Researches on the Transformation of General Education Curriculum System in Higher Education of China

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Abstract. Higher education is a golden stage for the cultivation of independent learning ability, in which general education undertakes most missions for the goal of “cultivating well-rounded people”. By analyzing the current situation of the construction of the general education curriculum system in colleges and universities in China, this paper points out the difficulties and causes of constructing this curriculum system, and puts forward some constructive suggestions. At the present stage, colleges and universities in China should establish a professional management organization for the general education curriculum to deepen the general education concepts, clarify its curriculum goal, innovate its teaching method, and establish the scientific evaluation mechanism.

Introduction

The concept of general education originated from the 19th century. Inspired by the over-specialized academic branches of the modern university and the serious separation of the knowledge, many European and American scholars created a general education, which purpose was to cultivate well-rounded people by training students to think independently, to recognize different disciplines, and digest different subjects. In the mid-1980s, a Taiwanese scholar translated the thoughts of general education and liberal education into the Chinese word “Tong shi jiao yu”, based on Chinese traditional culture’s understanding of “Tong” (general knowledge) and “Shi” (knowledge), that is, “Tong” means to be proficient, well-informed, and knowing the truth of things, and “Shi” is knowledge, common sense and insight. Accordingly, “Tong shi jiao yu” (general education) is the education for students to gain knowledge and insight.

General education is a worldwide concept. After a long ideological evolution, Chinese and western people have gradually put the thought of general education into practice. In the 1990s, with Yale university, Harvard University and other world-renowned universities taking the lead, the universities in western countries gradually began to attach importance to general education, and brought those courses related to general education into the compulsory curriculum. In Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, Taiwan university and Chinese university of Hong Kong have experienced a period of accumulation, and formed their own unique understanding of the practice of general education course. In mainland China, a group of elite universities sponsored by "985 Project" such as Peking University and Fudan University have made different attempts to develop and innovate the general education course, and other universities have followed suit, trying to construct a general education curriculum system suitable for their own development.

General education curriculum system is a main channel to carry out general education, and undertakes the responsibility and mission to complete the general education goal. At present, there exist different viewpoints in understanding of the general classes as follows. Firstly, some people holds that the general classes belong to the cultural quality education courses, mainly about humanities and social sciences courses. According to the document Some Opinions On Strengthening The Cultural Quality education of College Students promulgated by Ministry of Education in 1998, the work of strengthening cultural quality education focuses on humanistic quality education, mainly through strengthening the education of the humanities and social sciences
for college students such as writing, history, philosophy and art, so as to improve the cultural taste, aesthetic taste, humanistic quality and scientific quality of all college students. Secondly, some people insist that the general classes refer to the “general elective courses” or “public elective course”, which can be freely selected by students within the range of courses offered by the teaching staff. Thirdly, the general classes are also regarded as the general courses in a broader sense, generally referring to all courses except professional courses.

Current Situation of General Education Courses in Colleges and Universities in China

In the 1980s, when the disadvantages of over-specialization emerged in China’s higher education, and the trained graduates could not meet the requirements of socialist modernization, the trend of thought of the general education aroused increasing domestic attention. As a result, colleges and universities began to carry out the general education curriculum practice for a trial. In 1995, Tsinghua University established the School of Humanities and Social Sciences to offer humanities and social sciences courses to all students. Subsequently, a great number of colleges and universities devoted themselves to the construction of general education curriculum system respectively and accordingly, and brought the general education curriculum into the whole college talent training system, so as to provide the society with the versatile persons with basic ability, wide knowledge and exquisite professional skills.

1.1 Different university has different training objectives, but the “people-oriented” education concept runs through the whole process

Different universities have their own education concept and training objectives, which are related to their positioning and social functions. However, when it comes to the construction of general education curriculum system, all universities exemplify the “people-oriented” education concept. In order to cultivate the talents to meet the needs of social development, they attach importance to the construction of general education curriculum system and strengthen the cultural quality education, expecting students to have a perfect knowledge system and outstanding abilities, high quality and innovation, and become high-level national construction talents.

2.1 The universities borrowed some practical experiences of general education courses from America, but only superficially.

In the United States, nearly a century of practice and exploration of general education and general education curriculum has achieved a lot of productive results. General education courses generally account for more than 40% of the total curriculum system, even as much as 50% in some schools, fully reflecting the schools’ emphasis on general education. According to a survey, 78% of colleges and universities have made clear expectation of learning outcomes of general education. As is proposed by the university of Pennsylvania, general education will provide students with the belief of success, effective logical reasoning, quantitative analysis abilities, communication abilities and scientific cognitive abilities. Diversified curriculum forms are also one of the characteristics of American general education curriculum construction. Most colleges and universities will comprehensively use rich curriculum forms such as global curriculum, freshman seminars, diverse curriculum, interdisciplinary curriculum and so on. At present, the practice of general education in China is greatly influenced by that in American universities, but they only focus on the superficial things such as imitating the establishment of the organizational form of American universities, the external classification of general education courses, and the freedom of course selection, while ignoring the essence and core of general education courses.

