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Digital Reconstruction of Empathy and Praxis: A Mixed-Methods Investigation into the Effectiveness of Online Social Work Experimental Teaching Strategies

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Abstract: The unanticipated onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as a profound exogenous shock to the global ecosystem of higher education, precipitating a radical migration from traditional pedagogical environments to digital modalities. While theoretical disciplines have adapted to this "Emergency Remote Teaching" with relative fluidity, practice-based professions such as social work face a unique ontological crisis. Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and utilizing the specific reform context of the School of Shandong Technology and Business University, this study empirically investigates the efficacy and optimization strategies of online experimental teaching for the "Group Social Work" curriculum. Adopting a rigorous convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research synthesizes quantitative data from 165 undergraduate respondents with thick qualitative descriptions derived from semi-structured interviews with 25 participants. The empirical results unveil a complex "Digital Paradox": while purely online instruction successfully transmits declarative knowledge, it creates a significant "Empathy Gap" that hinders the cultivation of intersubjective professional skills. However, the data further suggests that a "Blended Experiential Learning" model, when supported by high "Teaching Presence" and "Social Presence," can effectively mitigate these deficits. Drawing upon the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, this paper proposes a systemic optimization strategy—the "Three-Dimensional Reconstruction Model"—integrating pedagogical process re-engineering, technological affordance maximization, and developmental assessment reform. The findings offer a critical roadmap for the modernization of social work education in the post-pandemic era, arguing for a shift from "virtual replication" to "digital transformation."

Keywords: Social Work Education; Experimental Teaching; Digital Empathy; Community of Inquiry; Mixed-Methods Research; Pedagogical Reform

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1.Introduction

1.1 The Digital Imperative and the Crisis of Corporeal Presence

The trajectory of higher education in the twenty-first century has been irrevocably altered by the intersection of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the global public health crisis triggered by COVID-19. Since early 2020, the mandate from the Chinese Ministry of Education to "Suspend Classes Without Suspending Learning" has catalyzed the largest-scale experiment in online education in human history. This digital migration, while preserving the continuity of academic instruction,

has simultaneously exposed the fragility of practice-based pedagogies. Social work, as an applied social science rooted in humanism and social solidarity, relies fundamentally on the "use of self" as a therapeutic instrument. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the China Association for Social Work Education have consistently emphasized that professional competence is a holistic integration of values, knowledge, and skills that must be cultivated through direct, embodied interaction.

In the traditional "Group Social Work" laboratory, learning is situated in the physical proximity of bodies in space. Students learn to read micro-expressions, interpret the shifting energy of a room, and modulate their own non-verbal communication to build rapport. The migration of these intimate interactions to platforms such as Tencent Meeting (VooV Meeting) and Rain Classroom introduces a layer of technological mediation that strips away these essential sensory cues. This phenomenon, which we term "Corporeal Absence," creates a profound pedagogical dilemma. When the client becomes a pixelated image and the group circle becomes a grid of black boxes, the ontological security of the therapeutic space is compromised. The central research problem of this study, therefore, is not merely technical but epistemological: Can the core competencies of social work—specifically empathy, group facilitation, and professional identity—be authentically constructed in a disembodied digital environment? If so, what are the specific mechanisms of transmission, and how can pedagogical strategies be optimized to bridge the digital divide?

1.2 Research Context: The Local Reform Initiative at SBTBU

This inquiry is not conducted in a vacuum but is deeply embedded in the specific institutional context of the School of Shandong Technology and Business University (SBTBU). As one of the pioneering institutions in Shandong Province to establish a social work program, the university has developed a distinctive "Dual-Track" training model that integrates classroom experimentation with community service. Under the leadership of the project host, Zhao Ruifang, and team members Lu Rumin, Zhao Shuliang, and Yang Xiaolong, the department has cultivated a rich ecosystem of practical training platforms. These include the on-campus "Angel Home" service center, which focuses on the resilience of migrant children, and the "Beidou Star" Social Work Service Center, which serves the elderly population.

Prior to the pandemic, these platforms provided a seamless transition from the "Social Work Laboratory" to the real world. However, the recurring waves of the pandemic and the subsequent campus lockdowns severed these physical connections. The teaching team observed a divergence in student performance during the shift to online experimental teaching. While some students demonstrated remarkable digital resilience, utilizing chat functions and virtual backgrounds to create new forms of engagement, others experienced profound alienation and "Zoom fatigue," leading to a fragmentation of their professional identity. This study, funded as a university-level teaching reform project (Project No. F06), aims to systematically evaluate these observations. By moving beyond anecdotal evidence to rigorous empirical analysis, the project seeks to construct a localized, evidence-based model for online social work education that can serve as a reference for similar institutions across China.

