

Discussion on “School is Society” and Its Enlightenment to the Construction of University Environment

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Abstract: The principle of “school is society” indicates that controlling the environment is the only educational method. By transforming the school into a microcosm of society, we can cultivate individuals who possess a social spirit and adaptability, preparing them to thrive in real-world social situations. By analyzing the social performance of colleges and universities in terms of their training objectives for society, research concepts for the development of society, and service consciousness for the improvement of society, as well as the current demand for a proper connection with society, it can be found that taking “school is society” as the guiding ideology for the construction of the university environment tends to be simplified, purified, balanced, broadened, and provided with practical space. This will be beneficial to the development of higher education.

Keywords: School is Society; Colleges and universities; Environment

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1. Introduction

As early as more than two thousand years ago, Xunzi, an educator in China, put forward in “Encouraging Learning” that “a lotus plant grows straight without support when it grows among reeds,” emphasizing the educational significance of the environment for human development. The history of the environment as an educational resource is long, and its educational significance needs no elaboration. As an organization that cultivates people in a planned and purposeful way, schools should make full use of the educational function of the environment. However, in traditional education, it seems that the environment has not played its due role as a major educational resource in school education. Based on the criticism of traditional education, John Dewey, a famous American educator, put forward educational thoughts such as “education is life” and “school is society,” emphasizing the control of the environment as the only educational method and placing the educational significance of the environment at the top. Although this claim is somewhat overcorrected, to a certain extent, this thought has reference significance for the environmental construction of universities today.

2. The thought of “School is Society”

In Dewey’s view, education is an activity in which society cultivates immature groups into ideal members. However, the beliefs society requires cannot be forced upon individuals, nor can the necessary attitudes be superficially imposed. So, how should the education of immature members be carried out? Dewey said that when a person’s activities are connected with those of others, he has a social environment ^[1], and the social environment can shape the behavioral, intellectual, and emotional tendencies of individuals through their various activities ^[1]. Therefore, Dewey concluded that education needs to rely on the role of the environment to elicit a response. However, the educational impact caused by an accidental environment and a carefully designed environment for educational purposes is quite different. Then, in order to control the environment of minors, which is the only educational method, the school, as an organization that exists specifically for education, should become a typical environment shaped according to the intellectual and moral tendencies of its members ^[1]. Thus, Dewey clearly pointed out that the school is a form of social life; it is a small and rudimentary society, and its responsibility is to provide a simplified, purified, balanced, and broad environment ^[2]. The educational principle of “school is society” thus came into being.

Regarding this educational principle, Dewey emphasized cultivating individuals needed by society in a social environment, and its core significance lies in making the school social. For basic education, its practical significance is too extreme, and it is inevitable to fall into the quagmire of weakening the role of education. For higher education, colleges and universities themselves possess many social characteristics, and “school is society” can be said to be the inherent need for the development of higher education. Moreover, there is a problem in Chinese colleges and universities that the cultivation of talents is disconnected from society, and finding an appropriate connection point between the school and society is a major breakthrough for the development of higher education. By taking this thought as a reference in the environmental construction of colleges and universities, perhaps the hidden education in the campus can make up for the defects of colleges and universities that focus on imparting knowledge while neglecting the training of thinking and the cultivation of skills.

3. The social performance of higher education and its reform needs

If we say that basic education indirectly produces social functions through its function of educating people, then higher education is directly connected with society. Higher education is based on epistemology. After the Industrial Revolution, the power of academic knowledge in promoting production made people discover the practical utility of higher education. Since then, in addition to undertaking the functions of preserving, transmitting, and developing advanced knowledge, higher education has also assumed the responsibility of serving the public. Along this direction of development, today’s higher education has already been caught in a complex network of social forces, and it can even be said that its main basis for legal existence is political theory ^[3]. In this regard, social characteristics are reflected in all aspects of colleges and universities and are very obvious in its three basic functions alone. In addition to its own characteristics, higher education also shows an urgent social demand in its development direction, elaborated as follows.

3.1. Training objectives oriented towards the society

As one of the stages of education, the primary essence of higher education is still to educate people, and its difference from ordinary education is mainly in the word “higher.” “Higher” means “advanced, specialized knowledge,” which is manifested in the cultivation of talents with advanced specialized knowledge and skills to meet society’s need for high-level specialized talents ^[4]. However, from the perspective of the development

