

# Exploring the Effectiveness of Participatory Teaching in the 'Social Work Administration' Course within Social Work Professional Education

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## Abstract

The application and effectiveness of participatory teaching in the field of social work professional education are crucial for enhancing students' practical abilities and vocational skills. This study aims to explore the implementation and effects of participatory teaching in the 'Social Work Administration' course at Nanning Normal University in Guangxi. Employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study comprehensively analyzes 56 sophomore students majoring in social work. The research found that participatory teaching strategies such as group cooperation, case analysis, and role-playing significantly increased students' active participation and enthusiasm. Additionally, substantial progress was observed in soft skills like leadership, communication abilities, and teamwork. Through practical activities, students effectively applied theoretical knowledge and gained a clearer understanding of career planning in social work. This study demonstrates the effectiveness and necessity of participatory teaching in professional education for social work, proposing suggestions for improvements in teaching methods. These suggestions emphasize the transformation of the teacher's role in the educational process and the development of students' comprehensive abilities. These findings and recommendations provide theoretical and empirical support for teaching practices in social work professional education. Furthermore, the study proposes future research directions, including expanding the sample size, exploring the application of participatory teaching in different teaching environments, and assessing long-term effects and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Participatory Teaching, Social Work Professional Education, Social Work Administration, Effectiveness

**Introduction**

The core objective of social work professional education is to cultivate social workers with profound professional knowledge and practical skills. In China, the establishment of social work as a discipline began in the 1980s, and the training of talents in this field is still in a phase of continuous exploration and development. Against this backdrop, a crucial question arises: how can effective teaching models be adopted to enhance students' knowledge and skills in social work? Research suggests that social work education, which imparts concepts and methods, inherently aligns with participatory teaching, which places students at the forefront of educational activities. This approach is a natural choice for social work education (Chen, 2011).

Participatory teaching, originating in the 1950s from British sociologists in international aid projects, was later widely introduced into education (Kong, 2015). This method represents a significant innovation over traditional "spoon-feeding" teaching methods (Si, 2013). It emphasizes student participation, encouraging them to be active contributors to the teaching process. Through various teaching methods such as group teaching, case analysis, role-playing, classroom discussion, and scenario simulation, it promotes information exchange and feedback, enhancing students' deep understanding and application of knowledge (Zhang, 2011).

Furthermore, the theoretical foundation of participatory teaching is robust, primarily based on constructivist learning theory. This theory emphasizes the constructiveness of knowledge, viewing students as the primary agents of the learning process. Within this framework, the teacher's role shifts to that of organizer, guide, and facilitator. They stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm through creative teaching activities like situation creation and dialogic exchange, helping students effectively construct knowledge. Additionally, theories about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in psychology also support participatory teaching. These motivational factors help to enhance students' enthusiasm for learning and teaching effectiveness, achieving a win-win situation for teaching and learning (Shen, 2018).

**Literature Review**

A search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) using "Participatory Teaching" and "Social Work" as keywords yielded 15 related articles, published between 2008 and 2022. Among them, three articles were included in CSSCI (Gao, 2008) and core journals of Peking University (Zhang, 2011; Chen, 2011). Existing literature mainly focuses on the application of participatory teaching in training social work professionals (Gao, 2008; Chen, 2011), its value in social work professional education (Zhang, 2011), and specific practices (Ye et al., 2018). Additionally, some studies concentrate on the application of participatory teaching in specific courses like "Group Social Work" (Zhang, 2011; Wu, 2019; He, 2022), "Social Administration" (Cai, 2017), and "Social Work Practice" (Zhang, 2022).

Overall, the research on participatory teaching in China's social work professional education shows the following characteristics: firstly, the investigation started relatively late, mainly concentrating on the last decade; secondly, the number of related studies is limited; thirdly, research methods and scopes are restricted, with most studies focusing on specific courses; and lastly, most studies are exploratory and descriptive, lacking in-depth theoretical research. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of participatory teaching in social work professional education, taking the "Social Work Administration" course as an example, in hopes of providing richer theoretical basis and practical guidance for teaching practices in this field.

**Methodology**

In this study, a mixed methods research approach was employed to investigate the effectiveness of participatory teaching in social work professional education. This approach combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research to provide a multi-faceted understanding and assessment of teaching effectiveness. The study was conducted in the context of the 'Social Work Administration' course at Nanning Normal University in Guangxi, involving 56 sophomore undergraduate students majoring in social work who already possessed basic professional knowledge and skills. Utilizing various data collection methods like observation, surveys, and literature review, the researchers aimed to comprehensively evaluate the effects of participatory teaching in this course and its impact on students' learning experiences.

