

# Research on the Academic Teaching Ability of University Teachers in the New Era

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**Abstract:** College teachers are the backbone of colleges and universities, and teachers' teaching and academic ability are their key core abilities. Starting from the evolution process and development context of university teachers' academic teaching ability, this study intends to analyze the theoretical implications of academic teaching ability, analyze the existing problems in the development of university teachers' academic teaching ability, and try to put forward the promotion strategy of university teachers' academic teaching ability by combing the development status of domestic and foreign academic ability, to promote the improvement of teachers' professional level.

**Keywords:** University teachers; Academic teaching ability; Teacher development

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching is the most important role task of higher education institutions, the essence of the teaching profession, and the most important academic responsibility of teachers<sup>[1]</sup>. In recent years, due to the close relationship between professional title evaluation and employment with teaching quality assessment and scientific research achievements, many colleges and universities have begun to form the tendency to emphasize scientific research and start neglecting teaching. With the rising voice of "returning to the way of university" in higher education, the convolitional development of colleges and universities to improve teaching quality as the core has gradually become the main theme of development. "How to improve the teaching level and research ability of teachers?" has become a topic of constant discussion in the academic community. This proposal of the theory of teaching and academic ability is providing new ideas for colleges and universities to return to the position of teaching center, for teachers to improve the level of teaching and research, and for colleges and universities to take the road of convolitional high-quality development.

## 2. The evolution process and development context of academic teaching

Many scholars at home and abroad have studied the evolution process of teaching academic theory and the

development context of teaching academic research. Combined with the representative views and key events of scholars in each period, this study divides the evolution process and development context of academic teaching into four stages: germination, creation, expansion and improvement <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **2.1. The budding stage of academic teaching**

In the 1980s, the issues of how teachers should allocate their time and energy between teaching and research, and how universities should ensure the quality of undergraduate teaching aroused widespread concern. It triggered heated discussion among scholars from all fields while the related concepts and ideas of “Academic teaching” slowly sprouted. As the scholar Rice said, the previous research and contributions of other scholars and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching laid the theoretical foundation for the proposed academic theory of teaching.

### **2.2. The creation stage of academic teaching**

In 1990, Boyer, an American scholar, brought up the concept of “Academic teaching” for the first time in his report “Reflection on Academic Level: The Key Areas of Professor’s Work”. Boyer pointed out that the academic activities of university teachers include the discovery of knowledge, knowledge integration, knowledge application and academic teaching <sup>[3]</sup>. Boyer believes that teachers with excellent teaching academic levels must be those who pay attention to the frontier of the discipline, update their learning content in time, and constantly improve their professional ability. Such teachers not only have excellent teaching ability but also pay attention to continuous learning, by constantly expanding their subject area. In general, the academic teaching ability of university teachers is mainly manifested in two parts, which are the teaching ability and the application of teachers in teaching work together with the scientific research ability of teachers and the application in scientific research work, respectively <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.3. The expansion stage of academic teaching**

Scholar Kleber believed that academic teaching entered a new era in 1995, and academic teaching was becoming more mature. Also in 1995, Donald Shein, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published a paper in *Change* magazine, which provided an epistemological foundation for the development of academic teaching. In 1997, Shulman further expanded the concept of academic teaching based on Boyer, proposing a shift from academic teaching to academic teaching and learning, letting teaching become a “shared wealth.” At the beginning of the 20th century, Hutchins introduced the teaching academic concept of “teaching community”, and proposed that teachers should improve the level of teaching professional development through shared learning, communication, discussion, etc., by enhancing teachers’ communication and information exchange <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **2.4. The improvement stage of academic teaching**

In recent years, the establishment of a teaching community has gradually entered a period of vigorous development with the emergence of teacher development centers and teacher education associations. Teaching academic theories are gradually put into practice, and many research institutions have begun to study the policy theory and method research of university education and teaching management, university education, and teaching evaluation systems <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **3. The theoretical implications of academic teaching**

