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Artificial Intelligence and Case-Based Learning in Social Work Education: Pedagogical Considerations and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more prevalent in higher education, it raises important pedagogical, ethical, and disciplinary questions. This theoretical paper develops a comprehensive theoretical foundation for considering the use of AI-generated case studies in social work education and examines the implications for teaching, learning, and professional identity formation. The theoretical framework is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, by drawing on Entwistle's conception of deep learning, Biggs and Tang's constructive alignment, new materialist perspectives on classroom technology assemblages, and critical discursive frameworks informed by Foucault and Packer, this paper argues that AI-generated case studies can enhance social work students' reflexivity when used with careful oversight. AI can expand the discursive space, diversify representational possibilities, and save lecturers' preparation time. Nevertheless, AI presents significant risks related to bias, representational ethics, and over-standardisation. Informed by practice realities, risks can be mediated by drawing on practitioner wisdom to orchestrate AI case study prompts and anchor AI-produced narratives. This theoretical paper emphasises the need for critical AI literacy, transparent governance, and educator–practitioner collaboration to ensure that AI serves as a tool for deep, anti-oppressive, and justice-oriented learning. AI-assisted case study pedagogy is shown to be most valuable when it strengthens, rather than diminishes, human judgement, reflexive practices, and relational social work education. This is a theoretical and conceptual paper. It does not report any empirical findings. Instead, it offers a structured synthesis of relevant pedagogical, philosophical, and practice-based literature to develop a framework for critically integrating AI-generated case studies into social work education.

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1. Introduction

Social work education is grounded in the challenge of preparing students for complex, unpredictable, and ethically charged practice environments. Unlike disciplines where factual and technical knowledge is prioritised, social work requires learners to develop interpretive judgment, emotional attunement, reflexivity, and the ability to work ethically within systems marked by uncertainty and competing demands[1]. Case studies have long been central to this work, providing students with simulated practice contexts in which they can rehearse professional thinking, test theoretical frameworks, and engage with the relational and contextual nuances of practice[2,3].

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education raises questions about the evolution of core pedagogical practices. Generative AI tools, capable of producing detailed case scenarios and narrative variants within seconds, offer both opportunities and challenges for social work educators and social work practice[4–7]. While AI-generated case studies may expand the diversity and adaptability of learning materials, they also raise concerns about bias, accuracy, representational ethics, and the potential erosion of humanistic values central to the profession[8]. To harness AI's pedagogical potential without compromising ethical and professional commitments, a theoretically grounded and critically informed approach is therefore essential.

This paper responds to this need by developing a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of AI-generated case studies in social work education. It brings together philosophical, pedagogical, and practice-based perspectives, including work on deep approaches to learning[9], constructive alignment[10], new materialist theories of teacher–student–technology assemblages[11], narrative enquiry into professional formation[12], Foucauldian insights into discourse[13], and the notion of practice irreverence[14]. Through this synthesis, the paper demonstrates how AI has the potential to support, disrupt, and reconfigure case-based pedagogy. It further considers how practitioner wisdom interacts with AI technologies, how discursive framings shape students' emerging professional identities, and how critical AI literacy must now form an essential component of responsible and ethically informed teaching. In doing so, this paper acknowledges the risks inherent in the use of AI and argues that these risks require deliberate and ongoing critical scrutiny.

This paper is theoretical in scope. It does not present empirical data or primary research results. Instead, it offers a conceptual synthesis of educational theory, critical social theory, and practice scholarship to develop a pedagogical framework for AI-assisted case study design in social work education. The aim was not to evaluate specific classroom interventions but to clarify the conceptual conditions under which AI-generated case studies may enhance or undermine professional formation. An empirical investigation would be an important next step in testing and refining the arguments presented here.

This paper makes a distinctive contribution by articulating a conceptual framework for AI-assisted case pedagogy. It positions AI as a discursive and relational pedagogical actor, rather than merely a technological efficiency tool. This paper foregrounds deep learning, constructive alignment, and discursive enquiry as its primary organising lenses. It also integrates practitioner wisdom and sociomaterial perspectives. Together, these perspectives clarify how AI-generated case studies can align with learning outcomes, professional identity formation, and justice-oriented teaching.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it outlines the pedagogical foundations of case-based learning and the contributions that AI can make to enhancing complexity, relevance, and diversity. Second, it examines the risks and ethical tensions associated with AI-generated materials, including issues of representation, confidentiality, standardisation, and bias. Third, it synthesises these considerations into implications for educators, institutions, and professional bodies. In doing so, this paper advances a theoretically grounded account of AI-assisted case pedagogy that extends beyond existing descriptive or technology-focused discussions.