1.3 Research Significance and Objectives

The significance of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to the nascent literature on "Digital Social Work" by testing the applicability of Western pedagogical frameworks, such as the Community of Inquiry (CoI), within the specific cultural and institutional context of Chinese higher education. Practically, it provides a set of actionable, data-driven optimization strategies for frontline educators who are struggling to maintain teaching quality in a hybrid learning environment. Policy-wise, it offers empirical evidence to support university administrators in allocating resources for the digital infrastructure required for high-quality experimental teaching. The primary objectives of this research are: (1) to quantitatively measure the impact of different teaching modalities (Pure Online vs. Hybrid vs. Traditional) on students' skill acquisition and professional identity; (2) to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of students and instructors to understand the "black box" of digital interaction; and (3) to develop a comprehensive optimization strategy that harmonizes technological affordances with humanistic professional values.

2.Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Paradigm Shift: From Apprenticeship to Digital Simulation

The historical evolution of social work pedagogy has been characterized by a continuous tension between the "apprenticeship model," which emphasizes immersion in the field, and the "academic model," which prioritizes theoretical rigor [1]. The introduction of "experimental teaching" or "laboratory education" in the late 20th century attempted to bridge this gap by creating controlled environments for skill acquisition. Scholars such as Bogo (2015) and Shulman (2005) have long argued that the "signature pedagogy" of social work involves the simulation of practice situations where students can experiment with professional roles without the risk of harming actual clients [2][3].

However, the integration of digital technology into this signature pedagogy has been met with historical resistance. Prior to 2020, the dominant narrative in social work literature viewed online education with skepticism. Reamer (2013), a leading voice in social work ethics, cautioned that digital practice could compromise confidentiality and boundary management [4]. Critics argued that the "high-touch" nature of the profession was fundamentally incompatible with "high-tech" delivery methods. Nevertheless, the post-pandemic reality has forced a paradigm shift. Recent literature, such as the works of Mishna et al. (2012) and López-Peláez & Marcuello-Servós (2018), has begun to articulate the concept of "e-Social Work." This emerging perspective posits that digital literacy is no longer an optional add-on but a core competency. The ability to build rapport via a screen, to assess a home environment through a webcam, and to manage group dynamics in a chat room are now essential skills for the modern practitioner. This study positions itself at the forefront of this shift, arguing that the goal of online experimental teaching is not merely to replicate the physical classroom, but to leverage the unique affordances of the digital medium—such as anonymity, asynchronous reflection, and recording capabilities—to enhance the learning process.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: The Community of Inquiry (CoI)

To analyze the complex dynamics of interaction in the online experimental course, this study adopts the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer [5]. The CoI framework posits that deep and meaningful learning in an online environment occurs at the intersection of three distinct but interdependent elements: Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Teaching Presence.

Social Presence refers to the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by projecting their individual personalities into the digital space. In the context of the "Group Social Work" course, Social Presence is paramount. It is the digital equivalent of "group cohesion." Without a strong sense of Social Presence, experimental groups devolve into collections of isolated individuals, making the simulation of group dynamics impossible.

Cognitive Presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. For experimental courses, this involves the higher-order thinking skills required to analyze a case, design an intervention, and reflect on the outcome. The challenge in online settings is to move beyond superficial information exchange to deep, critical inquiry.

Teaching Presence involves the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes [6]. In an online setting, the instructor's role shifts from a "sage on the stage" to a "facilitator in the cloud." The instructor must not only deliver content but also actively manage the digital environment, troubleshooting technical issues and fostering a climate of psychological safety. This study hypothesizes that the quality of these three presences directly determines the effectiveness of the online experimental course.

2.3 Experiential Learning Theory in the Virtual Domain

Complementing the CoI framework is Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." [7] The cycle consists of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. In a traditional laboratory setting, this cycle is seamless. However, in an online environment, the "Concrete Experience" is mediated by a screen. Critics argue that "Virtual Simulation" cannot replace the visceral reality of face-to-face interaction. However, proponents suggest that well-designed virtual scenarios can provide a safe, low-stakes environment for students to practice difficult skills. This paper posits that the optimization of online experimental teaching requires a deliberate pedagogical design that ensures all four stages of Kolb's

cycle are activated, utilizing different digital tools for each stage—for example, using Tencent Meeting breakout rooms for experimentation and Rain Classroom discussion boards for asynchronous reflective observation [8].

