

**Voices and Lenses: A Comparative and Collaborative
Workshop Series on Social Work Documentary**

Final Report

Xiaoning Huang, PhD, MPhil, MSW
Research Assistant Professor
Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine

Yixuan Wang, PhD, LMSW, LLM
Assistant Professor
China Youth University of Political Studies, Department of Social Work

Rafael Angulo, MSW
Clinical Professor
The University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work

Shiyu Wu, PhD, MSW
Assistant Professor
Arizona State University, School of Social Work

Executive Summary

This report presents a progressive teaching reform implemented in the Master of Social Work (MSW) curriculum at a social work school in China, aiming to enhance the internalization of professional ethics through filmmaking. During the project from January to December 2022, a course was designed to incorporate student-generated microfilms in MSW education. Lessons learned from educators from China and the United States informed the refinement of the course and exploration of effective pathways for students to internalize and advocate for professional ethics through filmmaking.

This report highlights the successes and challenges encountered, providing insights for social work educators interested in using filmmaking as a teaching tool. Integrating microfilm-making deepens students' understanding of social work ethics and equips them for ethical decision-making. Students engage in autonomous learning, expanding their knowledge and skills in social work ethics and filmmaking techniques. The process fosters professional reflection, emphasizing the importance of ethics in acting, editing, and cinematography. Peer support enhances learning outcomes, while external support, such as professional guidance and inter-group sharing, enriches understanding of ethical dilemmas and contributes to professional growth.

The findings underscore the potential of incorporating filmmaking into social work education to internalize and apply professional ethics. This approach offers a promising avenue for enhancing the teaching of social work ethics and preparing MSW students for the ethical complexities they will face in their careers.

Rationale and Purpose of the Project

Today, digital video production tools and computer non-linear editing equipment allow a social worker to witness individual and group struggles through an anti-oppressive lens. This program teaches social work documentary filmmaking to Master of Social Work students in Los Angeles, CA, and Beijing, China. This course, designed for students with little to no filmmaking experience, teaches visual content for social justice and social work ethics from concept to deliverable. The course will be divided into three areas of inquiry: 1) Documentary media production, which first includes research that explores the historical, political, and socio-economic origins of current social issues, documentary fieldwork, and cinematic editing for the ultimate creation of five to fifteen short documentaries; 2) Media outreach strategies for developing public communication campaigns to target audiences and examining the documentaries impact factor for social change; and 3) Comparative and collaborative approach between faculty and students from the United States and China to provide a deeper ecosystems perspective to societal problems and social work professional practice through documentary storytelling in different historical, cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts.

The present report focuses on a teaching reform for an MSW-level Social Work Ethics class at China Youth University of Political Studies following a social work documentary course at the University of Southern California, which utilized student-generated microfilm as the media of advocating for change. Microfilms are popular with a wide audience in China and the US. Short video platforms like Douyin (known as TikTok outside of China), Kuaishou, and Bilibili have become some of the most popular social media platforms in China; with millions of daily active users, short video clips have become the modern channel to deliver knowledge and to make social change. The project aims to equip MSW students with the skills to explore social work ethics and advocate for social justice through visual media, cultivating their professional values in an engaging and digestible way.

Through over a year of planning, actions, observations, and reflections on the teaching reform, this project responds to the challenges of teaching social work ethics and practices. It explores effective ways to incorporate filmmaking into the course design and extend lessons learned for international social work educators interested in incorporating digital artifacts into

their educational practice on professional ethics. Moreover, social work educators from China and the United States implemented this teaching reform collaboratively, highlighting the promotion of effective international collaboration in social work education.

Table 1. Action Plan

Preproduction
<p>Workshop 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Documentary Filmmaking - Theory & Practice and the Connections between Social Work and Filmmaking. • Brief History of Documentary Filmmaking • Students pitch documentary proposals regarding social problems & Select documentaries that will be greenlighted. <p>Workshop 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling Fundamentals & Identify and partner with leading organizations and people working on a particular issue.
Production
<p>Workshop 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding Film Theory & Screen Grammar • Essentials of Production: Shots, Interviews, Audio & Lighting • Student film crews start filming <p>Workshop 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production continues & Film crew viewing of shots, scenes, and storyline for critique and feedback. <p>Workshop 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production continues & Film crew viewing of shots, scenes, and storyline for critique and feedback.
Postproduction
<p>Workshop 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundamentals of Editing • Film crew viewing of edited material and feedback <p>Workshop 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced Editing • Rough cut viewing and feedback <p>Workshop 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final cut viewing and feedback

