The Positioning of the Social Anthropology Course in Social Work Education and the Practical Innovations in Teaching Methods

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Abstract: *The Social Anthropology course plays a crucial role in social work education by fostering students' cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural communication, and social observation skills. However, current teaching practices face challenges such as unclear positioning, vague objectives, and outdated methods. This paper addresses these issues by clarifying the academic value and practical significance of Social Anthropology in social work education. It proposes a SMART-based framework for designing cognitive, skill-based, and affective learning objectives, alongside the integration of blended teaching methods, including case studies, fieldwork, flipped classrooms, and simulated scenarios. Practical results indicate that these reforms enhance students' theoretical analysis and practical competencies while strengthening their cultural sensitivity and social responsibility. Future recommendations include adopting more flexible and hybrid teaching approaches to further integrate theory and practice.*

Keywords: Social Anthropology, Social Work Education, Teaching Method Innovation, Cultural Sensitivity, Blended Learning.

1. Introduction

The Social Anthropology course plays a vital role in social work education by providing a theoretical foundation for understanding diverse cultures and social behaviors and fostering cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural communication skills [1]. However, its teaching practice faces significant challenges, including unclear positioning, undefined objectives, and outdated methods. The course's role within the academic framework is poorly defined, with much of its content rooted in Western theories that fail to align with China's cultural and practical needs. Furthermore, its limited connection to core social work competencies creates a disconnect between the curriculum and professional practice. Teaching objectives often emphasize theoretical knowledge [2] while neglecting critical skills such as cross-cultural communication and cultural sensitivity, making it difficult to meet the complex demands of social work practice. Traditional lecture-based methods dominate, with insufficient use of real-world cases, limited classroom interaction, and inadequate practical engagement, leaving students unprepared to address issues in a multicultural society. These shortcomings diminish the course's effectiveness and weaken its role within the social work curriculum.

Building on the author's extensive teaching experience and continuous exploration, this paper aims to analyze the academic value and practical significance of the Social Anthropology course, establishing its core position in social work education. By refining teaching objectives, it proposes a training direction better aligned with professional practice needs. The paper also explores specific pathways for implementing innovative teaching methods, offering practical strategies for course improvement. Through these efforts, it seeks to enhance the social work curriculum and improve teaching quality, effectively addressing societal needs and advancing professional development.

2. The Role and Significance of the Social Anthropology Course in Social Work Education

With the advancement of the professionalization and localization of social work in China, the importance of the Social Anthropology course in cultivating students' cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural communication skills, and social observation abilities has become increasingly evident. Its unique theoretical framework and practical tools not only offer students a core perspective for understanding and analyzing social phenomena but also provide new directions for the development and enhancement of the social work curriculum.

2.1 The Theoretical Link Between Social Anthropology and Social Work

Social Anthropology and Social Work share a close theoretical connection, with the Social Anthropology course playing a significant role in helping students develop cultural understanding and social behavior analysis skills. As a discipline that studies diverse cultures and social phenomena, Social Anthropology focuses on cultural interpretation, cross-cultural perspectives, and social structure analysis, equipping students with theoretical tools to identify and analyze complex social phenomena. Social Work, on the other hand, aims to address social issues and enhance individual and group well-being. The integration of the two disciplines enables students to leverage the theoretical framework of Social Anthropology to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural contexts and social environments of service users, fostering their ability to analyze and solve problems holistically.

This interdisciplinary approach not only broadens students'

academic perspectives on social work but also provides strong theoretical support for their practical endeavors. For instance, the principle of cultural relativism helps students develop an inclusive attitude toward diverse cultures, avoiding cultural bias and adopting an open mindset when engaging with individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds. This foundation serves as a solid theoretical basis for students as they prepare for future careers in social work.

2.2 The Practical Functions and Supportive Role of the Social Anthropology Course

At the practical level, the Social Anthropology course provides students with essential tools for observing social issues and designing intervention strategies, utilizing cross-cultural comparison, fieldwork techniques, and social structure analysis. Cross-cultural comparison allows students to deeply understand the cultural backgrounds and needs of service users in multicultural contexts, enabling the creation of more targeted service plans. Fieldwork techniques further support students in gathering firsthand information through direct observation, helping to uncover the cultural and structural factors underlying social problems and to develop precise intervention strategies.