3.Methodology and Research Design

3.1 Research Design: A Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Approach

Given the complexity of measuring "teaching effectiveness" in a humanistic discipline, a single methodological approach would be insufficient. Therefore, this study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. This approach allows for the concurrent collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, which are then merged for interpretation. The quantitative strand utilizes a quasi-experimental survey design to test causal relationships between teaching modes and learning outcomes, providing breadth and generalizability. The qualitative strand uses a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of the participants, providing depth and nuance. The rationale for this design is that while statistical data can reveal that a difference exists between online and offline learning, only qualitative narratives can explain why and how these differences manifest in the subjective experience of the students.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study was conducted at the School of Shandong Technology and Business University. The target population comprised undergraduate students majoring in Social Work from the cohorts of 2019, 2020, and 2021. These three cohorts represent a unique historical natural experiment: the 2019 cohort experienced the sudden, forced transition to online learning; the 2020 cohort experienced a planned, hybrid model; and the 2021 cohort entered a university environment where digital tools were already normalized. A stratified random sampling method was used to select participants for the quantitative survey. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed via the "Wenjuanxing" platform, and 216 valid responses were retrieved, yielding an effective response rate of 86.4%. The sample consisted of 45 males (20.8%) and 171 females (79.2%), which accurately reflects the gender distribution of the social work discipline in China. For the qualitative component, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 20 students (representing high, medium, and low academic performance) and 5 key instructors (including the project team members) for in-depth semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Instrumentation

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study utilized rigorously developed instruments.

1.The Online Social Work Learning Effectiveness Scale (OSWLES): This instrument was developed specifically for this study by the research team. It is grounded in the CoI framework and the educational standards of the China Association for Social Work Education. The scale comprises four sub-dimensions: Professional Knowledge Acquisition, Practical Skill Application, Professional Identity, and Course Satisfaction. Each item is measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed the four-factor structure, and the Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.892, indicating high internal consistency.

2.General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) - Social Work Adaptation: The standard GSES was adapted to the specific context of social work practice to measure students' confidence in specific tasks, such as facilitating a group discussion online or managing a conflict between group members.

3.Interview Protocol: The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding the participants' experiences. Key questions included: "How does role-playing on Tencent Meeting differ from the physical classroom in terms of your emotional engagement?" "Can you describe a specific moment where you felt disconnected from your group members?" and "How did the instructor support your learning during technical difficulties?"

4.Empirical Results and Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Findings: The Divergence of Knowledge and Skill

The statistical analysis of the survey data provides a nuanced picture of the impact of teaching modes on student learning outcomes. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the means of the three teaching modes: Pure Online (Emergency Remote Teaching), Hybrid Model (Blended Learning), and Traditional (Face-to-Face).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Learning Outcomes Across Teaching Modalities

Dependent Variable	Pure Online (n=72) Mean (SD)	Hybrid Model (n=74) Mean (SD)	Traditional (n=70) Mean (SD)	F-Value	p-Value	Effect Size (η2)
Professional Knowledge	3.82 (0.65)	4.15 (0.58)	3.95 (0.62)	5.67	.004**	0.051
Practical Skill Application	3.45 (0.78)	3.92 (0.69)	4.05 (0.64)	12.34	.000***	0.104
Professional Identity	3.60 (0.72)	3.88 (0.65)	3.98 (0.61)	6.12	.002**	0.054
Course Satisfaction	3.55 (0.80)	4.02 (0.70)	3.90 (0.75)	8.45	.000***	0.073
Social Presence	3.12 (0.85)	3.75 (0.72)	4.10 (0.68)	28.56	.000***	0.211

Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Scale range 1-5.

The data presented in Table 1 reveals a critical dichotomy. In terms of Professional Knowledge Acquisition, the Hybrid Model group scored significantly higher (M=4.15) than both the Pure Online and Traditional groups. This suggests that the online environment is highly effective for the transmission of explicit, declarative knowledge. The use of recorded lectures and digital reading materials allows students to digest theoretical concepts at their own pace, leading to deeper cognitive retention.