#### **3.1. Analysis of the connotation of academic teaching**

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars introduced the concept of academic teaching, while theoretical scholars also researched academic teaching<sup>[7]</sup>. The research found that the connotation of academic teaching is manifested in that academic teaching is not only a simple teaching activity or academic research activity but also a comprehensive and systematic project, involving the communication and coordination between teachers, students, schools and other subjects. The focus of academic teaching is not only on the individual teachers engaged in educational research, but also on the formation of a “teaching community” where the results of community research belong to the shared knowledge among the teachers. At the same time, many scholars have further deconstructed the connotation of academic teaching and found that the interpretation of teaching academic connotation forms a closed loop. Academic teaching is based on subject knowledge or education knowledge. It pays attention to the practical problems of teachers’ teaching and students’ learning in the teaching process, referring to excellent teaching cases, learning frontier theories, etc. The system method is used to design teaching and conduct research before applying the research results to teaching practice after producing results which are published to receive peer review. Through peer review, the communication between peers is strengthened, to improve their professional level and promote the all-round development of students<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **3.2. Research on the characteristics of academic teaching**

The analysis of the connotation of academic teaching has led many scholars in the academic field to discuss its characteristics. The study found that its characteristics are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

- (1) The first is the diversity of integration. Academic teaching emphasizes the integration of multiple knowledge, not only the traditional basic knowledge of disciplines but also educational knowledge and other knowledge. At the same time, in this era of education 2.0, academic teaching also emphasizes the application of emerging information technology, online and offline communication and integration, and the formation of interdisciplinary, cross-professional, and cross-field mixed knowledge integration.
- (2) The second is practical and research-based properties. The practice of academic teaching is based on teachers’ teaching practice, which is a systematic study of teachers’ teaching and students’ learning. To improve academic teaching ability, teachers should adopt certain methods to carry out teaching practice, take the teaching classroom as a research place, conduct in-depth exploration and research on education and teaching problems. At the same time, teachers should also conduct in-depth reflection on academic research problems. The teaching results and systematic reflection results will be made public to form a shared knowledge of information among the community of scholars.
- (3) The third is sustainable development. Teachers bring up creative and operational strategies on teaching content, teaching methods, teaching links and other aspects through reflection and analysis in teaching practice. At the same time, teachers accept peer evaluation, to continuously improve their teaching and enhance academic teaching ability<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **4. The existing problems in the development of university teachers – academic teaching ability**

Looking at the academic teaching ability of Chinese university teachers, there are still many problems in the development process of teachers’ academic teaching ability. To sum up, it mainly lies in two aspects: teachers’ personal problems and the school’s external environment problems.

#### **4.1. Teachers' personal problems**

- (1) Teachers' academic level needs to be improved. Many young teachers have high enthusiasm for scientific research. However, due to their low academic level, their ability to engage in scientific research and carry out academic teaching theory research needs to be improved. At the same time, their ability to improve their teaching level by taking scientific research as their starting point also needs to be reconsidered.
- (2) Teachers' understanding of the academic connotation of teaching is not clear. Many university teachers agree that teaching is "academic" but they cannot accurately grasp the "academic" characteristics of academic teaching. At the same time, many teachers are easy to confuse about the concept of academic teaching and research teaching. Some teachers also cannot distinguish the difference between research teaching and scientific research. Due to teachers' unclear understanding of the connotation of academic teaching, teachers' academic teaching achievements are also lacking. On the other hand, due to the lack of initiative of teachers to generate academic teaching achievements, the evaluation criteria for teachers' teaching achievements are not clear as well as the reward mechanism for teachers in colleges and universities. This leads to teachers experiencing lesser research teaching and few academic achievements.
- (3) Teachers' openness to academic teaching achievements is not high. At present, even though teachers share their teaching achievements, the degree of openness to academic teaching achievements is low. In addition, the frequency of communication with other scholars is also relatively low, failing to establish the group engaged in academic teaching research.

