

“Student as Producer” and Its Applicants in Film Studies at a China’s College Education Practice

Yongchun Fu

Ningbo Institute of Technology
Zhejiang University
Ningbo, China

Jieyun Chen

Ningbo Institute of Technology
Zhejiang University
Ningbo, China

Abstract—This article examines a teaching pedagogy known as “Student as Producer”, as an effort to link teaching and research in university level. It delineates the experience of employing “Student as Producer” into a curriculum design in film studies as a China’s college, introduced by the author. Apart from exploring the reciprocal benefit for academic staff and undergraduate, the article also reminds the challenges when enforcing “Student as Producer” in the course delivery at a mid-size university.

Keywords—student as producer, pedagogy, college education

I. INTRODUCTION

This article considers at length on employing a pedagogy titled “Student as Producer” into a film study program at a small-size college located in a coast city in East China. The “Student as Producer” was developed by Professor Mike Neary. It links two core activities of university: teaching and research. According to Neary, the “Student as Producer” is a philosophy linking two core activities of university: teaching and research by research-engaged teaching [1]. It is “a fundamental principle of curriculum design whereby students learn primarily by engagement in real research projects, or projects which replicate the process of research in their discipline. Engagement is created through active collaboration amongst and between students and academics.” [2] “The benefits of enabling the student as producer include challenging ‘the very organizing principles upon which academic knowledge is currently being transmitted and produced’, resulting in a more collaborative and inclusive educational process” [3]. “Student as Producer” was popularly employed in British universities including University of Lincoln, Sheffield University, University of Reading, University of Warwick, and Sheffield Hallam. In addition, it obtained UK’s government funding such as Quantum Expert Forensics Limited, Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, and Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning [1].

II. PEDAGOGY

“Student as Producer” is encouraged by the effort of

Corresponding Author: Jieyun Chen, Ningbo Institute of Technology,
Zhejiang University, Ningbo, China

creating research environment for undergraduate in American leading universities. In 1998, a seminar report from the Boyer Commission in the United States noticed the failure of undergraduate education in research-intensifying university: “still lacking a coherent body of knowledge and any inkling as to how one piece of information might relate to others” [2]. The Boyer Commission then proposed that the university should provide “opportunities to learn through inquiry rather than simple transmission of knowledge” [5]. As a matter of fact, Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and University of Michigan had already developed undergraduate research programs titled Undergraduate Research Opportunity Programs (UROP) since 1969. Taking the project at the University of Michigan for instance, the research mentors provide a list of ongoing projects and invite undergraduate students to involve. The student will work closely with mentors for 6-12 hours per week for the entire academic year. Small research funding (\$500-800 per project), general training workshops and seminars are provided by UROP unit. The outputs of the project are usually present as journal article, posters and presentation at symposium. The impact of the UROP is significant and the universities above-mentioned are continuing the project [5]. The unsettling conclusion, however, is “the links between teaching and research are not nearly so well established as had been imagined” [1]. In order to further enhance the links between teaching and research, Professor Neary proposed “Student as Producer” project. Comparing with the UROP, “Student as Producer” draws heavily on design curriculum to incorporate the undergraduate study into academic projects. Instead of seeking “good” students like UROP, “Student as Producer” invites “all” students into research projects.

Eight key principles for “Student as Producer” were organized by the University of Lincoln, an institution spearhead the “Student as Producer” project. These principles are (1) Discovery: Student as Producer; (2) Technology in Teaching: Digital Scholarship; (3) Space and Spatiality: Learning Landscape in Higher Education; (4) Assessment: Active Learners in Communication of Practice; (5) Research and Evaluation: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; (6) Student Voice: Diversity, Difference and Dissensus; (7) Support for research-based teaching through expert engagement with information resources; and (8) Creating the Future: Employability,

Enterprise, Beyond Employability and Postgraduate study [2]. With regard to the principle of Discovery: Student as Producer, the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom characterized three approaches, Problem-based learning, Enquiry-based learning, and Research-based learning [2]. The “Student as Producer” mainly focuses on Research-based learning. “Student as Producer” considers inviting academics in the university to implement “authentic research problems” into their teaching practices and design their teaching programs accordingly.