2. Pedagogical Foundations for Using AI-Generated Case Studies in Social Work Education

The use of case studies has long been central to social work education because it enables students to engage with the relational, ethical, and contextual complexities that characterise real practice [2]. Unlike abstract or didactic pedagogies, case-based learning situates students within scenarios that require them to interpret judgements, prioritise competing demands, and manage uncertainty. From a discursive and constitutive perspective [15,16], case studies do not simply represent practice; they actively shape what becomes thinkable, sayable, and professionally legitimate within it. In this section, I explore several theoretical approaches to help educators reflect on the complexities of using LLMs to produce social work case studies. Educators should, of course, be open to other approaches.

This section is organised around three central pedagogical commitments: fostering deep learning, ensuring constructive alignment, and interrogating the discursive shaping of professional knowledge. Additional perspectives that extend or complicate these core commitments are introduced.

Social constructivist [17] and systemic [18] perspectives emphasise that knowledge develops through relational exchanges and conversations. From this standpoint, deep learning rests on the understanding that meaning is co-produced through interaction rather than being transmitted as fixed content. When educators draw on large language models to generate case studies, these orientations remain important points of reference in designing prompts and learning activities. The availability of multiple AI-generated case variants can support dialogic learning by encouraging students to compare, interpret, and discuss different scenarios. Educators can use prompts that invite students to explore systemic variations in themes such as risk, resources, and demographics. As students examine how different framings reshape meaning, they engage in collaborative enquiry [19] and hone reflexive skills central to ethical professional practice. AI-generated case studies can incorporate classroom practices, such as using circular questioning [20], where the aim is not to identify a single "correct" interpretation but to explore how interpretations emerge.

Working in this way also aligns closely with accounts of deep learning, in which students meaningfully internalise concepts by connecting theory to authentic and emotionally resonant situations. The capacity to learn in a "deep" way is especially important for students, where there are regulatory expectations [21] that they will be able to apply knowledge to practice situations. Therefore, when social work students explore the tensions, dilemmas, and ambiguities inherent in case narratives, they may develop what Entwistle [9] terms as "personal understanding" (p. 18), which is the ability to use knowledge flexibly, creatively, and ethically in novel contexts.

Carefully formulated prompts can be used to organise large language models (LLMs) to produce case studies that support deep learning scenarios. AI enables the rapid production of parallel case variants and facilitates educators to make visible how small contextual changes reshape interpretation, assessment, and professional reasoning [22]. For example, AI can support representational diversity by enabling the development of case materials that reflect a wider range of cultural, socioeconomic, and lived experiences. Although educators must critically review AI-generated outputs to avoid the reproduction of bias, generative models can assist in producing case studies that more closely mirror the diversity of situations encountered in contemporary social work, thereby supporting deep learning and personal understanding of the subject.

To realise this potential, educators using AI-generated case studies need to introduce meaningful contextual variation that invites students to attend to nuances, which is an essential capacity in reflective and ethically grounded practice. When used in this way, AI-enhanced case studies can increase experiential richness and contribute to the development of professional judgment. Thoughtfully crafted AI-generated scenarios can immerse students in the ethical, epistemological, and procedural complexities through which social workers can make sense of their work. By doing so, AI-generated cases can help students engage with what Entwistle [9] calls disciplinary 'ways of thinking and practising' (p. 48).

Biggs and Tang's [10] theory of constructive alignment provides an additional pedagogical rationale for the use and design of AI-generated case studies in teaching. Constructive alignment reminds educators that different stakeholders hold certain expectations for teaching. Case-based learning can support key social work learning outcomes related to critical analysis, ethical reasoning, communication, and re-

flexivity[21,23]. Thinking about constructive alignment helps educators to design AI-generated case studies aligned with programme and module outcomes. Thus, AI-generated case design remains subordinate to curricular intent rather than being driven by technological novelty. In other words, educators can adjust the complexity, emphasis, and narrative structure to suit learners' developmental stages. For example, first-year students might work with simplified, structured cases, whereas final-year or postgraduate students engage with multi-layered narratives that require advanced judgement.