Process of Implementation

The program for Chinese students was an adaptation based on USC's Social Work and Media course. The redesigned course content was delivered over six weeks, consisting of eight sessions (Table 1). The lectures were co-hosted by two U.S.-based professors who joined the classroom remotely (Figure 1) and moderated by the Chinese professor onsite. One of the U.S.-based professors has extensive experience teaching social work documentary filmmaking at USC for over ten years. The other U.S.-based professor, proficient in Chinese and English, taught documentary filmmaking to MSW students in China during summer workshops. Therefore, the course was conducted in bilingual mode. In addition, a Teaching Assistant (TA) was arranged for this course so that students could easily schedule appointments with any of the three professors and borrow professional filming equipment. The TA was also responsible for collecting any questions the students might have had during the six weeks and reporting them to the three professors before each lecture.

Figure 1.



The workshops first focused on filming skills and techniques. Although this part of the teaching content did not involve specific content on social work ethics, professors used case

studies to let students understand how to better express social work values through their lenses. They also taught students the cinematographical methods that can resonate with the audience. Meanwhile, The 50 students in the class were voluntarily divided into five groups to conduct in-depth reflections on self-selected ethical dilemmas and to write microfilm scripts based on reflections, requiring them to internalize the knowledge they have learned from the regular lectures in a timely manner. The Chinese professor was available to discuss ethical dilemmas with each student group, gatekeeping the original scripts to target social work ethics instead of unrealistic ethical drama. The U.S.-based professors went through the scripts of each student group during the latter part of the second session and provided guidance on what they should pay attention to during the filming stage (Figure 2). During the production phase, students had two weeks to film the first version of the microfilm clips, in which they applied the skills learned from the practical lectures (Figure 3).

Figure 2.



Figure 3.



In the postproduction phase, students learned how to edit and disseminate clips with the proper tools. Meanwhile, student groups presented their earlier versions of clips and solicited feedback and suggestions from professors and classmates, which were instrumental for them in carrying out further revisions after class. Some revisions were technical, while others were subversive. For example, one student group's original filming topic was social workers' responsibility and commitment to their clients. The group depicted a devoted social worker who was willing to sacrifice her personal time for work. As students in the group had some disagreements about the plot, they raised their concerns during the class, which led to a heated debate on social workers' self-care among all students. Eventually, the group reframed the story to raise awareness of social worker self-care, which was an important addition made to the NASW code of ethics a few years ago.

On average, each group had carried out a total of four rounds of revisions on their microfilm with the guidance of professors after class. Students' understanding of social work ethics deepened and evolved during repeated debates and revisions. The improvements from the earlier versions to the final version of their microfilm demonstrated their internalization and

down-to-earth reflections on the code of ethics. As shown in Figure 4, five microfilms that focused on different topics of social work ethics were finalized.

Figure 4.

**2022年社工专硕
《社会工作伦理》成果汇演
电影节**

时间 | 2022年11月19日 上午9:30-12:00 | 地点 | 至善楼 小阶梯教室

以家人之名
剧情介绍：19岁的女孩桃桃长期受困于学业压力和妈妈强烈的控制欲，终于在一次爆发后前来阳光家园服务机构寻求帮助。李想是机构的一名社会工作者，与桃桃顺利地建立了服务关系。然而，桃桃妈妈因李想“插手家事”暴躁如雷，特地找上门来警告李想。在对案主服务需求的专业判断以及案主人家的压力之间，李想究竟该如何抉择……

新手社工的成长之路
剧情介绍：大学生小晶在遭遇裸贷陷阱后，主动前往社工站求助。社工实习生小何第一次接案，对案主小晶的情况评估不当，擅自打破保密原则，向学校报告了小晶的情况，并因此与小晶发生矛盾。当初出茅庐的社工实习生因能力不足面临困境，该向谁寻求帮助？机构如何才能说服已经失望的案主小晶继续接受服务？

发声
剧情介绍：性格内向的黄明晓，学习成绩优异，经常遭到同学的欺凌殴打，在一次次被欺凌后遇见了学校社工站的小余，渴望请求帮助。面对再次被霸凌和勇于为自己发声的选择境况下，他该如何抉择……

你永远不懂我伤悲
剧情介绍：曾芒是一名一线社工，多年来，她忠于岗位，辛苦奋斗，帮助许多案主走出困境。但她同样承受着许多压力：工作的繁忙、同学聚会时的落差、家人的不理解，都让她深感疲惫。身处职业责任和个人利益的困境中，她应如何抉择？

