

Reforming Community Work Education for Grassroots Governance in the Age of Digital Intelligence

Daxia Lei^{1,a,*}

¹School of Law and Public Administration, Yibin University, Yibin, 644000, Sichuan, China

^aliya20080917@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: The reorganization of social work administration in China has broadened the institutional responsibilities, service populations, and collaborative relationships involved in grassroots governance. Community workers are now expected not only to provide professional services but also to interpret policy, assess needs, mobilize residents, facilitate deliberation, integrate resources, and use digital technologies responsibly. Conventional Community Work courses, however, are still commonly organized around theoretical knowledge and general intervention methods. This structure provides an important disciplinary foundation but does not always connect course content with governance tasks, sustain classroom-community partnerships, integrate digital tools with professional reasoning, or generate valid evidence of practice competence. This article presents the design of a competency-oriented reform of the Community Work course at Yibin University. Drawing on constructive alignment, experiential learning, and situated learning, the reform reorganizes learning outcomes, course content, authentic community tasks, and assessment evidence around students' capacity to understand and address real grassroots governance problems. Policy analysis, method training, simulation, community-based projects, and reflective assessment are integrated into a coherent learning process. Course teachers, field professionals, community practitioners, residents, and students contribute complementary evidence to the assessment of learning. The design also establishes boundaries for the use of generative artificial intelligence and community data. Rather than treating digitalization as the addition of platforms or software, the reform positions technology as a support for contextual judgment, ethical practice, and sustained collaboration. The article offers a context-sensitive approach to preparing social work students for community practice in an increasingly digitalized governance environment.

Keywords: Community work education; grassroots governance competence; digital intelligence; curriculum reform; university-community partnership

1. Introduction

Grassroots governance constitutes a critical foundation of national governance. In China, recent policy documents have called for stronger social participation, rule-based governance, intelligent technologies, professional capacity, better coordination of community services, and more systematic use of digital infrastructure ^[1,2]. The 2023 reform of Party and state institutions placed social work within a more integrated governance arrangement ^[3], while the Overall Plan for the Layout of a Digital China emphasized the enabling role of digital technologies in economic and social development ^[4]. More recent national policies on education digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) have encouraged the integration of digital technologies into curriculum design, teaching, assessment, and educational governance ^[5,6]. Together, these developments require social work education to respond to institutional change, expanding community responsibilities, and the growing influence of digital technologies on professional practice.

Community Work is a core course through which social work students connect professional values and intervention methods with grassroots practice. Contemporary communities are expected to respond to the needs of older adults, children, new forms of employment, and emerging organizations while also addressing organizational development, conflict prevention, resource coordination, digital inclusion, and community risk. Students who mainly memorize intervention models or design a single activity may understand the vocabulary of community work without being prepared to assess needs, negotiate

differences, coordinate stakeholders, revise interventions, or respond to uncertainty in real settings. At the same time, generative AI, virtual simulation, online collaboration, and learning analytics create new opportunities for curriculum reform. They also create risks related to privacy, fabricated information, algorithmic bias, cognitive dependence, and digital exclusion. A digitally enhanced course must therefore do more than introduce tools. It must clarify what competent practice looks like, how that competence develops through authentic tasks, and what evidence can demonstrate its attainment.

This article presents a curriculum design developed for the undergraduate Community Work course in the Social Work program at Yibin University. The reform is grounded in constructive alignment, which requires learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment to support one another [7]. It also draws on experiential learning, particularly the iterative relationship between experience, reflection, conceptualization, and further action [8], and on situated learning, which understands knowledge as developing through participation in communities of practice [9]. These perspectives are used to connect professional knowledge with local governance tasks while preserving educational and ethical boundaries. Because the project is still being implemented and evaluated, the article reports the rationale, design, and proposed mechanisms of reform rather than making unsupported claims about effectiveness.

2. Curricular Gaps in Responding to Grassroots Governance

2.1. Insufficient alignment between course content and governance tasks

Community Work courses have traditionally been structured around definitions, historical development, theoretical models, intervention processes, and practice techniques. This sequence provides disciplinary coherence, but it does not necessarily reflect how problems present themselves in community settings. The establishment of a central-level social work authority has brought greater attention to Party-led grassroots governance, volunteer service coordination, services for workers in new forms of employment, consultation with residents, and the prevention and resolution of disputes. Local practice in Sichuan and Yibin also highlights the importance of cultivating community organizations, linking charitable resources, supporting older adults and children, and improving digital inclusion. When course content remains centered on general community activities, students may learn how to apply a method without understanding the institutional environment, stakeholder relationships, and resource constraints that shape the problem.