Other educational theories extend the commitment to deep learning by foregrounding the discomfort, liminality, and conceptual disruption often required for genuine transformation in professional formation. The theory of threshold concepts proposes that there are certain concepts, or certain learning experiences, which resemble passing "through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view"[24] (p. ix). The theory accepts that this learning journey for students can be bumpy, a phenomenon that requires consideration in AI-generated case studies. This is an important perspective for educators to consider, as AI-generated outputs may overly simplify and minimise the interpretive and emotional labour that social workers encounter in real-world practice[25].

For example, students training to become practitioners can encounter "troublesome knowledge"[24] when confronted with uncertainty or tension. These learning experiences around different knowledge are akin to students traversing a bumpy pathway to truly understand a threshold concept[26], an essential constituent of what it means to practise as a social worker. AI-generated case studies can be designed to foreground such transformative moments, helping students work through dilemmas that challenge assumptions, disturb comfortable narratives, and prompt reflexive engagement. Because AI can create longitudinal or multi-perspective cases, it supports narrative pedagogies that emphasise temporality, relationality, and situated learning[27,28]. Therefore, students encounter case materials that capture the evolving, contextually embedded nature of practice, strengthening their capacity for empathic reasoning and reflective judgement.

A central justification for the use of AI is its capacity to augment[7] rather than replace practitioner wisdom. This perspective is important to remember, especially if LLMs feel omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. It is incredibly seductive to outsource case study production to a social entity that appears both sophisticated and humble. Practitioner wisdom is required when educators create AI-based case studies. Kwong and Fawson[29] argue that practitioner wisdom is less about practical knowledge and more about the practitioner's character. They emphasise the extent to which social workers possess and are motivated by social work values. In turn, these values shape a worker's perception, interpretation, and judgment of cases. If we understand practice wisdom in this way, those with wisdom can organise LLMs to deliver case studies that cultivate values such as open-mindedness, empathy, compassion, and social justice.

Research shows that practitioners' involvement in teaching promotes powerful reflective moments for both students and practitioners[30]. When practitioners provide the foundational elements of a case, such as ethical tensions, contextual pressures, or critical incidents, AI can extend these contributions by generating alternative pathways, contextual elaborations, or additional stakeholder perspectives. This collaborative process ensures that case studies remain authentically grounded in the realities of practice while benefiting from AI's capacity to diversify narrative possibilities. Practitioner-informed prompting also strengthens representational accuracy by ensuring that AI-generated cases reflect realistic organisational constraints, interprofessional dynamics, and systemic complexity[31]. In this sense, AI operates as a pedagogical partner that expands the reach of practitioner-authored scenarios.

New materialist perspectives[11] deepen this argument by challenging simple human–technology binaries and situating AI within the sociomaterial assemblage of teaching practice. They provide an ontological rationale for seriously considering the existence of LLMs and their implications. New materialist perspectives help us to conceptualise learning as emerging from 'entangled matterings'[32] (p. 372) among human and non-human actors (e.g., students, educators, texts, technologies, and institutional environments). Therefore, AI is not a detached technological add-on; it becomes part of the pedagogical assemblage that co-produces meaning. When AI generates case content and educators and students interact with and interpret that content, the boundaries between the creator, facilitator, and learner become porous. This ecologi-

cal understanding[33] helps counter both technophobic and technophilic narratives, situating AI within a relational and emergent pedagogy, rather than a mechanistic or deterministic model. This view also aligns with the dynamic nature of practice itself, as social work unfolds through relationships, contexts, bodies, and systems in motion. AI-generated case studies, with their capacity to introduce multiple trajectories or embed contextual nuances, help students appreciate this dynamism in rhizomatic ways[34].

From a discursive and constitutive perspective[15,16], case studies shape what becomes thinkable in the profession. Foucault's analysis of discourse[13] and Packer's[16] work on constitutive enquiry illuminate how case studies shape what is thinkable within the profession. Their work encourages educators to critically examine the outputs generated by LLM prompts. From this perspective, case study representations are never neutral; they foreground particular interpretations, marginalise others, and position service users and practitioners within specific moral and epistemic frames. When used reflexively, AI-generated cases can widen the discursive space by allowing alternative framings that unsettle dominant narratives. A safeguarding case in a child protection setting, for example, might be reworked to foreground structural inequality or cultural context[1], thereby interrupting default risk-oriented readings. In this sense, AI can function as a tool for critical pedagogy, rendering underlying discursive assumptions visible and open to scrutiny, and enabling students to examine the norms that shape their own professional reasoning.

