

Dilemmas and Responses to Social Work Education in the Context of the Digital Age

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Abstract: With the development of digital technology, social work education in China is entering a new period of high-quality development. However, in the context of the digital era, the development of social work education in China is still facing a number of dilemmas, such as the teachers' group facing the digital survival dilemma, the dilemma of separating the theory and the practice of social work education in the digital era, and the weak emotional continuity of social work students. In order to promote the development of social work education in China, based on the above analysed dilemmas, the following coping strategies are proposed: (1) Intellectual teaching empowerment: to improve teachers' digital literacy. (2) Practice empowerment: social work education needs to return to daily life. (3) Emotional empowerment: to carry out social work emotional education. (4) Technology empowerment: rational use of the advantages of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Digital Age; Social Work Education; Coping Strategies

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of information technology, today's society has fully entered the digital age. Digital technology has not only changed people's way of life and mode of work, but also had a profound impact on the field of education. Social work education, as an important way to train professional social workers, is facing a series of challenges in the context of the digital era. How to adapt to the needs of the digital era, innovate the mode of social work education, and improve the quality and effect of education has become an urgent problem in the current field of social work education.

The development of social work education in China has gone through many stages, such as

"restoration and construction" and "rapid development". Since the "Madian Conference" in 1987, the state confirmed the status of social work as a discipline^[1]. In the same year, Peking University and other colleges and universities established social work majors, and since then many colleges and universities across the country have opened related majors, marking the formal restoration and reconstruction of social work education in China. As of 2019, China's social work education has undergone great changes and achieved a quantitative leap, with the number of colleges and universities that have already offered undergraduate education in social work reaching 348 and 155 colleges and universities that have offered master's degree education in social work. At present, social work education is still in a period of rapid development. 2023 The Party and State Institutional Reform Programme announced the formation of the Central Ministry of Social Work in March 2023, which is another major step forward in the development of social work in China^[2]. It is undeniable that social work education in mainland China has indeed made many achievements since its reconstruction and after more than a few decades of development. However, in today's context of rapid development of digital technology, social work education is still faced with the problems of homogenisation and traditionalisation of teaching modes and methods, binary fragmentation of theories and practices, and insufficient persistence of the professional emotions of social work students.

In the digital age, the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is characterised by convenience and efficiency. Social work education also needs to keep pace with the times, make full use of the advantages brought about by digital technology, and innovate educational modes and methods to meet the growing social demand for professional social workers. However, the reality is that social

work education currently faces many challenges in the process of digital transformation. Firstly, educational concepts lag behind the development of the times, and some educators still stick to the traditional teaching concepts, which is fundamentally due to the failure to fully understand the impact of digital technology on the field of education; secondly, there is the problem of a single teaching mode and teaching method, which lacks interactivity and practicability, and it is difficult to satisfy the learning needs of the students in the context of the digital era; lastly, in the context of the rapid development of science and technology, and the pace of life is becoming faster, social work education is too "simple", and it is not easy to meet the needs of the students. At the same time, social work education is too "rationalized", the "emotional" quality of social workers and social work students is lacking, and social work is a kind of emotional labour^[3], so there is a lack of original professional emotion in social work education. Problems.

2. Literature Review

Since the restoration and reconstruction of the discipline, China's social work profession has made great achievements, but still faces many practical problems, mainly manifested in the relatively low maturity of the academic system construction, relatively weak faculty, the professionalism of the discipline practice to be strengthened, the value of the discipline is not presented to a high degree, and the rapid expansion of the development of professional education has produced a number of occupational problems and so on^[4]. At present, the dilemmas faced by the academic community about social work education are mainly focused on the following aspects. First of all, in the process of social work education, there are certain difficulties in the transmission of social work values, on the one hand, values are not knowledge^[5], contemporary social work education is based on the transmission of theoretical knowledge, on the other hand, the current social work education is based on the teacher's unidirectional transmission^[6], and the students are passive acceptance, which is not conducive to the formation of their own social work values. In the face of these dilemmas, Yang Hui created a path of values cultivation with the main link of embodied contexts,

