

Art Literacy as a Core Competency: A Study on the Paradigm Shift of Aesthetic Education Evaluation System in Higher Education

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the complex and ever-changing 21st century, art literacy has evolved from a marginal “soft skill” into a core competency integrating aesthetic judgment, innovative thinking and value shaping, emerging as a crucial underpinning for moral education and the all-round development of talents in higher education. As a key component of the holistic education system that integrates moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor education, the adaptability of the aesthetic education evaluation system directly determines the effectiveness of education. However, the current aesthetic education evaluation in Chinese universities is still trapped in the traditional paradigm of “technologism” and “knowledge-based orientation”, facing bottlenecks such as a narrow-minded conceptual understanding, a single evaluation method and an unbalanced evaluation subject. It can hardly meet the demand for fostering art literacy, making the promotion of a paradigm shift in the aesthetic education evaluation system an urgent task. From the perspective of core competency, this paper explores the internal driving forces of this paradigm shift, constructs a philosophical framework for evaluation centered on “literacy-based orientation”, and proposes practical paths featuring multi-dimensional indicators, progressive whole-cycle evaluation, intelligent empowerment and closed-loop application. It also establishes an institutional support system from the dimensions of governance structure, institutional design and resource guarantee. The research aims to drive the transformation of aesthetic education evaluation from “skill and knowledge assessment” to “literacy and competency evaluation”, and from “summative appraisal” to “developmental guidance”. It is intended to provide a theoretical reference and practical framework for universities to deepen the reform of aesthetic education and improve the quality of talent cultivation, helping aesthetic education truly become a core support for nurturing a new generation of talents with sound personalities and innovative capabilities in the new era.

Keywords: Art literacy; Core competency; Higher education management; Aesthetic education evaluation; Paradigm shift

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1. Introduction

A central topic in the global development of education in the 21st century is the cultivation of lifelong learners and innovators capable of addressing a future full of complexity and uncertainty. In this process, core competencies that go beyond pure knowledge and skills have attracted extensive attention ^[1]. As an integrated ability of individuals to perceive, appreciate, express and create beauty, art literacy is evolving from a marginal “soft skill” into a core competency that integrates aesthetic judgment, cultural understanding, innovative thinking and value shaping. It bears on the development of individuals’ perceptual awareness and the integrity of their personalities, serving as a source of innovative thinking and a cornerstone of cultural confidence. UNESCO, in **Rethinking Education**, emphasizes that education should focus on the cultivation of core competencies, providing an international consensus for the core positioning of art literacy ^[2].

The fundamental task of higher education is to foster virtue through education. As a key link in the integration of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor education, the effectiveness of aesthetic education is directly related to the quality of the implementation of this fundamental task. Relevant national policies clearly propose improving the aesthetic education evaluation system and promoting evaluation reform ^[3,4]. Nevertheless, the current aesthetic education evaluation in Chinese universities is still limited to the assessment of artistic skills or theoretical memory tests, falling into the trap of “technologism” and “knowledge-based orientation”. This evaluation paradigm narrows the connotation of aesthetic education, making it difficult to highlight its in-depth value of nurturing the soul and cultivating personalities, and is unable to effectively measure the cultivation process of art literacy as a core competency ^[5]. Promoting a paradigm shift in the aesthetic education evaluation system has thus become an urgent proposition.

The so-called paradigm shift in aesthetic education evaluation refers to the transition from the old evaluation concepts, standards and methods to a completely new system that is more adapted to the needs of the times and the goal of all-round human development. Its core is the shift from “skill and knowledge assessment” to “literacy and competency evaluation”, and from “summative appraisal” to “developmental guidance” ^[5]. This paper explores the internal driving forces, theoretical construction, practical paths and institutional guarantees of this paradigm shift, providing theoretical and practical support for the reform of aesthetic education in universities.

2. Internal driving forces of the paradigm shift: Limitations of traditional aesthetic education evaluation and the call of the times for core competencies

The predicament of the current aesthetic education evaluation in universities stems from the in-depth misalignment of concepts, methods and mechanisms, which is specifically manifested in three major contradictions and constitutes the internal driving force for the paradigm shift. Traditional evaluation regards aesthetic education as an appendage of intellectual education, and the instrumental rationality orientation neglects its ontological value of “nurturing people through beauty and cultivating the foundation through beauty”. It focuses on quantifiable skill outputs, deviating from the fundamental purpose of aesthetic education to cultivate aesthetic feelings and stimulate creativity. Cheng Jianping points out that excessive focus on skill training will ignore the moral education attribute of aesthetic education ^[6], and Du Wei and others also emphasize that the traditional evaluation concept seriously deviates from the humanistic essence of aesthetic education in universities ^[7]. At the same time, most universities adopt summative evaluation methods such as final assignments and report performances. The “one-exam determines all” model fails to capture the dynamic development of students in terms of aesthetic perception and creative practice, ignoring the characteristic that art

literacy requires long-term cultivation. The lack of process data makes it impossible for the evaluation to play a role in feedback and improvement ^[8], which is also the main crux of the current aesthetic education evaluation ^[9]. In addition, traditional evaluation takes teachers as the sole subject with a narrow dimension: design majors overemphasize software operation and visual forms, neglecting comprehensive literacy such as cultural connotation and team collaboration ^[10]; non-art majors only examine knowledge points of art history and do not evaluate the interdisciplinary transfer ability of aesthetic thinking ^[11], failing to fully reflect the overall picture of students' aesthetic and humanistic literacy.