抉择
剧情介绍：本短片主要讲述了遭受家暴的妇女莎莎，在无法忍受之际，想以自己的方式进行反抗。她来到司法社会工作机构咨询，在咨询过程中，社工小张发现了莎莎有些反常。社工向督导老王征求建议，走访莎莎的邻居，证实了自己的猜想，决定再次约莎莎见面。在社工的劝导与建议下，莎莎会不会转变想法？她又会如何抉择？

本次课程改革项目由
中国青年政治学院社会工作系与国际社会工作教育联盟(IASSW)联合资助

A university-wide microfilm festival was hosted after the completion of the course, in which student groups had the chance to officially screen their microfilms and advocate for the profession to a broader audience (Figure 5). Senior social work practitioners, professors who studied ethics, and a Vice President of the Chinese Association of Social Work Education were invited to the screening as reviewers and award presenters. All audience enjoyed the five microfilms. Especially, invited practitioners and professors were surprised and touched by the microfilms. They were eager to share their professional experiences during the intervals, implying that the microfilms had reached the evaluation criteria to arouse the audience's resonance and achieve an effect of public advocacy.

Evaluation, Outcomes, and Feedback

At the end of the course, each student was asked to share their experiences during the program, such as problems they encountered during microfilm-making and how they solved them. The reports were handwritten and later typed into digital form. Based on the compilation and extraction of students' accounts, the teaching reform has helped students to achieve learning objectives through three channels: personal growth, peer support, and external support.

Personal Growth

Autonomous Learning. Driven by the task of making microfilm, students enriched their knowledge and skills. They improved their ability to learn autonomously by self-learning the theory and practice of social work ethics and related filmmaking techniques while completing the course tasks.

“In the process of writing the script, I checked relevant knowledge, including the situations of legitimate defense and the need to violate confidentiality principles, as well as how social workers should choose when their clients' life and health are threatened.” (Student A from Group 5)

“We divided the work and studied the knowledge of film editing in advance to the practical lecture. Each of us came up with our own ideas and consulted relevant editing books and materials.” (Student B from Group 3)

Professional Reflection. During the process of ethical microfilm-making, students all experienced, to varying degrees, the professionalism of social workers by reflecting the code of ethics in their acting, editing, and photography. Such professional reflection cultivated their recognition of the importance of social work ethics.

“We had the opportunity to experience a role. No matter which role we played, we needed to understand their psychological activities. For my classmates who played the role of clients, they could empathize with the clients’ situation and better understand clients’ feelings while standing in the clients’ shoes. For my classmates who played the roles of social workers and supervisors, they exercised professional thinking and compared the uses of different professional skills in the given situation to make the microfilm more relatable to the audience. Those professional plots we designed and acted on have left deep impressions in our minds.” (Student C in Group 2)

Peer Support

Professional Reflection. During the process of ethical microfilm-making, students all experienced, to varying degrees, the professionalism of social workers by reflecting the code of ethics in their acting, editing, and photography. Such professional reflection cultivated their recognition of the importance of social work ethics.

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning reduced task difficulty, as group members each played to their strengths and achieved more in-depth learning results through cooperating with peers.

“There were still some unclear areas in our knowledge (even after the lectures), but when we encountered uncertainties during the filming process, we would hold collective discussions to clarify our doubts and carefully search for answers. It was all active learning that we enjoyed. We felt accomplished to gain a better understanding of social work ethics and to have resolved our doubts from class.” (Student D in Group 1)

Emotional Support. Producing high-quality microfilm was not an easy task for MSW students who had little experience. Emotional support within group members not only helped them overcome obstacles and frustration encountered in completing tasks but also improved group cohesion, which contributed to more efficient completion of the filming task.

“During the editing process, I bought fruit trays and snacks for everyone to alleviate their exhaustion and gave them encouragement. I even exaggerated their acting to entertain our group members, which helped us complete our microfilm successfully.” (Student E in Group 4)

“When one group member felt distressed, other members would offer emotional support, and some would buy fruit. Therefore, even if there were sometimes negative emotions and states within the group, someone always stepped up to cheer us up.” (Student F in Group 4)

External Support

Professional Guidance. Professional guidance consists of lectures inside the classroom and discussions between professors and students outside the classroom.