3.1 Classroom teaching and assessment are traditional and simple

In China, the general courses have compulsory courses and elective courses of quality education. The former includes political theory courses, foreign language courses, physical education courses and military courses, etc., which are generally subject to the unified requirements and assessment by the whole school. There is no significant difference between different majors. The latter
mostly belongs to the mode that teachers independently design and open courses, which can be
taken by students themselves, and the assessment method is determined by teachers themselves. 
Such courses cover a wide range of areas, including natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, 
language, art, computer science, basic skills and so on. From the perspective of classroom teaching, 
most of them are traditional lecture-based teaching, which is passively accepted by students. In 
terms of assessment and evaluation methods, most elective courses are evaluated in the form of 
small course papers, with low requirements. Compared with the specific content learned, 
assessment and evaluation are more like “going through the formality”, and many colleges and 
universities only have two forms of “pass” and “fail”.

Analysis on Problems Existing in General Education Curriculum in Chinese Universities

In the process of the construction of the general education curriculum system, various colleges and 
universities have made great efforts and produced numerous results in order to improve the 
curriculum construction and cultivate comprehensive talents. However, some problems still arose 
from inexperience.

2.1 The management of general education curriculum system needs improving

At present, the general education curriculum in China is not systematic, which is contrary to the 
purpose of general education of eliminating the barriers in traditional disciplines and fields to train 
students to have a comprehensive understanding of knowledge. In the personnel training programs 
of general education in colleges and universities, more attention is paid to the credit system 
requirements of general education courses in form, and the education is realized by opening several 
general education courses, while the specific content and training objectives of general education 
courses remain vague. This patchwork accumulation of general knowledge may only provide the 
students with some topics for talking, rather than the real deep humanistic quality, thinking horizon 
and spiritual realm.

In the current general education curriculum system management, the curriculum setting requires 
teachers to declare and make the curriculum design by themselves for students to choose after the 
school’s approval. Such a teacher-directed model will lead to the lack of overall design of the 
structure of general course selection in schools, and the lack of internal consistency and relevance 
of courses, making it difficult to set up courses that truly cultivate students’ humanistic quality and 
practical ability according to their interests and actual social needs. At the same time, due to lack of 
control system for later examination and assessment, most of the schools appear loose in the 
evaluation management of the optional courses, lacking of objective and scientific evaluation. The 
evaluation is not only about students’ achievement, but also about the feedback of the teacher’s 
abilities and the course quality in the whole semester, so despising evaluation is not only bad for the 
construction and optimization of curriculum system, but also bad for the enthusiasm of teachers and 
students.

2.2 Teachers’ insufficient understanding and preparation for general education courses

General education courses in China are mostly dominated by one-way imparting and indoctrination, 
with little interaction between teachers and students and between students and students. However, 
new interactive teaching models such as flipped classroom are hardly adopted, and classroom 
teaching lacks cultivation, guidance and training of students’ learning methods, basic abilities and 
critical thinking modes. The reason is that teachers do not know enough about general education 
curriculum. This curriculum is mostly constructed by the school, and the teachers may apply for it. 
For the teachers, it has become a “task”, an influencing factor of professional title evaluation and a 
burden rather than their “free will” due to the indoctrination of the school in this aspect is not 
specific enough. Meanwhile, the existing academic system requires teachers to pay more attention 
to scientific researches rather than classroom teaching, but to set up a general education course 
requires the teachers devote a great deal of time and efforts. Besides lectures giving, teachers also 
need to prepare lessons, make PPT and other teaching AIDS, evaluate teaching and so on. In such
an environment, the teachers have their own considerations, so it is inevitable that they choose to neglect the teaching preparation of general education courses. The insufficient thinking leads to insufficient attention to general education courses and stiff curriculum design. The monotonous teaching language and inflexible teaching methods in the classroom lead to students’ resistance to the general education class, forming a vicious circle.

In addition, in the choice of courses, more emphasis is placed on professionalism and application.[3] Some teachers take the courses of their major as general education courses after lowering the requirements. And as for knowledge, according to its depth, it can be divided into basic knowledge and professional knowledge, while according to the level of abstraction, it can be divided into theoretical knowledge and applied knowledge. Generally speaking, theoretical basic knowledge is more universal. Therefore, general education should put the teaching of theoretical basic knowledge to students as the important place, so as to enhance their ability to accept new knowledge and solve new problems. Besides, teachers should consider the choice of courses more comprehensively and carefully. There should also be more communication and discussion among teachers to ensure that the course in a curriculum area has internal links and consistency.

2.3 Students’ insufficient commitment to general education courses

First of all, college students do not pay enough attention to the general education courses. In China, general education courses are more commonly called “general elective courses” or “elective courses”, which naturally gives students a feeling that they do not need to pay too much attention. Compared with compulsory courses, the elective courses originally intends to give students more choice and autonomy, but students actually understand it as “optional courses”, a kind of “leisure education”. However, those who teach elective courses are almost from different majors or colleges, which has little relation with students’ interests and reduces their binding force and supervising effect on students. So they are not careful in choosing general education courses.