The course also emphasizes the principle of cultural relativism, guiding students to respect diverse cultural values, avoid biases or misunderstandings, and build trust-based relationships with service users. Through social structure analysis, students are encouraged to situate individual issues within broader societal contexts, identifying systemic challenges such as unequal resource distribution. This approach combines micro-level interventions with macro-level advocacy to provide sustainable support. Together, these methods enhance students' ability to navigate complex social environments, improve cross-cultural communication and social observation skills, and lay a strong foundation for effective social work practice.

3. Designing Teaching Objectives for the Social Anthropology Course

The teaching objectives of the Social Anthropology course are designed to develop students' core competencies and qualities to address social issues in multicultural contexts. Closely aligned with the professional skills required in social work, the course equips students with foundational theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and cross-cultural sensitivity. Guided by the SMART principles (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) [3], the teaching objectives are structured across three levels: cognitive, skill-based, and affective. These levels are interrelated, collectively fostering students' professional competence and holistic development.

3.1 Cognitive Level: Mastering Theories and Analytical Methods in Social Anthropology

At the cognitive level, the course aims to equip students with a solid understanding of the fundamental theories, core concepts, and research methods of social anthropology, including cultural relativism, cross-cultural comparison, and fieldwork. Students are expected to comprehend the

relationship between culture and social structure and apply anthropological analytical frameworks to examine social issues. Through theoretical learning and case analysis, students will develop a strong theoretical foundation.

In terms of assessment, students are required to complete a social phenomenon analysis report to demonstrate their understanding of cultural and social issues. For example, students might analyze telecommunications fraud as a cultural phenomenon, applying cultural relativism and social structure analysis to explore its underlying cultural and social drivers. They would also examine its impact on social trust and interaction patterns.

3.2 Skill Level: Developing Cultural Comparison and Social Observation Abilities

At the skill level, the course focuses on developing students' social observation and cultural comparison abilities. Students will learn to conduct small-scale fieldwork, analyze the influence of cultural contexts on behavior patterns, and design targeted intervention strategies. Additionally, they will acquire cross-cultural communication skills and enhance their practical capabilities in multicultural settings through role-playing and scenario simulations.

For assessment, students are required to complete two practical tasks to demonstrate their mastery of social observation and intervention strategy design skills. Using telecommunications fraud as an example, the first task involves producing a fieldwork report. Students will design and conduct a study on telecommunications fraud, analyzing how individuals from different cultural backgrounds perceive and respond to the risk of fraud. The second task requires students to participate in a simulated telecommunications fraud scenario, focusing on the psychological and behavioral responses of both perpetrators and victims. This activity aims to enhance students' social observation skills and their ability to design and implement effective intervention strategies. These practical exercises comprehensively evaluate students' analytical abilities regarding social phenomena and their problem-solving skills in cross-cultural contexts.

3.3 Affective Level: Fostering Cross-Cultural Sensitivity and Social Empathy

At the affective level, the course emphasizes cultivating students' sensitivity to cultural differences and empathy for service users. Through reflective learning and simulations of multicultural contexts, students are encouraged to recognize and overcome cultural biases, fostering a professional attitude of respect and inclusivity. This level aims to enhance students' psychological adaptability and professional competence when working with individuals and groups from diverse cultural backgrounds.

For assessment, students are required to submit a personal reflection report evaluating their growth in cross-cultural sensitivity and empathy. For example, by analyzing cases of telecommunications fraud, students will explore how individuals from different cultural backgrounds perceive risks, develop empathy for the psychological states of victims, and reflect on their own cultural biases when addressing similar

issues.

This goal-oriented design ensures students achieve comprehensive development in theoretical knowledge, skill training, and emotional growth. Through systematic learning, students can effectively apply the theories and methods of social anthropology to social work practice, developing a holistic perspective and professional competence. This provides scientific support for addressing complex social issues. As a result, the Social Anthropology course plays a pivotal role within the social work curriculum, laying a solid foundation for cultivating social workers with cultural adaptability and social analytical skills.

