

Construction of the Graded Teaching Model for Specialized Courses

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to analyze the characteristics of specialized courses and put forward a hierarchical graded teaching model suitable for specialized courses. Compared with the graded teaching of public courses, the graded teaching of specialized courses has its own characteristics and is relatively difficult to put into practice. At present, there are mainly three graded teaching models: class-divided graded teaching, course-based graded teaching and “covertly” graded teaching. Among the three graded teaching models, since the “covertly graded” teaching model puts graded teaching into practice while maintaining the original class structure, it is relatively scientific and feasible for the graded teaching of specialized courses. However, no matter which graded teaching model is adopted, more efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of faculty, textbooks, management, etc.

Keywords: Specialized courses; Graded teaching; Mode

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of graded teaching was introduced into China in the early 20th century from the West by Japanese and other ways. It was originally called “group instruction”, mostly practiced in the field of children's education or compulsory education. This method “can classify the students who have similar performance in different aspects into different ‘levels’, which can not only avoid the disadvantages of the ‘one-size-fits-all solution’ which does not distinguish between objects, but raise ‘individualized teaching’ to an operational level, thus greatly improving teaching efficiency.” [1] Graded teaching has been widely applied in China in recent years and has gained some achievements. At present, the theoretical studies and practice of graded teaching mainly focus on public courses such as College English, Advanced Mathematics, Computer, and College Physical Education, and the purpose of these studies is usually to discuss the theoretical basis and necessity of graded teaching from a theoretical level, to prove the effect of graded teaching through empirical studies, or to discuss strategies for specific problems in graded teaching.

If the graded teaching of specialized courses is implemented following the current graded teaching model of public courses, then in the case of a shortage of educational resources, there will be a problem of “diseconomy”, and sometimes even graded teaching cannot be achieved. Compared with public courses, the number of students in specialized courses is relatively small, while teachers are assigned according to the number of students. However, if grading or classification is conducted on such basis, the educational cost must be raised. At the same time, after the graded teaching of

public courses is conducted, there will be several classes of the same level, with several teachers assigned. And on such basis, the textbooks, teaching content, and teaching methods can be discussed, and even a special teaching and research office can be set up. However, after the teaching of specialized courses is graded, sometimes there may be only one class at one level, and there may be only one teacher that is assigned to undertake the teaching tasks of a certain course at a certain level since the specialized courses feature a wide variety and strong expertise, which puts forward higher requirements on teachers’ teaching concept, teaching proficiency and teaching loads.

Regarding the graded teaching of specialized courses, the above facts indicate that, how to determine the standards and objectives, how to create a scientific and reasonable management model, how to match textbooks and faculty construction, and how to evaluate the teaching effect are urgent problems that need to be solved. Based on the experience in the reform and practice of the graded teaching of public courses, this paper studies the graded teaching of specialized courses from the dimensions of objectives and principles, model construction, management system construction, textbook and faculty construction, etc., considering the particularity of specialized courses.

2. MODEL CONSTRUCTION FOR THE GRADED TEACHING OF SPECIALIZED COURSES

At present, graded teaching is usually conducted with five steps: objective classification → student classification → teaching by grade → assignment grading → evaluation grading. Currently, there are two graded teaching models available. One is the traditional model that is generally

implemented in the graded teaching of public courses by class division, as mentioned above, and the other is the course-based graded teaching model that breaks a fixed class and grades the course difficulty. Besides, another model called “covertly graded” teaching has been gradually advocated in recent years. These teaching models are shown below:

2.1. Traditional Class-divided Graded Teaching Model

The traditional class-based teaching model has the advantages of simple operation, high feasibility and efficiency. However, if the model construction and teaching practice are not totally scientific and reasonable, this model will cause problems. For example, there will be a lack of role models among students due to class division, the learning pressure on students will increase, students’ self-esteem will be affected, and students will lose self-confidence. More seriously, this model ignores students’ career planning, cognitive style, etc., and fails to distinguish between different courses. More and more researchers focus on discussing how to grade (divide the class in essence) in a more scientific manner and how to solve the negative effects on students’ learning more effectively and other problems, but surely if no effort is made to break this class-divided model, such limitations will be inevitable. In general, class-divided graded teaching is a relatively extensive teaching model. Although it is relatively simple to implement, it has relatively great negative effects, so it is not suitable for the graded teaching of most specialized courses.

