

Solutions to Teaching Reform Challenges of Elective Courses under the Background of New Liberal Arts: Taking International Trade in Services Course as an Example

Huiqian Yu*

Economic School, Shandong Technology and Business University, Yantai 264005, Shandong Province, China

**Corresponding author:* Huiqian Yu, yuhuiqian@sdtbu.edu.cn

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Variations in the allocation of university resources, teachers' course selection preferences and teaching commitment levels, as well as students' course preferences and assessment requirements, create subjective differences. These differences, compounded by the demands of the new liberal arts reform, place significant challenges and pressure on elective course instructors. To meet these demands, elective course teachers should enhance their teaching methods and explore new instructional models. The International Trade in Services course, for instance, has implemented six areas of curriculum reform, enriching the practice of elective course improvement.

Keywords: New liberal arts reform; Elective course; Curriculum teaching model; Teaching method reform; Curriculum test

Online publication: November 27, 2024

1. Introduction

Disciplines and majors are the key to the high-quality development of higher education. In February 2023, the Ministry of Education, together with the National Development and Reform Commission and other five departments jointly issued the Reform Plan for the Adjustment and Optimization of the Professional Setting of General Higher Education Disciplines, which clearly proposed that by 2025, the optimization and adjustment of about 20% of the disciplinary professional layout in colleges and universities will accelerate the pace of professional adjustment ^[1]. The current era is an era of change with accelerated progress in science and technology, accelerated iteration of the industry, accelerated evolution of business formats, and accelerated replacement of jobs ^[2]. Compared with the rapid change of the times, the reform of the higher education system and personnel training mode is difficult to achieve the same rapid change, which makes college graduates face greater employment challenges and pressure.

2. Challenges faced by the innovation and development of elective courses

In the aspects of value shaping, knowledge imparting, and skill training, elective courses and compulsory courses bear the same education function and the common responsibility of education ^[3]. Due to the objective differences in the positioning of elective courses and compulsory courses in the professional training programs of colleges and universities, there are subjective differences between them in terms of the degree of resource inclination and emphasis, the course selection preference of teachers, the intensity of teaching energy input, and the course selection preference of students and the assessment constraints. This actual difference and the background and requirements of the new liberal arts reform put forward more severe challenges and pressures to the reform and innovative development of elective course teaching ^[4].

First, due to the limited number of students, there will even be a phenomenon that a teacher will only teach a certain elective course once a semester ^[5]. This is in sharp contrast to the situation where multiple teachers share a required course and one teacher teaches a required course for different classes in a semester. It is also common for one teacher to take on several electives at the same time in a semester. The former situation will bring about the adverse impact of the slow accumulation of teachers' experience and quality in the elective course. The latter situation objectively increases the lesson preparation load of teachers and breaks up their time and energy investment in a single course. In addition, colleges and universities face the pressure of scientific research assessment on teachers in addition to teaching, which further squeezes classroom teaching of elective courses and the implementation of teaching reform.

Second, compulsory courses belong to the basic and core courses in the curriculum system and professional personnel training. Most electives are directional courses, with diverse research directions within the basic disciplines and inheriting and expanding teaching contents. In the training program, it may be adjusted according to the practical development of disciplines and employment needs. They focus on the pursuit of applicability and have obvious employment direction. The most important thing is that the opening of elective courses depends on the situation of students' course selection, and the choice of students cannot be completely predicted, their behavior logic may not be consistent with the original intention of the course, with a wide range of selective factors. If the number of courses is less than the minimum quota of the teaching class, the class cannot be opened, which brings uncertain factors to the teachers to complete the teaching workload of the quota, and makes the course not necessarily continuous.

3. Exploring the path to release the innovation vitality of elective courses

First of all, teachers who carry the task of teaching elective courses should change the idea that electives are inferior to compulsory courses and catalyze the differences between electives and compulsory courses introspectively. Secondly, elective course teachers could firmly strengthen their professional commitment, remaining steadfast and transforming challenges into proactive opportunities. Thirdly, they should leverage the individual-focused nature of these courses to efficiently conduct course assessments, identifying innovative elements of the new liberal arts that can be effectively embedded in the curriculum. Fourthly, teachers actively participate in online and offline teaching innovation training and conferences organized at provincial, university, and department levels, learn advanced education and teaching methods, and empower classroom teaching with scientific and technological means and tools. Fifthly, teachers who teach multiple elective courses in one semester should improve course teaching step by step, explore new teaching models, concentrate their time and energy on selecting one course to make a breakthrough in the early stage, accumulate experience, and then transfer the experience into other courses.

