

The Analysis of the Curriculum Assessment's Characteristics in American Colleges and Its Inspiration

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Abstract. Contrasting to the current situation of curriculum assessment in the domestic colleges, this study analyzes the characteristics of the course in the American colleges and reforms "a test set for life" examination model, and establishes the curriculum assessment system of 'General assessment + Innovative assessment', 'Process + Termination'. We summarize the experience to gradually stimulate students' enthusiasm and innovation spirit, which will further optimize the domestic colleges' curriculum assessment system and provide an effective way for improving assessment methods.

Keywords: American colleges; curriculum; assessment reform; examination reform.

1. Introduction

Increasingly worried about the quality of higher education is seen with its continuous expansion in scale. The personnel training mode reform, the curriculum system optimization and the teaching means and skills innovation are rather well concerned and discussed. And relatively, the criticized curriculum assessment system is of less concern. However, the course examination and assessment system are of vital importance in the entire learning process. It is not only a measurement of teaching effect, but also an effective method to stimulate individual potential and has a significant influence on improving the curriculum teaching quality. The third plenary session of 18th states clearly: 'Deepening the comprehensive reform in the field of education. Promoting the enrollment examination system innovation, to fundamentally overcome the weaknesses of a test set for life.' [1] Therefore, curriculum assessment system reform is of crucial practical and theoretical significance, which is still a heavy responsibility and long course.

2. The Current Situation of Curriculum Assessment in the Domestic Colleges

'A test set for life', 'make effort at the last moment' such kinds of phenomena prevail in current domestic colleges' curriculum assessment and students will not concern about courses' content until the deadline, so it can not be fully understood, let alone be digested, which results in plagiaristic style in examination that small group of students take risks to pass it and teaching quality can not be enhanced.

These defects and problems are closely related to curriculum assessment system, and the root causes are mainly in the following two aspects: first, ossification thinking. As our country has been in examination oriented education environment for a long time that examination is the only selection mode from primary to secondary school, educational administrators, teachers and students have an unchanged conception to conduct exams, i.e. learning effects, test determines. The continuation of the examination-oriented education pattern, to some extent hinders the pace of curriculum assessment reform in colleges. Second, deficient management. ①The lack of detailed standards in assessment system. ②Imperfect supervision institution. The supervision and management of final exams in colleges are of great attention which eclipses the usual process absolutely.

3. The Analysis of the Curriculum Assessment's characteristics in American Colleges

Some deficiencies exist in domestic colleges while how foreign colleges to solve it? Take American colleges for example, formative assessment mode (process-based assessment model) has been adopted in almost all courses in American colleges according to the research which has clear assessment objective and standard management system with representative significance. We chose the international top Princeton University and non-profit private University of Southern California as the research object, analyzing the ‘*American Images*’, ‘*Ethics and Technology: Engineering in the Real World*’ courses in fall semester 2014-2015 of Princeton University as well as the assessment program of ‘*Junior Seminar in Ethnic Studies*’ in University of Southern California. To summarize the characteristics of the curriculum assessment in American colleges with an analysis of multi-aspects of assessment objective, form, content, value ratio, etc.

3.1 Specification of the Curriculum Assessment’s ‘Quality Concept’ [2].

From the curriculum assessment programs in two universities, we can see the Princeton University and the University of Southern California have established a clear "Quality Concept", i.e. Using the curriculum examination and assessment to stimulate students' independent abilities and inquisitive minds and gradually develop their learning, jobs adaption, actual problems solving, practice abilities and innovative spirits to the stage where students learning effects could meet the needs of society and the objectives of teachers.[2] The specification of assessment objectives area prompt to students' self-learning ability so the access to acquire knowledge is no longer confined to the classroom and the combination of teaching, learning and testing is achieved which promotes the cultivation of high-quality talents.

3.2 Emphasis on the Develop and Publish of Curriculum Assessment Program.

Two American colleges believe that the course examination and assessment is one of the most important steps in class teaching, which requires each teacher to form a scientific and rational curriculum assessment program as the significant teaching archives that would be published before classes choosing. Therefore students could have an acknowledgement of each course’s assessment program in choosing courses, including assessment contents, sample and score weights etc. Then developing appropriate learning plan independently which fully represents the leading role of curriculum assessment program for learning. Further analysis of two American colleges curriculum assessment programs can also be seen the features of intensive applications, specific requirements, strict management.

Intensive applications. Assessment system covers the whole process of teaching. Like the course ‘*Ethics and Technology: Engineering in the Real World*’ in Princeton, the assessment consists of the following five contents: class participation and quiz, three small papers, engineering design, mid-term research papers, final exams, lasting the complete teaching process including class and after class time from mid-term to final semester. Students are supposed to participate in class interactions, complete the quiz, write essays, read a required number of reference books, finish assignments, submit the research papers in mid-term semester and take final course exams.

Specific requirements. The division on curriculum assessment contents and scores are of extremely specification in two colleges. Like the assessment requirements of the course ‘*American Images*’ in Princeton University (see Table 1), ‘*Junior Seminar in Ethnic Studies*’ in the University of Southern California (see Table 2). Each course is composed of multiple aspects and details of each project are specific so to help students have a better understanding of the assessment contents and objectives.