capturing values, transforming values, and reinforcing values^[7]; secondly, in the context of the construction of new liberal arts disciplines, the lagging of theory behind practice has become a structural dilemma that affects the high-quality development of social work education^[8]. China's social work education has the limitation of not closely combining teaching and practice, so social work education should return to the community, teaching and learning, and deal with the organic connection between a priori theory and local practice^[1]. In addition, China's social work education has entered a new stage of development, and should overcome the challenges of the three aspects of "teaching", "learning", and "use", and focus on the social reality^[9]; Finally, there is a lack of emotional education for social work in China. There is a lack of social work emotional education in China. On the one hand, both teachers and students have the problem of lack of original professional emotions in social work. On the other hand, social work professional emotion cultivation is not enough, and some colleges and universities have not created a good emotion teaching environment. In addition, due to the lack of original professional emotion and insufficient follow-up emotion cultivation, there is a problem of weak emotion continuity in social work^[3].

At present, digital technology is widespread in China's social governance and people's lives, and digital social work has a certain impact on the traditional social work service relationship, but the two belong to a mutually complementary relationship^[10]. Some scholars believe that artificial intelligence injects new opportunities to social work while also bringing real challenges such as the limitation of service audience under the digital divide, the lack of adaptability of social workers in the development of technology, the ethical risk of social work under the rationality of technology, and the lag of social work research in technological innovation, etc., and that overcoming the above problems is the top priority for the development of the quality of China's social work under the digital era^[11]. Wang Hongbo argues how digital social work practice is feasible in the field of children's social work from the dimension of digital intimacy^[12]. In addition, the development of social work education centred on "digital

human rights" also needs to be put on the agenda^[13]. Wang Yuxiang focuses on youth social workers, digitalisation has brought about changes in various aspects, and youth, as the main witnesses of the digital era, are more affected by digital technology, youth social workers are faced with the challenges of knowing and understanding youth service users, and applying traditional youth social work theories and methods^[14]. How to promote the high-quality development of China's social work profession and social work education in the digital era is an important issue of concern today, so this paper starts from the reality and analyses the dilemmas and coping strategies faced by social work education in the era when digital intelligence continues to develop rapidly.

3. The Realistic Dilemma of Social Work Education in the Digital Age

According to the Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Civil Affairs in 2021, as of the end of 2021, the number of licensed social workers nationwide had increased by 1.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent.

Reaching 737,000 people, the number of social work professionals is growing rapidly, and the effectiveness of professional education and practice is remarkable^[15]. Social work professional education is in the stage of rapid development as far as we can see. However, with the arrival of the digital era, traditional social work education faces certain dilemmas and challenges. For how to use intelligent digital models to promote the development of social work education and how to better integrate theory and practice in the digital era, and how to cultivate the persistent professional emotions of social work students, further discussion is still needed. Combined with previous related studies, at the current stage, this paper believes that social work education mainly faces the following dilemmas.

3.1 Teachers' Community Facing the Digital Survival Dilemma

3.1.1 Imbalance between digital literacy and pedagogical needs

In the digital age, teachers need to possess a certain degree of digital literacy in order to carry out teaching activities effectively. However, at present, there is a general problem of insufficient digital literacy among teachers

of social work. On the one hand, some teachers have limited knowledge of and ability to apply digital technology, making it difficult to integrate digital technology into teaching practice. For example, in classroom teaching, they still adopt the traditional didactic teaching methods and lack the use of digital tools such as multimedia teaching software and online teaching platforms, which leads to poor teaching results. On the other hand, teachers lack the ability to acquire and integrate digital resources, and are unable to provide students with rich, high-quality learning resources. In the digital era, there are a large number of social work-related resources on the Internet, but teachers lack the ability to retrieve and filter information, making it difficult to extract valuable content for teaching.