4. Innovating Teaching Methods: Dual Emphasis on Interaction and Practice

To address the lack of interaction and the disconnect between theory and practice in existing teaching methods, the first author has implemented diverse and innovative approaches in the Social Anthropology course. These include case-based teaching to enhance practical application understanding, fieldwork methods to develop social observation skills, flipped classrooms to promote active learning and in-depth discussions, and simulated scenarios to foster cross-cultural communication and problem-solving skills. By combining theory with practice, these methods aim to invigorate classroom dynamics while equipping students with the comprehensive competencies needed for social work in multicultural contexts. This approach provides a more engaging and participatory learning experience, laying a solid foundation for students' future careers in social work.

4.1 Case-Based Teaching: Exploring Pathways from Theory to Practice

The application of case-based teaching in the Social Anthropology course aims to develop students' ability to apply theory, gain insight into social issues, and enhance critical thinking. This method integrates abstract theories with real-world social phenomena, allowing students to engage in interactive and participatory learning experiences. Its core strengths lie in fostering classroom interaction, emphasizing a practice-oriented approach, and establishing an organic link between theory and practice. Carefully selected cases with real-world relevance and challenges not only stimulate students' interest in learning but also enable them to analyze and address issues from an anthropological perspective.

While teaching the practical value of Social Anthropology, the first author used the global issue of illegal organ trafficking to vividly demonstrate its applied significance and humanistic concern. The lecture began with images of human organs priced on the global black market and news reports on China's crackdown on organ trafficking, capturing students' attention and sparking discussions on the cultural context, socio-economic drivers, and human rights implications of organ trafficking. The first author introduced the "Organs Watch" organization [4], established by anthropologists researching organ trade, to illustrate the practical value of anthropological studies in addressing global issues and the ethical responsibilities of researchers in promoting social justice. Through step-by-step guidance, students progressed

from understanding the surface-level phenomenon to analyzing its deeper cultural and social drivers, ultimately gaining a profound appreciation of Social Anthropology's role in addressing complex social issues while enhancing their cross-cultural analytical skills and social responsibility.

4.2 Fieldwork Method: Cultivating In-Depth Observation and Problem-Analysis Skills

Fieldwork, a core research method in Social Anthropology, emphasizes understanding cultural and social phenomena through immersive fieldwork [5]. Its teaching objective is to equip students with the ability to uncover the internal logic of specific cultural or social phenomena using techniques such as participant observation and in-depth interviews. In practice, fieldwork aims to cultivate students' social observation, problem-analysis, and cross-cultural adaptation skills, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. By emphasizing practicality, this method requires students to master the entire process, from research design to data collection and analysis. It not only enhances their sensitivity to social phenomena but also lays a solid foundation for future professional practice.

In classroom teaching, the first author designed a practice-oriented assignment using a field study on the Mosuo people's walking marriage custom as a case study. Students, under the instructor's guidance, were required to submit a fieldwork proposal based on methods taught in class, such as participant observation and interview techniques. The assignment simulated a one-month summer fieldwork trip, requiring students to define research objectives, plan the study's scope, draft interview outlines, and devise strategies for building trust with respondents. Additionally, the proposal had to detail data collection methods, such as how to take observational notes in different settings and address potential cultural conflicts. This assignment not only allowed students to apply classroom knowledge to practical issues but also helped them develop initial skills in cultural analysis, research design, and data collection. Moreover, it enhanced their understanding of Social Anthropology's unique role in fostering cultural understanding and addressing social problems.

4.3 Flipped Classroom: Inspiring Active Learning and Cultural Understanding

The flipped classroom is a student-centered teaching approach that shifts traditional knowledge transmission to pre-class learning, allowing classroom time to focus on interactive discussions, case analyses, and problem-solving [6]. This method emphasizes active participation and deep learning, making it particularly suitable for understanding and applying complex concepts in Social Anthropology courses. By engaging in pre-class self-study of theoretical content, students can deepen their understanding of cultural phenomena through teacher-facilitated discussions during class. This approach not only enhances classroom interaction but also fosters critical thinking and cross-cultural analytical skills.

When teaching the topic of "Mechanisms of Cultural Change," the first author employed a flipped classroom model, using the

global spread of chili peppers and their influence on the development of Sichuan's spicy cuisine as an example. Before class, students were assigned to read anthropological studies on the cultural diffusion of chili peppers and watch a documentary tracing their history from the Americas to Asia and China. In class, the instructor guided students in an in-depth discussion on the acceptance process of chili peppers in Sichuan and its connections to cultural selectivity, geographic environment, economic development, and cultural characteristics. Through group discussions and case analyses, students gained a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of "diffusion," "selection," and "adaptation" in cultural change, applying theoretical concepts to analyze specific social phenomena using the formation of Sichuan cuisine as a case study. This teaching method shifted students from passively receiving knowledge to actively exploring questions, significantly enhancing classroom engagement and learning outcomes. It enabled students to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of cultural change and its social significance, providing an effective practical model for teaching reform in Social Anthropology courses.