The gap is partly curricular and partly epistemological. In conventional teaching, theory is often introduced as content to be mastered before practice begins. In community settings, however, theory functions as a resource for interpreting ambiguous situations, deciding what information matters, and justifying action. Students need opportunities to use policy and theory while they are defining problems, negotiating competing expectations, and revising plans. Without such opportunities, the course risks separating academic knowledge from the practical reasoning that gives it professional value.

2.2. Limited integration of digital tools with professional reasoning

Digital teaching is often confined to presentation slides, online attendance, electronic questionnaires, and assignment submission. Virtual simulation, geographic information, collaborative platforms, generative AI, and learning analytics are less consistently integrated into community assessment, crisis communication, resource allocation, and project decision-making. Operational familiarity with a tool should not be mistaken for competence in digital governance. Students must be able to decide whether a technology is appropriate for a professional purpose, evaluate the credibility and limitations of its output, and recognize who may be excluded by its use.

Generative AI makes this distinction especially important. It can assist with brainstorming, scenario development, comparison of interview guides, and the organization of de-identified material. It can also produce plausible but inaccurate information, homogenize analysis, conceal uncertainty, and encourage students to outsource judgment. The educational question is therefore not whether AI should be used, but how its use can be made transparent, verifiable, proportionate, and consistent with social work ethics. Digital competence in community work must include critical appraisal, data responsibility, and the ability to maintain non-digital alternatives for residents who face technological barriers.

2.3. Weak continuity between classroom learning and community practice

Practice components are sometimes organized as site visits, short-term volunteering, or one-off community events. Such activities may increase students' exposure to the field, but they do not necessarily connect assessment, problem definition, collaborative planning, implementation, feedback, and reflection. Universities and communities can consequently develop an asymmetrical relationship in which a course needs a placement site and a community accommodates an activity. Community concerns may enter the classroom only briefly, while student assignments rarely become resources that community partners can use.

A stable partnership requires continuity, reciprocity, and clear expectations. Community partners should have a meaningful role in defining appropriate tasks and evaluating the usefulness of student work. Students should be able to follow a problem across multiple stages and observe how contextual knowledge changes their initial assumptions. Teachers should also bring unsuccessful or incomplete cases back into the classroom, because professional learning depends not only on successful products but also on the disciplined examination of constraints, unintended effects, and failed decisions.

2.4. Assessment practices that underrepresent competence development

Final examinations, term papers, and one-time project proposals can assess conceptual knowledge and written expression. They provide less evidence of how students enter a community, identify needs, respond to disagreement, document decisions, revise a plan, or communicate with residents. Group products may also conceal unequal contributions. Because grassroots governance competence is developmental, integrative, and context-dependent, it cannot be inferred from a single text produced at the end of a course.

Assessment needs to combine multiple forms of evidence collected across time. Teacher observation, student self- and peer assessment, field supervision, and feedback from community practitioners and residents can illuminate different aspects of performance. Policy briefs, community profiles, interview protocols, needs assessments, project drafts, meeting records, implementation notes, community feedback, explanations of digital-tool use, and reflective writing can together show how students' reasoning and practice develop. The central challenge is to connect each source of evidence to an explicit learning outcome rather than accumulating activities without a coherent assessment purpose.

3. Reform Goals and Design Principles

3.1. Defining learning outcomes from the requirements of grassroots practice

The reform treats students' ability to understand and address problems in authentic settings as an important indicator of educational quality. Students are expected to understand the changing role of social work in grassroots governance and to develop a professional position grounded in respect for residents' agency, informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of service-user rights. They must also acquire knowledge of community work theory, policy and regulation, social research, needs assessment, deliberative practice, and project management. Knowledge becomes educationally meaningful when students can use it to enter communities appropriately, analyze needs, coordinate resources, support collective action, and evaluate outcomes.

Professional competence also requires public responsibility, digital ethics, and reflective judgment. Grassroots settings frequently involve incomplete information, competing interests, and constraints that cannot be resolved by applying a standard technique. Students therefore need to communicate their reasoning, acknowledge uncertainty, seek supervision, and adjust action in response to feedback. The goal is not to train students to perform every community role independently, but to prepare them to contribute responsibly within their level of competence and to recognize when a matter should be referred to qualified practitioners.