**Research Method**

Mixed Methods Research combines quantitative and qualitative research characteristics, forming a comprehensive research design that simultaneously applies these two methods in a single study. The application of this method allows researchers to delve into research questions from multiple perspectives and levels, significantly enhancing the comprehensiveness and reliability of the study. The topic of "the effectiveness of participatory teaching in social work professional education" is particularly suited to this approach, as it allows for the integration of diverse data, including quantitative data (such as survey results) and qualitative data (participant observation and individual student feedback). This integration not only provides a comprehensive reflection of the course's teaching effects but also covers a wider range of dimensions and depths.

Additionally, the mixed methods approach strengthens the validity of the research by combining the definite numerical results provided by quantitative data with the in-depth understanding offered by qualitative data. It helps researchers to validate hypotheses and models while exploring the reasons and motivations behind these results. Given the multifaceted and complex nature of social work professional education, the mixed methods approach allows researchers to focus on both quantitative indicators of educational effectiveness (grades and participation levels) and qualitative aspects (such as students' subjective experiences and interactions during teaching). This approach overcomes the limitations that might exist in solely quantitative or qualitative methods, enabling the research to capture all dimensions of teaching effectiveness more effectively.

Therefore, using the mixed methods approach for evaluating the teaching effectiveness of the 'Social Work Administration' course is an apt choice. It provides a more comprehensive and in-depth research perspective and ensures the balance and comprehensiveness of the research results. Through this method, researchers can more accurately assess and understand the actual effectiveness of participatory teaching in social work professional education.

**Research Setting and Sampling**

The study focused on 56 sophomore undergraduate students majoring in social work at Nanning Normal University in Guangxi, China. They had completed foundational courses like 'Individual Social Work', 'Group Social Work', and 'Community Social Work', thus possessing certain theoretical knowledge and basic skills. This provided an ideal sample environment for assessing the effectiveness of participatory teaching in social work professional education.

The research setting concentrated on the 'Social Work Administration' course undertaken by these students. This course holds significant importance in social work professional education as both a compulsory subject in undergraduate education and an indirect service method in social work. Aimed at providing key training in professional knowledge and practical skills, the course uses a rich curriculum based on the textbook 'Social Work Administration' (2nd Edition) by Professor Shi Lirong, covering multiple professional chapters. To enhance the course's interest, interactivity, and practicality, a variety of teaching methods, such as group cooperation, case analysis, and scenario simulation, were incorporated.

The course duration was 48 hours, with 4 hours every Monday afternoon, providing ample learning time for students to thoroughly understand the content and effectively integrate theory with practice. The students' backgrounds were diverse, including their reasons for choosing the major, volunteer service experiences, and plans for future study and careers. They held high expectations for the course, looking forward to enriching their learning experience through various teaching methods, the integration of theory and practice, and the course's interest and practicality.

During the course, considering the number of students, gender, professional background, and the number of teaching sessions and learning tasks, the class was divided into eight groups, each with seven members. The composition, leadership, and activities of the groups were determined by the students themselves. This arrangement not only promoted skill development but also enhanced the students' agency, enabling them to be more proactive and participative in the learning process. Throughout the course, the researchers employed seven main teaching strategies to enhance students' learning experiences and participation. These strategies included: 1) group cooperative learning, where students completed various learning tasks through teamwork; 2) case study discussions, delving into actual cases to strengthen understanding and application; 3) fun game interactions, with each group responsible for a warm-up game before class to enliven the class atmosphere; 4) scenario simulations, creating job resumes and interview questions to enhance professional skills; 5) role-playing, where students practised and displayed learned skills by acting as "job applicants" and "interviewers"; 6) development and presentation of volunteer management plans, emphasizing the importance of volunteer resources and management in social work service activities; 7) group learning outcome reports, allowing students to summarize and present their group cooperative learning achievements throughout the semester. These strategies not only promoted active learning and practical application but also reflected the course's emphasis on integrating theory and practice. Overall, this research setting exemplifies the focus on combining practical and theoretical elements in social work education, as well as the efforts made by educational institutions in training social work professionals.

Selecting such a research setting and sample was not only because they could provide rich data and practical insights but also because they hold significant positions in theory and practice. By studying this specific group's learning experiences and outcomes in the 'Social Work Administration' course, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of the actual role of participatory teaching in social work professional education, and how this teaching method could be optimized to enhance educational quality.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The study utilized participant observation, survey questionnaires, and literature review methods for data collection.

(1) Participant Observation: The course instructor observed students' listening and participation during classes to assess their learning effectiveness.

(2) Survey Questionnaires: Surveys were conducted through the UMU interactive learning platform, both before the course began and after its conclusion, to research students' background and evaluate teaching effectiveness.

