

The Exploration of Philosophy Teaching Organization Form at Oxford University

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Abstract

Philosophy educational goals of Oxford University are that by reading and training regularly to enlighten students' mind, cultivate their reading ability, critical thinking and logical thinking ability, etc.. At Oxford University, cultivating students' ability depends on rich teaching organizational forms. Teaching organizational forms affects the teaching quality and efficiency directly, and relates to the realization of educational objectives. Oxford University philosophy teaching takes various teaching organizational forms, which are lectures, tutorial system, seminars and presentations. These teaching organizational forms not only make Oxford University achieve its educational goals, but also become its features enjoying a worldwide reputation. This paper attempts to elaborate and analyze the four teaching organizational forms, to grasp its specific implementation process, characteristics as well as values, and to reflect on its enlightenments for Chinese university teaching organizational forms.

Key words: Lectures; Tutorial system; Presentations

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INTRODUCTION

University's mission has always been a primary concerning topic for higher education. From the medieval universities, the mission of the university has experienced the change of personnel training, scientific research, social services and culture lead. Oxford University's educational philosophy also has undergone the change and development, but it has inherited and continued the tradition of liberal and elite education, emphasizing the development of students' potential, the enlightenment of their minds and the development of their independent thinking and innovation spirit (Li, 2013, p.98). Faculty of philosophy at Oxford University is one of the world-class philosophy faculties, which cultivates a larger number of well-known philosophers, humanities scholars, social activists and politicians in history. As the times progress, Oxford University continually seeks and changes its teaching organizational forms, to achieve its established educational goals and aims. In terms of philosophy education, Oxford university has four teaching that has traditional features as well as meets the needs of modern society development, namely lectures, tutorial system, seminars and presentations. These four teaching organizational forms have their characteristics, and play important roles in enhancing students' professional standards, developing their cognitive, thinking, reasoning and logical thinking abilities. In consideration of the problems, such as "spoon-feeding", "cramming education" which exists in Chinese universities, this paper plans to explore the effectiveness of philosophy teaching organizational forms at Oxford University, aiming to improve teaching organizational forms in Chinese universities

1. PHILOSOPHY LECTURES

Lectures model first appeared in the Macedonian empire period, at that time, King Ptolemy (Greek: Πτολεμαίος

ο Σωτηρ) set several lectures in Alexandria university in Egypt, including philosophy, linguistics and rhetoric lectures, etc.. (Dai, 1989, p.142) During this period, many scholars were attracted to these diversified lectures, and it became one of effective forms to training personnel. Therefore, Oxford University inherits and innovates the ancient form, developing it as a guarantee for high quality education.

Syllables in the past decade showed that faculty of philosophy at Oxford University will publish a lecture list and lecture prospectus each term. The lecture prospectus will give tutors and students guidance about the related contents.¹ Faculty of philosophy will publish the latest version of the lecture list on the website. Students can get information from the website, social science library and other places. When students meet his tutor, it's necessary for them to take the lecture list, because the tutor will give advice on which lectures he should attend. The lecture list includes a provisional programme for the remainder of the academic year, which will help students to plan for the future. You may not expect lectures on a subject always to coincide with the term in which you are writing essays on that subject. Important lectures may come a term or two before your tutorials, students can consult your tutor. In addition, there is some important lectures that can not be missed, because they are likely to relate to the contents of the final exam.

In general, the philosophy lecture at Oxford University usually takes one hour, the teachers will delay 5 minutes before class and dismiss the class 5 minutes early. Therefore, and the actual class time is only 50 minutes. Besides, in class, teachers will give time to interact with students. Although, each lecture time is not long, students are always absorbed in class for the rich contents and the wonderful teaching. All in all, the philosophy lectures present the following three features:

Firstly, lecture topics are various. In 2013-2014 academic years, we can find there are a variety of lecture topics from the undergraduate lecture list of faculty of philosophy at Oxford University. For instance, for the history of philosophy, the faculty of philosophy opened a series of lectures named after philosophers' names, such as, Plato and Aristotle of ancient Greece, Descartes and Hume, who are representatives of the modern rationalism and empiricism, as well as Kant, the representative of German classical philosophy, etc.. Meanwhile, it also includes ethics, moral philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of mathematics, logic and Wittgenstein's philosophy as well as other contents on the lecture list. There is no doubt that lectures of faculty of philosophy at Oxford University reflect its characteristics, that is, lecture not only focus on the philosophical tradition,

but also pay attention to forefront questions about philosophy.

