

The “Theme-Process-Outcome” Chain-Driven Mechanism of Inquiry Learning to Empower the Educational Paradigm and Practical Path of Ideological and Political Courses in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract: In response to the current teaching dilemmas in ideological and political (I&P) courses in colleges and universities, constructing a “theme–process–outcome” chain-driven mechanism has become a key path to empower ideological and political education. In terms of the educational paradigm, the theme layer anchors the value orientation, the process layer deepens practical understanding, and the outcome layer realizes value sublimation and feedback, forming a closed educational loop that integrates knowledge and action. In terms of practical paths, a four-in-one guarantee system of “top-level design – implementation paths – resource support – evaluation optimization” is adopted to ensure the effective implementation of the mechanism. This model aims to break the boundary between the classroom and society, realize the resonance of knowledge imparting and value shaping, and provide operable theoretical support and practical plans for the construction of “great ideological and political courses” in colleges and universities in the new era.

Keywords: Inquiry learning; Chain-driven mechanism; Ideological and political teaching in colleges and universities

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1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes that education is a major plan of the country, and fostering virtue through education is the fundamental task. As the main front of education, ideological and political courses in colleges and universities must arm young people with the Party’s innovative theories, inspire their sense of responsibility, guide their values, support the construction of “great ideological and political courses”, and achieve the goal of “three-wide education”, providing solid theoretical support and operable practical paths for the innovation of ideological and political teaching in the new era ^[1].

2. Multi-dimensional empowering value of the inquiry learning chain-driven mechanism for ideological and political teaching in colleges and universities

As a student-centered, real-problem-oriented, and inquiry-practice-based teaching model, inquiry learning is highly consistent with the goals of ideological and political education. It shows deep value in three dimensions in empowering ideological and political education.

2.1. Solving the separation of knowledge and action and deepening value internalization

Through the logic of “problem-driven – practical inquiry – reflection and sublimation”, inquiry learning breaks the common problem of “empty preaching” in traditional ideological and political courses, and transforms abstract basic principles of Marxism into perceptible, participatory, and responsive social realities. In this immersive learning mode, students understand the logic behind theories and policies in practice, and achieve the leap from “knowing what it is” to “knowing why it is” and then to “knowing what to do”, truly unifying knowledge internalization and action consciousness.

2.2. Reconstructing the teaching ecology and promoting mutual development of teaching and learning

In inquiry learning, teachers change from “authorities of knowledge” to “guides of learning”^[2], and students change from passive recipients of knowledge to active discoverers of problems, designers of plans, and creators of outcomes. Teachers and students carry out in-depth discussions, field investigations, and co-construction of achievements around common social issues. Through equal dialogue and ideological collision, their understanding and recognition of the path, system, theory, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics are further deepened. This interaction not only improves the attractiveness and affinity of teaching but also cultivates students’ critical thinking, public spirit, and sense of social responsibility imperceptibly, forming a benign teaching ecology of “mutual development of teaching and learning and co-construction of values”.

2.3. Expanding the educational field and strengthening empowerment in the era

Relying on the construction concept of “great ideological and political courses”, inquiry learning expands the educational front from closed classrooms to the broad social stage. Moreover, cooperative relations can be established with red education bases, urban and rural communities, enterprises, institutions, and social organizations to build a three-dimensional educational network. The process of social practice is a vivid national conditions education course, helping students build a complete understanding of the country, society, and themselves, achieving the close integration of ideological and political education and social life, and improving the timeliness and pertinence of education.

3. Innovation of the educational paradigm of ideological and political teaching in colleges and universities under the inquiry learning chain-driven mechanism

The “theme–process–outcome” chain-driven mechanism uses systematic thinking to integrate all links of inquiry learning. Through logical connection and value progression among the three, a new, sustainable and iterative ideological and political education paradigm is constructed.

3.1. Theme layer: Value anchoring and direction guidance

As the starting point of education, the theme must take “ideological and political nature” as the fundamental principle, focus on the core of education in the new era, closely follow major propositions such as Chinese-style modernization, national rejuvenation, socialist core values, and a community with a shared future for mankind, and keep up with the pulse of the times such as scientific and technological innovation, green development, digital China, grassroots governance, and rural revitalization. This ensures that the theme has both ideological height and practical warmth, responds to national strategic needs, and is close to youth growth concerns.

The selection of themes adheres to the four-dimensional standards of “priority of ideological and political nature, adaptation of practicality, distinctiveness of the times, and closeness to students”, ensuring in-depth content, operable forms, and feasible research. A progressive problem system is constructed to guide students to see through phenomena to the essence, deepen their political, ideological, and emotional identification with the Party’s innovative theories in layers of inquiry, and consolidate the foundation of faith.

