

# Separation or Integration: Analysis about the Theories of Vocational Enlightenment Education Courses

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**Abstract:** Currently, vocational enlightenment education is being implemented in various forms in some primary and secondary schools, but there is still an ongoing exploration of the recognized forms of vocational enlightenment education. The two main forms of vocational enlightenment education at present are independent implementation in a separation-based approach and integration with other disciplines. Analyzing the basic forms of vocational enlightenment education through the lens of disciplinary development theories such as disciplinary training and interdisciplinary studies can help us understand its construction foundation as well as the pros and cons of its development. In order to establish a unique form of vocational enlightenment education curriculum, it is necessary to clarify its distinctive features, delineate its knowledge domain, and establish disciplinary boundaries. Through a continuous process of standardization, scientific development, and stability, vocational enlightenment education can transcend disciplinary boundaries and integrate with related courses to innovate its distinctive practical approach.

**Keywords:** Vocational enlightenment education; Vocational enlightenment education courses; Interdisciplinary

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## 1. Introduction

The question of how vocational enlightenment education courses exist in what form has been the focus of existing research. Most studies have explored how to integrate vocational enlightenment education into related courses, such as labor education, comprehensive practical activities, and major cultural courses. Some scholars argue that vocational enlightenment education should not be limited to being an add-on to certain courses, but rather be considered as an independent curriculum. They emphasize the need to construct a complete, independent, and scientific vocational enlightenment education system<sup>[1]</sup>. According to John I. Goodlad's classification of curriculum, vocational enlightenment education courses are currently considered an "ideal curriculum." Relevant policies advocate the implementation of vocational enlightenment education at primary and secondary school stages, but there are no specific curriculum plans or standards. Whether to integrate vocational enlightenment education into a comprehensive course or to establish it as a separate and independent course requires a theoretical analysis based on practical considerations such as curriculum content and form, examining the potential mechanisms for the separation

or integration of vocational enlightenment education courses.

## **2. Separation of vocational enlightenment education courses**

### **2.1. Separation of vocational enlightenment education courses and other courses**

To analyze the current status of the separation of vocational enlightenment education courses, it is necessary to define their content based on the assumption of their separation. Vocational enlightenment education courses refer to the induction and integration of vocational enlightenment elements covering different occupations. They can be divided into knowledge domains that constitute an independent and relatively mature vocational enlightenment education curriculum system. This allows vocational enlightenment education to be implemented within the scope of school education in the form of designated independent class hours. Currently, independent vocational enlightenment education courses are mainly developed in secondary vocational schools. However, there are no unified curriculum standards, teaching syllabi, or instructional designs. Additionally, there is a lack of effective coordination between vocational enlightenment education courses at different educational stages. When comparing vocational enlightenment education courses with labor education courses and comprehensive practical courses, each has its emphasis and characteristics.

From the perspective of curriculum development, comprehensive practical activity courses focus on students' personal development, targeting their life contexts. These courses aim to enable students to gain experience and understanding of life and nature, integrate knowledge from various disciplines, and cultivate abilities to solve problems, take responsibility, and materialize creativity. The goal is to help students form a value system. Labor education courses, on the other hand, are directed toward students' labor contexts. They aim to shape students' positive values and spirits regarding labor, cultivate labor habits and abilities, and ultimately promote the comprehensive development of students' qualities. Vocational enlightenment education, based on students' future career development needs, is oriented toward the work contexts of various occupations. The purpose is to initially cultivate vocational awareness and skills, guide vocational interests, and form correct vocational values.

In terms of current curriculum content, developed vocational enlightenment education courses in secondary vocational schools mainly focus on DIY handicrafts or labor-related technical content, which have a relatively weak vocational orientation. The content of comprehensive practical activity courses is based on various activity themes, such as science and technology, arts, and ethics. This allows students to establish intrinsic connections with society and nature through their participation in these activities. The main content of labor education courses includes knowledge, skills, and values related to daily life labor, productive labor, and service-oriented labor. The content of labor education courses has progressively advanced across different educational stages. In primary school, the focus is on labor within students' personal lives, school, and family. In junior high school, emphasis is placed on engaging in labor both within and outside the school, including productive labor and service-oriented labor. In high school, there is an emphasis on experiencing labor in vocational.

