Innovation of History Classes

Organizing Specialized Courses Groups from the Perspective of "New Humanities and Social Sciences"

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Abstract. Officially promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2020, the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program is based on traditional education of humanities and social sciences and is directly guided by new social needs. In response to the requirements for the innovation of the curriculum system as proposed by "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program, this paper aims to explore the ways to establish specialized course groups for history majors. On the base of brief outline of the connotation of the program, it moves forward to discuss the challenges currently faced by history education in colleges and universities. To cope with these challenges, it then proposes groups of courses that strive to enrich the curriculum system for history majors, which can also provide reference for the reform of other majors and other courses.

Keywords: "New Humanities and Social Sciences" · History majors · Specialized courses · History education

1 Introduction

In August 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China announced that "higher education should strive to develop new engineering sciences, new medical sciences, new agricultural sciences, and new humanities and social sciences" [1]. On November 3, 2020, the "Declaration for Constructing New Humanities and Social Sciences" issued by the Ministry of Education proposed that it is urgent to train application-oriented students who are able to meet the new requirements of the society [2]. Under this new orientation, the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program is based on traditional education of humanities and social sciences and is directly guided by new social needs. Promulgated and promoted by the Ministry of Education, this program aims to promote the integration and upgrading of education in humanities and social sciences and to realize the connotative development of higher education.

As one of the main majors in humanities, history is not only a traditional subject of study but also related to the long-term development of high education in China. With the rapid advance in modern science and technology and the immense socio-economic changes, the traditional teaching ideas and training methods for history majors are no longer suitable for the requirements of the new era. In response to the requirements for

the innovation of the curriculum system as proposed by "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program, this paper aims to explore the ways to establish specialized course groups for history majors. On the base of brief outline of the connotation of the program, it moves forward to discuss the challenges currently faced by history education in colleges and universities. To cope with these challenges, it then proposes groups of courses that strive to enrich the curriculum system for history majors, which can also provide reference for the reform of other majors and other courses.

2   The Connotation of "New Humanities and Social Sciences"

The concept of "New Humanities and Social Sciences" originated from the model of "New Liberal Arts" implemented by Hiram College in 2017, when the college president Lori Varlotta announced to subvert the traditional liberal arts thinking through reorganization of disciplines with the idea of interdisciplinary integration. In the following academic years, Hiram College created curricular programs that integrated information science, online education, and engineering technology into courses such as philosophy, literature, and language, etc. [3]. With the help of mobile technology program dubbed "Tech and Trek", the faculty began to make significant changes in the delivery of their courses and the students were able to do classroom and out-of-classroom learning by creatively and critically using electronic devices to capture resources, ideas, feelings, and questions [4]. In doing so, students majored in humanities start to be able to experience interdisciplinary learning and to cultivate comprehensive talents with interdisciplinary knowledge and ability. The reform at Hiram College, as assessed by some experts, still bears shortcomings, because it is heavily inclined to vocational-technical education (such as computer science, accounting and finance, comprehensive sports science, etc.), which has raised concerns about whether the new liberal arts of Hiram College is still liberal arts or not.[5] In particular, it fails to answer the questions as how humanities, as traditional fields of learning, can better adapt to students' diverse knowledge needs in the age of Internet [6].

Following the announcement of the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program, there has been a surge of research in this field. According to the search results of CNKI, as of mid-April 2022, a total number of 1730 published papers are directly devoted to "new humanities and social sciences", of which 98 were published in 2019, 370 in 2020, and 1265 in 2021 [7]. To some extent, the name of China's "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program can be traced back to the influence of Hiram College's new liberal arts. But in essence, China's program is a national-level strategy that aims at actively meeting the new challenges of industrial transformations in the age of science and technology. In implementing the strategy, it strives to design a general layout for the current situation and future prospects of China's higher education.