3.2. Organizing learning through whole tasks

The course no longer treats theoretical instruction, skill practice, and community engagement as separate phases. Instead, teachers select authentic but educationally appropriate tasks from grassroots practice and embed relevant theory, policy, and methods within the process of completing them. Students first examine policy cases, local community materials, and simulated scenarios. They then

conduct supervised inquiry and consultation in a community, develop a preliminary response, and revise it after receiving feedback from practitioners and residents.

Whole-task design preserves the complexity of practice while allowing teachers to manage risk and cognitive demand. A task may begin with the production of a community profile and proceed to stakeholder analysis, a meeting plan, a small-scale intervention proposal, and a reflective account of revision. Student outputs include not only final reports but also records of action, annotated versions, explanations of decisions, and individual reflections. This structure links knowledge acquisition, method training, practical application, and assessment feedback, while allowing the course to be improved on the basis of evidence collected in each teaching cycle.

4. Reorganizing Course Content around Governance Tasks

Table 1 provides an overview of the course stages, primary content, learning tasks, and evidence of learning.

Table 1: Course Content and Evidence of Learning

Course stage	Primary content	Representative learning tasks	Evidence of learning
Foundations	Governance institutions and ethics; community policy; social inquiry and needs assessment	Policy interpretation; community observation; interviews; needs identification	Policy brief; observation notes; needs statement
Integrated practice	Support for older adults, children, and workers in new employment; digital governance; community organizations; charitable resources; dispute mediation	Community diagnosis; deliberation; project design; resource coordination; feedback	Community profile; resource map; project plan; evaluation report
Advanced application	Party-led governance; governance innovation; burden reduction; volunteer coordination; risk response; professional practice	Complex decision-making; model design; transfer and reflection	Governance recommendations; innovative product; professional evidence

4.1. Establishing foundations in professional standards and community inquiry

The first part of the course introduces grassroots governance institutions, social work values and ethics, relevant policy and regulation, professional relationships, informed consent, confidentiality, and boundaries of service. Through policy interpretation, community observation, interview practice, and needs assessment, students learn how to enter a community respectfully and formulate an initial understanding of a problem. Expected outputs include policy briefs, observation notes, interview protocols, needs statements, and basic community profiles. These products provide evidence of foundational knowledge and skills while preparing students for more complex project work.

4.2. Developing integrated competence through priority governance tasks

The central part of the course addresses community support for older adults and children, services for workers in new forms of employment and emerging organizations, digitally enabled community governance, development of community organizations and volunteer teams, integration of charitable resources, and prevention and mediation of community disputes. These topics are not taught as isolated units. Students examine how service needs, stakeholder interests, policy requirements, and available resources interact in a particular setting. They then develop a response that includes assessment, deliberation, project design, resource coordination, implementation planning, and feedback. The purpose is to help students understand how community work methods operate within governance institutions and everyday community life.

4.3. Extending competence to complex and innovative practice

After developing foundational and integrated skills, students examine more complex areas such as Party-led community governance, governance innovation, reduction of administrative burden at the grassroots level, mechanisms for gathering public suggestions, rule-based petition work, volunteer-service coordination, and responses to emerging risks. Learning tasks may be connected with professional competency requirements or student competitions, but certificates and competition results do not replace course outcomes. Students are required to compare alternative responses, examine their contextual suitability and potential risks, and integrate ethical judgment, professional methods, digital tools, and collaborative strategies. This stage is intended to support transfer from the course to

placement and early employment settings.

5. Implementation Mechanisms

5.1. Integrating public values and professional ethics

Value education is embedded in the analysis of grassroots institutions, community resources, and professional action rather than treated as an additional topic. Cases involving Party-led resource mobilization, services for emerging organizations, the contemporary Fengqiao approach to conflict resolution, and volunteer-service systems help students examine the public responsibilities of social work. Community practice also draws attention to mutual aid, respect for older adults, intergenerational support, family traditions, festivals, and local cultural resources. These materials enable students to understand that community identification and collective efficacy depend not only on formal institutions but also on trust built through everyday relationships.

5.2. Connecting digital resources, simulation, and community practice

Online teaching materials include policy documents, cases, local community information, and standardized learning resources that students review before entering the field. Virtual simulation is used for crisis communication, resident consultation, community decision-making, and risk response. It allows students to encounter alternative scenarios, compare consequences, and practice communication in a safe setting. Offline learning relies on appropriately bounded tasks drawn from projects undertaken by local social work authorities, subdistricts, communities, social service agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

Generative AI may support the comparison of interview guides, the development of scenario variations, the organization of de-identified material, and analysis of the learning process. Students must disclose how they used the technology, verify generated content, and retain records of substantive revision. Online learning, simulation, and field practice are organized around the same problem so that technology supports, rather than fragments, professional learning. The aim is to strengthen contextual judgment and timely feedback, not to replace community contact or professional responsibility.

