on Case-Based Teaching

Through the use of case-based teaching, varied practical cases can be brought into classrooms and students can benefit from such practical experience through case discussion, simulation and reflection on cases, which could help to improve their problem-solving skills (Zhang & Fei, 2023). Bonney (2015) also discovered that compared with reading textbooks or classroom discussion, the case-based teaching method achieved not only significantly higher students'

performance in exams, but also increased students' perceived learning. Based on the above similar studies, it can be concluded that the application of case-study methods or case-based learning in higher education classrooms not only can motivate students' active participation, but also can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills. In addition, empirical studies also revealed that small-group case discussions are more effective than lectures (Mahdi et al., 2020). Büchler et al. (2021) introduced the Integrated Case Method (ICM), which integrates case studies, flipped classroom and ecosystem-based learning into a teaching model that focuses on interaction, inquiry and reflection.

### 2.3 Research on Constructivism

According to constructivism, knowledge is viewed as the active construct of the cognitive subject, and learning is a process of constructing knowledge. Teaching is viewed as the process of developing students' subjectivity and helping them to construct new knowledge from their experiences. In this regard, teachers play the role of facilitating, collaborating and guiding students in the process of constructing meaning (Chen, 2007). Constructivist learning theory can trace its roots to Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development. According to constructivist learning theory, learners are active constructors of meaning and knowledge from their experiences and interactions with the environment and others, rather than passive receivers of knowledge from the outside world. Knowledge is not a passive reflection of an external reality, but an understanding constructed by the learner within a socio-cultural context (Bruner, 1996). The main features of constructivist learning theory can be described as follows four dimensions. First, learner-centredness: the learner is the central agent in the process of meaning construction. The teacher's role is to design appropriate learning contexts and provide supportive systems that facilitate this process (Loyens et al., 2008; Xing & Zhang, 2009). Second, contextualised learning: knowledge is inseparable from its context, and learning should take place within authentic or simulated social situations that allow learners to construct understanding through real-life or practice-based experiences. Third, social interaction: learning occurs through collaboration, discussion, and reflection with others. Social interaction serves as a crucial pathway for the construction of meaning (He, 1997; Loyens et al., 2008). Fourth, reflective learnings: learners regulate their own learning and achieve continuous development through reflection and self-monitoring, as emphasised in constructivist learning environments (Loyens et al., 2008).

The theory underscores the learner-centred principle, regarding that learning outcomes depend on the bidirectional construction between individual experience and social interaction (Chen & Zhang, 1998). In a constructivist classroom, teachers design contexts that facilitate students' interaction with their environment, experiences, and peers, guiding students to actively construct deep understanding rather than passively receive knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Within the constructivism framework, the instructional model should position learners at the center of the learning process, encouraging them to actively construct knowledge through inquiry and interaction in authentic contexts, while the role of the instructional designer is to create supportive environments that facilitate this process (Savery & Duffy, 1995).

## 3. Current Status and Problem Analysis of Course Teaching

### 3.1 Introduction to the *Introduction to Social Work Course*

*Introduction to Social Work* is a foundational entry-level course in the social work curriculum, where it plays a critical role in cultivating students' professional identity. It also establishes their basic understanding of core theoretical concepts and fosters an appreciation of professional ethics and practice contexts. This course is typically offered in the first semester

of the undergraduate freshman year, with a total of 64 credit hours carrying 4 academic credits. Its scope includes the history and development of social work, professional roles and functions, and social welfare services and systems. In addition, it covers introduction to human behavior and the social environment, basic direct practice methods of social work [casework, group work, community work], and an introduction to social work research. The course is mainly intended for undergraduate social work majors.

The current teaching approach still largely adopts the traditional method of giving lectures and has limited use of case studies analyses and classroom discussions. Teachers still stick to the prescribed curriculum to explain social work theories one by one and use case studies for illustration. The cases used are often isolated, remote and simplistic. Currently, course assessment still depends largely on close book end examinations and assignments submitted by individuals. This method fails to effectively assess students' analytical skills, practical competence, and reflective abilities throughout the learning process.