Certainly, the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program does not represent a complete denial of the traditional models of teaching and training, rather it is more a response to the inherent innovation of new educational concepts, technical methods, and research paradigms. In this way, the connotation of the concept of "New Humanities and Social Sciences" is mainly reflected in the integration of disciplines by breaking the barriers of disciplines and mutual borrowing of methodology and research themes among

various disciplines within the humanities, social sciences, as well as natural sciences [8]. In consequence, its connotation is mainly manifested in the following three areas:

First, to explore a feasible path for internal innovation in the humanities and social sciences. One of the core aims of the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program is to break the barriers between disciplines, in order to eliminate the knowledge barriers and skills divisions brought about by the traditional separation of subjects in humanities and social sciences [9]. The technological changes marked by cloud computing, big data and new technologies have put forward new requirements for the research of humanities and the understanding of society. This also requires related fields in humanities and social sciences to adopt a broader theoretical perspective to remodel teaching and studying methods from within.

Second, to adopt a new method to transform the concept of education. The traditional teaching model of humanities and social sciences laid emphasis on the leading role of teachers and students were trained to acquire a mastery of basic theories and to achieve the output of research papers. However, the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" education pays more attention to the implementation of diversified development and practice orientation in the process of education, in order to promote both the output of research results and to generate social benefits. In doing so, it aims at transforming the traditional mind-setting and orientation in the education of humanities and social sciences.

Third, to outline new directions of disciplinary intersections. In the process of promoting the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program, one of the most important directions is to explore a path to realize the integration of traditional disciplines including history, literature, philosophy, as well as sociology, economics, an legal and political sciences [10]. Moreover, it is also necessary to seek for practical methods to connect humanities and social sciences with natural and engineering sciences, so as to obtain new materials and to stimulate new thinking and new logic in the relevant discipline.

3   Current Challenges in History Education

As an established discipline, the traditional historiography is essentially a study overwhelmingly based on written sources. Accordingly, the curricular system for history majors in universities and colleges is also mainly built on the basis of the study of written sources, focusing especially on training the students to be able to read historical documents and their ability to express in words. With the advent of the information age, however, various forms of digital documents begin to emerge, ranging from electronic texts, databases, and system platforms. In terms of information search, for instance, resources such as rare documents that are scattered around the world can now be easily found through the Internet. In terms of academic expression, texts are now not the only form, because dynamic data including audio and video greatly enlarge the scope of research materials available. Therefore, the modern technology poses a serious challenge to traditional way of history learning and studying.

3.1 Organization of Specialized Courses

In the information age, there is a growing need for compound talents who not possess necessary knowledge but also acquire the ability to handle electronic devices and to source data information. Most of existing specialized courses for history majors, however, focus on introducing written texts and instructing traditional research methods. In particular, the scope of utilizing information technology is rather limited in specialized courses for history majors. Taking the construction of courses using visual stimulation as an example, among the 728 virtual simulation classes certified by the Ministry of Education until 2021, only 9 are offered by teachers for history [11]. While some studies begin to discuss the necessity and advantages adopting technologies such as visual stimulation in history classes, few attempts have been made to provide detailed empirical studies or theoretical analysis.

3.2 Integration of Disciplines

One of the bottlenecks that "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program strives to solve is the lack of integration of disciplines. For history courses, it is necessary to include the integration of courses such as literature, philosophy, and sociology, as well as those that do not belong to the humanities or social sciences. For example, the relative lack of course in engineering and information sciences has led to the limited use of new technologies in history classes, so that online resources and technologies such as virtual simulation are rarely used [12]. To stimulate the enthusiasm of students and to reform teaching methods, it is urgent to adopt technologies into the class and to promote the integration of disciplines.

3.3 Cultivation of Innovative Ability

Influenced by the concept of utilitarian education, the faculty tend to focus more on research than on the quality of teaching [13]. Since relatively little attention is paid to classroom teaching, the pedagogical theories and social development needs become increasingly disconnected, so that the effectiveness of teaching for history majors has been impaired. In particular, history courses are often limited to classroom teaching so that practical teaching opportunities are not sufficient. In consequence, such lack of emphasis on the functional orientation of teaching also leads a relative neglect of current social issues and practical problems in history teaching, which in turn restricts students' academic vision and sense of innovation. When students of history majors feel that the knowledge and methods they are learning are distance away from contemporary social and economic development, the subjects thus becomes less attractive.