process of talent training objectives, since the day when higher education has a social nature, the academic and social orientations of talent training have begun to compete. From the academic orientation to the confrontation between the two sides, and to today's emphasis on skills, the social characteristics of talent standards have become increasingly prominent. Up to now, talent training in colleges and universities has gradually shifted from academic elites to applied talents needed for social development. This kind of applied talent is not only oriented toward the needs of existing jobs but also makes university graduates the creators of future jobs ^[5]. However, whether they are successors of existing jobs or creators of future jobs, this fully reflects that the training objective of colleges and universities is directly oriented toward society. Moreover, the quality of a school's running is directly reflected in society's acceptance of college students, and schools whose educational direction is disconnected from the needs of society will be mercilessly eliminated by the tide of the market economy. From this perspective, colleges and universities play the role of the "seller" in the market. Therefore, making college students integrate into society appropriately has naturally become a major task for the school. Then, how should this talent goal closely connected with society be cultivated? As Dewey said, it is a pity for the school to cultivate future members of the social order when the conditions of the social spirit are lacking ^[2]. Obviously, it is inappropriate to place students in an ivory tower. Then, the emphasis of the "school is society" thought—cultivating the people needed by society in a social environment—may provide guidance for the development of colleges and universities.

3.2. Research concept for the development of the society

The unparalleled contribution of the scientific research function of colleges and universities to scientific and technological innovation is an important reason higher education is highly expected by society. Marx had already pointed out that "science is productivity" and clearly stated to what extent general social knowledge has become a direct productive force, and to what extent the conditions of the social life process are controlled by this general intelligence and transformed according to this intelligence ^[6]. This assertion has been greatly recognized and even placed in an important position in the strategy of rejuvenating the country. As a specialized organization for researching advanced knowledge, colleges and universities undoubtedly undertake this responsibility. Nowadays, promoting the development of science through research knowledge and thus promoting the development of productivity has been regarded as the basic activity of colleges and universities. However, from the perspective of the conversion rate of scientific research achievements, the effectiveness of China's scientific research achievements in promoting the development of productivity is still far from sufficient. In the 20 years from 1985 to 2005, the number of invention patents authorized by Chinese colleges and universities increased significantly, but the conversion rate of scientific research achievements into real productivity was less than 10%, or even lower, and the final scientific research achievements formed into industries was less than 5%. However, the conversion rate of scientific research achievements in developed countries' colleges and universities (such as Cambridge University in the UK and Stanford University in the US) is as high as 35% ^[7]. This fully reflects that the sociality of scientific research consciousness in Chinese colleges and universities needs to be strengthened.

3.3. Service consciousness for the improvement of the society

In addition to providing services to society through talent training and scientific research, colleges and universities also undertake the important function of directly participating in social practice with their own resources to help solve practical problems. Specifically, social service is a project carried out through the direct participation of college students in society in the form of internships and volunteer activities. It not only directly

participates in the improvement and solution of social practical problems but also combines service with learning, and academics with application to deepen the understanding of the course content and enhance the sense of social responsibility. It is an important measure for colleges and universities to cultivate talents^[8]. This function is not only the manifestation of colleges and universities' assumption of social responsibilities but also reflects the recognition of the educational significance of the social environment by colleges and universities. However, the social environment is complex, with both positive and negative influences, and it unconsciously and aimlessly exerts educational and shaping influences^[1]. Simply "going out" to participate in social practice in the hope that the accidental environment will give students educational influences is a great waste of educational resources. As a specialized educational organization, the school should neither fully accommodate such educational resources nor let them go unchecked. Therefore, it may be advisable to take "school is society" as the guiding ideology to build the university environment and "bring in" this huge educational resource of society in order to systematically and purposefully exert its educational influence.

4. The enlightenment of "school is society" to the construction of university environment

In addition to the above, the social characteristics of higher education are also reflected in many aspects. For example, in its own system, the interweaving of academics and administration; in the relationship structure, the complexity of various organizations and groups; in the management system, the occupation of students' lives by the boarding system, and so on. The various social connotations and development directions of colleges and universities fully indicate that "school is society" is the proper meaning of higher education, and this thought has a strong reference significance for the environmental construction of colleges and universities.

4.1. Simplification and purification

The "society" in "school is society" is different from the real social environment. It is a typical social environment with specific educational significance after transformation. Therefore, the primary responsibility of the school is to transform the environment. Dewey emphasized this idea in relation to children, arguing that society is too complex and chaotic for them to grasp fully. By selectively presenting what children can understand and removing unnecessary confusion, the school can create a clear and supportive environment. Additionally, by focusing on what benefits children and eliminating harmful or irrelevant influences, the school can become an exemplary and structured environment that promotes progressive learning and development. Accordingly, the transformation of the school environment should start from simplification and purification. In terms of simplifying the environment, unlike the uniformity found in basic education, modern universities in China are typically divided into four categories: higher vocational colleges, teaching-oriented universities, research-oriented universities, and teaching-research-oriented universities. Each type of institution has its distinct focus and goals, requiring a tailored approach to environmental transformation that aligns with its specific educational mission and the needs of its students^[9]. The distinction of levels makes higher education more diverse, and the functional focuses of different schools are also different. Therefore, each college and university should simplify the environment according to the specific situation and its own needs. For example, the curriculum setting of research-oriented universities itself is biased towards the discussion of professional knowledge, and its learning atmosphere is inevitably narrow in specialized knowledge. Therefore, the environmental construction should be simplified in the atmosphere of professional in-depth development and enriched with opportunities for horizontal intersection of heterogeneous groups; while the curriculum arrangement of higher vocational colleges focuses on the learning of skills and methods, so the cultural spirit

