Applying the Good Teaching Practices into an undergraduate Chinese economics course

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ABSTRACT

The difficulty in gaining employment for new graduates has become an issue in recent years. Using an international economics course as an example, this paper proposes five measures of improving undergraduate business teaching, in an attempt to improve undergraduate education as a means of increasing graduate employment.

Key words: Undergraduate teaching quality; Business instruction; Employment dilemma

THE STATUS QUO OF CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES’ EMPLOYMENT

Chinese graduates’ unemployment has become an increasingly serious problem since 1999 when China’s institutions of higher education expanded recruitment for the first time. In 2005, there were 3.38 million general higher education graduates seeking employment, a 20.7% increase from 2004. In 2006 the number of graduates was 4.13 million and during the Eleventh Five-Year period the number is expected to rise to 25 million. (Refer to the Table 1)

Table 1: The number and annual growth rate of higher education graduates during 2005-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number (million)</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>6.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Education of PRC
Note: the numbers of 2007 to 2010 are calculated from the data of previous years.

We can see the growth rate of higher school graduates plateaus in the future four years (as shown in the table above), but during that period the predicted demand for graduates is not expected to change nearly as much (Table 2). For example, in 2005 the new job positions for the whole of China were 9 million, and from these, 5 million were reserved for those already unemployed, leaving only 4 million positions for new and existing graduates. Job hunting is becoming a much more serious problem for higher education graduates.
### Table 2: Predicted annual demand for higher education graduates during 2005-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005 (million)</th>
<th>2006 (million)</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth rate (%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>-2.71</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** China employment strategy report of 2004 – Changing employment environment and Chinese undergraduates’ employment, Page 119, Zeng Xiangquan, China Renmin University Press.

One side of the problem is that about 50% of new graduates can’t find an equal job; however at the same time, 45% of companies cannot find suitable employees. Some multinational companies have reported out that only 10% of graduates meet their requirements. Many measures have been taken by the government to solve this problem; however, the ultimate method might be improvements in the higher education system, especially the undergraduate teaching quality.

### SEVERAL MEASURES TO IMPROVE UNDERGRADUATE INSTRUCTION QUALITY

In 1991, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson published a now-famous set of Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, which have been widely implemented around the world (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). In this paper, I have chosen five of these principles, and applied them to an international undergraduate economics course as an example to explain how those measures can improve undergraduate business teaching quality, and help students become better prepared for employment.

#### Encourage cooperation among students

Cooperation and collaboration among students helps to increase their involvement and engagement with study. When I teach international economics, I offer students some topics related to some chapters. Those students who are interested in a particular topic are encouraged to unite as a team and conduct additional research on that topic. One week or two weeks later, each team presents the results of their research in class, and other teams give their comments. As the teacher, I provide guidance at appropriate times, and give a fair and impersonal evaluation to every student at the completion. Through this activity, the students will learn how to cooperate with other people to finish a task and develop an idea of partnership sharing. That is very important to their future development.
**Encourage active learning**

Undergraduates’ study should not be just listening passively to the teacher in the classroom and remembering the answers to exercises. The more important aspect is the whole experience of study, including reflection and application. However, as the information explosion and number of undergraduates increase, lecturing to large cohorts of students becomes the main teaching method because it can save time, it’s easy to prepare and it can be repeated for additional groups of students. Teachers easily control the whole instruction process, but the result is that many students don’t understand how to relate theory with reality, or understand why they should learn such theories. Eventually, students lose interest in study and attendance at lectures drops. That may be one of the most important reasons why most students complain about the standard of college education after they graduate. When they look for a job, they often remember little of their study and feel the undergraduate education has been of little help for their employment.