#### **4.2. Problems existing in the external environment of the school**

- (1) The implementation of university policies of "emphasizing form over substance" and ignores teachers' demands for teaching and academic development. At present, colleges and universities have paid more attention to teaching work, but have not yet paid enough attention to the demands of teachers' teaching and academic development. The relevant policies formulated by colleges and universities pay more attention to the form and ignore the real implementation effect.
- (2) The teaching academic community in colleges and universities has not yet been established. According to the survey, most teachers in colleges and universities want to participate in the academic teaching community. Unfortunately, the school has not yet established a perfect organization of the academic teaching community. At present, colleges and universities have set up some teaching teams and created several grassroots teaching organizations, but the activities of these organizations are mostly to discuss projects and various scientific research, and most of the activities are a mere formality. There are many discussions on teaching activities, which are very limited to improving the overall teaching quality of the school and the teaching level of teachers and deepening the reform of education and teaching.
- (3) Colleges and universities lack the protection of the academic teaching system environment. At present, the various evaluation systems and evaluation standards of university teachers are still focusing more on scientific research, and less on teaching. There is also a lack of perfect teaching incentive mechanisms for teachers, especially for application-oriented colleges and universities. It is particularly important for them to cultivate "double-qualified" teachers with academic teaching ability and professional application skills. On the other hand, colleges and universities also lack a special exchange and sharing mechanism for academic results and findings at the school level. Schools mainly invite experts to share academic teaching results by holding lectures and other forums but have not yet formed a strong atmosphere for teachers to generate teaching academic results <sup>[10]</sup>.



## **5. The development status of teaching and academic systems at home and abroad**

### **5.1. The vigorous development of the domestic teaching and academic system**

Since 2020, the domestic teaching and academic system has begun to thrive with various academic conferences related to teaching and academic research also being held. In the past two years, for example, the fourth annual Academic Teaching Conference of Chinese Universities was successfully held online in 2022 with the theme “Academic Teaching: From Learning Effectiveness to Student Achievement”. 430 higher education scholars, teachers and teaching development personnel from 84 universities across the country gathered in the cloud to discuss academic teaching. The outline of the annual meeting focused on the demand for an innovation-driven strategy for talent training, students’ learning effect and comprehensive development. The conference also deeply discussed teaching activities and strategies that conformed to the law of students’ growth and talent, at the same time meeting their individual needs from the perspective of students. In addition, the second academic conference on Teaching Development of Private Universities in the Yangtze River Delta in 2022 was also successfully held with the theme of “Reforming Classroom Teaching: Digital Transformation and Development of Private Higher Education.” The conference aimed to further promote the construction of teachers in private universities in the Yangtze River Delta, create a teaching cultural atmosphere, share high-quality teaching resources, and vindicate of improving teaching quality and efficiency. In June 2023, the fifth annual Teaching Academic Conference of Chinese Universities was also successfully held. With the theme of “Academic Teaching: Integrating Education and Cultivating Innovative Talents”, the annual conference set up 4 conference reports, 11 sub-venue forums, 5 pre-workshops and poster display sites. A total of 262 higher education scholars, teachers and teaching development personnel from more than 80 universities in China gathered at Jiaotong University to discuss the new paradigm, new mission and new vision of academic teaching development <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **5.2. The development and advancement of teaching and academic systems in the world**

Academic teaching was first proposed by the American scholar Boyer, so it was also the first academic teaching movement to rise in the United States.<sup>[12]</sup> Subsequently, many Western countries also attach great importance to the effectiveness of academic teaching in improving the quality of higher education. Canada, Britain, Australia and other countries began to extensively carry out the practice of academic teaching movement and deepen the connotation of academic teaching theory.

#### **5.2.1. The academic development of teaching and learning in the United States**

In the 30 years since Boyer brought up the concept of academic teaching in 1990, many universities in the United States have paid more and more attention to the development and practice of teaching techniques. Through the establishment of academic teaching centers and the reformation of teacher evaluation and reward systems, many universities in the United States have improved the effectiveness of teachers’ teaching and students’ learning together with the quality of teaching <sup>[13]</sup>. For example, Kennesaw State University has established a teaching and learning center and established a teaching and learning program. The university has set up teachers’ learning groups and provided financial support and incentives for teachers involved in academic teaching development <sup>[14]</sup>.

#### **5.2.2. The academic development of teaching in Australia**

The Commonwealth University of Australia has set up a Learning Innovation and Professional Practice Center to support, enhance and promote learning and teaching practice. The center has also set up a teaching and academic research group specializing in theoretical research, actively exploring the dissemination and

recognition of teaching and academic research. For example, the Australian National University has set up the Higher Education and Learning Teaching Center, which provides a variety of programs and platforms to promote faculty development and conduct teaching evaluations and awards <sup>[15]</sup>. The University of South Australia has set up a teaching innovation center to promote the implementation of the school's teaching and learning framework. Teachers should become reflective teachers, analyze and reflect on their teaching data, and at the same time become academic teachers, engage in teaching discussion activities and invite peers to evaluate their work.