(3) Literature Review: Relevant classic works and academic papers were consulted to formulate teaching strategies and analyze students' learning summaries and group assignments.

This section detailed the study's methods, setting, data collection techniques, and teaching arrangements, providing a clear framework for understanding the research on the 'Social Work Administration' course teaching.

### **The Results and Discussion**

In the study of the 'Social Work Administration' course, researchers observed significant effectiveness, especially in enhancing student participation and engagement. A series of innovative teaching strategies were implemented successfully, stimulating student motivation and participation. These strategies included group cooperative learning, case study discussions, fun game interactions, scenario simulations, role-playing, development and presentation of volunteer management plans, group learning outcome reporting, and student participation in teaching evaluations. These methods not only fostered a democratic and open learning atmosphere, building harmonious teacher-student and peer relationships but also enhanced students' active participation and engagement, facilitated planned knowledge transfer and meaning construction, inspired group cooperative learning motivation and skills, developed students' leadership, communication, and motivation abilities, and ultimately improved students' ability to apply knowledge practically. This section will explore in detail the specific impact of these teaching methods on student learning experiences and how they promoted the development of students' comprehensive skills and practical application.

### **Enhancing Student Participation and Engagement**

The course explicitly included group cooperative learning grades as part of individual ongoing assessments, promoting a "one for all, all for one" spirit and healthy competition among groups. Students were given the freedom and right to participate in classroom evaluations, such as evaluating each "job applicant" in a simulated social service agency position via the UMU interactive learning platform, and voting for the top three group cooperative learning performances. This approach maximized student agency and ensured comprehensive and objective evaluation feedback.

"I really enjoyed the pre-class games because they were fun and allowed me to experience different games, relaxing my mind. They also provided experience for future social work, like ice-breaking and relaxation activities during events," (Group 7 member HKX)

"I used to dislike group tasks, as they often ended up being completed by one person while others did nothing. However, this course's group tasks were well-designed to involve everyone. For instance, selecting representatives for interviews, where their performance affected the whole group, motivated us to internally compete and select the best candidates," (Group 7 member HKX)

### **Developing Leadership, Communication, and Motivation Skills**

The many group learning tasks assigned during the course required substantial time and effort for collaboration. From establishing trust for cooperation to delegating tasks and overcoming challenges, groups engaged in extensive communication and coordination, assigning tasks based on members' availability, willingness, and abilities, and providing encouragement, support, and help. Group leaders played a vital role, and every member contributed their best, maximizing the efficacy of group cooperative learning. This process also provided opportunities for introverted students to express their views and gain confidence.

"I was not very outgoing, but I took on the role of 'job applicant' with encouragement from my peers, a significant breakthrough for me. I took on most of the communication responsibilities, gradually learning to enhance member engagement through discussions," (Group 8 member MQD)

### **Enhancing the Ability to Apply Knowledge Practically**

Reflecting on the group learning outcome presentation, some groups mentioned using methods and techniques from "Chapter 3: Decision Making and Planning" to complete tasks, like using "Gantt Charts" for planning and "feasible plan models" for selecting the best candidates for simulated job interviews. Personal summaries highlighted that experiences like creating resumes and mock interviews were highly beneficial for future job searches and interviews. Knowledge from "Chapter 8, Section 2: Volunteer Management" and the training in developing "Volunteer Recruitment and Training Management Plans" proved useful in later social practice activities.

"I'm in charge of the Social Work Association at my college and need to recruit volunteers. After learning the 'Volunteer Management' section, I realized many areas in our volunteer plans needed revisions. The knowledge helped me write more qualified volunteer recruitment plans," (Group 8 member TXL)

"The course's unique teaching style, with practical assignments like creating volunteer management plans, resumes, and mock interviews, prepared us well for entering the workforce," (Group 8 member TXL)

### **Inspiring Motivation and Capacity for Group Cooperative Learning**

As group task performance affected individual grades and the final group presentation required outlining each member's responsibilities and achievements, students were motivated to collaborate effectively. They learned to assign tasks based on members' personalities, availability, and strengths, balancing workloads and avoiding free-riding. This approach ensured timely and successful completion of each group task.

"I was lucky to join an active group, which helped eliminate my negative attitudes. This experience taught me the importance of communication, cooperation, a good atmosphere, and leadership. I'll carry these lessons into my future studies and life, encouraging myself to join different groups to understand various team spirits and practical methods," (Group 1 member HYL)

### **Building Harmonious Teacher-Student and Peer Relationships**

In pre-class warm-up games, organized by the duty groups, an active and relaxing classroom atmosphere was created for both teachers and students. In group cooperative learning, aspects such as group composition, leader selection, and task delegation were democratically

decided by group members. In interactive teaching, the teacher gave students ample time for thought and discussion, and participation in answering questions or presenting group outcomes was left to the students' or groups' discretion. In student evaluations, group cooperative learning grades were not solely determined by the teacher or group leader but through a combination of self-evaluation within the group, cross-evaluation between groups, and teacher evaluation. This open, democratic, and respectful learning atmosphere, along with the freedom for students to participate in evaluations and frequent interactions in group learning, led to very relaxed and harmonious teacher-student and peer relationships.