Thus we encourage active learning, which encourages students to engage more with their studies. For example, when I teach the Stolper-Samuelson Theorem, I didn’t tell students the content directly, but gave them a problem to work on first. Students were asked to find the real reason why most American Labor unions are opposed to free international trade with China. Then after their research, I can teach the theory, which will be strongly impressed on their memory because of the linkage to the real-world example. Such theories may seem to be irrelevant to the job hunting process, but actually they are not so. Stolper-Samuelson theorem was one of the interview questions from China National Development and Reform Commission and the test aim is to check the analysis skills of the interviewee. Such skills can only be acquired or improved through actively practicing using examples and cases, and rarely from traditional lecture instruction.

**Encourage student-faculty contact**

Many research studies have shown that a student’s success is at least partly related to the standard of their teachers. The teacher is not only a developer of student’s intellect but can also have an impact on the student’s personality. Thus student-faculty contact can have a tremendous impact on students’ study and development. However, that contact is becoming less because of colleges extending their enrollment, teachers spending more time on research and social works, and capitalization of housing distribution. Since most teachers interact with their students only in class, the teaching method should focus more on discussions and questions besides traditional instruction, and the teacher should give prompt and constructive
feedback. In order to achieve that, the number of students in each class should be as few as possible. For example, there are 62 students in one class when I teach international economics. If 10 students unite as a team, there will be 6 groups. If each group spends 10 minutes making a presentation about their research I will spend more than one academic hour (50 minutes) on such a discussion without taking the feedback time into account. Assuming there are only 30 students in my class I could organize more discussions and spend more time on feedback. Thus the fewer students in one class, the more effective that contact is, and the better feedback each student will receive.

We also encourage formal or informal student-faculty contact out of class such as through Internet and all kinds of extracurricular activities. That will also offer help to student’s development.

**Communicate higher expectations**

Generally the higher education schools have higher expectations of students’ study in class but ignore the expectations of their personality, professional spirit and social responsibility. It is very important to develop an idea or a school spirit that every student is excellent. In such a school climate the students will be self-confident and strive for some goal because they know their endeavor is worthy and accepted. Some freshmen who come from rural area may be nervous about such high expectations. Teachers should give them more encouragement and positive evaluation to improve their self-confidence.

Expectations of every student should be different. Higher expectation will lead to higher study passion and academic records only if it is combined with students’ talent, emotion and experience. What teachers should do is to encourage every student to try his best but not to require everyone to reach the same goal. During instructions of international economics, I try to create a free class climate. I set a goal that I hope they reach and allow them to finish their task based on their own interest and requirements. I offer the reference answer but welcome any new idea and allow the mistake. Respecting difference between students is helpful for confidence cultivation.

Higher expectations may also come from students. The class climate of mutual support will help students to develop a team spirit because they are sure their efforts and sharing will be respected and supported by other students and teachers. All of that is crucial to students’ job hunting.
Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

Undergraduates are always different in their age, nationality, religion and experience which may lead their different talents, goals of learning and time arrangement. But some of them will have the same class in the same place at the same time. Therefore there should be a university climate of allowing and respecting diversities which can be embodied in the curriculum arrangement and instruction ways. Besides usual class impartation, group discussion, social practice and personal independent study are all effective ways of teaching. When I taught international economics to students majoring in finance for the first time, I found some students sleeping in my class and some students reading other books themselves. After discussion with these students, I learnt that those students sleeping in class are more interested in the application of the knowledge, but most of my lecture was about pure theory. Those reading other books have an excellent self-teaching ability and they hope to be challenged more. After learning this, I redeveloped my lectures to include a variety of content, such as playing a video about practice operation and increasing discussion and question. To summarise, I try to diversify my teaching to meet different requirements of students.

CONCLUSION

Chinese graduates are faced with a serious employment dilemma. Improving the undergraduate teaching quality may be the most effective way to solve that problem for our graduates. Taking international economics course as an example, this paper proposed five specific measures which are:

- Encouraging cooperation among students
- Encouraging active learning
- Encouraging student-faculty contact
- Communicating higher expectations
- Respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

These measures have been practiced among students majoring in both international trade and finance, and are helpful for students to develop teamwork skills, to improve their self-confidence, and more creative and well-rounded personalities. All of that is indispensable for graduates when seeking employment.
REFERENCES