4.4 Simulated Scenarios: Creating Cultural Experiences and Problem-Solving Contexts

The simulated scenario method is a teaching approach that engages students in learning through role-playing or experiential activities within constructed contexts or situations [7]. In Social Anthropology education, this method aims to immerse students in specific cultural contexts, allowing them to observe and experience different cultural phenomena firsthand. This approach helps students understand the internal logic of social and cultural phenomena while stimulating their awareness and reflection on diverse cultures and lifestyles. By designing simulated scenarios, students can step beyond their own experiential boundaries to explore the cultural characteristics and formation processes of social structures in various societal contexts. This method not only enhances classroom interaction and participation but also fosters critical thinking and cross-cultural adaptability, providing a solid foundation for analyzing social issues.

When teaching the topic of "Livelihood Patterns," the first author employed the simulated scenario method, using immersive questions and visual contexts to help students understand the deeper connections between livelihood patterns and lifestyles. The class began with questions tied to students' personal experiences, such as "What do your parents rely on to make a living and raise you?" "How do you view your parents' way of living?" and "What are your aspirations for your future livelihood?" These questions prompted students to reflect on the relationship between livelihood patterns and lifestyles based on their own experiences. To create vivid visual contexts, the author presented photographs of labor scenes, such as the terraced fields of Longji in Guangxi, China, a young girl carrying firewood in rural Vietnam, and images of urban white-collar women from the Chinese film Nothing But Thirty. These visuals illustrated the sharp contrasts between traditional agrarian societies and modern urban life. After observing these scenarios, students assumed roles from different social backgrounds and engaged in discussions, exploring questions like, "Which lifestyle do I prefer?" and "How do these livelihood patterns shape specific

cultures and social structures?" Building on these discussions, the author guided students in combining their contextual observations with theoretical analysis, highlighting that "An individual's way of making a living directly shapes their way of life, while the livelihood pattern of a group or society forms its cultural foundation, giving rise to systems of economy, politics, and social stratification." By engaging in observation and role-playing through the simulated scenario method, students not only deepened their understanding of livelihood patterns but also appreciated the essential role of Social Anthropology in uncovering the nature of social and cultural phenomena.

5.   Conclusion and Outlook

This paper explores the teaching reform of the Social Anthropology course within the social work curriculum, focusing on course positioning, teaching objectives, and innovative teaching methods. By clarifying the academic value and practical significance of Social Anthropology in social work education, the study proposes SMART-based teaching objectives and introduces four teaching methods: case-based teaching, fieldwork, flipped classrooms, and simulated scenarios. These approaches aim to address the lack of interaction and the disconnect between theory and practice in current teaching practices. The proposed reforms not only enhance students' theoretical analysis and practical skills but also strengthen their cross-cultural sensitivity and sense of social responsibility, providing vital support for the further integration of Social Anthropology into the social work curriculum.

To address the utilitarian mindset of some students who undervalue theoretical learning and focus solely on the practical application of knowledge, teaching reform should adopt a blended online-offline approach. This method can guide students to recognize the importance of theoretical learning in enhancing cross-cultural sensitivity, problem-analysis skills, and social practice capabilities. Online teaching can utilize short videos, animated lessons, and interactive quizzes to deliver core theories, such as "cultural relativism" or "fieldwork methods," in a concise and visually engaging manner, enabling students to independently grasp foundational knowledge. Offline teaching, on the other hand, incorporates practical activities like scenario simulations, role-playing, and case analyses to help students apply learned concepts to specific social contexts, experiencing the practical value of theory firsthand.

In teaching practices at general universities, local resources and practical needs can be incorporated into the design of relatable case studies and field observation activities to strengthen the integration of theory and practice. This flexible teaching approach not only enhances students' interest and engagement but also facilitates the deeper integration of Social Anthropology into social work education. Moreover, it provides robust support for cultivating social work professionals equipped to meet the evolving demands of the modern era.

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