In terms of curriculum implementation, comprehensive practical activity courses are conducted through methods such as investigation and exploration, community service, design and production, and experiential learning. Labor education courses are primarily implemented through activities such as labor weeks, special lectures, thematic speeches, labor skills competitions, labor achievements exhibitions, and practical labor projects. The implementation methods of vocational enlightenment education courses are still being explored. Currently, the main forms of implementing vocational enlightenment education include vocational enlightenment days, vocational research, vocational role-playing, and other forms of vocational experiences outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, activities such as handicraft making, creative living, and traditional Chinese medicine health practices are incorporated into the curriculum, drawing on

local development and relevant international experiences <sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2.2. Theories about the separation of vocational enlightenment education courses**

The practical forms of the curriculum can be traced back to the historical development of “disciplinary training” and the institutionalization of disciplines. “Disciplinary training” is both an institution and an educational practice that refers to the evaluation of the effectiveness and legitimacy of knowledge based on certain scientific standards, as well as the categorization, coordination, and regulation of the boundaries and hierarchical status of knowledge. This concept is derived from the combination of the two concepts, “discipline” and “training.” “Discipline” has two basic meanings: one is the different fields of knowledge and subjects of study, and the other is the strict regulation and shaping of human development according to certain standards, which is known as disciplinary training. The term “training” was initially introduced by Foucault, referring to “the normalization of training.” It was later developed and updated by scholars such as Wallerstein and Hawkins in the United States. They emphasized the “educational practice” between knowledge and power and revealed the forms of power and knowledge within this “educational practice.” They introduced the concept of “disciplinary training” to elucidate the institutionalization process of disciplines.

Wallerstein’s research on social sciences points out that from the 19th century to the mid-20th century, the emergence of social science disciplines such as economics and sociology facilitated the institutionalization process of disciplines. Among various disciplines, especially those with similar research content, attempts were made to delineate the boundaries of knowledge in order to establish and regulate their unique domains. While there may be some overlap between vocational enlightenment education courses and comprehensive activity courses or labor education courses, each has its emphasis and characteristics. This is a necessary condition for the vocational enlightenment education curriculum to separate itself from related courses and form its own system. If vocational enlightenment education is to establish an independent curriculum system, it is also necessary to clearly delineate independent knowledge domains in order to consolidate the identity of the curriculum.

The establishment of curriculum identities is inevitably influenced by various aspects such as socioeconomic factors, political power, and culture, which in turn impact the boundaries, extent of development, and differentiation or recombination of different disciplines. One assumption of the sociology of knowledge suggests that the organization of school curriculum, academic disciplines, and the production and development of knowledge are to varying degrees influenced by social class, gender, and race. While this is considered an exploratory assumption by scholars, Michael F.D. Young also emphasizes that “it is never in itself a reason for supporting (or opposing) a particular curriculum.” However, it does provide an analytical framework for understanding the existence and forms of vocational education curricula.

The traditional ideologies of “officialdom” and “education leading to official positions” continue to exert influence to this day, and subject-based curriculum still holds a prominent position within the primary and secondary education system. Furthermore, the negative societal attitude towards vocational education has, to some extent, hindered the implementation of vocational enlightenment courses in primary and secondary schools <sup>[3]</sup>. Through a case study of a primary school, it was found that elementary school students have a narrow understanding of professions. The formation of vocational aspirations in such a state may have varying degrees of negative impact on individual students or socio-economic development. Vocational enlightenment education should serve as the foundation of the modern vocational education system, and its curriculum design needs to adapt to the socio-economic development and trends in talent cultivation. The independent manifestation of vocational enlightenment education courses is of significant importance in this regard <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.3. Advantages and disadvantages of the separation of vocational enlightenment education courses**

To establish a relatively independent vocational enlightenment education curriculum system, it is essential to popularize public awareness of vocational enlightenment education and have more independence in terms of content and implementation. On the other hand, public recognition can also promote the in-depth development of vocational enlightenment education, increase investment in the development of vocational enlightenment education courses, gradually establish a mature vocational enlightenment education curriculum system, and create an internal virtuous cycle. However, the current development of the vocational enlightenment education curriculum is just in its early stages, and to truly build a more mature curriculum system and achieve the separate development of vocational enlightenment education courses, several conditions need to be established as the foundation. Vocational enlightenment education courses need to achieve coordination and overall planning with other related courses in terms of content and implementation, rationalizing the division of overlapping areas and emphasizing their characteristics. In addition, introducing a new course poses a major challenge to the development of primary and secondary education, requiring further exploration in curriculum development, allocation of teaching hours, teacher selection and training, and the selection and construction of vocational experience bases. Due to the immature development of vocational enlightenment education in our country, scholars also need to continuously explore localized vocational enlightenment education courses based on lessons learned from foreign curriculum development experiences. The separate development of vocational enlightenment education courses requires certain concessions and changes from relevant disciplines, as well as the joint efforts of government, schools, scholars, and other stakeholders. The government plays a guiding role by providing legal, financial, and other guarantees. Vocational colleges not only provide vocational and professional information and experiential venues but also develop vocational enlightenment education courses and supply vocational enlightenment teachers to primary and secondary schools. Primary and secondary schools, as the main implementers of vocational enlightenment education, need to effectively implement the curriculum and conduct timely evaluation and feedback. Relevant social enterprises and vocational enlightenment education venues actively participate in cooperation to support the separate development of vocational enlightenment education courses [5].

