Enhancing Students' Social Skills in Chinese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT. *Since the sociability of college students in their working environment has become a serious issue, enhancing students' experience in socializing needs to be studied urgently in higher education. The essay will start with the situation of sociability in China and Chinese higher education. Through analyzing the reasons why college students have problems in personal communication, the definition of social skills and the significance of social skills to the college students and the internationalization of the university, it suggests that the essence of social skills is in relation to role shift. And then the essay proposes four ways of enhancing students' social skills in which voluntary activity that belongs to extra-curricular activities is highlighted.*

KEYWORDS: *social skills, socialize, sociability, internationalization.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Situation of sociability in China:

Epidemiological studies have found that social anxiety tends to increase dramatically in the development from childhood to adolescence. The problem of social anxiety in teenagers is widespread and has a bad impact on their growth both physically and psychologically (Zhang, 1998)[1].

Another study also found that social anxiety disorders occur frequently in adolescence and they seem to be seen rarely after the age of 25. In addition, it was found in cross-cultural studies that this phenomenon is particularly serious in Asian countries (Guo, 2000)[2]. Those indicate that as one of the Asian countries, in China, the problems in sociability requires immediate attention.

The curve of the socializing hump indicates that the peak of socializing is during the youth of the human life. At present, the average age of college students in our country is between 18 and 24, which lies in the peak time of socializing. From the

perspective of the length of human life, this shows that the problem of students' sociability in the university era is in a pivotal position (Liu & Jiang, 1990)[3].

The college students who are in adolescence are of high possibility of being weak in socializing. Therefore, most college students, due to their long distance from home, would ask for help from their university, and it would be necessary for the university to be well-prepared to help them or even train them in the area of socializing in advance.

1.2 Situation of sociability in higher education:

In the background of globalization and internationalization, higher education is totally involved as a crucial part. On the one hand, the competition in knowledge-based economy from globalization brings challenge to higher education. On the other hand, it seems that colleges and universities think internationalization as a good way to deal with the problems emerging currently. Then the relations between universities become strong and the phenomenon of talent mobility which has influence on staff and students in higher education - and by which college students are classified into domestic students and international students - is identified as common in universities. Here, 'domestic students' refers to the college students who are studying in a country and have this country's nationality status in law, while 'international students' refer to students without the nationality status of the country in which they are studying and come from other countries. The only item illustrated in the difference between international students and domestic students is whether students are studying abroad. But what is stressed in the essay is the similarity between international students and domestic students and that is the long distance between college students' home and the university they are studying in.

1.2.1 Current situation of international students:

As noted in an investigation in Australia, of the 200 international students interviewed, almost 130 of them (65%) stated that they had experienced loneliness (Erlenawati et al, 2008)[4].

As one of the defining features of the international student experience, loneliness is more likely to occur under circumstances such as prolonged foreign travel or the loss of – or separation from - significant others. For the international students, often networks with family and friends are attenuated by distance or by cultural displacement just when they are most needed. Then traditional bonds do not meet all their needs for sociability (Marginson et al., 2010)[5]. New relations or networks need to be established urgently which requires students' ability of adapting to a new environment. In other words, at the transferring period from domestic student to international student and from high school student to college student, international students are likely to be confronted with more difficulties in transforming

themselves and socializing with new people around them.

1.2.2 Current situation of domestic students:

The land area of China is 9.6 million square kilometers, which accounts for about 1/15 of the total land area of the world. It ranks the third place in the world which is next only to Russia (17.075 million square kilometers) and Canada (9.971 million square kilometers). By the end of 2004, in relation to the administrative division in China, there were 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities, 2 special administrative regions (Introduction of China, 2017)[6]. Because of the big land area of China, there is high possibility for the students to go far from their home to start their study in university. Similar to what is mentioned in the current situation of international students, long distance also means that they have to adapt to a new educational environment and enhance their social ability to build their own social networks. Then in fact the domestic college students in China would probably face the similar problems as international students in this way.

Zhao Chen, a postgraduate student from the Capital Normal University, has done a survey on 498 students from the Capital Normal University including freshman, sophomore and junior students. The result of the sampling survey shows that two-thirds of college students feel the general sense of loneliness, and nearly one-fifth of college students experience a higher sense of loneliness because of the large gap between what they desire and what they actually have in interpersonal relationships (Zhao, 2008)[7]. Thus, the issue of dealing with loneliness and enhancing students' social skills is of significance not only for international students but also for domestic students. Since the problem of socializing for college students is widely recognized, then it should be viewed solemnly.

2. The causes

In different stages of life, people are playing different roles constantly. Different role settings in different life stages of human beings mean that people ought to change their methods of communicating or getting along with others in interpersonal communication to adapt to those with whom they interact. But in the process of interpersonal communication, there could be obstacles for college students to socialize: shyness, social anxiety and loneliness.