should be nurtured in the campus environment. In short, the simplification of the university environment should correspond to the bias of its curriculum setting to play the role of hidden education in compensating for explicit education. At the level of purifying the environment, although higher education has multiple responsibilities, “educating people” is still its foundation. On this core issue, every stage of education remains consistent. Therefore, purifying the environment for higher education also means eliminating negative influences.

4.2. Broadening and balancing

Dewey said that the responsibility of the school environment is to balance the various components of the social environment, ensure that everyone has the opportunity to avoid the limitations of their social group, and establish a vibrant connection with a broader environment ^[1]. This assertion coincides with the development concept of higher education. “Modern education with Chinese characteristics and world-class level” is the general goal of China’s educational development. Therefore, as the highest level in the education system, integrating Chinese traditional culture and world culture into the campus is an unquestionable development direction for higher education. However, before the policy requirements and the training objectives of colleges and universities put forward an inherent demand for the broadening of the environment, the university environment has already been developing towards broadening. In the past 100 years, especially in the recent 40 years, the early homogenized campuses have gradually disappeared and been replaced by student groups that are increasingly diverse in terms of race, religion, gender, and nationality ^[10]. Although the reason for this broadening trend in colleges and universities is unknown whether it is the active absorption of colleges and universities or the passive influence of society, this diversified environment has many benefits for the development of students ^[10]. This has practically confirmed the feasibility of taking Dewey’s thought of “school is society” as the guiding ideology for the construction of the university environment. After the broadening enters the school environment, the problem of balancing follows. Students of different races, religions, and customs will be mixed in the same school, and each group has the power to form the active tendency of group members ^[1]. If various forces cannot be balanced, it will be dangerous. This danger is a problem that higher education institutions in a diverse environment urgently need to solve. Dewey proposed a balancing plan for the school. Dewey believed that every group can become a group because they can provide an educational environment for those who join their group or common activities, and this environment is a mode of union or common life ^[1]. Therefore, the school should give all groups a balanced environment of union or common life, so that each member can form a community in a sense and make changes for the common purpose of the group. With such development, the campus environment can continuously play its educational role in coordinating the balance problem in the process of broadening.

4.3. Providing practical space

The core of Dewey’s educational thought is “learning by doing,” and “school is society” is still centered around “doing.” In traditional education, children cannot fully and freely utilize the experience gained outside the school in the school, nor can they apply the knowledge learned in the school in daily life ^[2]. Such a split phenomenon has caused the greatest waste in the school. Similar splits also exist in higher education, such as the separation between professional subjects, the one-to-one correspondence between goals and courses, and so on. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of many scholars. Wang believed that one of the trends of curriculum reform in colleges and universities around the world is to avoid letting students learn some scattered course fragments that have no connection with each other as much as possible ^[11]; Bok also clearly stated that most colleges and universities are not weak in curriculum arrangement and measures taken, but lack a

comprehensive plan to integrate numerous projects^[10]. It can be seen that making up for various fragmentation phenomena has become a common problem faced by colleges and universities in various countries. In this regard, Dewey has already proposed “learning by doing” as a solution. He said, “The importance of active assignments in education lies in that they can represent social situations”^[1]. By using children’s active assignments to form a real social situation between school and social life, education naturally becomes holistic. In this way, various purposes and ideals of education—cultural cultivation, training, knowledge, and other disciplines—can be taken into account, and the phenomenon of sacrificing one goal for another will not occur^[2]. Similarly, in higher education, adopting practical experience in real-world situations as a means to integrate knowledge, critical thinking, and skills is a wise approach. If classroom teaching is limited to the imparting of concepts for various reasons and is unable to effectively reverse the fragmented situation between various subjects and classes, then the construction of the campus environment can focus on providing a place for knowledge to be connected and practiced, allowing the university environment to play the educational role of compensating for the defects of classroom teaching. Hidden education and explicit education complement each other, enabling college students to learn the knowledge, concepts, and skills needed by society in a situation rich in social spirit.

Any type of university is the product of heredity and environment^[12]. Today’s universities have followed the evolution of the environment and entered the center of society from the “ivory tower,” and their social needs urgently need to be met. Guiding the construction of the university environment with the thought of “school is society” will not only strengthen the function of colleges and universities in exploring advanced knowledge but also bring out the hidden educational role of the campus environment and appropriately meet the mutual needs of colleges and universities and the society, which is of great significance.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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