## **3. Syncretism of vocational enlightenment education courses**

### **3.1. Syncretism of vocational enlightenment education courses and other courses**

The vocational enlightenment education curriculum exhibits partial intersections in terms of content, format, and resources with integrated practical courses, labor education courses, and major cultural courses. This mode of vocational enlightenment education, based on interdisciplinary intersections, constitutes the integrated manifestation of the vocational enlightenment education curriculum.

There is an overlap in terms of curriculum content and format. The vocational enlightenment education courses developed by vocational schools, with content names such as “Colorful Weaving,” “Ribbon Accessories,” and “Fan Art,” are referred to as vocational experiential courses. Vocational experience is one of the implementation forms of integrated practical courses, thus there exists an overlap between vocational enlightenment education courses and design-oriented or labor-oriented courses within integrated practical activities. In primary and secondary schools, vocational enlightenment education is often implemented through practical activity classes. However, these types of content mainly emphasize students’ hands-on abilities, focusing to some extent on cultivating their craftsmanship and environmental awareness, rather than having a strong vocational orientation. In reality, this does not align well with the definition of vocational enlightenment education courses established by most scholars. The essence of vocation is labor, which includes labor in vocational job positions and labor in life situations. Moreover, labor cannot be separated from hands-on practice. From this perspective, the content covered by labor education courses

includes some aspects of integrated practical activities and vocational enlightenment education courses. Therefore, vocational enlightenment education courses and integrated practical activity courses can also be considered methods of implementing labor education.

Additionally, there is an intersection of teaching staff in the curriculum. Vocational enlightenment education is mostly implemented by subject teachers, vocational college teachers, or specially trained teachers from schools. Labor education courses and integrated practical activity courses have dedicated teachers, while some primary and secondary schools assign subject teachers to teach these courses. Currently, vocational enlightenment education is mainly conducted through offline vocational experiential activities. The sharing of teaching staff for its curriculum remains at a superficial level of inter-school guidance, such as vocational college teachers and vocational enlightenment education experts being stationed in regular primary and secondary schools and vocational enlightenment education centers to provide guidance on curriculum implementation and development. As there is more room for selecting and utilizing teaching staff in vocational enlightenment education courses, there are more paths worth exploring for sharing teaching staff with the other two courses.

Moreover, there is a fusion of curriculum hardware resources. Vocational enlightenment education, labor education, and integrated practical activities share common venues for implementation, including classrooms, on-campus and off-campus vocational experiential sites, vocational schools, and enterprise institutions. In terms of equipment, in addition to physical devices, networked digital resources serve as more efficient and convenient forms of resources. However, their application in these courses is limited, yet they are indispensable and represent latent hardware resources that are waiting to be developed. If better developed and utilized, they will also serve as important conditions for the integration of vocational enlightenment education courses with other courses <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **3.2. Theories about the syncretism of vocational enlightenment education courses**