The “Student as Producer” can address such imbalance by raising the status of teaching. The imbalance between teaching and research is not only a national issue but also an international one. The academics in university paid too much attention on research instead of teaching, since the promotion criteria are mainly based on academic outputs, instead of teaching ones. Therefore, teaching, in particular in research-intensive universities, become an inevitable while unpleasant duty for staff. By employing research-based teaching, the academics in the university could project his/her intellectual thoughts in his/her teaching load. The sparks from students’ engagement could enlighten the academic’s research by offering fresh ideas.

The subject of “Student as Producer” is the undergraduate students. As a method of research-based learning, “Student as Producer” is believed to raise the education quality from three levels. First, it “effectively develops critical academic and evaluative skills” [1]; secondly, it “equips students to continue learning after tertiary study, making links to the lifelong-learning agenda” [1]; and thirdly, it “encourages students to construct knowledge through increasing participation within different communities of practice” [1]. In this sense, the classic Confucius proverb, “Mutually Beneficial Collaboration between Teacher and Students” (*Jiao Xue Xiang Zhang*) is well presented in terms of the aim of “Student as Producer”.

III. IMPLICATION

“Student as Producer” can be well employed into China’s college education practice. As an academic and teaching staff in a university, I have introduced “Student as Producer” in my teaching pedagogy since 2016. The university which I work is a university located at a coast city in East China. It is with a population of 10,000 undergraduate, with very few post-graduate students. I supervise ten students’ undergraduate thesis each year. A number of graduates choose to further their study as post-graduate. I teach inter-culture communication, film history, as well as film industry. The course which I employ “Student as Producer” is known as History of the Chinese Film Industry. The duration of the course is 16 weeks. In the following section, I will describe how I deliberately incorporate “Student as Producer” into my teaching pedagogy.

The course draws heavily on teaching students how to conduct an original research on the history of the early

Chinese film industry. A collection of *Selection of Film Journals and Magazines in the Republic of China* is the major sources of primary materials. The students are third grade and the total number is about 30. Given the fact that the students have no previous knowledge about the early Chinese film industry, two to three weeks are spent to teach the overview of the early Chinese film industry in seminars. Some readers are recommended. From the fourth week onward, the students started to access the primary materials in and out the class. The teacher will present to answer questions about some knowledge during the material reading. From the eighth week, the students present their preliminary topic for the assignment, based on their interests. The teacher will help to adjust or reject the title based on the current literature. The topic will be decided by the end of tenth week. It should be noticed that no every topic has significance in academic contribution. However, the teacher will ensure the topic has significance in academic training. From the eleventh week onward, the students will be introduced some databases associated with the research topic. The students started to write the final project, and some sample projects are shared in the following courses. The final outputs will be an assignment with 4,000 words, with proper academic format, including literature review, argument, research question, notes, and reference.

The students are encouraged to expand the assignment into undergraduate thesis. As I mentioned above, not all topics have original academic contribution. The teacher will seek the original accounts for further supervision. Some intensive academic supports will be provided in the following supervision. Some incentive mechanism will be introduced as well. For instance, the students will have chance to present their working-in-progress output in the symposium. One of my students worked on the dubbing technology in the early cinema. Her submission had accepted by a national film history conference. The school offers a travel grant for her accomplishment. In addition, the students involved are invited to take a tour on visiting the old theatres located in Shanghai to gain a better direct impression about their study objects. The students are encouraged to publish as well. Two students have published their thesis in academic journals. The most important output about employing Student as Producer is generating and fostering the students’ academic interests. They had initial experience about academic study and gained confidence to further their academic study. In the past three years of the appliance of “Student as Producer”, five students in this group have gone abroad for post-graduate study. It is a major accomplishment for a course at a mid-size university like my institution. Apart from the third and fourth grade students, the teacher will recruit some fresh students through interview. Therefore, it could become an organic research group and some major project could be continuously explored.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