2.2. Improved Course-based Graded Teaching Model

Regarding the improved course-based graded teaching, more precisely, it is a model where tests are arranged to allow students to choose courses of different levels under the guidance of teachers after the course is graded, instead of making a distinction between students after classifying them. With its scientific advantage of taking into full consideration the imbalance in the development of specialized courses of various subjects caused by differences in students’ cognitive styles, learning interests and learning objectives, this graded teaching model can not only highlight its strengths, but also make up for shortcomings in a targeted manner, ultimately contributing to achieving coordinated development of various courses in students’ specialty. In such graded teaching model, it is particularly important to clearly distinguish and describe the teaching objectives of different levels of the same course. Certainly, like other graded teaching models, it also requires selection of different teaching contents, application of different teaching strategies, and evaluation of students according to different levels of objectives. Although it has the above advantages, the course-based

graded teaching model needs to break the class-based teaching model adopted by most colleges and universities, and implement a thorough course and credit system, which sets high requirements for most colleges and universities in terms of system, management, educational resources (e.g. funds and faculty), etc. Thus, the implementation of such model is relatively difficult and requires a long-term commissioning process.

2.3. The Emerging “Covertly Graded” Teaching Model

The so-called “covertly graded” teaching model is to implement covert grading within the class while maintaining the class structure. This graded teaching model requires at least three different levels to be set in the stages of objective setting, teaching process, and test evaluation. The teacher classifies the students covertly, and then the students can choose and complete the stages of different difficulty levels according to the teacher’s requirements and their own situation. Focusing on such model, the specific operations are discussed below.

In the stage of objective setting, the teacher shall first change the original concept of enabling all students to achieve the excellent level or a unified objective, and shall set different levels of objectives (at least three levels) for the teaching of a specific course according to the actual situation of the students. For example, Wang Xianrong pointed out that there may be “fundamental objectives, improved objectives and development objectives”. [2] The teacher shall classify students based on periodic testing and continuous observation (The teacher shall not explicitly propose the classification, but shall understand and guide a student’s own learning objectives, and finally determine the student’s learning objectives). In addition, it should be noted that in group learning and teamwork groups applied in most classrooms at present, the reasonable distribution of students at different levels should be ensured.

In the explanation part of the teaching process, the teacher shall combine the explanation methods (theories-cases-charts and diagrams-multimedia, etc.) adapted to different cognitive styles. Besides, as the Q&A and discussion parts are critical for the implementation of “individualized teaching”, teacher should set up questions or tasks with different difficulties (i.e. basic, comprehensive and practical) in different quantities for students to answer and complete, with the premise that the teacher has set the difficulties of the questions and tasks accurately and has a good understanding of the students’ levels in the lesson preparation stage. Students’ completion of coursework and tasks should not be evaluated with unified standards, either. In the extracurricular self-study and tutoring, the scope and content of self-study, as well as the objectives and effects to be achieved through self-study should be clearly and appropriately explained according to different levels of the students. Throughout the teaching process, “teachers should focus on guiding students with poor foundation to conduct imitative learning, so that those

students can find out the rules and try drawing inferences; teachers should also guide average and excellent students to conduct creative learning, inspire their divergent thinking and encourage them to be active in asking questions". [3] The principles of implementation and key points of the evaluation stage have been covered above and will not be repeated here.