The analysis of the separation and integration of vocational enlightenment education courses can be inspired by the development of disciplines. The separation and integration of disciplines have been reflected in the debate over the status of science and philosophy. In the 17th and 18th centuries, science and philosophy were considered “independent and equal” allies in the pursuit of truth about the world. Since the 19th century, intellectual history witnessed the specialization and professionalization of knowledge, with knowledge being systematically divided into different knowledge clusters and forming multiple disciplines such as history, economics, sociology, and political science. Different disciplines took different epistemological positions, leading to a situation where science and philosophy were seen as completely distinct or in direct opposition, with science gradually gaining overwhelming dominance. Since 1945, there has been a growing pursuit of more precise knowledge, leading to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and an emphasis on interdisciplinary integration while disregarding disciplinary differentiation. Efforts to eliminate disciplinary organizing forms and promote interdisciplinary or anti-disciplinary research have emerged. The emergence of “area studies” has further fostered close connections between different disciplines, particularly emphasizing collaboration and achievements between individual-focused historical disciplines and generalizing social sciences. The three traditional social science disciplines have gradually overlapped in terms of research subjects and methodologies, creating opportunities for the emergence of interdisciplinary fields. In the 1960s and 1970s, the interrelation and boundary-crossing of knowledge domains were extensively explored, and collaboration among different fields of knowledge was increasingly valued. Social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences became “potential places of self-harmony.” Communication, collaboration, and even integration between disciplines have become important directions for the development of disciplines, providing a theoretical perspective for the integration of vocational enlightenment education courses.

In the 19th century, universities established various departments by “dividing and classifying” disciplines, and the boundaries thus established were changeable. These disciplinary boundaries can be used to delineate fields of knowledge and facilitate cross-disciplinary permeation of different disciplinary contents. The stronger the exclusivity and stability of the knowledge domain of a discipline, the less likely it is for cross-disciplinary permeation to occur. This is a manifestation of the institutionalization of disciplines. Currently, vocational enlightenment education has not formed a stable knowledge domain and knowledge structure. Practical experience indicates that there is a basis for disciplinary permeation between vocational enlightenment education and related disciplines, providing possibilities for the integration of vocational enlightenment education courses with other relevant courses. Hollisstein argues that universalism is the pursuit of social sciences, but it is also a source of controversy because this “universality” needs to prove its narrowness to the public. Rebuilding an open social science requires addressing the problem of disciplinary segregation through collective discussions. Therefore, opening up social sciences, promoting interdisciplinary cooperation based on the narrowness of each discipline, and achieving “pluralistic universalism” are important forms of disciplinary development. With the development of knowledge updates and the information age, interdisciplinary integration is being increasingly discussed by scholars. The concept of interdisciplinary, first proposed by Woodworth, involves integrating information, data, skills, tools, perspectives, concepts, and theories from two or more disciplines or professional knowledge fields. It expands and deepens the knowledge of various disciplines and professional fields, or collectively addresses problems that cannot be solved by a single discipline or research field. The fused curriculum established through interdisciplinary approaches generally revolves around a specific theme and utilizes multiple disciplines to address practical issues. The current “comprehensive practice activity courses” are a concrete manifestation of fused courses.

Disciplinary training and interdisciplinary integration should not be seen as opposing forces; interdisciplinary integration needs to be based on the effectiveness and legitimacy of disciplinary knowledge within disciplinary training. Hawkins has upgraded the concept of disciplinary training and regards the disciplinary training system as a new knowledge ecosystem, where the knowledge domains are open and capable of endlessly generating new disciplinary training fields and sub-disciplinary training fields. Vocational enlightenment education intersects with the knowledge domains of comprehensive practice and labor education, which can jointly constitute a new integrated knowledge ecosystem. The interactions between the different knowledge domains can lead to the delineation of new disciplinary boundaries and the generation of new disciplinary training fields, potentially resulting in the creation of new fused courses from the three subjects. However, the emergence of these fused courses requires the establishment of knowledge domains within each discipline that are effective and legitimate. The development of social sciences promotes mutual cooperation between disciplines but needs to be based on the solid knowledge systems of each discipline and move towards “universality” while maintaining the uniqueness and relative independence of their knowledge domains. The intersection of vocational enlightenment education courses with other related courses in terms of themes, content, format, and resources constitutes partial conditions for integration. However, a crucial prerequisite for interdisciplinary integration is the maturity within each discipline. Vocational enlightenment education courses need to undergo their construction and development, which is closely related to the overall development of vocational enlightenment education. Given the current state of vocational education development, it will still take a considerable amount of time to establish a stable knowledge domain and system for vocational enlightenment education courses.