4. Teaching reform measures of the International Trade in Services course

4.1. Strengthening the function of “value leading” for students

In the classroom, we should pay attention to the influence of teachers' value guidance on students' logical and rational development. Linking the right values, policy viewpoints, and methods and ways of thinking in teaching will also make the knowledge content of teaching more profound. Taking the course as an example, the two periods of teaching the topic of “International Trade in Services Agreement” focus on guiding students to understand the negotiating position of developing countries, realize that “strength is the basis of negotiation,” experience the great progress in the field of China's service trade in the past two decades, and enhance the sense of pride and mission. In class speech and discussion, students should guide and correct their exposed value tendency, understand things, people, and human nature, and be reasonable.

4.2. Enhancing the skill training of students

In terms of skill training and method shaping, we pay attention to “four intersections,” namely the intersections of liberal arts and engineering research methods, the intersections of basic liberal arts and economics and management, the intersections of academic logical thinking training and applied skills, and the intersections of employment and innovation ability. In combination with the course content, the semester courses involve database data acquisition, data processing ability and visual presentation, online platform use, literature collection and reading, policy document download, division of labor, speech expression and other abilities, and skill awareness training. It is necessary to increase the teaching of cases such as the development situation of service trade, key parks, and leading enterprises in the cities where universities are located, help introduce relevant job information, and guide students to find employment opportunities in the field of service trade and service outsourcing. Taking the above teaching topic as an example, it focuses on helping students learn strategic thinking in negotiation and master dynamic game skills.

4.3. Strengthening the connection between teaching and learning and improving teaching design and content iteration

A lecture-based teaching style is established, utilizing a series of questions to engage students and strengthen teacher-student interaction. Classroom questions are crafted to reflect curriculum ideological and political value guidance, professional logic and quality, historical context empathy, and other elements that promote learning. “Addition” and “subtraction” are effectively managed within the limited class time by refining and condensing the explanations of professional terms, theories, and phenomena, allowing more time for student-led learning. Through pre-class preparation, in-class engagement, guided questioning, and point incentives, students are encouraged to think, act, and communicate more, honing their expression, logical reasoning, reflective skills, and imagination. Teaching plans are prepared with careful attention, ensuring effective interaction time is reserved, with each session mentally rehearsed in advance. This rehearsal optimizes the teaching process and helps adjust the pacing and duration of interactions. After class, a focus is placed on summarizing and reflecting on the teaching experience, enabling iterative improvements to the teaching plans.

4.4. Increasing the test integration and improving the testing method

Enhancing face-to-face classroom teaching does not necessarily mean that the more teachers talk, the more students learn and the better they learn. When teaching feedback between teachers and students is lacking in the classroom, two issues often arise. On one hand, teachers may find themselves lecturing without knowing

if students are truly engaged or understanding the material; on the other, teachers may perceive the teaching pace as slow and the atmosphere as disengaged, leading them to further fill the class time with additional content in an attempt to sustain engagement.

Both of these aspects are contrary to the requirements of new liberal arts construction. Tests are a good method to give feedback on learning. It is a common practice before electives to test students' completion of classroom learning through exercises or homework after class. Currently, in addition to retaining the final test, some test tasks are put forward and embedded in the teaching process of each class, so that students can be immersed in the teaching environment of "learning-test-learning-test."

The pre-test tasks are divided into two types: classroom real-time tests and periodic quizzes. The real-time test operation is that the teacher designs the test questions in the teaching PowerPoint in advance for the online system to read. After the knowledge module is taught, students will answer questions in the online application and other systems. The number of participants and the distribution of answers are displayed online, and the teacher can capture the information such as the accuracy rate of answers and the distribution of wrong answers, so as to understand the teaching quality of knowledge points and the achievement of knowledge goals in the class and make comments.