3.2. Process layer: Practical inquiry and cognitive internalization

The process is a key carrier of value internalization, following the three-step progressive logic of “theoretical foundation – practical tackling – cognitive sublimation” to form an interconnected and in-depth educational chain.

In the theoretical foundation stage, classic literature reading and important policy analysis are used to consolidate students’ ideological foundation and research ability, ensuring that practice has direction and investigation has methods.

In the practical tackling stage, students are organized to go into real fields, such as fields and communities in project teams, perceive national conditions, understand public opinions, and understand political situations in “embodied cognition”, and enhance their realistic perception and emotional belonging to the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.

In the cognitive sublimation stage, through achievement reports, themed debates, reflection seminars, and round-table forums, students are guided to conduct in-depth analysis of contradictions, confusions, and value conflicts found in investigations. Under the guidance of teachers, they use Marxist standpoints, viewpoints, and methods for theoretical improvement, realizing the leap from perceptual experience to rational cognition and from individual experience to collective consensus, promoting the transformation of political theories from “abstract concepts” to “vivid practices”, and truly achieving “integration of learning, thinking, and application, unity of knowledge, belief, and action”.

3.3. Outcome layer: Multi-dimensional transformation and value sublimation

Academic achievements serve as tangible manifestations of educational effectiveness, necessitating a shift away from traditional single-dimensional evaluation models toward establishing a comprehensive achievement framework characterized by “multi-dimensional formats, three-dimensional transformations, and value orientation.” In terms of presentation formats, innovative expressions are encouraged, including high-quality research reports, policy advisory proposals, micro-documentaries, thematic plays, comic infographics, WeChat posts, short videos, and public welfare project proposals, all balancing academic rigor, social relevance, and communicative impact. Regarding implementation pathways: First, actively integrate achievements into teaching practices by carefully selecting outstanding works for inclusion in ideological and political education

course case libraries and teaching resource packages, enabling their application in classroom instruction to foster a virtuous cycle of “student innovation → faculty refinement → classroom application.” Second, enhance societal impact by submitting policy-relevant research reports to relevant authorities and organizing student-led community outreach, public service initiatives, and volunteer activities, thereby translating research findings into concrete social governance actions and strengthening the societal contribution of ideological education. Third, reinforce value internalization through achievement exhibitions, media campaigns, and recognition incentives to cultivate students’ sense of accomplishment, honor, and mission, facilitating their transition from “passively completing tasks” to “proactively assuming responsibilities” at a spiritual level.

4. Practical path of ideological and political education in colleges and universities under the inquiry learning chain-driven mechanism

Systematic thinking is used to build an integrated practical support system, transforming the “soft goals” of ideology and politics into “hard constraints” in educational links, ensuring that inquiry learning always advances in the correct political direction.

4.1. Top-level design: Institutional guarantee and resource integration

Party building, leadership and collaborative governance are strengthened. A special working group is set up under the overall leadership of the university Party committee, led by the School of Marxism, with the participation of the Academic Affairs Office, Student Affairs Department, Communist Youth League Committee, and all faculties. The working group takes “fostering virtue through education” as the fundamental principle, focuses on the in-depth integration of ideological and political education and inquiry learning, coordinates the overall direction, key tasks, and resource allocation of mechanism implementation, and breaks down departmental barriers.

Multi-party educational resources are systematically integrated to build a “university-government-enterprise-society” collaborative education platform^[3]. Cooperation agreements are signed with local governments, enterprises, institutions, and social organizations to build a number of off-campus practice bases with both practical and ideological and political functions. An off-campus tutor think tank composed of ideological and political theoretical experts, industry leaders, and outstanding grassroots cadres is established to provide ideological guidance, practical guidance, and value navigation for students. Special funds are set up to focus on supporting students to carry out ideological and political inquiry learning projects, such as red investigations, rural revitalization practices, and social governance observations, providing solid material guarantees for ideological and political empowerment of inquiry learning.

4.2. Implementation path: Whole-chain precise management

In the theme stage, the principle of “ideological and political guidance and conformity with the times” is adhered to. Every spring, an annual inquiry learning theme guide is released around core ideological and political themes such as national strategies, social hotspots, red culture, and moral construction^[4]. Students are organized to combine professional characteristics, highlighting the three orientations of “value, reality, and ideology and politics”. A review team composed of ideological and political experts, professional teachers, and industry representatives ensures that inquiry learning is closely linked to ideological and political education

requirements from the source.