Meanwhile, the development of the times puts forward new requirements for talent quality. Under the innovation-driven strategy, art literacy is a catalyst for scientific and technological innovation; in the construction of a culturally strong country, aesthetic judgment is the core of cultural inheritance and innovation; in the era of artificial intelligence, humanistic aesthetic literacy is a unique advantage that distinguishes humans from machines. Relevant international studies have also confirmed that art education has a significant positive effect on the cultivation of core competencies ^[12]. Therefore, establishing an evaluation system matching art literacy as a core competency is an inevitable choice for higher education to respond to the call of the times.

3. Theoretical construction of the paradigm shift: An evaluation philosophy from “skill-oriented” to “literacy-based”

The new aesthetic education evaluation paradigm centers on “literacy-based orientation” and is built on a brand-new evaluation philosophy, including four interrelated theoretical pillars. First, the evaluation goal is oriented towards the all-round development of students' core aesthetic literacy, covering dimensions such as aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, cultural understanding and aesthetic sentiment. It embodies the purpose of “all-round human development” and brings aesthetic education back to the core of education ^[5]. Second, the evaluation focus shifts from “learning outcomes” to “learning process”, running through the entire process of aesthetic education teaching. It attaches importance to students' emotional attitudes, thinking processes and collaborative abilities in activities such as project inquiry and cooperative creation. Through the combination of process and performance evaluation, the visualization of growth trajectory is realized, and the formative and diagnostic functions of evaluation are exerted ^[8], which is also consistent with the concept of “focusing on the learning process and strengthening process evaluation” emphasized by Zhang Chao ^[13]. Third, the evaluation subject expands from a single teacher to a diverse community, including student self-evaluation, peer evaluation, teacher evaluation, industry mentor evaluation and social evaluation. Negotiated evaluation can more comprehensively reflect students' comprehensive literacy and cultivate their awareness of democratic participation ^[5-9]. Fourth, the evaluation function deepens from a “management tool” to a “development engine” and a “strategic dashboard”. For students, it is a personalized development navigator; for teachers, it is a compass for teaching reform; for university management, it is a decision-making basis for resource allocation, ensuring that aesthetic education is in step with the talent cultivation strategy ^[5].

4. Practical paths of the paradigm shift: Construction of a multi-dimensional, integrated and intelligent evaluation system

Based on the above theories, a new aesthetic education evaluation system can be constructed from four core dimensions: evaluation indicators, evaluation cycle, technological empowerment and result application.

Universities need to design differentiated evaluation models in light of the characteristics of student groups and the differences in aesthetic education forms: art majors should break through the consideration of techniques, draw on the standards of the WorldSkills Competition, and incorporate creative conception, cultural connotation, professional ethics and other aspects into the evaluation category ^[10] to realize the integration of “cultural accomplishment and technical skills, and the unity of moral integrity and artistic attainments”; non-art majors should take stimulating aesthetic interest and promoting interdisciplinary transfer as the goal, refer to the “four-circle” approach of Fuzhou University, conduct hierarchical evaluation of environmental participation, curriculum effectiveness, personality internalization and creative practice, with the core of examining the professional application of aesthetic thinking ^[14]; the immersive scenarios of campus aesthetic education need to break the limitations of time and space, record students’ implicit performances such as club participation and cultural interaction through digital platforms, and incorporate them into the comprehensive literacy file to realize global evaluation ^[4].

To address the predicament of fragmented undergraduate aesthetic education and the absence of postgraduate aesthetic education, it is necessary to construct an integrated whole-cycle evaluation chain for undergraduate and postgraduate education. The undergraduate stage focuses on basic aesthetic knowledge, artistic experience and initial creative expression, ensuring the fundamentality of aesthetic education input; the postgraduate master’s stage shifts to the comprehensive effects of cultivating morality through beauty and inspiring innovation through beauty, incorporating the internalization of scientific research spirit and the integration of humanistic care into the evaluation, drawing on the experience of Fuzhou University in integrating aesthetic education into postgraduate education ^[14]; the doctoral stage focuses on the aesthetic pursuit in professional research, cross-cultural aesthetic consensus and contributions to social aesthetic education, highlighting the role of aesthetic education in the literacy upgrading of high-level talents ^[5].