When students are learning to identify how case narratives privilege certain interpretations, construct particular subject positions, and normalise specific interventions, they are learning to develop critical reflexivity. When educators make the discursive framing of case studies explicit, it directly shapes programme learning outcomes. Students begin to recognise that professional judgment is not merely a technical skill but is also discursively shaped. By interrogating how AI-generated case studies are generated, we can support learning outcomes related to critical analysis, ethical reasoning, and professional identity formation.

Cecchin et al.'s[14] notion of irreverence extends this discursive framing by encouraging epistemic flexibility and resistance to fixed interpretive positions. Irreverence is the practice of holding ideas lightly and cultivating curiosity, which offers an additional justification for AI use. One of the great privileges that educators experience when teaching social work students is opening their minds to the possibilities of different hypotheses to explain the presence of social problems, as well as exploring the nature of interventions to address these problems. One intention of irreverence is to illustrate to students the risks of fixating on one explanation for a problem and arriving at one solution. AI-generated case variations can deliberately introduce unexpected trajectories that disrupt rigid interpretive habits. Being outside one's comfort zone invites epistemic humility, as one has to consider alternative possibilities. This type of generative disruption can help students to develop their capacity to navigate practice uncertainties.

Building on commitments to deep learning, constructive alignment, and discursive enquiry, these theoretical perspectives suggest that AI-generated case studies do not represent a break from established social work pedagogies but rather extend and rework them. They support deep learning, strengthen constructive alignment, enrich narrative and relational pedagogies, broaden discursive possibilities, and amplify practitioner wisdom. When used critically and ethically, AI offers educators a powerful means of enhancing the complexity, diversity, and responsiveness of case-based learning while remaining firmly anchored in the profession's epistemological, ethical, and relational commitments.

3. Pedagogical Risks, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Although AI presents notable pedagogical opportunities, its use in social work education raises significant risks and ethical considerations. These concerns must be carefully addressed to ensure that AI-generated case studies uphold the values and responsibilities of the profession[35]. Critical oversight is essential, particularly because social work is underpinned by commitments to anti-oppressive practice, ethical sensitivity, and social justice[36].

One major risk relates to accuracy and hallucination[37]. Generative AI tools may produce plausible-sounding but factually incorrect or internally contradictory case details. Such inaccuracies can mislead students or distort their understanding of legislation, practice procedures, or ethical guidelines. Social work education must therefore uphold rigorous stan-

dards of accuracy, requiring educators to review and correct AI outputs before using them in teaching. This aligns with the expectation embedded in professional standards [21] that social workers develop critical and ethical reasoning skills, including the ability to interrogate information sources.

There are also concerns about trustworthiness and a lack of accountability regarding the use of AI in social work [38]. AI prompts must be carefully constructed to avoid replicating identifiable practice scenarios or disclosing sensitive information. Balancing the need for practice narratives to contain emotional and relational depth while ensuring their anonymity remains a challenge for educators [39]. Therefore, when AI is used to support case construction, it is essential that the generated scenarios remain fictitious yet feel authentic.

Kinchin and Gravett [11] warn that contemporary higher education is shaped by dominant discourses of efficiency and performativity that promote increasing levels of standardisation. While a degree of standardisation is necessary for coherence and quality assurance, they argue that these pressures frequently drift into over-standardisation. If this happens, thoughtless pedagogical routines may occur that restrict creativity and flatten complexity. AI-generated case studies, if used uncritically, risk intensifying this problem. They risk generating homogenised or predictable narratives that appear efficient but misrepresent the ambiguity and nuance of real practice. Such over-standardisation diminishes the emotional, ethical, and contextual complexity that students must learn to navigate. This echoes Packer's [16] view that critical enquiry should reveal, rather than smooth over, the constitutive complexity of lived realities. Since case studies are never neutral, AI-generated cases must be used to expand interpretive and discursive possibilities rather than narrow them.

Ethical risks also arise from how students interpret and engage with AI-generated case studies. Without careful mediation, students may assume that AI outputs are authoritative or neutral, overlooking the fact that AI functions as a discursive and technological actor shaped by the patterns, biases, and omissions embedded in its source data [40], reflecting broader societal and professional discourses [15]. For example, AI systems may inadvertently reproduce stereotypical or deficit-based portrayals of individuals, families, or communities, or normalise dominant cultural narratives that marginalise alternative perspectives. For example, unchecked, AI might over-associate risk with certain ethnic groups or portray lone parents predominantly in crisis. Therefore, unfiltered AI-generated case studies in social work education pose significant dangers for representational ethics [41], as they risk biased or closed thinking around race, gender, class, disability, immigration, and family structure. If social work students take such representations at face value, they may internalise distorted understandings of service users or develop oversimplified accounts of practice, undermining the cultivation of critical reflexivity [42].