### **Accomplishing Planned Knowledge Transfer and Meaning Construction**

The course instructor successfully completed teaching tasks for all ten chapters of 'Social Work Administration', with most students grasping the relevant knowledge and passing the final course assessment. This was attributed to the teacher's ability to integrate key points of the curriculum, adult learning principles, students' professional backgrounds, learning capacities, and future development needs, setting diverse learning tasks. Students understood the importance of social work administration as an indirect service method in social work, were motivated to participate, and were encouraged to actively acquire and apply the relevant knowledge and methods in practice.

"The biggest takeaway from this course was the constant engagement with practical tasks. The teacher understood our needs, making me enjoy and find the course interesting and truly experience the integration of knowledge and practice. As a student leader, I can now apply the knowledge from 'Decision Making and Planning' to college event planning, motivate my peers using methods from 'Leadership, Communication, and Motivation', and use 'Social Work Human Resource Management' knowledge for volunteer recruitment during events,"  
(Group 7 member HKX)

### **Enhancing Teacher's Teaching Enthusiasm and Self-Efficacy**

The course instructor, with limited teaching experience, having only taught a public elective course for one semester, was initially inexperienced. However, by employing diverse participatory teaching methods in the 'Social Work Administration' course, the teacher observed students' active participation in various teaching activities, serious preparation and completion of group tasks, and positive teaching feedback, which exceeded expectations. Students achieved various degrees of learning and skill development by the end of the course. These outcomes significantly enhanced the instructor's teaching enthusiasm and self-efficacy, motivating continuous improvement in teaching methods and plans according to students' developmental needs and practical situations, and constantly elevating teaching quality and effectiveness.

### **Conclusion, Implication, and Recommendation**

This study, through an in-depth analysis of the 'Social Work Administration' course, found that innovative teaching strategies significantly enhanced student participation and engagement. Methods such as group cooperative learning, case study discussions, fun game interactions, scenario simulations, role-playing, development and presentation of volunteer management plans, group learning outcome reporting, and student participation in teaching evaluations, not only advanced students' knowledge acquisition but also significantly improved soft skills

like leadership, communication, and teamwork. Students learned to apply theoretical knowledge in practical activities, enhancing their understanding and response capabilities in professional practice. Moreover, the diversified teaching model of the course provided students with a clearer and more realistic understanding of career planning in social work, laying a solid foundation for their future careers.

The study highlights that traditional teaching models need to incorporate more diversified and practical innovations. Introducing interactive activities like group cooperation and scenario simulations can effectively increase student interest and engagement, enhancing the attractiveness and effectiveness of the teaching process. Additionally, the teaching process should focus more on developing students' comprehensive abilities, including soft skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork, which are crucial for overall student development. To better apply theoretical knowledge in practice, course designs should closely integrate theory and practice, using case analyses and simulations to help students deeply understand and master theoretical knowledge in practical operations, thereby preparing them for their future careers. In this process, the teacher's role should shift from being a traditional knowledge transmitter to a facilitator and coordinator, encouraging active student participation and autonomous development to promote self-directed learning and personal growth. Moreover, harmonious teacher-student and peer relationships and classroom cohesion can be effectively built through group cooperation and interactive games, enhancing mutual understanding and collaboration among students and creating a positive learning environment.

In teaching the 'Social Work Administration' course, the researchers achieved certain effectiveness using participatory teaching methods, especially in enhancing student participation and engagement. However, there were areas for improvement, particularly in the volume and setup of assignments and learning tasks. Due to the additional pressure of other courses, excessive assignments and frequently changing tasks added to students' burdens, potentially impacting their overall learning experience.

Therefore, for future teaching, it is recommended to continue using participatory teaching while considering students' overall workload more carefully. Teachers should clearly set learning tasks at the beginning of the course and minimize changes during the course, ensuring students can better plan their study time and effort. Regular assessments of students' progress and stress are also suggested, allowing for timely adjustments in teaching plans and assignment requirements, ensuring students can complete tasks under manageable stress for optimal input-output ratios. Additionally, enhanced teacher training is recommended, encouraging exploration of more effective teaching methods and student participation styles to improve teaching outcomes and build more harmonious teacher-student relationships. These measures can further enhance teaching quality, help students better adapt to future professional challenges, and promote their holistic development.

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