3.1.2 Difficulty in changing teaching concepts and models

For the time being, the learning styles and needs of students have changed greatly, and they are more inclined to acquire knowledge through online learning and independent learning. This requires teachers to change their teaching concepts and modes from the traditional teacher-centred teaching mode to the student-centred teaching mode. However, many social work teachers are deeply influenced by traditional teaching concepts and are accustomed to adopting indoctrination teaching methods, which are difficult to adapt to the teaching requirements of the digital era. In addition, some social work teachers stick to the existing knowledge system and are not innovative enough. Textbooks have been taking casework, group work and community work as the three major methods of social work^[9], but with the development of theories, the methods should be further updated.

3.2 The Dilemma of Separating Theory and Practice in Social Work Education in the Digital Age

3.2.1 Disconnection between theoretical teaching and practical teaching

Social work is a highly practical discipline, and theoretical teaching and practical teaching should be closely integrated. However, in actual teaching, there is often a disconnection between theory teaching and practice teaching^[16]. On the one hand, theoretical teaching pays too much attention to the transmission of knowledge, lacks the analysis

and discussion of practical cases, and it is difficult for students to combine theoretical knowledge with practical work. On the other hand, professional education focuses on text teaching, and in social work practice courses, although students learn the theories and methods of social work, they don't know how to apply these theories and methods to solve practical problems in the process of internship. As Professor CHEUNG Ho-ching said, "The current teaching activities are specialised local practice rather than localised professional practice. We should not take western professional knowledge and methodological skills and use them as they are, but should continuously internalise and apply them practically based on the local Chinese practical situation."^[1]

3.2.2 Impact of digital technology on practical teaching and learning

With the arrival of the digital era, digital technologies such as virtual reality provide new means and methods for practical teaching, but also bring new challenges. On the one hand, there are differences between the practice environment simulated by digital technology and real social work scenarios, and it is difficult for students to get real practice experience in the virtual environment. On the other hand, over-reliance on digital technology for practice teaching may lead to a lack of communication and interaction with real service users, which in turn affects the improvement of students' practice ability. In the author's opinion, although some advanced simulation practical training software for social work majors can simulate various scenarios of social work, students often only operate according to the process set by the software, lacking the understanding of the real needs and feelings of service users.

3.2.3 Insufficient resources for practical teaching

In the digital age, social work practice is demanding more and more teaching resources. However, at present, the practice teaching resources of the social work profession are relatively insufficient. On the one hand, the number of practice teaching bases is limited, which makes it difficult to meet the practice needs of students. Some schools lack courses on social work practice, and theoretical education is carried out throughout, which is inconsistent with the principle of combining

theory and practice. On the other hand, the practice teaching teachers are weak, and there is a lack of social work professionals with rich practical experience to serve as practice instructors. There is also a lack of funds for practice teaching, which leads to problems such as outdated practice teaching equipment and difficulties in carrying out practice programmes.

3.3 Weak Emotional Continuity Among Social Work Students

3.3.1 Lack of professional identity

In the digital age, social information spreads rapidly, and a variety of career information floods students' vision. As a relatively new profession, the social work major has relatively low social awareness and recognition, resulting in some students' lack of identification with the profession. Some students choose social work major not out of their own interests and aspirations, but because of reasons such as transfer, which leads to their lack of enthusiasm and initiative in the learning process. At the same time, in the professional learning, students have the idea of "pragmatism", and their attention is focused on how to get a job with a considerable income^[16], ignoring the connotation and value of social work itself.

3.3.2 Insufficient professional emotional engagement

Social work is a profession that requires a high degree of emotional engagement, and social workers need to build trusting relationships with their clients and care for and help them solve problems. However, in the digital age, students are influenced by the virtual world and have less emotional experience and concern for the real world. Some students just complete their work tasks mechanically during their internships and lack emotional care and commitment to their service recipients. In addition, the fast-paced life and competitive pressure in the digital age also make it difficult for students to calmly focus on the study and practice of the social work profession, resulting in a lack of professional emotional engagement.