Beyond issues of bias and representational accuracy, generative AI introduces more subtle pedagogical risks related to affect, interpretation, and authority. Social workers are organised to value ways of thinking and feeling that prioritise relationship building with service users [35]. Consequently, they may be at greater risk than other students when AI-generated case narratives produce responses that appear empathic, emotionally attuned, and professionally sensitive. Such displays should not be mistaken for genuine relational understanding or ethical judgment. Apparent empathy in AI-generated narratives is a discursive effect produced through patterned language rather than through embodied, situated, or accountable relational engagement. In social work education, this presents a significant pedagogical risk. Specifically, students may attribute care, authority, or professional wisdom to AI-generated case material without recognising the absence of reflexive, moral, and relational responsibility underpinning those representations. Without careful mediation, AI's simulation of empathy risks obscuring the interpretive labour, emotional attunement, and ethical accountability required in real-world practice, thereby flattening the distinction between professional judgement and stylistic plausibility [15,40]. AI-generated case studies are most pedagogically valuable when they are used to interrogate empathy rather than to model it, inviting students to examine how empathic language is constructed, where it fails, and what it omits in relation to ethical and relational practice.

Moreover, unexamined AI-generated narratives may obscure structural factors, including power imbalances, and sanitise the emotional and ethical complexity of real-world practice. These risks underscore the need for educators to actively frame and interrogate AI-generated materials. Educators must ensure that students learn to question both the

representational and epistemic assumptions embedded in digital case narratives. Educators, therefore, need to critique AI-generated case materials to ensure that they promote anti-oppressive and strengths-based perspectives in line with social work values [43].

There are also professional risks related to transparency and academic integrity. Educators need to reflect on whether they should disclose that case studies have been AI-assisted, both to uphold transparency and to model the ethical use of technology [44]. This reflects broader debates in higher education regarding responsible digital engagement [45]. AI should never be used covertly or presented as human-authored creativity; its use must be explicit, accountable, and subject to critique. The absence of transparency may erode trust in both educators and social work programmes, particularly if students later discover that learning materials were produced through undisclosed technological means. Failing to acknowledge AI involvement blurs authorship and risks overstating the reliability and authority of AI-generated content.

4. Implications for Social Work Teaching and Practice

The arrival of AI has several implications for social work teaching and practice. By situating AI within relational, discursive, and practitioner-informed frameworks, educators can approach technological integration in a manner aligned with social work's epistemological, ethical, and political commitments. This section explores these implications and argues that AI can catalyse pedagogical and professional renewal when used critically and reflexively.

4.1. Re-Envisioning the Role of the Social Work Educator

The use of AI-generated case studies invites us to reconceptualise educators' roles. It expands the role from content producer to curator, mediator, and co-inquirer. In traditional pedagogical models [46], social work educators are responsible for generating case materials by selecting examples to support theoretical learning. With AI's capacity to rapidly produce multiple variations, educators can reinvest their saved time to focus on higher-order pedagogical tasks, such as facilitating discussions and nurturing reflexivity [47]. This mirrors the argument advanced by Entwistle [9], who emphasises the value of teaching that promotes deep, personal understanding over surface-level engagement with content.

Within this context, social work educators become critical filters through which AI outputs are situated within the professional domain [7]. This involves selecting AI-generated narratives that align meaningfully with learning outcomes. The educator takes on an active role by adjusting language or emphasis to reflect professional values and to ensure that the materials stimulate reflective enquiry by social work students [46]. It also requires the educator to demonstrate how AI use can be critiqued [48]. Social work lecturers can demonstrate to students how digital artefacts can be interrogated for bias and accuracy. They can also invite a discussion on the ethical implications [35] of using AI. Such modelling contributes to the development of students' critical AI literacy, a developing competence in practice environments as digital tools increasingly inform assessment processes and decision-making activities.