Secondly, college students do not commit enough time to general education courses. The curriculum design of general elective courses seldom involves students’ participation and commitment, and almost none of them have homework after class. Nowaday, students’ after-class schedules are diversified, and few of them devote their after-class time to general education courses without clear requirements and guidance.[4] Some colleges even do not set specific points on general courses, but with two grades of “passed” and “failed” for the final evaluation, and the vast majority of teachers are not willing to “embarrass students”, making students take for granted “the general education courses are easy to pass”, so in time distribution and choice, students prefer putting time in professional course learning to devoting themselves to the general education courses.

3.1 Deepening the concept of general education and establishing a general education curriculum committee

General education is a kind of comprehensive education as far as possible to cultivate students’ independent personality and the quality of independent thinking. It goes beyond utilitarianism and practicality and plays a very important role in guiding lifelong learning and building a learning society in the new era. As an educational concept and a talent training mode, general education should not only build a system in curriculum setting, but also make each general education course have specific educational significance. Deepening the concept of general education should be carried out not only at the school management level, but also at the level of teachers and students, which requires each school to have an independent management organization to carry out the related matters of general education, and one of the solutions is to establish the general education curriculum committee.
The general education curriculum committee is responsible for the top-level design and construction planning of general education core curriculum. Besides, it also should deal with all aspects of the implementation of a curriculum, such as indoctrinating the general education concept, discussing and constructing the general education curriculum plan, coordinating the teaching requirements of general education courses for teachers of various disciplines, and exploring various forms of teaching and curriculum reform and innovation of curriculum evaluation ways, etc. Of general education curriculum, “the rule by law” rather than “the rule by man” should be carried out, so the systematic and complete management rules and regulations of general education curriculum should be also developed in order to standardize the development of the curriculum, strengthen the training of teachers to teach and supervision, and establish scientific and reasonable general classroom teaching quality evaluation system, [5] to strengthen guiding the students’ course selection and learning.

3.2 Clarifying the objectives of general education courses and promoting the all-round development of students

At present, the practice of general education in China focuses on the external classification and curriculum setting of general education courses, but ignores the essence and objectives of general education courses. The basic goal reflected in the general education curriculum is to cultivate “people”, followed by the cultivation of knowledge and ability. Based on the actual situation of China’s universities, it is necessary to strengthen students’ civic moral education, cultivate their good civic quality, and guide students to establish a correct world outlook, outlook on life and values, shaping students’ perfect humanity.

As the old saying goes “teach a man to fish than give him a fish”, the general courses should focus on construction of the basic theory knowledge, to give students the right study view and methods of study, letting the students hold the interest for continuing to study and the ability for autonomous learning, and pay attention to developing the students’ ability of sustainable development, including learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability, international understanding, etc. As a result, the students may look for the study interest independently in the broader life, and realize their comprehensive development.

3.3 Diversifying teaching and evaluation methods of general education courses

In China, general education is limited by the faculty and classroom forms, so the school should strongly advocate the multi-channel general education course organization form, such as the special lecture series. The regular lectures held by many colleges and universities have a good effect on expanding students’ horizon and expanding students’ thinking.

Moreover, the teaching methods of general education courses should be diversified. The construction of general education curriculum system needs high-quality teachers, who should not only have the spirit of selfless dedication to general education and have extensive knowledge, but also master and constantly innovate their own teaching methods to adapt to the “classes”. In teaching, according to the characteristics of each subject, a variety of teaching methods such as classroom teaching, group discussion, research-based learning and thematic discussion are adopted to lay emphasis on students’ absorption and feedback of the courses so as to let students focus more on the study of the course, and let them think deeply about the general education course and its internal learning method while participating in classroom activities.

Furthermore, the evaluation methods of general courses should be diversified. One of the reasons why general education courses tend to be formalized is that the evaluation form is simple and the evaluation quality is low demanding. Schools should establish a more scientific curriculum evaluation mechanism for the general education classes, especially for their teaching quality. Starting from the training objectives of general education, diversity, pertinence and vitality should be stressed in regard to test methods. For example, in addition to the traditional written test, schools had better add a variety of methods such as the classroom interaction and thesis writing and so on, strengthen examination at ordinary times, to create a course examination evaluation system combining formative assessment and summative assessment, giving priority to comprehensive
evaluation and process evaluation. In the process of assessment and evaluation, more attention should be paid to the development of students’ comprehensive ability and quality. Compared with the knowledge mastered by rote, teachers can pay more attention to whether the students have unique thinking and new perspectives on problems, and whether they can provide ideas to solve problems with the knowledge they have learned in the learning process. The purpose of general education is to improve students’ thinking ability and innovation ability, cultivate their interest and methods of autonomous learning, and promote their all-round development through the orientation of evaluation.

References