### 3.2 Main Challenges Identified

The *Introduction to Social Work* course currently faces the following primary issues:

#### 1. Passive Learning and Insufficient Interaction

In a classroom-based teaching method focused on lectures, learning is largely a one-way flow. Teachers play the role of the knowledge owner and transmitter, while students play the role of the knowledge receiver. This makes students overly dependent on teachers and trains them to rely on general questions to solve problems, analyze issues or construct knowledge. It also trains students to passively receive knowledge rather than actively identify problems, analyze issues or construct knowledge. The learning activities focus on teachers' lectures and examination requirements. That is, learning is mainly about receiving and memorizing information rather than engaging and reflecting. As a result, students' interaction with knowledge is superficial. This also hinders the cultivation of critical thinking and true knowledge mastery.

#### 2. Outdated Cases and Content in Teaching

Although case discussions are included in teaching, the cases used are outdated and disconnected from real service situations. This problem is reflected in the following three aspects. First, the content of the cases used is outdated. Current technologies (such as digital), new service models (such as the platform, sharing services) and new policies are not included in the cases. These technologies, service models and policies shape the current service environment, so it is necessary to include them in the case content. Second, the scenario representation is lacking. Many cases are simplified or idealized, and thus cannot adequately reflect the complexity, uncertainty and multi-stakeholder characteristics of real situations. For example, the community governance case can't reflect the current grassroots models and challenges in real society. Third, the use of cases produced in other socio-cultural contexts instead of local cases makes it difficult for students to understand problems and find solutions suitable for the local context.

#### 3. Limited and One-Dimensional Assessment

The current assessment for the Introduction to Social Work course includes closed-book exams at the end of the semester and individual written work. This type of assessment focuses on assessing students' memorization of fixed knowledge points. It is ineffective at assessing the development of students' analytical skills, practical ability and reflective ability during the learning process. Since the evaluation system lacks a focus on the

learning process and multi-dimensional ability development, students tend to rely on examination-taking methods instead of seeking true understanding and ability accomplishment.

#### **4. Design of the Teaching Reform Plan**

##### **4.1 Targets of the Teaching Reform Design**

Target 1: Stimulate students' ability to active learning and interaction. Take the case-based, inquiry-learning way to lead students to be active learners from being a passive receiver of knowledge to being an active constructor of knowledge through case-based inquiry-learning way. This target attempts to systematically train students to analyze, evaluate and solve complex problems in real context.

Target 2: Accumulate teaching case resource and reform curriculum. It will try to establish a systematic training with course teaching objective-based case library. It will try to adopt diversified teaching formats actively, such as group-based discussion, role-play, situational simulation and field practice etc. This target intends to improve students' social interaction ability and enhance team spirit.

Target 3: Established a diversified assessment system. It will try to adopt formative assessment (such as class-based performance, case-based analysis report, students' contribution to group-based discussion) and summative assessment (such as final exam, practical based assessment) etc. This target intends to improve students' reflective ability and self-regulation ability and lifelong learning ability.

##### **4.2 Principles of the Reform Design**

This reform plan adheres to the core principles of constructivist learning theory. First, learner-centred approach, teachers shift from being mere transmitters of knowledge to guides and facilitators, designing contexts that enable students to explore independently. Second, contextualised learning, cases are carefully designed to closely reflect real social work practice, allowing students to understand theoretical concepts within real contexts. Third, social interaction, knowledge construction is promoted through group collaboration, role-playing, and discussions, fostering interaction among students and between students and teachers, and supporting the development of communication and teamwork skills. Fourth, reflective learning, students are encouraged and guided to continuously review and reflect on their learning processes, decision-making, and case analysis, promoting self-regulation, critical thinking, and ongoing professional growth.

##### **4.3 Course Reform Measurements**

In the context of the modernisation of the national governance system and the establishment of the Party's Department of Social Work, the *Introduction to Social Work* course, as an introductory and foundational professional course, is reformed from three perspectives: curriculum content reconstruction, innovative teaching methods, and assessment system reform.