AI-generated case studies also offer particular value for reflexive pedagogies. Reflexive teaching practices foreground the co-construction of meaning through dialogue, critical questioning, and the exploration of uncertainty [17,49]. The availability of multiple AI-generated case variants enables educators to design pertinent learning activities. For example, students can compare interpretations across different framings, uncover underlying assumptions within each variant, and explain why practice decisions may or may not vary because of context [50].

More specifically, students might be presented with three AI-generated versions of a safeguarding scenario, each highlighting different contextual or cultural details. Through facilitated interaction, students learn that meaning is not inherent in the case itself but emerges through interpretive processes shaped by discourse, values, and professional frameworks. This aligns with Packer's [16] argument that enquiry is constitutive rather than merely descriptive, with understanding developing through interactions among participants, materials, and discursive contexts. Used in this way, AI can contribute to dialogic pedagogies that sustain multi-voiced and critically engaged learning environments. Within social work education, AI-generated case studies may also give rise to multiple learning pathways, reflecting what has been described as multifinality [51], in which educational encounters generate outcomes that are neither singular nor fully

predictable.

AI can also support the creation of emotionally resonant and relationally complex case narratives. Such case narratives are important for cultivating emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity. These qualities are fundamental to social work practice but are difficult to teach through abstract theory alone. When used critically, AI-generated case studies can incorporate emotion-producing plots, generating feelings of fear, ambivalence, and confusion in social work students. Such feelings invite students to move beyond theoretical abstraction to engage with the emotional effects of social work situations. Students can be invited to discuss how their reactions might affect them personally and their professional decision-making as social workers.

4.2. Supporting Practitioner–Educator Collaboration

One of the most significant implications of introducing AI into case-based teaching is the potential to deepen collaboration between practitioners and educators. Previous research has demonstrated that practitioners gain renewed insights when engaging with students in the classroom [30]. Teaching serves as a site of reciprocal learning in which practitioners encounter fresh perspectives on their practice. Their interactions with students create opportunities to revisit ethical dilemmas and recognise the discursive and emotional dynamics shaping their decision-making [39].

AI can extend this collaborative space by enabling practitioners to contribute their tacit knowledge more readily to case design. This knowledge can be understood more as practitioner wisdom [29] in that the virtues and values of practitioners come to the centre stage. This phronesis or "know-how" focuses less on the technical what to do with certain social work cases. Instead, it keeps forefront the significance of practitioner values across a range of cases. LLM prompts can therefore draw from practitioner wisdom in devising realistic case studies. Which aspect of social justice is considered and how can this be operationalised? How can social workers combine risk management and empathy? How can social workers be empathetic when they deplore the service user's behaviour or beliefs?

Additionally, when preparing to teach a social work topic, practitioners could outline the key dynamics of a real situation without compromising confidentiality and collaborate with educators to prompt AI to create multiple versions of the scenario. They are aided by their professional curiosity and the values that organise how they approach different cases. This not only ensures authenticity, which all professional students in training value [9], but also supports reciprocal learning as practitioners reflect on how AI representations differ from, enrich, or illuminate their own understanding of practice contexts. By doing so, the ecological system in which social workers operate is also likely to expand [52,53].

4.3. Implications for Curriculum Design and Professional Identity Formation

At the curriculum level, AI-generated case studies should not be treated as isolated teaching innovations but as elements within an integrated programme design. Programme teams can map AI-supported case work across levels of study, beginning with structured and guided analysis in early modules and progressing towards complex, ambiguous, and multi-layered scenarios in advanced practice units. This developmental scaffolding aligns with constructive alignment principles [10], ensuring that case complexity matches the intended learning outcomes and assessment demands.

AI-generated case studies also have implications for assessment design. They can support comparative analysis, ethical reflections, and critical evaluations of linear decision-making. Programme-level planning should therefore clarify where and how AI-assisted materials are introduced, how they align with regulatory standards, and how students are supported to engage with them critically. Such explicit curriculum mapping strengthens coherence and helps to ensure that technological innovation serves pedagogical intent rather than being driven by novelty.

AI-generated case studies also influence how students come to understand and inhabit the professional identity of a social worker. Professional identity is shaped not only by formal knowledge but also by discursive narratives, stories, and representations through which the profession is imagined. Foucault's insights into discourse highlight that power circulates through the stories we tell, the categories we employ, and the interpretations we prioritise. In other words, AI-generated case studies can help students problematise [15] what it might mean to become and practise as a social worker. Case studies are, therefore, not merely pedagogical tools but discursive artefacts that shape the boundaries of the

profession's imagination.