Lessons and challenges exist as well. In the future

curriculum design, Student as Producer should be incorporated into the entire student periods. At this stage, only third grade students are employed into Student as Producer in one course. It is, however, far too short for the enforcement of Student as Producer. In the future, fresh undergraduate should learn the fundamental knowledge and history of the Chinese cinema, as well as modern China and film industry. Sophomore students should grasp the method of writing a serious essay. They should know how to quote, reference, and make literature review. Starting from the third year, students then could access the collections of *Selection of Film Journals and Magazines in the Republic of China*. Otherwise, a compressed and intensified course could satisfy the requirement of Student as Producer. If the research is promising in the third year, some projects are encouraged to continue as undergraduate dissertation. In this way, the students could have a better training and a better outcome. Otherwise, the quality of students' output will have a great uncertainty.

The teachers subscribing Student as Producer could seek financial support from outside. As a mid-size university, our university suffered significantly on fund. Without financial support, however, some methods are unable to operate. For instance, some students had to abandon their plan to attend some symposium due to financial reason despite they granted invitation. As a matter of fact, the education authority encouraged the teaching reform through funding. The Students' Platform for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program is a national project funding up to 50,000 yuan per year. The Department of Science and Technology, Zhejiang University issued Zhejiang New Sprout (Xinmiao) Project funding 10,000 yuan for per undergraduate group. The "Student as Producer" program can actively involve into the fund application. As a new pedagogy employed in China, I believe that the education authority would love to sponsor such teaching reform endeavor. I, together with my team members, started to apply for these funds this year.

The inspiration for teacher is key to the sustainability of enforcing Student as Producer. Since the undergraduate student had no previous academic training, considerable time-consuming efforts will be spared for teachers. Although teaching is not a cost-benefit business, specific educators may calculate his/her effectiveness in the context of teacher assessment. Some teachers may devote themselves to educating a student, while others may not. The passion for educating students could not become a continuous drive for enforcing Student as Producer. Apart from the regular course teaching, the educators should spare considerable extra time for supporting Student as Producer. Such extra time could be leisure time, or research time. True, the work of undergraduate may benefit the research of the teacher, including data collection and analysis. In addition to academic contribution, the university should find some other ways to support Student as Producer. Otherwise, such teaching reform is not sustainable. Such support should not be limited as stipend package and sabbatical period.

With regard to student publication, major concern is the risk of plagiarism. Although it is not intentional operation, some students are not familiar with the boundaries between plagiarism and citation. It is particularly true in the context of China, where plagiarism scandals happened frequently. Un-appropriated citation will cause serious trouble for students as well as educators, since the teachers usually serve as the second author. Therefore, the educators should guarantee there is no plagiarism risk before submitting for publication. Taking Turnitin for instance, "there is no clear cut rules...as all work will probably contain some words from other sources" [6]. As a guide, "a returned percentage of below 15% would probably indicate that plagiarism has not occurred" [6]. The Chinese websites such as CNKI and Weipu provide similar services like Turnitin. However, the percentage of below 15% may satisfy the requirement of an essay, but not for a journal article. A reputable journal does not allow any plagiarism. The risk of plagiarism would jeopardize the educator.

The implication of Student as Producer can be advanced by the university level. The university can arrange some academic festival and conference to present the outcome of Student as Producer. The University of Lincoln arranges a dissemination event every year. Staff and students attended such event and viewed the students' posters before attending a student-led presentation [5]. In China's national lever, the National Conference of Undergraduate on Innovation and Entrepreneurship has hosted seven times. Another popular way for promoting Student as Producer is to organize a referred journal. The journal is operated by students and published students' outcome exclusively. In this way, students could enhance their academic confidence.

A further thinking on Student as Producer is how to include all students into the project. The "Student as Producer" is alleged to incorporate all students into the collaborative project, but we must notice that not all students show interests into such gestures and we must respect the diverse demands from undergraduate students. The Student as Producer is a good measure to enhance the teaching quality in university, but it is not a medicine for all.

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