4. Paths to Reconstructing Social Work Education in the Digital Age

4.1 Smart Teaching: Enhancing Teachers'

Digital Literacy

Strengthen the training of teachers in digital technology and improve their ability to use digital technology for teaching and scientific research. Firstly, build a systematic training system, including the application of intelligent technology, online course design, etc., to improve teachers' digital skills; secondly, optimise the digital resources and support environment, build a smart classroom, develop a professional digital resource library, and provide teachers with a wealth of teaching tools and resources; lastly, encourage teachers to carry out research on digital teaching, and explore the digital teaching models and methods suitable for teaching the social work profession. In addition, establish an incentive mechanism for teachers' digital teaching, incorporate digital literacy into the evaluation system of teachers, and stimulate teachers' self-improvement.

4.2 Empowering Practice: Social Work Education Needs to Return to Everyday Life

In the context of the digital age, social work education should adhere to the focus on service users, return to daily life and solve people's real problems^[1]. The current view of knowledge widely adopted in social work education and the corresponding teaching methods are based on the mainstream school of science dominated by positivism, functionalism and structuralism. While positivism is concerned with objectivity, the real-world problems addressed by the social work profession are often fraught with uncertainty and complexity. Therefore, in the era of rapid development of artificial intelligence, the social work profession should still aim at solving real problems and promoting the integration of theory and practice. Increase the proportion of practical teaching courses in the educational process and optimise the interface between theory and practice courses. In theoretical teaching, practical cases are introduced to guide students to use theoretical knowledge to analyse and solve practical problems. In practical teaching, the guidance of students' theoretical knowledge is strengthened, so that students can deepen their understanding and mastery of theoretical knowledge in practice.

4.3 Emotional Empowerment: Developing

Emotional Education for Social Work

Altruism is an essential attribute of social work, which is known as "the art of loving practice", but there is a lack of "love" in the development of social work nowadays. Some social work teachers and students have difficulty in "loving people as they already are". Therefore, we need to realise the return of "love" in the emotional education of social work, and cultivate students' love of service^[3]. The classroom is the place of interaction between teachers and students, and it is an important field for the formation of professional emotional value. Therefore, on the one hand, teachers should explain to students the trend of the development of the social work profession and the advantages of the future development, so as to stimulate students' confidence in the profession. On the other hand, it is necessary to create a good internship atmosphere for students, so that social work students can form professional identity in the process of practice and experience professional emotions in the process of helping service users. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the education on professional values of social work, let students deeply understand the professional concepts and values of social work through a variety of forms, and enhance students' sense of professional identity and mission of social work.

4.4 Technology Enablement: Rationalising the Benefits of Artificial Intelligence

In the digital era, social work education should make full use of artificial intelligence technology to promote the innovation of teaching mode. Firstly, with the help of virtual simulation and artificial intelligence, social work practice scenarios are constructed so that students can improve their ability to cope with complex situations in the simulated environment and enhance the effect of practical teaching. Secondly, make reasonable use of the information and knowledge reserves of generative artificial intelligence to rapidly acquire relevant professional knowledge in learning and build a systematic intervention in order to better provide services for service users.

5. Summary

The digital age has brought new opportunities and challenges to social work education.

Currently, social work education faces many dilemmas at the teacher level, the separation of theory and practice, and the problem of students' professional emotions. In order to cope with these dilemmas, social work education needs to actively adapt to the requirements of the development of the digital era, strengthen the training of teachers' digital literacy, reform the curriculum system, strengthen the integration of theory and practice, and cultivate students' professional emotions. Only in this way can we improve the quality of social work education, cultivate high-quality social work professionals who can adapt to the needs of the digital era, and make greater contributions to the development and progress of society. In the future development, social work education also needs to continue to explore and innovate in order to better cope with the various challenges brought by the digital era and achieve its own sustainable development.

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