Secondly, teachers make full preparation and give a wonderful lecture. Before the lecture, most teachers will give students materials that associated with lecture content, and teachers also have teaching materials. Actually, we rarely find that teachers repeat what the book says, because they are so familiar with the teaching contents that they can in full accordance with their own ideas when they go to a lecture. Although faculty of philosophy have opened the same course every year, but it does not mean that teachers need not prepare before lecture. Instead, they will prepare lesson seriously again before each lecture. Of course, in order to present the latest and most effective teaching for students, teachers will add the forefront questions about philosophy and their latest research results or insights into the lecture.

Thirdly, students are free and concentrated in lecture. In the classroom, students are allowed to move around and eat or drink freely. Although, it seems that students are too casual in class, they actually follow teachers' ideas. Teachers usually ask students to answer some questions that are associated with the teaching contents. For students, they can not only give the correct answer, but also can comprehend by analogy. At the same time, because teachers make full preparation for the lecture and it is also instructive, it's not difficult for students to come up with questions. In class, students can ask questions at any time. Teachers usually won't be angry, on the contrary, they appreciate the good questions students put forward, and then teachers will also give a satisfying answer for the specific issue.

In short, philosophy lectures at Oxford University not only to enrich students' knowledge, improve their professional level and bring the latest accomplishments in the research of contemporary philosophy, but also change the way of knowledge production. Therefore, we regard the lecture system as a basic system of academic activities at Oxford University.

2. THE TUTORIAL SYSTEM OF PHILOSOPHY COURSE

2.1 The Tutorial System and Its Characteristics

Winchester bishop William Wickham, who established the "New School" in the early 14th century, initiated the tutorial system at Oxford University (Liu, 2012, p.68). The tutorial system is also translated into individual counseling system. The tutor refers to a specialized person who guides students to study independently and write papers in institutions of higher education and research organizations. As the name implies, the tutor is a man who gives students guidance in studying in individual conversation and individual tuition (Qiu, 1986, pp.83-

¹ HANDBOOK for the undergraduate course in Philosophy and Theology 2007-2008, Standing Joint Committee for Philosophy and Theology, University of Oxford.

89). The tutor not only should guide students' learning, but also should cultivate their good behaviors. Generally, tutors make study plan for students, and help them to elect subjects, courses as well as specified reading list and so on. As for students, they need to meet the tutor regularly, and communication with tutors about their study and living conditions in the recent period. What's more, they should also discuss with the tutor about academic issues in depth.

Throughout the ages, Oxford University's tutorial system has received peoples' esteem, and it is regarded as one of the important forms of personnel training. Professor Richard Aldrich, from the University of London, said that "the tutorial system becomes an eternal feature of Oxford University and Cambridge University." (Aldrich, 1987, p.152) As an ancient personnel training philosophy, tutorial system is implemented by faculty of philosophy at Oxford University, mainly having the following three characteristics:

Firstly, the tutorial system is a basic teaching system. Although the traditional classroom teaching can provide students with systematic and comprehensive knowledge, it still can not replace the tutorial system that has a great of flexibility and pertinences. As an important complementary form to the classroom teaching and lectures as well as other teaching forms, it's characterized by helping students and teachers to build an effective teaching relationship. Besides, it pays more attention to cultivating students' values and train their thinking. As a basic and formal teaching system, the tutorial system has received recognition and appreciation from faculty members, and become a model object.