###### **4.3.1 Content Reconstruction**

In light of the establishment of the Party's Department of Social Work, the following content is added and systematically integrated: New unit on the functions of the Social Work Department, including analysis of policy documents. Expanded case repository covering topics

such as grassroots conflict mediation in petition-related social work and management of volunteer service organisations.

In terms of case library. Priority will be given to incorporating practical cases from areas such as volunteer services, petition social work, services for new employment groups, and the construction of industry associations and chambers of commerce, particularly those emerging since the establishment of the Party Committee's Social Work Department. Furthermore, the case content should also encompass typical practice scenarios related to the three traditional social work methods—casework, group work, and community work—highlighting the deep integration of theoretical guidance with practical application.

#### **4.3.2 Innovative Teaching Methods**

##### **Integration of cases into classroom learning.**

Teachers compile cases from various fields, particularly petition-related social work, volunteer service management, and emerging employment groups (e.g., couriers, ride-hailing drivers). Students work collaboratively in groups to discuss and develop preliminary solutions, with teacher guidance and feedback. Upon completing case analyses, group members present their findings to the entire class for sharing and peer evaluation, thereby cultivating collaboration and critical thinking skills, and applied problem-solving skills.

##### **Scenario-based practice and action reflection.**

This includes two components: practice. The first one is organizing students to participate in four hours of volunteer service through the university's Youth Volunteer Association, in collaboration with local social work departments, streets/towns, villages/communities, and social service agencies. Services focus on child care, elderly care, and support for people with disabilities. Students reflect on their volunteer experiences, while teachers clarify the distinctions between social work and volunteer service. The second is inviting experienced social work practitioners into the classroom to present real-world case scenarios. To integrate seasoned social work professionals, including Senior Social Workers and outstanding practitioners from within and outside the province, into the freshman classroom for case-based teaching. These sessions would utilize practical cases from various social work fields, such as grassroots dispute mediation and volunteer service management.

##### **Blended online and offline learning**

This blended learning model is designed to systematically cultivate students' analytical skills and practical competence. It begins with an online phase where learners independently analyze case materials and articulate their initial thoughts in reflective journals, thus building a foundational understanding. And then students will enter the physical classroom, where this preliminary knowledge is tested, refined, and applied through interactive activities such as collaborative discussions and realistic simulations, all under the guidance of expert teacher feedback.

#### **4.3.3 Diversified Assessment**

Before the assessment of Introduction to Social Work course reform, the *Introduction to Social Work* course assessment consisted of 30% regular performance, 30% mid-term, and 40% final exam. After the reform, the assessment includes 60% formative assessment and 40% summative assessment. Formative assessment includes three innovative modules: volunteer service practice (20%), classroom case discussion performance (20%), and periodic assignments (20%), with summative assessment accounting for 40% of the final grade. This

reform increases the degree of continuous feedback, promotes reflective learning, and fairly assesses students' practicality and development.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Analysis of the Innovativeness and Feasibility of the Reform Plan

This teaching reform plan is innovative in the following three aspects. First, in order to improve the theory-practice link, the reform plan introduces case repositories such as "Grassroots Conflict Mediation Practices" "Volunteer Service Organisation Management," and the content is systematic and current. Second, the innovation in teaching method is not limited to the traditional way of lectures, but combines case analysis and scenario-based practice, based on the group cooperation and peer-evaluation mechanism, which create an entire scenario where students keep on constructing knowledge and improving their practical decision-making and communication skills. Third, by combining online self-directed learning (including cases, discussion forum and reflective journal), offline interactive classroom and teacher's instruction, the online-offline teaching mode based on integration promotes the integration of independent study and cooperation. This combination creates a seamless, multi-channel learning experience that supports diverse learning needs.