5.3. Sustaining reciprocal classroom-community partnerships

One class may be paired with one community as a basic unit of collaboration. Teachers and community practitioners first identify tasks that have educational value, practical relevance, and manageable risk. Students then undertake supervised community inquiry, problem analysis, collaborative planning, limited implementation, and feedback. Community situations are brought into the classroom for theoretical interpretation and preliminary design. Student outputs, such as community profiles, resource inventories, meeting procedures, and project proposals, are returned to practitioners and residents for comment and revision.

At the end of a project, teachers use difficulties, unintended outcomes, and unsuccessful decisions as materials for structured reflection. Subsequent cohorts can build on documented experience rather than restarting from zero. This arrangement changes community engagement from a one-way placement relationship into a more reciprocal process in which communities contribute contextual knowledge and evaluation, while the course produces carefully supervised analyses and resources that may be useful to local practice.

5.4. Building a collaborative teaching team

University teachers retain responsibility for curriculum coherence, theoretical instruction, learning support, and ethical oversight. They are joined by specialists familiar with policy and professional standards and by frontline practitioners who understand local needs, relationships, and operational conditions. Specialists contribute policy interpretation and guidance on complex issues; course teachers connect field tasks to theory and assessment; community practitioners provide contextual knowledge and feedback on feasibility. Joint lesson planning, focused lectures, field supervision, and collaborative review enable these contributions to complement one another.

Collaboration does not remove professional boundaries. Crisis cases, sensitive disputes, and confidential information must be handled by appropriately qualified and experienced personnel.

Students may participate only when authorization, supervision, and task design are consistent with their level of competence. Authenticity in teaching should never be used to justify avoidable risk to residents or students.

5.5. Establishing process-based and multi-source assessment

Assessment focuses on students' capacity to address grassroots governance problems. It examines their use of theory and policy as well as their performance in inquiry, communication, deliberation, project implementation, innovation, and reflective improvement. Evidence is contributed by course teachers, students, field supervisors, community practitioners, and, where appropriate, residents or service users. Relevant materials include policy and ethics briefs, community profiles, annotated project drafts, consultation records, feedback, statements on digital-tool use, and individual reflections.

A flexible weighting scheme can allocate 40% of the final grade to process learning, 40% to the community project, and 20% to integrated reflection, an innovative product, evidence of professional competence, or a relevant competition outcome. Process assessment considers preparation, simulation, participation, documentation, and revision. Project assessment considers analytical quality, feasibility, collaboration, ethical practice, and responsiveness to feedback. Fabricated data, disclosure of confidential information, or substitution of AI-generated work for a student's core contribution constitutes a serious breach of course ethics. Assessment results are used to adjust task difficulty, learning resources, supervision, and individualized support in subsequent teaching cycles.

6. Ethical Boundaries and Conditions for Implementation

6.1. Governing the use of AI and community data

Course data should be classified according to accessibility and sensitivity. Informed consent, anonymization, data minimization, purpose limitation, secure storage, and scheduled deletion should be incorporated into teaching protocols. Students must not enter residents' names, contact information, health conditions, family difficulties, or details of disputes into public AI systems. AI may be used for idea generation, language improvement, simulated questioning, and organization of already de-identified material, but conclusions, service records, and outcome data must be verified by a responsible person.

Digital participation should be accompanied by accessible non-digital alternatives. Older adults, persons with disabilities, and residents with limited digital skills should not be excluded because a course project privileges a platform or application. A human-centered approach to educational AI is consistent with international guidance that emphasizes human agency, ethical responsibility, inclusion, and critical understanding of AI systems ^[10,11].

6.2. Using existing institutional and community foundations

The reform builds on existing teaching, research, and practice relationships rather than creating an isolated platform. The course leader has participated in professional development related to industry-education integration and has prior experience with outcomes-based and competency-oriented curriculum design. The School of Law and Public Administration maintains a research platform in rural community governance, has access to relevant Chinese and international scholarship, and includes staff with experience in higher education, community governance, and frontline social work. The Social Work program also collaborates with social work authorities, subdistricts, communities, social service organizations, and nonprofit partners in Yibin.