Secondly, the tutorial system is a form that benefits both students and teachers. Faculty of philosophy at Oxford University arranges tutors for every student. There is no doubt that it is beneficial for students to communicate with tutors deeply. Students can present their understanding on some philosophical core questions, such as, "Whether there is a God, what he is like, and whether we can know anything about whether he is interested in the world and whether religion has any relevance for human life." After a long debate with tutors and knowledge collision, students can not only have mature thought, but also cultivate their democratic and equal habits of mind. For tutors, by discussing and exchanging ideas with students on a certain academic issue, they can also broaden their horizon and obtain new knowledge.

Thirdly, the tutorial system is a form highlighting individual counseling for students. For one thing, tutors give students professional guidance in learning. For another thing, they also teach students to be an excellent person through the daily life. In the faculty of philosophy at Oxford University, students are required to meet tutors regularly, and the meeting place is very casual, such as

schoolroom and coffee house, etc.. During the meeting, students should state their recent learning and living conditions. The interaction between tutors and students makes tutors informed of the students' situations in all respects, which largely contributes to tutors giving students a further guidance. Looking back at history, we find that many distinguished figures regard his or her tutor as a good teacher and helpful friend, and establish a deep emotion between them.

2.2 The Specific Implementation of the Tutorial System of Philosophy Course

In the faculty of philosophy, every student has his tutor. For example, for the Mathematics and Philosophy course, students are bound to have at least two of them. They guide and supervise students to facilitate their academic progress. In addition, tutors arrange counseling for students and give advice on the general academic matters, such as the election of elective course, as well as providing career advice and references and so on. In addition, tutors concern about students' welfare and help with any problems that students have outside work.

Much of your teaching will be done within your college, but sometimes you will be sent to a tutor (a Fellow, Lecturer, Research Fellow or graduate student) in another college, or, very occasionally, another qualified person. This may happen for various reasons: e.g. because one of your tutors is on study leave, or because there is no specialist in a particular area within your own college, or because your college tutors are specialists in other areas and are exchanging their skills for those of another tutor.²

In a word, the tutorial system plays an important role in students' learning and life. It can stimulate students' enthusiasm and imitative as well as develop students' good personality and innovation spirit. At the same time, as the traditional characteristic of Oxford University, it guarantees and promotes the teaching level.

3. THE PHILOSOPHY SEMINAR

Seminars are inseparable from the tutorial teaching methods. Seminars are an essential part of undergraduates' courses in the faculty of philosophy at Oxford University. Seminars are usually arranged by the college tutors of faculty and seminars are occupied 1/4-1/3 teaching hour of each course. In seminars, students usually should study and discuss with others, and seminars also require them to do some reading and occasionally prepare a presentation.³

In the faculty of philosophy at Oxford University, basically every week has seminars, and the theme of

² HANDBOOK for the undergraduate course in Philosophy and Theology 2007-2008, Standing Joint Committee for Philosophy and Theology, University of Oxford.

³ HANDBOOK for the undergraduate course in Philosophy and Modern Languages 2004-2005, Standing Joint Committee for Philosophy and Modern Languages, University of Oxford.

seminars is rich and diverse. For example, in seminars of the 2009 Hilary term, there are a number of issues for the study of Aristotle: "Explain and assess Aristotle's account of efficient causation", "The virtuous agent chooses to do good action for its own sake". What does it mean? Is it plausible? "Aristotle's explanation of the occurrence of *akrasia* is wholly unconvincing." Discuss. As for the study of Hume, the specific issues are as follows: "What are Hume's 'simple ideas'?" "Does Hume have a univocal conception of reason?" "Hume's philosophy should be extricated from his psychology." Do you agree? "Hume's distinction between reason and passion is equivalent to that between belief and desire". Assess. No doubt, through weekly seminars to discuss different philosophical issues regularly, we can cultivate students' logical thinking, strain capacity and critical thinking.