However, a different pattern emerges for Practical Skill Application. Here, the Pure Online group scored the lowest (M=3.45), significantly lagging behind the other two groups. This empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that the acquisition of tacit, embodied skills—such as counseling techniques, empathetic responding, and conflict mediation—is hindered in a purely digital environment. The lack of immediate, three-dimensional feedback makes it difficult for students to calibrate their interventions. Notably, the Hybrid Model group achieved scores (M=3.92) that were statistically comparable to the Traditional group (M=4.05), indicating that a well-designed mix of online theory and offline (or intensive online synchronous) practice can achieve near-parity with traditional methods.

The most striking disparity was found in Social Presence, where the Pure Online group scored drastically lower (M=3.12). This confirms the CoI theory that building a sense of community is the most significant challenge in remote education. Without the casual, informal interactions that occur before and after class—the "hallway conversations"—students in the online group felt isolated and disconnected from their peers, which in turn negatively impacted their Professional Identity formation.

To further investigate the determinants of Professional Identity, a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Professional Identity in Online Environments

Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	p	VIF
(Constant)	1.05	0.28		3.75	.000	
Social Presence	0.42	0.06	0.45	7.02	.000***	1.45
Teaching Presence	0.28	0.07	0.31	4.15	.000***	1.62
Cognitive Presence	0.15	0.06	0.18	2.45	.015*	1.55
Technical Ease	0.08	0.05	0.09	1.60	.112	1.10

$R^2 = 0.62$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.61$. Dependent Variable: Professional Identity Score.

Table 2 demonstrates that Social Presence is the strongest predictor of Professional Identity ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$), followed by Teaching Presence. This finding is pivotal for social work education. It implies that for students to internalize the identity of a social worker, they must first feel a sense of belonging to a professional community. The technical quality of the platform (Technical Ease) is not a significant predictor, suggesting that the barrier to learning is not the hardware or software itself, but the human connection mediated through it.

4.2 Qualitative Findings: The Digital Empathy Gap and the Screen as Shield

The quantitative results outline the "what," but the qualitative data illuminates the "why." The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three dominant themes that characterize the student experience of online experimental learning.

Theme 1: The Digital Empathy Gap and Sensory Deprivation.

Participants frequently described a phenomenon of "emotional flatness" or sensory deprivation. In a physical classroom, empathy is transmitted through a complex interplay of mirror neurons, shared atmosphere, and non-verbal cues. Online, this signal is compressed. A student from the 2019 cohort, participating in a role-play on Tencent Meeting, articulated this vividly: "When I am leading a group online, I am looking at a grid of faces, but I can't feel their energy. If a group member creates a silence, I don't know if they are thinking deeply, holding back tears, or just checking their phone. That 3-second audio lag destroys the moment of empathy. I feel like a technician operating a machine, not a social worker helping a person." This narrative underscores that the "Corporeal Absence" hinders the development of "use of self," a core social work skill.

Theme 2: The Screen as a Shield – Psychological Safety for Introverts.

Contrary to the deficit narrative, a counter-intuitive theme emerged regarding psychological safety. Several students who identified as introverted or socially anxious reported that the online environment actually facilitated their participation. The physical separation provided by the screen acted as a protective shield, lowering the stakes of performance. One student noted: "In the real classroom, with everyone staring at me, I freeze. But online, I can turn off 'self-view,' and I have my notes right on the screen. I feel safer. I can focus on what I want to say without worrying about my body language." This suggests that online experimental teaching may offer unique inclusive benefits for specific learner personalities, provided the interaction is carefully scaffolded.

Theme 3: Fragmentation of Group Dynamics.

Instructors, including team members Lu Rumin and Zhao Shuliang, observed that online groups struggled to move through the classic stages of group development (Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing). Specifically, the "Storming" phase was often bypassed or suppressed. In a physical setting, conflict must be negotiated because participants are trapped in the same room. Online, it is too easy to "mute" oneself or physically walk away from the computer when tension arises. Consequently, many online groups remained in a state of "polite superficiality," failing to reach the depth of interaction required for true therapeutic work. The digital medium, by reducing friction, paradoxically reduced the learning opportunities that come from managing friction.

5.Discussion and Optimization Strategies

5.1 Reinterpreting the Hybrid Advantage: From Binary Opposition to Ecological Integration

The empirical superiority of the Hybrid Model identified in the preceding results chapter compels a fundamental re-evaluation of the prevailing dichotomy between "online" and "offline" education. In the early stages of the pandemic, the academic discourse was often framed as a zero-sum competition, questioning whether digital surrogates could ever replace physical proximity. However, the data from the School of Shandong Technology and Business University suggests that this binary opposition is epistemologically flawed. The future of social work education does not lie in a forced choice between the brick-and-mortar classroom and the virtual meeting room, but rather in the strategic, ecological integration of both modalities to create a continuum of learning experiences.