The proposed teaching plan has strong feasibility. It makes good use of online and offline learning resources and can adjust the balance between virtual learning and in-person learning to adapt to the differences in class size and the characteristics of the course. Furthermore, the proposed diversified assessment system, which reasonably uses formative evaluation and summative evaluation methods, has strong feasibility. This strategy provides comprehensive feedback on student learning while ensuring the plan's practical implementability in real-world teaching contexts.

### 5.2 Dialogue with the Literature

The design of this plan is based on constructivist theory and relevant domestic and foreign research on blended learning and case-based teaching. Constructivism holds that learners' active engagement in knowledge construction, social interaction, and reflective learning (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). These views are consistent and similar to the design of case analysis, group discussion, role-playing and scenario-based practice in the present plan, which aims to motivate students to learn with initiative, collaboration ability and critical thinking. Research results of international studies showed that blended learning models using online resources in combination with face-to-face contextual interaction help learners to construct knowledge and develop capability (Vaughan et al., 2013). The design of diversified assessment is based on the principles of formative assessment, which stresses the importance of process-oriented feedback in facilitating learners' knowledge construction and capability development (Black & Wiliam, 2009). In summary, this reform plan is based on the core ideas of constructivism in terms of its theoretical basis, methodological design and assessment system, offering solid theoretical support to the reform of case-based teaching in social work education.

### 5.3 Limitations of the Plan

Though the plan shows innovation and feasibility with the support of constructivism, there are still some limitations. First, the effectiveness of case analysis and practice based on scenarios may be affected by teachers' practical guidance ability and level of proficiency in using technology. It is recommended that *Introduction to Social Work* be taught by teachers with both solid theoretical knowledge and practical experience to ensure the quality of *Introduction to Social Work*. Second, students differ in their motivation and engagement as well as their

ability to learn online in a self-directed way. It is necessary to set up a good system to monitor students' online learning to ensure effective learning and promote consistent learning effectiveness. Third, the plan is based on the experience of one discipline or one class. Its implementation in different disciplines or even at the university level may need further optimization of course content, teaching methods and assessment system to ensure effectiveness, relevance and feasibility.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

Guided by constructivism, this study addresses the issues in case-based teaching of the *Introduction to Social Work* course, including passive learning and insufficient interaction, outdated cases and content in teaching, limited and one-dimensional assessment. A systematic teaching reform plan is proposed, with three elements as follows: Curriculum content reconstruction, adding case repository to achieve deep integration of theoretical knowledge and practical contexts. Innovative teaching methods, incorporating case analysis, group collaboration and peer evaluation, scenario-based volunteer practice, and a blended online-offline teaching model to enhance students' active learning, collaborative skills, and social practice abilities. Diversified assessment system, integrating formative and summative evaluation to strengthen students' reflective learning and self-regulation capabilities.

The theoretical basis of the reform plan is firmly rooted in the core principles of constructivism, namely learner-centredness, knowledge construction through social interaction, and emphasis on contextualised and reflective learning. The plan also draws on domestic and international research on blended learning, case-based teaching, and formative assessment, providing strong theoretical support and practical feasibility for the proposed teaching reform.

### 6.2 Recommendations

Continuous improvement of teacher training and professional development should be focused on training teachers in constructivist instruction, case-based teaching methods, and online-offline blended instruction to improve teachers' capacity in designing and implementing student-centered teaching. Second, systematic student learning support should be put in place. This includes providing online resources and technical support and assistance, and vigorously motivating students to engage in discussion and case analysis. The ultimate goal should be to ensure that students with different abilities can all benefit equally from the teaching. It is recommended to establish a process for the continuous optimization of the plan. This mechanism should involve the regular collection of student feedback and learning data, which will then be used to iteratively refine teaching methods, case content, and assessment approaches. The ultimate aim is to ensure that the educational reform remains dynamic, contextually relevant, and effective.

In summary, the teaching reform plan developed in this study enriches both the content and teaching methods of the *Introduction to Social Work* course. It responds to new requirements of social work education after the establishment of the Party's Department of Social Work. It provides theoretical basis and reference for cultivating students' practical competencies, social interaction skills, and critical thinking skills.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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