

Research in Teaching and Learning Approaches in a Liberal Arts College in China

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Abstract:

The establishment of a liberal arts college in China was a formidable research experience that took place 10 years ago. With the joint effort between the Beijing Normal University and the Hong Kong Baptist University, the United International College (UIC) was set up in Zhuhai, a city near Hong Kong, with the aims of breaking through the conventional educational objectives, and to align China's college education system with international standard. Since then, 9 such new Colleges were established, often in cooperation between a university in China and a Western counterpart. Basing on the ten-year experience of UIC, the purpose of this symposium is to initiate a discussion on the changing educational scene in China.

Objective

Since the announcement of the economic reform in 1978, the Chinese's economy took an exponential upturn. Multi-national conglomerates set up branches in China bringing in foreign employees that are highly educated with deep knowledge in China. Many students who had studied abroad returned to China to take up important position in these offices. Yet, the education system in China was not prepared to train local students with international outlook. At the turn of the century, the Chinese government had decided to investigate the possibility of introducing the western education system into China. The proposed session is a symposium on reviewing a ten years' development of a liberal arts college with international emphasis in China. Besides evaluating the success in conduction of this program, comments and suggestions are invited to improve teaching and learning.

The following is the structure of the symposium

1) Educating students with global mindset in China

Mildred Yang, Director of General Education Office, BNU-HKBU United
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Approved by China's Ministry of Education in 2005, Beijing Normal University and the Hong Kong Baptist University formed a joint alliance to establish the United

International College (UIC) in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. The major aims of this alliance were to pioneer internationalization of higher education in the country and bring a new direction in teaching and learning methods that may unleash students' potential. The curriculum was designed to provide a broad base of knowledge crucial to students' professional goal, and to develop the person with attributes in creativity and proper citizenship. The College also practices good management techniques placing major emphasis on quality assurance and accountability that are applied to all higher education institutions in Hong Kong.

2) The first-step in successful learning in a Liberal Arts College: an iterative process to develop a mandatory course for fundamental information literacy training

Chunyan Ji, Senior Lecturer, BNU-HKBU United International College

KP Mark, Associate Director of Information Technology Services Center, BNU-HKBU United International College

To educate liberal arts students, UIC has set seven graduate attributes. The IT course is a mandatory course to help build students' information literacy and problem solving skills, which is one of the graduate attributes. Information literacy is the core skill to succeed in university and lifelong learning in the contemporary society. This includes the operational skills of computing devices, e.g., productivity software applications, information retrieval and analysis skills, and digital dissemination of information, e.g., web publishing. Successful information literacy training does not emphasize on the advanced IT application skills. Instead, smart use of information and technology for problem-solving and communication in the respective domains should be the core of training. Challenges arise, however, when the western concept of interdisciplinary information literacy training meets Chinese students who come from 31 different provinces. This session will introduce the challenges we have faced and solved, the iterative process to develop this mandatory course, and related research we have done in the past ten years. The IT course has experienced three stages of development from teaching computing theories stage to teaching both theories and practical knowledge stage, and to interest-oriented categorized teaching method stage. In this session, we will share our successful reformation experiences on how to motivate Chinese students to learn, to build lifelong learning spirit, to cooperate with each other in real and virtual teams, and how to lead Chinese students to overcome the habit that they have built by the exam-oriented training in their past 12 years. We will also present our IT educational data mining research result to support our new interest-oriented categorized teaching method, which will further improve teaching quality, stimulate enthusiasm for learning, maximize students' potential and strength to learn what they need for their future.

3) Whole Person Education with Chinese Characteristics: An Experiential Learning-based Approach

Haipeng Guo, Director of Whole Person Education Office, BNU-HKBU United International College

Whole Person Education aims to facilitate students' holistic development of their multiple dimensional potentialities including physical, intellectual, moral, esthetical, emotional, social and spiritual developments. In the past nine years, an experiential learning-based whole person education curriculum has been developed at the United International College to supplement its liberal arts education practice, which consists of two other components, major study and general education. It has seven modules: experiential development (outward-bound training), emotional intelligence, sports culture, experiential arts, voluntary service, environmental awareness, and adversity management. The curriculum is based on the Confucianism's philosophy in which a person is considered as an organic whole and a dynamic process that is connected to and nurtured by layers of bigger wholes such as family, community, society, culture, earth, and the cosmos. An experiential learning approach is adopted that emphasizes learning by doing and reflections after various kinds of direct experiences. We have also carried out continuous efforts to study the learning outcomes. The data we have collected and the feedbacks from the parents and employers of our graduates have been very positive and encouraging.

4) Creating Space for Imagining the West: Teaching American History in China

Mark Perry, Associate Director of General Education Office, BNU-HKBU United International College

The general challenge in teaching American history at United International College is the same as anywhere else: to make history come alive. But at UIC there are two further challenges. First is the culture gap. What might cause great emotion in the West may not register so strongly in the East, and vice versa. Students may understand an episode in American history as abstract fact but not readily grasp the long-term implications. The instructor can help them overcome the gap by encouraging them to use their imagination, draw parallels, and relate the West to their own lives and cultural history. Second is performance anxiety. Students often feel that the classroom is a formal space for academic performance, and to avoid losing face before their peers they remain silent. The instructor can transform the classroom into an informal workshop in which ideas can be freely shared no matter the level of academic proficiency. Teaching American history in China therefore can be enhanced when the classroom becomes a creative and

encouraging space for all students to share ideas, to imagine, and to practice identifying parallels and contrasts between East and West.

Discussant

Mildred Yang, Professor and Director of General Education Office, BNU-HKBU United International College

Significance

In the past decade, China has emerged as a global power with rapid economic growth and deep involvement in world politics. The current topic in A Changing College Education Scene in China can be discussed in view of the 10 year experience of UIC in training a next generation of Chinese to keep abreast of the Country's development. In this experience, many lessons can be learned, which may help policy makers and educators to evaluate the pros and cons of adopting a western educational style, and map the future direction of higher education in China.