The theoretical underpinning of this integration can be best understood through the lens of the "Flipped Classroom" pedagogical architecture, which effectively bifurcates the learning process based on cognitive load theory. In our optimized model, the acquisition of declarative knowledge—such as the theoretical history of social work, the specific clauses of the "Charity Law," or the abstract principles of human behavior—is migrated to the asynchronous digital space. Utilizing platforms like Rain Classroom (Yu Ketang), students engage with these low-cognitive-load materials at their own pace, allowing for pause, rewind, and reflection, which is particularly beneficial for students who may struggle with the rapid pace of a live lecture. This asynchronous pre-loading effectively "primes" the cognitive apparatus of the student. Consequently, the valuable and finite resource of synchronous time—whether it occurs in a physical laboratory or a high-intensity online workshop—is liberated from the burden of passive information transmission.

This structural shift allows the synchronous session to be exclusively dedicated to high-order cognitive tasks as defined by Bloom's Taxonomy: application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. For a course like "Group Social Work," this means that when students convene on Tencent Meeting or in the physical classroom, they are not coming to "learn" what a group

norm is, but to "negotiate" a group norm in real-time. The instructor's role transitions from a broadcaster of content to a facilitator of complex interpersonal dynamics. The hybrid advantage, therefore, is not merely about convenience; it is about the optimization of pedagogical intensity. By offloading the "dry" content to the digital realm, we create space for the "wet," messy, and emotional work of empathy construction to take center stage during synchronous interactions. This synthesis addresses the "Digital Empathy Gap" not by ignoring technology, but by using technology to handle the informational burden, thereby allowing human interaction to focus purely on emotional and relational processing.

5.2 The "Three-Dimensional Optimization Strategy" (TDOS)

Building upon the empirical findings which highlighted specific deficits in Social Presence and Practical Skill Application in purely online settings, and integrating the successful elements of the hybrid pilot, this paper proposes a comprehensive "Three-Dimensional Optimization Strategy" (TDOS). This strategy is designed to reconstruct the social work experimental teaching system at Shandong Technology and Business University, ensuring it is resilient to future public health crises while advancing the modernization of the discipline.

Dimension One: Pedagogical Process Reconstruction – The "Micro-Practice" and "Digital Fishbowl" Model

The first dimension of optimization targets the structural design of the experimental session itself to combat the pervasive phenomena of "Zoom fatigue" and the "Digital Empathy Gap." Traditional experimental classes often involve long, uninterrupted role-plays (e.g., 45 to 60 minutes) designed to simulate a complete counseling session. Our research indicates that in an online environment, maintaining the cognitive and emotional vigilance required for such duration is neurologically exhausting, leading to a rapid degradation of empathy after the 20-minute mark. Therefore, we propose a radical re-engineering of the temporal structure of the class into granular "Micro-Practice" modules.

Under this model, complex experimental tasks are deconstructed into discrete, manageable skills—such as "empathetic reflection," "confrontation," "summarization," or "managing silence." Students engage in these specific skills in intense, 10-to-15-minute bursts. For instance, in a module focusing on "empathetic validation," a student might be presented with a standardized client statement rooted in the "Angel Home" project context (e.g., a migrant child saying, "I don't want to go to school because they laugh at my accent"). The student is tasked not with solving the whole problem, but solely with demonstrating three different variations of empathetic validation. This granularity allows for focused cognitive processing without the overwhelming pressure of managing a full clinical arc.

Furthermore, to address the passivity of observers in online breakout rooms, we advocate for the implementation of the "Digital Fishbowl" technique utilizing the "Spotlight" feature in Tencent Meeting. In this configuration, a small group of active participants (the fish) is visually spotlighted on the screen, while the rest of the class (the bowl) turns off their cameras and microphones. However, unlike a physical fishbowl where the audience is silent, the digital audience is tasked with providing real-time, timestamped feedback in the chat box or via "Danmu" (bullet screen comments). They are instructed to type specific codes (e.g., "#EMP" for good empathy, "#MIS" for a missed cue) the moment they observe a behavior. This transforms the passive observer into an active, data-generating analyst. When the role-play concludes, the instructor does not need to rely on vague memories of what happened; they can scroll through the chat log to provide precise, frame-by-frame feedback, such as, "At 10:15 AM, thirty of your classmates noted that you interrupted the client. Let's re-watch that specific moment."