### **5.2.3. Academic development of teaching and learning in the UK**

In 1965, Ruth Baird established the Department of University Teaching Methods at the Institute of Education, University of London, which was the first higher education teaching support service organization in British history, marking the beginning of supporting higher education teaching at the practical level in Britain. After this practice, other higher education institutions in the UK also set up similar institutions to serve the teaching practice of the organization and promote the improvement of teaching quality. Higher education institutions in Britain have established internal and external quality assurance systems to jointly ensure the quality of teaching. The University of Warwick, the University of Cambridge and the University of Edinburgh have all set up teaching academic centers or teaching development centers to help teachers improve teaching quality <sup>[16]</sup>.

### **5.2.4. Teaching and academic development in Canada**

Many universities in Canada have set up special academic support institutions for teaching and learning. The University of Toronto has set up a Teaching Support and Innovation Center to provide teaching support, educational technology, educational research and teaching awards. The University of British Columbia has a teaching and Academic community of practice and a Center for Teaching, Learning and Support, which provides a place for teachers from all disciplines to exchange their work and findings, learn from each other and participate in teaching and academic research.

## **6. Strategies for improving the academic ability of university teachers**

### **6.1. Improve the management mechanism of colleges and universities to ensure the orderly operation of the teaching and academic community**

To create a good academic environment suitable for the development of teachers' academic teaching ability, colleges and universities must utilize the system and policy as guidance. To be specific, the evaluation system of university teachers' academic teaching ability level should be improved, and the reward system for teachers should be established with the teaching academic level as the reference standard. To construct the multiple teachers' evaluation system in colleges and universities, it is necessary to pay full attention to the value and status of academic teaching ability, comprehensively consider the multiple subject evaluation systems such as teacher evaluation, student evaluation, peer evaluation, and third-party evaluation, and construct the evaluation chain of teaching academic level related to students, teachers, and peers <sup>[17]</sup>. Teachers in colleges and universities should be encouraged to carry out high-quality teaching and academic activities in terms of professional construction and curriculum construction. At the same time, colleges and universities should further revise and improve the relevant academic evaluation system, and guide teachers in colleges and universities to constantly update their education concepts. This will encourage the teachers to pay attention to the improvement of their professional level and establish teaching and academic concepts through system guidance and management services.

## 6.2. Reshape the academic willingness to teach and the construction of teachers ‘academic teaching community

Shulman, an American scholar, has been actively advocating the establishment of teaching and academic community. He believes that the establishment of a teaching community can make the teaching behavior become a collective behavior, and the teaching experience from individual to public sharing, so that it can continuously gain a positive influence from excellent teachers. Colleges and universities should also formulate and improve policies to promote cooperation between teaching teams, carry out professional construction in the form of teaching teams, develop teaching materials, carry out teaching plans, and execute cross-professional and interdisciplinary exchanges and cooperation <sup>[18]</sup>. To improve the academic ability of teaching, we should first reshape the academic willingness of university teachers, stimulate their enthusiasm for academic teaching activities, guide them to break the traditional academic concept and enhance the sense of academic identity of teaching. At the same time, colleges and universities should also create an atmosphere for teachers to engage in teaching academic activities by establishing a teaching academic community so that teachers can gradually update their traditional academic concepts and strengthen their teaching academic consciousness, achieving the final aim of encouraging academic teaching activities. In addition, establishing a teaching and research community also helps in breaking through individual self-limitation and teaching island practice, by carrying out substantive teaching and research cooperation in mutual support, mutual stimulation, mutual complement, common practice, common research and common sharing. These are effective ways to improve teachers’ academic teaching ability. To promote the exchange and interaction between theory-teaching researchers and professional teachers, theory-teaching researchers can assist professional teachers’ education and deliver knowledge through courses, lectures, saloons and other forums. Besides, the researchers can also discuss teaching together with professional teachers, to guide the improvement of professional teachers’ academic teaching ability. By condensing teachers’ collective wisdom, the teaching task will become more vibrant <sup>[19]</sup>.

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## Disclosure statement

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