The "covertly" graded teaching model achieves a balance between the scientific nature and feasibility, serving as the compromise of the two graded teaching models mentioned above. According to the distinction made between students' cognitive levels and styles, this model achieves the optimal development of various courses within the specialty while maintaining the existing class structure, reducing the difficulty in management, and making full use of teaching resources. Therefore, it is more suitable for the actual situation and requirements of the graded teaching for specialized courses at the present stage.

3. GRADED TEACHING CONSTRUCTION FOR SPECIALIZED COURSES

3.1. Faculty Construction for the Graded Teaching of Specialized Courses

Teachers who adapt to graded teaching are the core prerequisite for the achievement of effective graded teaching. In particular, the "covertly graded" teaching model has put forward higher requirements for teachers' personal abilities. In graded teaching, teachers must possess the following abilities: (1) Cognitive ability: the ability to observe, understand, and position students' cognitive abilities, levels, and styles; (2) Operating ability: the ability to implement different teaching strategies for the students at different levels in the teaching process; (3) Monitoring ability: the ability to monitor students' learning process, provide feedback, properly evaluate students' learning outcomes, and make adjustments based on the evaluation of the graded teaching effects; (4) Communication ability: the ability to communicate with students on issues such as learning objectives, learning difficulties, and students' psychological burden. From the perspective of schools and departments, opportunities should be created for the improvement of teachers' abilities, and more efforts should be made to improve the investment in teaching resources. For example, colleges and universities shall organize teachers to learn the relevant theories in cognition and pedagogy, provide training courses and lectures, communicate with the colleges and universities that have conducted graded teaching for specialized courses, and organize teaching and research meetings for graded teaching; encourage teachers to study the theory and practice of graded teaching, and give them key grants in terms of projects and funds. At the same time, teachers should change their long-held ideas and strive to act the role in designing, monitoring and facilitating students' learning in the teaching process. They

should actively learn the related theories of cognition and pedagogy, and participate in training classes and lectures organized by their respective colleges or universities. They should also carry on deep thinking to the issues in graded teaching and study textbooks and teaching methods for the specialized courses they teach.

3.2. Management System Construction for the Graded Teaching of Specialized Courses

A scientific management system adapted to graded teaching is a significant guarantee about the successful implementation of graded teaching. And different graded teaching models have different requirements for the construction of a management system. Since the traditional class-divided graded teaching model and the improved course-based grading teaching model break the original class structure, they are quite difficult to conduct management. In particular, for the implementation of the scientific dynamic graded teaching, in addition to classifying or selecting students based on their test scores at the beginning of admission or in the early stage of learning to allow them to enter the course, it is necessary to conduct a second classification through a re-evaluation of learning outcomes at least in each semester (except for courses set for one semester only). This means that terminal management is carried out. The original management model based on the class should be transformed into a model based on individual students, which requires institutional reform and standardization of student status management, schedule arrangement, and examination management. Unlike the above two models, the "covertly graded" teaching model maintains the original class structure and has little impact on the original management mode. Especially for the management of the office of academic affairs and departments, no great changes shall be made. However, this graded teaching model requires teachers to strengthen the dynamic management of daily graded teaching. In particular, teachers should consciously observe students' characteristics and tendencies during the learning process, evaluate the students' learning status and learning phase at different stages, put the results into records, and continuously adjust the internal grading of the class based on such records.

4. CONCLUSION

No matter in theory or reality, it is necessary and feasible to carry out graded teaching of specialized courses. Unlike the teaching of public courses, the teaching of specialized courses has its own characteristics. Among the three graded teaching models discussed above, the traditional class-divided graded teaching model is not suitable for the characteristics of the graded teaching of most specialized courses and has many negative effects. Although it is scientific and reasonable, the course-based graded teaching

model is quite difficult to implement, putting forward quite high requirements on management, faculty, and textbooks. Since it implements graded teaching while maintaining the original class structure, the “covertly graded” teaching model is a relatively scientific and feasible solution to the graded teaching of specialized courses. However, in general, no matter which graded teaching model is adopted, more efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of faculty, textbooks, management, etc.

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