“We carefully noted down the content taught by professors in class and searched for relevant teaching videos after class.... We eventually achieved our desired results”. (Student G in Group 5)

“I sincerely appreciate the knowledge and rich experience that the ethical microfilm assignment has brought me. During the filming period, I benefited greatly from the help of American professors.” (Student H in Group 4)

Inter-group Sharing of Clips. By watching and discussing the early versions of other groups’ clips in class, students had the chance to immerse themselves in diverse ethical dilemmas and enrich their professional knowledge.

“Through learning from the video clips of other groups, I found it easier to digest the contents of professional codes compared to just listening to lectures.” (Student I in Group 3)

“Watching a microfilm is comparable to reading a case file. Different microfilms allow us to gain a deeper understanding of different ethical principles through “case study.” (Student J in Group 1)

Conclusions, Discussions, and Future Directions

In conclusion, the incorporation of microfilm-making in social work education has proven beneficial in facilitating personal growth, peer support, and external support for students. Through creating microfilms while learning and applying social work professional ethics, students demonstrated autonomous learning, enhancing their knowledge and skills in social work ethics and filmmaking techniques. They also engaged in professional reflection, recognizing the significance of social work ethics in their acting, editing, and cinematography. Peer support was crucial as students collaborated, shared knowledge, and provided emotional support to overcome challenges and achieve more in-depth learning results. External support, including professional guidance from professors and inter-group sharing of clips, further enriched students’ understanding of ethical dilemmas and enhanced their professional knowledge.

Overall, the integration of microfilm-making in social work education fosters a holistic learning experience, empowering students in their personal and professional growth as future social workers. On the other hand, a few things that shall be properly dealt with in future attempts came to the authors’ attention. First, the educators shall encourage students to express their perception of professional ethics from the students’ cultural backgrounds and perspectives, which are not necessarily the same as the professors’ but may still be in line with social work professional values. For example, U.S.-based professors demonstrated how to proactively film advocacy clips on LGBTQ+ topics in class. Some Chinese students, coming from a more conservative and conflict-avoiding cultural background, do believe in equal rights for all humans regardless of gender and sexuality. Still, they preferred to seek more deliberate, subtle, and implied approaches. The autonomous filmmaking process would allow the students to create

films representing various social contexts, promoting cultural competence and sensitivity. The experiences during the course help students and educators recognize their biases and foster an appreciation for the richness of diversity in social work practice.

Second, the authors noticed that students had become quite curious about real-world situations and asked questions such as “Is my acting reasonable as a social worker reacting to the dilemma?” or “How would this plot be handled in real practice?”. However, the best way for MSW students to get answers to these questions would be through field observation or interviews with social workers. As China was implementing strict COVID-19 epidemic control during the program, students involved in this study were unable to gain sufficient field observations. Therefore, future projects could investigate whether and how field research could inspire students to further bridge their passionate creativity and professional reality.

Third, to keep pace with the social development in a digital age, social work schools, either in the East or in the West, shall consider open microfilm-making courses or workshops for their MSW student. In fact, as the authors have already recommended the application of microfilm in MSW curriculums in a few social work conferences, some Chinese colleagues have started considering reforming their social work ethics courses. However, social work educators should be aware of the extra work behind the scenes, such as properly arranging the class contents and keeping responsive to students after class. Further, a great number of resources would be needed to facilitate international collaborations. The sustainability of such a bilingual teaching mode would be questionable without substantial funding. Hence, although achieving optimal teaching outcomes should remain the focus, it is still worthwhile to initiate gradual endeavors to incorporate microfilm elements into the course structure and progress iteratively despite the inherent flaws.

Other worth-noting points include ethical considerations during the production processes. Discussing the ethical considerations when using filmmaking in social work education is essential. This includes obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, addressing power dynamics, and maintaining cultural sensitivity. Educators must provide guidance and create a safe environment for students to navigate these ethical dilemmas. This project developed a film festival for dissemination and advocacy. Secondly, having a

platform, online or onsite, by submitting the films to competitions, film festivals, or websites to disseminate the microfilms created by students to a wider audience could make a greater impact beyond the classroom. This exposure can raise awareness, advocate for social work values, and contribute to social change. Third, ongoing evaluation and improvement of the microfilm-making approach in social work education are necessary. The current study is based on student, educator, and stakeholder feedback. In the long term, this feedback could be instrumental in refining the curriculum, addressing challenges, and enhancing the learning experience. Lastly, The current study is a fruit of successful international collaboration supported by the International Association of Schools of Social Work. Such collaborations could facilitate access to resources, provide expertise, and enhance the quality of microfilm productions. Additionally, partnerships with other disciplines, like film studies or media production, can contribute to interdisciplinary learning and foster innovative approaches to social work education.

Figure 5.