Seminars mainly adhere to the following procedure: Tutors give presentations and express his views, and then students discuss the issue and tutors summarize it. Before seminars, tutors will give students a reading list. Some tutors give out the entire term's reading lists at the beginning, and others may just give out one tutorial reading list for the next seminar. Reading lists vary greatly from tutor to tutor according to his or her individual interests and perspectives on the subject. In seminars, tutors will give a brief introduction and guidance to enable students to discuss the topic quickly. Although tutors will evaluate students' performance, most of the time are left for students to discuss. Students' discussion is the most wonderful part of the seminar. Students usually regard it as a good opportunity to express themselves, and thus they have a positive and active performance. After the discussion, tutors will summarize it and put forward more topics to discuss. Besides, at the end of the seminar, tutors will require students to hand in essays regularly. Different tutors have distinct ways to deal with essays. Some tutors will make written comments only on essays not read out, others will take in even those essays which are read out and make written comments on them.

We generally believe that the most proper and effective teaching way is that combining teacher's lecture with class discussion. The reason is that this interactive teaching way is similar to "elicitation teaching theory" advocated by ancient Greek philosophy Socrates, which can attract students' attention and mobilize their enthusiasm and initiative, and thus to develop their potential for obtaining knowledge. However, to ensure the effective seminar needs certain premises (Xü, 1997). Firstly, in perception, students should develop their problem consciousness and be good at showing their personality. At the same time, students should understand that teachers are delightful if they can put forward different academic views. Secondly, students have the capacity to elect other subjects. In the seminar, the ideal students are from different disciplines or branches, but take the same course in the long time. Thus, seminars are exciting, because different students

have different ideas. Last but not the least, students and teachers must have sufficient preparation. Teachers should concern to the forefront issues about philosophy and update their knowledge. At the same time, students should also be familiar with the topics to make the seminar to get the best results.

The main objective of the seminar is to encourage students to think actively and ask questions. Students should use their own essays, not just to summarize what they have read, but also to present their individual viewpoints.⁴ As for classroom teaching, the seminar is a good and creative way. Some students find interests on the research by communicating with tutors, and then start their academic career.

4. THE PHILOSOPHY PRESENTATION

At Oxford University, philosophy teaching has flexible ways. In addition to the ways mentioned above, the presentation also plays an important role in philosophy teaching. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the concept of presentation as gift(n); (formal) introduction; display; description; submission; report; performance; appearance, etc.. In fact, the term of "presentation" originated from Latin, which means "a description or presentation forms including presenting facts, material or information". Different from the traditional classroom teaching, the presentation has various forms and involves a wide range of contents, which provides abundant academic feast for Oxford students.

4.1 The Main Types of the Philosophy Presentation

In the faculty of philosophy at Oxford University, the presentation is so frequent that students can choose to participate in any one of them. Generally, the presentation will be held in one hour before lunch or at lunch. Since the British lunch is simple, we can often see students holding the sandwich when they listen to a presentation. The main types of the presentation are as follows:

The first type is experts or scholars presentations. The speakers are well-known scholars from Oxford University or other Britain's universities. And sometimes the faculty of philosophy also invites philosophers from the United States, Germany, France and other countries. The content is usually the speakers' research subject and also involves the forefront of the subject. After the presentation, students can ask questions and have an in-depth discussion with speakers on a hot issue. These presentations often make students expand their horizon, because each presentation relates to different areas. In

⁴ HANDBOOK for the undergraduate course in Philosophy and Modern Languages 2004-2005, Standing Joint Committee for Philosophy and Modern Languages, University of Oxford.

addition to listening to the presentation seriously and taking notes, students can ponder the problem and form their own academic point of view. What's more, the content of the presentation refers to the forefront of the subject, which is beneficial for students to understand the research progress of philosophy.

The second type is student presentation. The presentation is generally pre-arranged by the teacher. Teachers will give students the scope of topic, and students can choose the topic freely. Typically, such presentations are held by groups or individuals. The preparation time for the presentation is not long, which can be controlled within a month, with strong operability and feasibility. Students can choose any methods to make a presentation, such as blackboard or courseware, etc., and the presentation usually takes 10-15 minutes. The procedure is as follows: firstly, groups or individuals make a presentation, and then teachers and other students ask questions based on the contents. Groups or individuals should answer questions. Secondly, students communicate and discuss with each other. Finally, teachers make a conclusive evaluation including the content and form of the presentation. According to the circumstances, teachers can regard the presentation as assessments components, and also as a training session to encourage students to communicate with others.