When AI-generated cases position service users through risks, needs, or pathologies, students may internalise these framings as normative. Conversely, when cases foreground structural inequality, relational complexity, and service user agency, students are invited to inhabit a different professional subject position. Discursive framing, therefore, shapes not only what students analyse but also who they are becoming as practitioners. Making these framings visible enables educators to align identity formation with intended learning outcomes around anti-oppressive practice, ethical accountability, and critical reflexivity.

When AI is used to generate diverse and reflexively challenging case materials, the discursive field through which social work identity is shaped becomes more expansive. Students exposed to multiple framings (e.g., structural, relational, rights-based, trauma-informed, culturally grounded) are more likely to develop flexible, critical, and ethically responsive professional identities. From a post-structuralist perspective, AI-generated case studies therefore invite social work students to review the discursive structures through which they are being formed as practitioners [54]. They learn that social work is not reducible to a single worldview but is constituted through ongoing negotiation among competing interpretations. This multiplicity fosters epistemic humility, including a willingness to question one's assumptions and a receptiveness to tolerate alternative perspectives.

4.4. Organisational Implications and Digital Futures

AI should not be understood as a future or speculative influence on social work practice but as an extension of existing forms of technology-mediated communication already embedded within human service systems. Automated responses, decision-support tools, and generative text applications increasingly shape how individuals access information, interpret support, and engage with services. Consequently, social work students are likely to encounter AI-mediated interactions both as service users and as practitioners, often in contexts where professional judgement, ethical reasoning, and relational sensitivity remain essential [5,8].

AI-generated case studies, therefore, provide a pedagogically valuable means of preparing students for the realities of digitally mediated practice environments [4]. When situated within critically informed teaching frameworks, such cases allow students to examine how technological systems shape professional decision-making, redistribute authority, and introduce new ethical tensions around accountability, trust, and care. In this way, AI-assisted pedagogy functions not as a departure from practice realities but as a structured site for their critical examination.

As AI becomes more prevalent within social work organisations [55], whether through predictive analytics or semi-automated writing (e.g., assessments, reports, and client letters), students must be prepared to navigate digital landscapes ethically and critically) [56]. AI-generated case studies provide a safe environment to explore the implications of digital tools for professional autonomy, accountability, and service user rights.

For example, a scenario might explore how an algorithmic risk assessment tool shapes a practitioner's judgement, prompting students to reflect on the boundaries between human and machine decision-making. Such exercises cultivate awareness of the tensions identified in new materialist ideas [11], such as the entanglement of human and technological actors, the co-production of knowledge, and the shifting location of professional agency. This invites us to speculate on the emerging debate that AI will not replace social workers but that, together, AI and social workers might replace social workers. Engaging in these kinds of exercises and debates when using AI-generated case studies in social work bids students to advocate for ethical digital practices, confront discriminatory algorithms, and navigate institutional expectations that increasingly rely on digital infrastructures.

At the organisational level, educators must work with other stakeholders, such as programme leaders, IT departments, and professional bodies, to develop guidelines for using AI ethically. We must consider issues such as transparency, confidentiality and consent, data security, and academic integrity. University discussions about the appropriate use of AI-assisted pedagogy echo wider discussions about AI use in social work agencies.

4.5. Ethical and Political Responsibilities

Finally, the use of AI in social work education must be considered in light of the profession's ethical and political commitments. Social work is grounded in principles of social justice, anti-oppressive practice, and the protection of human

rights[23]. From this standpoint, AI cannot be approached as a neutral or purely technical tool but must be understood as a sociotechnical system shaped by and operating within existing relations of power[57].

Therefore, educators are responsible for ensuring that AI-generated materials interrogate, rather than reinforce, structural inequalities. This involves scrutinising AI outputs for bias, attending to cultural sensitivity, and actively including service-user perspectives. It also requires locating AI within critical pedagogical discussions that examine how technologies reproduce and sustain social patterns of inequality (e.g., who has access to knowledge?)[15]. When situated within reflective, critical, and justice-oriented pedagogical frameworks, AI practices have the potential to support, rather than undermine, the exploration of core social work values.