These resources make it possible to convert appropriately selected field projects into supervised learning tasks. Future development should focus on improving resource sharing, maintaining continuity in community partnerships, and gradually standardizing task guidance and assessment. The purpose is not to build a separate digital platform for its own sake, but to improve the educational use of relationships and resources that already exist.

6.3. Evaluating the reform through action research

Implementation begins with a review of course needs and student capabilities, followed by revision of content, development of learning tasks, classroom implementation, and iterative analysis. Each

teaching cycle collects evidence such as drafts and revisions of student work, learning-platform records, teacher observation, field-supervisor feedback, and community responses. These data are used to examine changes in professional values, application of knowledge, practice competence, transfer, and reflective learning. Findings then inform revisions to the syllabus, case resources, project tasks, and assessment criteria.

Expected project outputs include a revised syllabus, teaching plans, online resources, case materials, a course model, a research report, and scholarship on teaching and learning. Later evaluation should include pre- and post-course measures, comparison groups where feasible, and follow-up interviews. The reliability and validity of assessment rubrics also require examination. Most importantly, future research should investigate whether competence developed in the course transfers to field placement and early employment rather than inferring effectiveness from polished student products alone.

7. Discussion

This reform contributes to community work education in three ways. First, it places professional reasoning, rather than isolated activities, at the center of curriculum design. Students must connect policy, theory, community knowledge, and ethical judgment while completing a whole task. This is particularly important in grassroots governance, where problems are rarely presented in the categories used by textbooks. Second, the reform treats university-community partnership as part of the learning architecture rather than as a supplementary placement arrangement. Community partners contribute to problem definition, contextual interpretation, and evaluation, while teachers retain responsibility for educational quality and professional boundaries. Third, digital intelligence is conceptualized as a dimension of professional judgment. The educational value of AI and simulation depends on whether students can explain their use, verify outputs, protect data, and preserve meaningful human participation.

The design also has limitations. It is situated in one university and reflects the governance environment and partnership resources of Yibin. Adaptation to other institutions will require attention to local policy, community relationships, staff expertise, student preparation, and access to technology. In addition, the project is ongoing; the present article describes a curriculum design rather than a completed effectiveness study. Claims about learning gains must await systematic evidence. Future research should examine how students negotiate tensions between institutional expectations and resident priorities, how assessment judgments differ across teachers and community partners, and whether digitally supported practice strengthens or weakens students' independent professional reasoning.

8. Conclusion

Community Work education in the age of digital intelligence must respond to institutional change and the practical realities of grassroots governance. Course outcomes should be expressed through students' capacity to understand community problems, enter communities appropriately, support deliberation, coordinate resources, and revise action in response to evidence. The curriculum must retain necessary theory, policy knowledge, and professional standards while giving students sustained opportunities to use them in authentic but carefully bounded tasks.

Digital resources, virtual simulation, and generative AI can expand learning environments and make support more timely. Their educational use must nevertheless remain subject to social work ethics, data governance, critical verification, and commitments to inclusion. Participation by teachers, field professionals, and community partners can improve the specificity of feedback and the practical relevance of student work. The ultimate purpose of curriculum reform is not to create elaborate labels, but to establish a clear, stable, and improvable educational process through which professional values, knowledge, practice, and community feedback are integrated into each learning task.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Teaching Reform and Research Project of Yibin University, "Teaching Research on Community Work Oriented toward Grassroots Governance Competence in the Age of Digital Intelligence" (Project No. 409-XJGY2025015).

References

- [1] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, & State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2021). *Opinions on strengthening the modernization of grassroots governance systems and governance capacity* [in Chinese].
- [2] General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2022). *Plan for the development of urban and rural community service systems during the 14th Five-Year Plan period* [in Chinese].
- [3] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, & State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2023). *Reform plan for Party and state institutions* [in Chinese].
- [4] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, & State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2023). *Overall plan for the layout of a Digital China* [in Chinese].
- [5] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, et al. (2025). *Opinions on accelerating education digitalization* (Jiao Ban [2025] No. 3) [in Chinese].
- [6] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, et al. (2026). *Action plan for "Artificial Intelligence + Education"* [in Chinese].
- [7] Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher Education*, 32(3), 347-364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138871>
- [8] Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- [9] Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>
- [10] Miao, F., & Holmes, W. (2023). *Guidance for generative AI in education and research*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/EWZM9535>
- [11] UNESCO. (2024). *AI competency framework for teachers*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ZJTE2084>