In the process stage, a whole-process management mechanism of “three-step guidance” is constructed and promoted according to the logic of “theoretical training, practical tracking, and summary improvement”^[5]. In the theoretical training link, guidance on ideological and political methodology is fully integrated to help students establish correct research positions. In the practical tracking link, a digital platform is used to record students’ investigation tracks, ideological dynamics, and practical outcomes in real time, realizing the traceability of the ideological and political practice process.

In the outcome stage, focus is placed on “transformation and branding of ideological and political outcomes”. A university-level inquiry learning outcome exhibition platform is built, and “Ideological and Political Research and Innovation Competition” is regularly held. Ideological and political experts, industry backbones, and social representatives are invited to participate in the review. While paying attention to the academic and innovative nature of the outcomes, their ideological and political connotation, social value, and educational effect are highlighted^[6]. Selected excellent outcomes are promoted through compilation, online promotion, and school-enterprise cooperation applications, creating a demonstration ideological and political education brand activity to further expand the ideological and political radiation of inquiry learning.

4.3. Resource support: Multi-dimensional collaboration and digital empowerment

A four-in-one cross-dimensional guidance team of “ideological and political teachers + professional tutors + industry experts + student peers” is built. Among them, ideological and political teachers are mainly responsible for value guidance and strengthen the ideological and political orientation and ideological tempering in research; professional tutors focus on professional empowerment and promote the full integration of ideological and political elements and professional knowledge; industry experts transmit ideological and political connotations such as craftsmanship spirit and professional responsibility from the practical frontier; student peers achieve ideological resonance and value identity through experience sharing and mutual assistance and collaboration. All parties collaborate to gather the educational force of “casting the soul with ideology and politics, laying the foundation with professionalism, and empowering with practice”^[7].

Characteristic ideological and political practice bases are built by category to form a scenario-based learning support system of “one theme, one base; one project, one scene”. Among them, red education bases focus on inheriting revolutionary traditions and red genes; rural revitalization bases focus on cultivating students’ social responsibility and practical spirit; scientific and technological innovation bases focus on strengthening the concept of serving the country through science and technology and innovation awareness; grassroots governance bases are committed to improving students’ public service ability and legal thinking; ecological civilization bases focus on fostering the concept of green development and ecological responsibility. Through scenario-based and immersive practical activities, students are encouraged to further deepen their understanding of ideology and politics in real situations and temper their moral character.

4.4. Evaluation optimization: Multi-dimensional, three-dimensional and process-oriented

A three-dimensional ideological and political evaluation model of “four-dimensional indicators and four-party subjects” is constructed. Among them, the “four-dimensional indicators” focus on the core points of ideological and political education, including the evaluation of theme value, process participation, outcome innovation, and value identity. The “four-party subjects” gather the force of multi-dimensional evaluation: students’ self-evaluation focuses on the perception of ideological and political learning; group mutual

evaluation focuses on the responsibility reflected in the collaboration process; teachers' evaluation highlights ideological and political orientation and educational effect; social evaluation focuses on the social value and ideological and political radiation of the outcomes, so as to comprehensively improve the scientificity, comprehensiveness, and credibility of evaluation^[8].

A comprehensive evaluation method combining “process evaluation + summative evaluation” is adopted to break the limitations of single outcome evaluation. On the one hand, students' professional research ability is examined; on the other hand, the ideological and political literacy such as family and national feelings, social responsibility, moral judgment, and value identity formed by students in the process of inquiry learning is emphatically evaluated, so as to achieve an all-round evaluation of students' knowledge, ability, emotion, attitude, and values^[9].

With the closed-loop optimization mechanism of “evaluation – feedback – improvement”, a system of evaluation result feedback and continuous teaching improvement is built. Regular student satisfaction surveys are carried out to collect students' opinions on ideological and political guidance, practical arrangements, and resource support; teachers are organized to hold ideological and political education reflection meetings to summarize the experience and deficiencies of ideological and political integration in inquiry learning; ideological and political experts and industry representatives are invited to conduct third-party evaluations to accurately locate educational shortcomings^[10].

5. Conclusion

The “theme–process–outcome” chain-driven mechanism of inquiry learning is a systematic and innovative paradigm exploration of ideological and political teaching reform in colleges and universities in the new era. Taking the theme as the starting point to anchor the value direction, the process as the link to deepen practical understanding, and the outcome as the foothold to achieve value sublimation, the three are interconnected and progressive, forming a complete educational closed loop.

This mechanism not only effectively solves the bottleneck problems such as the separation of knowledge and action, lack of subjectivity, and single evaluation in traditional ideological and political education, but also realizes the in-depth integration of theory and practice, school and society, knowledge and value, individual and the times through the carrier of inquiry learning. It marks that ideological and political education is moving from “curriculum teaching” to the construction of “educational ecology” and from “knowledge transmission” to “personality shaping”.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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