4.6. Operationalising AI-Generated Case Studies in Teaching Practice

I now offer a brief illustration of how an AI-generated case study might be applicable to a social work classroom. It is a second-year module on adult safeguarding aligned with social work standards[21]. Before approaching an LLM, the educator would consult with a practising social worker about recurring contextual dilemmas, such as balancing autonomy and protection in cases of self-neglect. The practitioner outlines core tensions but shares no identifiable details about particular cases. Often, it is best to develop an amalgam to uphold client confidentiality and promote particular learning points. This process draws on practitioner wisdom, understood as value-informed judgement rather than technical instruction[29]. The educator then constructs a structured prompt that asks the AI tool to generate a fictional safeguarding case marked by ambiguity, socioeconomic context, and ethical conflict. The design aligns clearly with module outcomes and assessment tasks, consistent with the principles of constructive alignment[10].

By offering a structured prompt informed by practitioner and pedagogical wisdom, AI can produce three short variants of the same scenario. For example, there can be a shifting emphasis towards family conflict, structural deprivation, or cultural interpretations of care.

Students work in small groups. Each group analyses one variant using safeguarding legislation, ethical principles, and risk frameworks. Students can identify how small contextual changes reshape assessment and decision-making. The class then compares their interpretations. The educator invites a discussion by asking reflective questions. Students see that meaning does not reside in the case itself. It develops through classroom interactions, leading to a greater appreciation that meanings are contested and that context is important. By becoming aware of these greater complexities and nuances, social work students are being encouraged to embrace a deeper approach to learning[9]. The educator then discloses that the scenarios were AI-generated and invites critique. Students can then be invited to examine whether the case study fostered bias or omissions. Students can also be invited to reflect on whether AI-generated narratives reach out empathically and seductively, priming an empathetic, complacent, and less critical response in students.

5. Conclusions

AI-generated case studies constitute an important development in social work education. When embedded within theoretically grounded, ethically informed, and critically reflective frameworks, AI can extend the depth, range, and responsiveness of case-based teaching. By placing deep learning, constructive alignment, and discursive enquiry at the centre of the analysis, this paper has aimed to preserve conceptual coherence while engaging with theoretical plurality. The analysis indicates that AI's pedagogical contribution lies less in technological novelty than in its capacity to reinforce long-standing commitments within social work education. These commitments include practitioner-informed pedagogy, justice-doing[58] and sustained attention to the lived complexity of human experience.

This paper contributes to existing discussions of AI in social work education[5,7] by reframing AI not as an efficiency mechanism or disruptive technology, but as a discursive and relational element within pedagogical practice. Rather than emphasising automation or productivity, it positions AI-generated case studies as sites through which reflexivity is cultivated. In doing so, this study highlights how case narratives shape what becomes thinkable in practice and how students come to understand themselves as emerging practitioners. This shifts the focus of AI use away from questions of substitution or acceleration and toward issues of epistemic responsibility, professional identity formation,

and justice-oriented pedagogy.

The analysis suggests that AI is most pedagogically effective when embedded within relational, dialogic, and critically engaged learning environments. Used in this way, AI-generated case studies can open up discursive space, unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions, and support ethical deliberation. Case studies can also foster the relational and imaginative capacities required for professional practice. Rather than serving primarily as tools for automation or efficiency, AI-generated case studies are best understood as structured opportunities for reflexivity. They invite students to reflect on why they think about social problems in certain ways, what they can do in practice, and what it might mean to become a social worker. This reframes AI use away from questions of substitution or acceleration and toward concerns of epistemic responsibility, professional identity, and justice-oriented pedagogy.

At the same time, the use of AI carries clear risks. Without careful pedagogical framing, AI-generated materials may reproduce bias, oversimplify complex situations, obscure emotional nuance, or reinforce dominant narratives. Educators, therefore, have an ethical responsibility to critically engage with AI, ensuring that its use remains aligned with anti-oppressive principles and the profession's wider ethical commitments.

As a theoretical contribution, this paper clarifies some of the conceptual and pedagogical conditions under which AI-generated case studies might strengthen social work education. It does not provide an empirical evaluation of classroom implementation. Future research should examine how AI-generated case studies operate in practice, including their impact on student learning, professional identity formation, and ethical reasoning.

Ultimately, AI is best understood as a discursively active participant in pedagogical enquiry rather than a substitute for human judgement, empathy, or relational accountability. When guided by practitioner expertise, critical theory, and reflective dialogue, AI can support the development of knowledgeable, ethically grounded, and socially responsive practitioners. Used with care, AI-generated case studies may contribute to a more reflexive and justice-oriented social work profession, one that is better equipped to navigate the opportunities and tensions of an increasingly digital practice landscape.

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