Table 1 the assessment requirements for ‘*American Images*’

| Requirements | Grading | Instruction |
|-----------------------------|---------|---|
| Paper in Lieu of Mid Term | 20% | |
| Final Exam | 30% | |
| Papers | 20% | Two papers |
| Class/Precept Participation | 15% | Short viewing and listening assignments |
| Other(See Instructor) | 15% | Weekly reading between 50-100 pages |

Table 2 the assessment requirements for ‘*Junior Seminar in Ethnic Studies*’

| Requirements | Grading | Instruction |
|-----------------------------|---------|---|
| Midterm | 25% | Exam covering assigned readings, films, and guest speakers include short-answer and essay questions |
| Oral History or Book Review | 25% | Determined by a 5-7 page essay (excluding bibliography of 3-5 sources) |
| Final Exam | 40% | Exam covering assigned readings, films, and guest speakers include short-answer and essay questions |
| Participation | 10% | Be punctual, and well-prepared to participate in class discussions |

Strict management. According to curriculum assessment requirements, each item should be strictly observed and implemented. For example, students must complete the preview, homework submitting, discussion material preparing, etc within the limited time. Those who can not complete the assessment requirements would get zero in relevant course which is included in the final total score of courses.

3.3 Focus on the Continuity of the Curriculum Assessment.

Different from the curriculum assessment system in domestic colleges, the two foreign universities attach great importance to the continuity of the course examination, which emphasize the correspondence and integration of teaching and assessment so students’ extracurricular study time could be increased and the range of knowledge could be broadened. During the course ‘*American Images*’ in Princeton University, impromptu quiz and small papers are distributed to each class so that students are supposed to prepare before class and review after class. Consequently, the realization of the diversity and continuity of courses stimulates students’ self-learning ability and enthusiasm.

Overall, an open and free approach of curriculum assessment is adopted in two American colleges which maintains the conception of ‘quality view’ and focuses on stimulating students’ initiative and independent learning capacity to carefully design the assessment of each course, which will be published as an significant teaching archives before classes choosing with time, contents, score percentage etc. Thereby, students could have fully acknowledgement of studying purposes and assessment principles to organize time schedule independently during the whole learning process which better ensure the quality of teaching.

4. The Inspiration of the Curriculum Assessment Reform in Domestic Colleges

Compared with American colleges, we can see clearly that differences in curriculum assessments result in students varied learning attitudes. Therefore, taking in the essence of curriculum assessment in American colleges and reforming domestic assessment system referring to college practices. It will help to mobilize students’ initiative and independent learning ability that can better advancing the quality of personnel training.

4.1 Transfer Inherent Minds to Disdain Conventional Thinking.

Transition and renewal of inherent minds is the premise and foundation of all reforms and developments. It is the understandings in minds that achieve a top-down harmonization and rooting the essence of reform in practice. Under the exam-oriented education environment in China, the pattern of ‘examination determines, grade levels’ prevails. However, there are great changes in curriculum teaching approach and the traditional model is no longer suitable for college. Therefore, educational administrators, teachers are supposed to renew thoughts, advocate the principle of ‘quality-oriented’ and ‘student-centered’ to ultimately stimulate students' initiative and independent learning ability, so the promotion of personnel cultivation quality could be targeted.

4.2 Stress the Essential and Establish Management System.

The foundation and improvement of regulations is the source of reform which determines the direction of reform and development. We must organize the ideas of reform to institutionalized management documents, so it can produce the driving and restrictive force to teachers and students, schedule can be instructed all along, the smooth implementation of curriculum assessment reform can be guaranteed.

First, establish the independent learning oriented curriculum assessment system. The assessment right is owned by teachers to set a formative assessment based, summative assessment supplemented mode which will increase the proportion of class performance and include practice and innovation. Apply new requirements and standards to evaluate innovative competences and found the curriculum assessment system of 'general assessment + innovation assessment' and 'Process +Termination'. Therefore, students 'integrated ability could be promoted with the rising enthusiasm in independent thinking, researching and innovation.

Second, encourage teachers to use a variety of curriculum assessment methods. Reform in curriculum evaluation systems will inevitably have an impact on curriculum assessment methods--- signing in and final exam are not adequate to meet the curriculum assessment needs. Consequently, teachers should be encouraged to diverse curriculum assessment methods if necessary such as class representation, free debate, literature review, small papers, answering questions and so on to integrate students into the classroom cultivating their independent thinking ability and gradually acquiring effective studying habit.

4.3 Emphasis on the Practice, Strengthen the Implementation of the Execution.

System is the principle of standard and guidance; reform is the practice of summary and feedback. The effectiveness of curriculum reform counts on the implementation in each course. Thus, every teacher should attach great importance to it, especially under the current implementation of University Credit System Teaching Management Mode, doing sufficient preparation before classes, during classes and after classes to guarantee the strength of curriculum assessment.

Before class, teachers are needed to be ready for curriculum assessment program and submit it to the elective classes system to perfect the preparation of relevant information before courses elective system is open. During class, strictly implement the curriculum assessment program. Teachers are the dominators so the corresponding assessment contents should be completed on the classes. Contents shall interest students to contribute more energy into the everyday classes. After class, collect students' opinions and suggestions in time. Teachers should conduct class questionnaire survey and satisfaction investigation and collecting students' comments and suggestions on curriculum assessment seriously to adjust the program timely and reasonably.

5. Conclusion

American colleges have clearly assessment objectives of 'quality concept' based on examination and assessment to stimulate students' independent and initiative learning capacity and promote the curriculum learning. We would integrate the good experience with domestic colleges' practice, establishing and improving relevant management systems and guarantee measures to gradually reverse the current 'a test set for life' phenomena and inspire students' sense of urgency, pressure and crisis As they actively contribute much more energy into study, the real purpose of assessment could be workable; the quality of personnel cultivation could embrace everlasting development.

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