4.2 The Significance of the Philosophy Presentation

The various presentations not only make Oxford students obtain knowledge, but also benefit them by preparing the presentation and communicating with teachers, which have great humanistic value and significance.

Firstly, it cultivates students' team spirit. In the philosophy classroom, students should be a team to complete a presentation on a certain topic. When students prepare the presentation, every member must participate in the group. Only through mutual cooperation and effort can students present a wonderful academic presentation.

Secondly, it improves students' thinking and practical ability. In the traditional classroom, teachers are the carrier of knowledge, and students are the recipients of knowledge. In this process, students are lack of opportunities to think and analyze. However, in the presentation, students play important roles, and they take the initiative to collect and display knowledge. During the preparation process, students need to consider the feasibility of the topic seriously, and analyze the starting point of the problem, problem-solving methods as well as preparing PPT, etc. There is no doubt that it develops and trains students' independent thinking and practical ability.

Thirdly, it enhances the interaction between teachers and students. The presentation makes the teaching mode shift the focus from the teacher to the students. When students take the podium, they need to ponder the question

that how to effectively show the content and attract others attention and interest. Through role reversal, students will understand teachers, and in the future learning, they will complete the learning task actively.

5. ENLIGHTENMENT

Through lectures, tutorial system, seminars and presentations, the faculty of philosophy not only cultivates students' logical thinking ability, but also trains their ability to analyze and solve problems. As a "pearl" on the crown of Oxford University, we should draw lessons from the above four teaching organizational forms on the basis of an in-depth discussion. In China, some universities are still taking "cramming" as their main teaching method. What's worse, there are little discussion classes and seminars, and tutorials are generally limited to science and engineering courses. Despite there are expert lectures and academic reports, however, because of funding problems, they are not much. (Wang, 2004) Therefore, Chinese universities should think about the problem that how to avoid the traditional "cramming" education and enrich teaching forms. As far as the author concerned, we can make improvement from the following aspects.

Firstly, we should establish and implement tutorial system. Once students enter into Oxford University, they will have a tutor to give their guidance. This teaching organization form encourages students to have independent leaning and come up with innovative ideas, which greatly train their initiative spirit and innovative consciousness. However, Chinese universities usually arrange tutors for students when they prepare to write the thesis. Tutorial counseling is a long-term process, and its effect can not be reflected in a short time. Therefore, we should implement tutorial system when they are freshmen. Although at the moment, it's difficult to achieve the individual counseling, we can arrange a tutor to guide three to five students. Through mentoring and self-learning, students can make great progress in their study, character and mind.

Secondly, we should conduct seminars. At Oxford University, seminars are various, which benefits students to obtain knowledge. Chinese universities should strengthen students' participation awareness and the spirit of active learning. For one thing, in the classroom, teachers should give students sufficient time for reflection, expression and communication. For another thing, in their spare time, the college or department should organize rich seminars, to encourage students to analyze a certain academic issue and form their own views. By this process, we can cultivate students' thinking, organizational and presentation ability.

Thirdly, we can organize rich lectures or academic presentations. In the faculty of philosophy, a variety of

lectures and presentations not only enhance the school's academic atmosphere, but also enable students to understand the forefront issues about philosophy. Drawing lessons from the department of philosophy at Oxford University, Chinese university also should organize rich lectures or academic presentations according to their characteristics. We can take advantage of the faculty, such as professors, associate professors, lecturers and even doctors or masters. According to their research areas and direction, we can arrange some lectures and presentations. By taking use of the school's academic resources, we can not only make teachers and students expand their horizon and obtain knowledge, but also stimulate their learning enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

Oxford University has an excellent education tradition, which promotes the teaching philosophy of "people-oriented". Looking back at its history, we find it changes its functions, training objectives and teaching content.

However, it still maintains its teaching organization form. Through the historical inspection and selection, we inherit its spirit, and undoubtedly the diverse teaching organizational forms play important roles.

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