4 Reorganization of Specialized Courses for History Majors

To cope with the above-mentioned challenges, the History Department of Hangzhou Normal University has organized groups of specialized courses that combine majors in history, Chinese language and literature, Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, and

History + Ideological and Political Education. In addition, the curricular groups also integrates new concepts and technologies such as natural science, information technology, and artificial intelligence. In doing so, the courses strive to instruct solid professional knowledge of humanities and to cultivate students' ability of comprehensive application of new technologies in the humanities. The experiment took the following steps:

First, redirect goals of teaching. Based on the standard of Chinese culture, the courses aim to break the "traditional model" of teaching that has been defined by individual disciplines and majors. To achieve this, the courses are designed to strengthen classic study and basic training, as well as reading and writing abilities. The courses shall collectively cultivate independent and creative thinking and stimulate a sense of social responsibility.

Second, establish connections between courses. To implement the concept of "value guidance, knowledge development, and practical ability", the courses are selected based on the inherent connection between history, literature, and philosophy. Specific courses are chosen to be placed throughout the eight semesters, so that the students can focus on different themes and receive intensive training in various subjects.

Third, promote the integration of teaching and research. Based on the related courses that run through semesters, a specifically designed tutor model has been adopted, with tutors responsible for interest guidance, potential stimulation, ability training, and quality improvement. The team of tutors, consisting of faculty members with different specialized areas of research, lead the students to carry out research projects and by doing so cultivate their ability in solving problems. In this way, the students are able to have possibilities to experiment self-learning and independent working.

Fourth, adopt information technology to existing courses. By inviting faculty of mathematics, computer science, information engineering, and animation design, a composite teams of teachers who offer different specialized courses. Students of history majors are able to choose from a wide range of courses including "Fundamentals of Computer Science", "Applied Technology of ACCESS Database", "Python Programming for History Majors", "Big Data and Humanities and Social Sciences Research". Through these courses, students are able to master the use of major databases and electronic platforms and to make effective use of technological tools to conduct innovative historical research.

Fifth, reform evaluation standards. The selected courses are invited to reform the methods of teaching and to create a new set of evaluation standards that combine assessment of both the process (in-class performance) and the result (final exam). Through adoption of such new standards, the students are guided to pay more attention to actively participate the class and energetically perform through the whole semester.

After two rounds of experiments from 2019 to 2021, followed by necessary adjustments, four groups of specialized courses have been established, ranging from basic skills, professional skills, specialized orientation, and specialized development. The selection of specialized courses are organized into the following groups (Table 1).

Table 1. Groups of specialized courses

Group	Course	Semester	Total Teaching Hours	Experiment/Training Hours
Basic Skills	Advanced Mathematics	1–2	64	0
	Fundamentals of Computer Science	1–2	64	32
	Humanities, Science & Arts	2	16	6
	Integrated Skills of Foreign Languages	3	32	16
Professional Skills	Database and Literature Retrieval	1	24	16
	Applied Technology of ACCESS Database	3	32	24
	Python Programming for History Majors	4	48	32
	Virtual Simulation	5	32	16
Specialized Orientation	Introduction to Archaeology and Art History	3	32	0
	Historical Anthropology	4	32	6
	The Silk Road and Intangible Cultural Heritage	6	32	4
	Philosophy of Human Science	7	32	0
Specialized Development	Brain Rules	5	32	4
	Introduction to Cognitive Science	5	32	4
	Big Data and Humanities and Social Sciences Research	6	32	8

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*continued*)

Group	Course	Semester	Total Teaching Hours	Experiment/Training Hours
	New Media and Cultural Communication	7	32	8

5   Conclusions

As the world is entering a new era marked by various challenges and complex international situations, the society is in urgent need of innovative and compound talents who are not refined to specific disciplines. The "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program is now a major strategic issue in Chinese education and it becomes an integral part of the historical mission of higher education [14]. In this context, history, as a traditional field of study and research, is facing a new set of challenges. How can these challenges be transformed into opportunities for the development of history? The "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program provides the direction and a feasible path for the realization of this transformation.

The basic characteristics of history are comprehensiveness and integrity, thus the subject matter of history covers all the fields and processes of the past activities of human beings. This means, all fields of knowledge is indispensable for history majors, including not only the integration of history, literature, and philosophy, but also the interaction between humanities and natural sciences [15]. In particular, it is necessary to adopt specialized courses of other disciplines into the curriculum. Certainly, as the world is rapidly developing and the "New Humanities and Social Sciences" program itself is continuously evolving, the reform of history majors is not only a process of continuous exploration and rethinking, but also a work of constant accumulation and innovation.

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