Digital and intelligent technologies provide core support for aesthetic education evaluation. Universities can draw on the practical experience of intelligent evaluation in Guangdong and Shenzhen ^[6,15] to build a professional intelligent platform. In the data collection link, relying on online platforms, AI assessment tools and the Internet of Things devices, the seamless collection of the entire process of learning and practice is realized to ensure the comprehensiveness and authenticity of data ^[16]; in the data analysis link, big data is used to integrate multi-modal information to generate a three-dimensional “digital portrait of art literacy”, breaking subjective limitations; in the feedback and intervention link, personalized learning suggestions and academic situation reports are pushed to realize “intelligent empowerment and tailored evaluation” ^[8].

The core value of evaluation lies in application, and it is necessary to establish a closed-loop mechanism of “evaluation - improvement - promotion”. At the student level, the evaluation results are incorporated into the comprehensive literacy file and linked to scholarships, merit selection and postgraduate recommendation without examination, guiding students to attach importance to aesthetic education; at the teaching level, curriculum design and teaching methods are optimized through evaluation data; at the teacher level, the effectiveness of aesthetic education practice is incorporated into performance assessment and professional title evaluation and appointment to stimulate the enthusiasm for reform ^[10]; at the resource allocation level, funding, venue and project support are dynamically adjusted according to the evaluation results to improve the efficiency of resource use ^[15].

5. Institutional guarantees for the paradigm shift: Construction of a collaborative, long-term and adaptive evaluation governance system

The paradigm shift in aesthetic education evaluation is a systematic project, which needs to rely on a

collaborative organizational structure, long-term institutional design and sufficient resource guarantee, to ensure the steady progress of the reform. The fragmentation of traditional aesthetic education evaluation stems from the segmentation of departments, so it is necessary to establish a governance structure of “unified leadership, division of responsibilities and collaborative linkage”. A university-level leading group for aesthetic education work should be set up to coordinate the Academic Affairs Office, the School of Art and other relevant departments, clarify the responsibilities of each department, and form a closed-loop evaluation chain covering “curriculum - practice - literacy”; strengthen university-local and university-university collaboration, introduce industry standards and social evaluation resources, build a communication platform for universities, and form a joint force for reform^[14].

Institutional stability is the key to the implementation of the paradigm shift, and it is necessary to establish and improve norms around evaluation implementation, result application and quality monitoring. In terms of evaluation implementation, formulate the “Implementation Rules for Aesthetic Education Evaluation in Universities,” clarify the goals, processes and data norms, formulate differentiated guidelines for different majors and academic stages, and establish a whole-cycle evaluation mechanism to avoid “one-time assessment”^[15]. In terms of result application and incentives, link the evaluation results with students’ further education and employment, as well as teachers’ performance evaluation and appointment, and set up a special reward fund to stimulate the enthusiasm of teachers and students to participate. In terms of quality monitoring, establish a third-party evaluation mechanism, collect multi-stakeholder feedback, and dynamically optimize evaluation indicators in light of the needs of the times to ensure alignment with the education goal^[3].

Sufficient resources are the material and technical support for the advancement of the reform, and it is necessary to strengthen the guarantee of teachers, funding and technical platforms. In terms of teachers, build a team of “professional teachers + industry experts + part-time mentors”, strengthen the training of in-school teachers, introduce off-campus experts to make up for the shortcomings of practical evaluation^[14], and establish an interdisciplinary communication mechanism to promote the integration of aesthetic evaluation and professional teaching¹⁰. In terms of funding, set up a special fund for evaluation reform, focusing on the collection of process data, the development of intelligent tools and other fields, and establish a performance evaluation mechanism for fund use to improve resource efficiency^[14]. In terms of technical platforms, integrate functions such as online learning, AI assessment and big data analysis, generate three-dimensional portraits of students’ literacy, strengthen data security and fairness, and ensure full coverage of evaluation^[6,8,15].

Establishing art literacy as a core competency and promoting the paradigm shift in aesthetic education evaluation is a profound conceptual change and systematic project, whose essence is a return from utilitarian and one-sided evaluation to comprehensive education evaluation, and a transformation from a management and control tool to a development and empowerment engine^[15].

6. Conclusion

Looking to the future, continuous efforts need to be made in four aspects: first, strengthen top-level design and incorporate the new evaluation system into the university’s talent cultivation plan; second, improve teachers’ evaluation literacy and promote the implementation of the paradigm through special training¹⁰; third, deepen the integration of technology and ethical research, balancing intelligent empowerment with humanistic care; fourth, strengthen empirical research and international comparison to build an evaluation system with both Chinese characteristics and a global vision.

Only by completing this paradigm shift can aesthetic education transform from a “soft task” into a “hard power”, and from an “ornament” into a “necessity for education”, laying a solid foundation of literacy for nurturing a new generation of talents who can shoulder the great mission of national rejuvenation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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