### **3.3. The possibility of integration between vocational enlightenment education courses and other related courses**

Analyzing the integration mechanisms between vocational enlightenment education courses and other related courses requires a clear understanding of the driving forces and obstacles for integration. In terms of driving forces, vocational enlightenment education courses are currently lacking a mature curriculum system, with fragmented course modules and a lack of coherence between courses. It will take a considerable amount of time to explore how to establish a balanced “knowledge ecosystem” between vocational enlightenment education courses and related courses, allowing vocational enlightenment education courses to become independent, systematic, and well-integrated with other courses. In comparison, utilizing existing vocational enlightenment education course resources to improve, analyze, coordinate, and integrate them with the content of related courses can develop a brand-new course that not only includes shared general content before integration but also encompasses the respective focuses and characteristics of each course. This approach can more effectively mobilize collaborative course resources and generate greater benefits in course development. There is also currently a lack of “specialized” teachers for vocational enlightenment education. Vocational enlightenment education in primary and secondary schools is mostly implemented by teachers from vocational schools and other subject teachers. Training teachers for vocational enlightenment education would require significant financial and human resources. However, under the integration mode, there is no need to train new teachers specifically for vocational enlightenment education courses. Instead, training can be provided to existing teachers of related courses on the unique content of vocational enlightenment education. This approach can reduce the waste of course resources, financial resources, human resources, and time to some extent. Finally, the integration mechanism cannot be achieved without policy support. The exploration of the integration of vocational enlightenment education courses with comprehensive practice activities and labor education courses is a process of secondary development of the national curriculum. It is an important path to promote the reform of new curricula and a key initiative actively promoted by the education authorities.

In terms of integration obstacles, the content of courses will naturally increase under the integration mode. Scientific adjustments need to be made to the scheduling of class hours. While ensuring the integrity and effective implementation of the curriculum content, it should not negatively impact other cultural courses. Comprehensive practice activities and labor education courses have already become familiar components in primary and secondary schools. The former has been advocated as a compulsory course since 2001. Vocational experience serves as an activity theme in comprehensive practice activities and as an implementation form in labor education. The integration of vocational enlightenment education content will disrupt the relative stability of the existing curriculum to some extent. It will require a certain amount of time for adjustment and adaptation to truly integrate with these courses.

The integration of vocational enlightenment education courses with related courses forms a new curriculum, and consolidating itself is the foundation for achieving interdisciplinary integration. It is necessary to deepen the theoretical research of vocational enlightenment education, establish a comprehensive theoretical framework, and establish curriculum standards as guidance for curriculum development and implementation. It is also essential for establishing a resource coordination mechanism for vocational enlightenment education courses and related courses, fully mobilizing and utilizing resources from related courses, as well as establishing a communication and collaboration platform for stakeholders. Under the integration mode, more stakeholders are involved, requiring the establishment of more effective information communication and collaboration.

## **4. Conclusion**

### **4.1. Separation or integration: The future development of vocational enlightenment education**

Wallerstein and others do not unilaterally advocate for the separation or integration of disciplines. They point out that the effectiveness of disciplinary roles relies on the normativity and validity of disciplinary boundaries and, to some extent, achieving consensus. Similarly, interdisciplinary theory suggests that the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches are contingent upon the maturity of course content during specialization. Therefore, when discussing whether vocational enlightenment education courses should be separated from or integrated with other related courses, it is essential to clarify the disciplinary boundaries between vocational enlightenment education courses and related courses. Regardless of separation or integration, it is necessary to strengthen the distinctive features of vocational enlightenment education courses and continuously mature in terms of content and implementation. This requires further development and improvement of vocational enlightenment education courses and other related courses, enabling them to fully leverage their unique characteristics and achieve their educational objectives in the separation mode. In the integration mode, they should also combine the advantages of different courses to cultivate students' comprehensive qualities.

Based on this, the separation mode of vocational enlightenment education courses should serve as the foundation for the formation of the integration mode. The separation mode, as a transitional form leading to the integration mode, precedes the integration mode. However, the integration mode can continue to advance during the stabilization process of knowledge domains. Therefore, the development of distinctive features in the separation mode of vocational enlightenment education courses should be the current focus. Nevertheless, this process does not hinder the exchange and integration between the knowledge domains of vocational enlightenment education courses and related courses. Building upon the effectiveness, stability, and standardization of the vocational enlightenment education knowledge domain in the separation mode, considering the construction of a global community with a shared future for humanity and the promotion of global integration, an interdisciplinary collaboration among various disciplines is continually facilitated. Under the development of their knowledge domain characteristics, disciplines also transcend disciplinary boundaries, establish bridges for disciplinary communication and integration, and even give rise to new disciplines. The development of vocational enlightenment education courses will inevitably follow this recognized law of disciplinary development.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **Author contributions**

F.Z. conceived the idea of the study. L.Y. wrote the paper. H.Z. and Y.Q. analyzed the data.



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