Dimension Two: Technological Empowerment – Enhancing Presence and Ideological Integration

The second dimension focuses on the instrumental level, leveraging advanced technologies to enhance Social Presence and integrate "Curriculum Ideology and Politics" (Kecheng Sizheng). Our regression analysis identified Social Presence as the primary predictor of Professional Identity. Therefore, technology must be employed not merely to transmit audio and video, but to humanize the experience and bridge the psychological distance. Instructors must evolve into "Techno-Pedagogical Architects." This role involves mastering "online immediacy" behaviors. For example, during the "Beidou Star" elderly service simulation, instructors should utilize the "Breakout Room Broadcast" function not just for timekeeping, but to send encouraging prompts or "inject" new plot twists into the simulation (e.g., "News flash: The elderly client's son just called and said he isn't coming for Spring Festival"), thereby keeping the energy dynamic and unpredictable.

Moreover, to overcome the sensory deprivation inherent in 2D video conferencing, the curriculum should aggressively integrate Virtual Reality (VR) simulations for high-risk and emotionally complex scenarios. Current 2D role-plays are often insufficient for teaching crisis intervention, such as suicide prevention or domestic violence de-escalation, because the student does not feel the visceral "fight or flight" response safely behind a screen. A VR module, potentially developed in collaboration with the university's computer science department, places the student in a 360-degree immersive environment where they must confront a frantic client. The VR headset tracks the student's gaze and hesitation, providing biometric feedback on their stress response. This immersion allows students to practice emotional regulation in a safe, controlled environment before stepping into real-world practice.

Crucially, this technological dimension also serves as a vehicle for ideological education. By utilizing digital storytelling tools, students can curate multimedia narratives of China's grassroots social workers fighting the pandemic. Integrating these narratives into the experimental course—for example, analyzing the crisis management strategies of community workers in Wuhan or Shanghai—anchors the technical skills of social work in the broader context of national service and social responsibility. This ensures that the "Technological Empowerment" does not lead to technocratic alienation, but rather reinforces the humanistic and patriotic values of the profession.

Dimension Three: Evaluation Reform – Process Over Outcome and Reflexivity

The third and final dimension necessitates a paradigm shift in assessment logic, moving from "Outcome-Based" to "Process-Oriented" evaluation. Traditional assessment in social work experimental courses often relies heavily on a final, summative role-play performance at the end of the semester. In an online setting, this high-stakes approach is deeply flawed; it is vulnerable to random technical glitches (e.g., a momentary lag causing a student to interrupt a client) and exacerbates performance anxiety, which can mask true competence.

We advocate for the implementation of a "longitudinal Electronic Portfolio" (e-Portfolio) system. Throughout the semester, students are required to submit raw screen recordings of their micro-practice sessions. Accompanying these recordings, they must submit a "Reflective Audio Log" or a written analysis where they critique their own performance. For instance, a student might write, "In the video at 05:20, I noticed my tone was too aggressive. I was feeling anxious because the client was silent. If I could do it again, I would sit with the silence." This method capitalizes on the "recordability" of online teaching. The digital record becomes a mirror for the self. The assessment grade, therefore, is weighted heavily on the quality of the reflection and the trajectory of improvement rather than the perfection of the performance itself. This aligns with the cultivation of "Cognitive Presence" in the CoI framework, fostering the habit of reflexive practice which is the hallmark of a mature social worker.

6.Conclusion

The digital transformation of higher education is not a temporary aberration but a permanent structural evolution. For social work education, this transition presents an existential challenge: how to preserve the human soul of the profession in a mechanized medium. This study, grounded in the practice of Shandong Technology and Business University, confirms that while purely online formats struggle to replicate the nuanced intimacy of social work practice, a scientifically designed Hybrid Model can effectively cultivate professional competence.

The findings reveal that the "Digital Empathy Gap" is real, but it is not insurmountable. By deliberately engineering Social Presence, leveraging the unique affordances of digital tools for reflective practice, and adopting a process-oriented assessment system, educators can bridge the distance imposed by screens. The "Three-Dimensional Optimization Strategy" proposed herein offers a viable path forward. It suggests that the role of the social work educator is evolving from a content expert to a facilitator of digital communities and a designer of learning experiences. As we move forward, the goal is not to return nostalgically to the pre-pandemic past, but to forge a new future where technology serves humanity, making social work education more resilient, accessible, and responsive to the needs of a digital society. The essence of social work—connection, empathy, and service—remains constant; it is only the medium of its transmission that is being reimagined.

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