The periodic quiz operation is that the teacher conducts a closed-book test in a certain week for the early-stage teaching content, including objective and subjective questions. During the quiz, the teacher toured the classroom to observe the distribution of the students' objective questions. After handing in the exam, the teacher immediately comments. After class, the teacher checks the quiz to understand the students' phased learning situation and conducts targeted talks or early warnings for those who do not learn well. The specific number and content of the quiz are flexibly arranged by the teacher. The periodic quiz can help to correct the traditional view that students do not pay attention to learning by not conducting closed-book assessments of elective courses, consolidate the habit of closed-book testing, and objectively play a role in stimulating and restricting.

4.5. Elevating the assessment density of the whole process of schoolwork

The specific mechanism and grading method of the International Trade in Services course is as follows: (1) Class attendance accounts for 10%. In addition to sick leave and personal leave, students who are absent for no reason should be given a warning. Students who are absent three times should be warned, and their counselors should be contacted for supervision. Those who are absent for six times should be disqualified from the final examination. (2) Online assignments and small papers account for 20%. The setting goal of online homework has changed from checking the completion of learning and urging students to practice while learning to the acquired training of relevant innovation ability and academic accomplishment. It is essential to emphasize training students in data collection and organization, academic literature search, database usage, statistical data analysis, data visualization, and interpretation, and to assess their learning outcomes. This includes tasks such as creating charts for China's total trade in services, imports, exports, surplus, deficit, and other relevant data over the past decade, compiling China's trade in services BOP statistics and visual data, sourcing data from foreign trade websites, and gathering and summarizing news and information on trade in services. (3) Classroom Q&A interaction takes up a proportion of 5%. It guides students to sort out and examine the grasp of important knowledge points and improves their comprehensive ability to understand and solve complex foreign trade problems. Interactive questions and answers cover all students, plus 1~2 points/time. (4) Independent learning after class accounts for a proportion of 5%. Students

read and learn the extracurricular learning materials and learning videos in the cloud class, and statistics on the progress of independent learning in the cloud class are collected. (5) Group discussion report accounts for 10%. According to the number of students in the class, four to six students form a study group and select different countries to make a comprehensive report on the development of their service economy, and the development of bilateral trade with China. Data analysis, data icon drawing, PowerPoint making, and reports are required.

4.6. Increasing the use of information-based teaching methods

By participating in teaching reform training at all levels, teachers can be familiar with the popular teaching technical tools in the domestic teaching reform and innovation circle, skilled in the application of teaching auxiliary technology means, and selectively integrate them into teaching. The comprehensive utilization of different products such as Blue Ink Cloud class and Yangtze River Rain class can effectively improve the efficiency of diversified and whole process assessment work, and at the same time help teachers to achieve open and fair assessment data, orderly and effective course activities, save teaching management time, create new interactive teaching scenes, and leverage mobile phones as a good assistant for students' classroom learning rather than a "bad teammate" in class. It is also important to improve the PowerPoint production level, abandon the text stacking typesetting, instead of intelligent graphics, pictures, or charts display, embody teaching logic by a flow chart, strengthen the visual attraction of courseware, and introduce high-quality videos from third-party platforms.

5. Conclusion

Under the background of new liberal arts construction, the reform of elective courses is more difficult than that of compulsory courses. Doing a good job in classroom teaching of elective courses is conducive to improving teaching quality and enhancing students' academic research ability and employment ability. Elective course teachers should plan teaching design, enhance the interaction between teaching and learning, improve testing methods, and increase the form of assessment so that students can benefit from the course.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Xu F, 2021, New Liberal Arts Construction: Where Does the "New" Come From and Where Does It Lead? *Guangming Daily*, March 20, 2021, (10).
- [2] Ministry of Education, 2023, The Ministry of Education and Five Other Departments Issued the "Reform Plan for Adjustment and Optimization of Discipline and Major Settings in General Higher Education," viewed August 28, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202304/t20230404_1054220.html
- [3] Pan M, 2014, Reflections on the Construction of Higher Education Disciplines. *China Education Science*, (04): 3–19.
- [4] Lv L, 2021, Construction of "New Liberal Arts Education" in Chinese Universities: Value Implication, Core Connotation and Practice Path. *University of Education Science*, (05): 49–59.

- [5] Lin L, 2024, Teaching Reform of “Business Italian” Course in Higher Vocational Colleges under the Background of New Liberal Arts Construction. *New Curriculum Research*, (03): 10–12.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.