2.1 Shyness and social anxiety

Social anxiety refers to nervousness or discomfort in social situations and social anxiety is limited to certain types of social situations (Antony & Swinson, 2008)[8]. Usually, the experience of social anxiety is related to common personality styles and traits of college students. For example, college students who are shy often feel uncomfortable in certain social situations, particularly when they involve interacting

with others or meeting new people. It seems that they might be anxious or fearful easily when socializing.

2.2 Loneliness of college students

In the student era, most of the time is spent on study and classmates, teachers and family are whom students interact with frequently. But in their career, colleagues and superiors occupy a crucial position in the process of interpersonal communication. That is to say, for students, they are required to enhance their social skills to communicate with different people. Particularly for the college students, what they face is more severe than other students in primary school, middle school and high school as they are closer to the working position after graduation. In other words, most of the college students would graduate from university into the real world as clerks. In addition, the sociability might not be smooth and the sense of loneliness might arise with the emergence of problems in sociability.

Peplau, Russell and Heim (1979) believed that loneliness occurs when the social network of individuals is smaller or less satisfying than expected[9]. Schmit (1983) thought that loneliness is caused by the inconsistency between what the individual has and what the individual expects in interpersonal relations[10]. Huang (2004) thinks that loneliness is a negative emotion experience, which is a kind of sadness as a result of dissatisfaction with close relations in sociability[11]. Besides, Cen (1996) defines loneliness as a negative psychological state which is caused by the perception that the individual is not satisfied with his social expectations in interpersonal communication, and then feels subjectively to be neglected, forgotten and ignored by others[12].

The loneliness that arises because of the problems emerging in sociability also needs to be solved through realizing a good social network. Meanwhile, for the college students, problems with study, homesickness, career, depression, violence, especially sociability, have all arisen with varying degrees of frequency. Hence, as a college student, the status transition from high school student to college student requires not only time but also various social skills.

3. Definitions

3.1 The definition of social skills

The phrase "social skills" refers to those kinds of behavior which are basic to effective communication face-to-face among people whereas "life skills" are defined as kinds of behavior that are essential to survival in society, which are identified as the ability of solving such problems as finding a job or managing money (McGuire & Priestley, 1981)[13].It is believed that there is no really hard and fast distinction existing between 'social' and 'life' skills, and in contemporary application the two

terms have become nearly interchangeable.

The social skills can be sorted into three large classes: self-knowledge or self-awareness skills, interactive skills and problem-solving skills (James, M.G & Philip, P., 1981). Of these three categories, interactive skills are the intermediate link in social skills. For a person, his or her interactive skills would change depending on the role he or she plays at present. Meanwhile, his or her self-knowledge or self-awareness skills would serve for the summary of interactive skills while his or her problem-solving skills would be achieved through the practice or experience of interaction. Thus, the central part of social skills is interactive skills and the essence of social skills is role shift. Finally, interactive skills in sociability would be attached with high importance in the next passage; these skills are regarded as the ability of communicating with others or establishing new social networks.

3.2 The definition social skills training

Social skills training is any attempt organized to help people acquire or develop those skills itemized above – for self-check, dealing with others, or solving the problems that they face (James, M.G & Philip, P., 1981). Some practical activities created to enhance students' social skills would show the way social skills are trained in sociability.

The practical activities are designed to help college students with their self-check; to improve their interactive skills; and to help them to learn how to solve problems more efficiently. And the overall aim of such activities is to enable individuals to practice and learn how to interact or communicate with different people in different places. As mentioned above, the essence of social skills is role shift. Then in substance, social skills training means the summary or conclusion from the experience in role shift.

4. Significance of social skills

4.1 The significance of social skills to college students

In the real society, there could be no one who is single or isolated, but living and growing in interaction with the surroundings or people around them. The growth of a person depends on the development of all other people who interact with him or her directly or indirectly (Zou, 2008)[14]. As an ordinary person, it could be unavoidable to get nutrition from the outside world, including the surroundings or people around them in his or her growth.

The main activities of college students are completed in the process of socialization, in which their physical and mental health and their cultivation of various abilities are closely related to the establishment of social relations (Liu & Bi, 2003)[15]. Then for the college students, it might be hard to separate their growth

from their sociability. And good social skills could be a cure for students to release or even overcome the social anxiety in sociability. Finding a way of enhancing college students' social skills turn to be a must in the growth of college students.

At school, as a tool of communication, social skills play an important role in living and studying. The development of college students is closely related to their social skills. A certain social ability is conducive to the healthy development of students' personal physical and mental health.

In the transition from high school to university, the primary task for students is to adapt to the new university campus. Almost everything they contact is unfamiliar and socialized and then new methods should be summarized and adopted to cope with the complex and changeable problems. In addition, being away from family and old friends, college students have to create new social circles to alleviate the feeling of being a stranger in a new environment. Through interpersonal communication, people could exchange their information and ideas, express their emotions and needs, learn experience and skills, thus realizing mutual understanding, cooperation and promotion (Zou, 2010)[16].

As written in the *Art of Socializing* (Lei, 2004)[17], sociability refers to social interaction, in which people use certain tools to convey information, exchange feelings to achieve certain goals. Entering university, students find that the curriculum structure has changed because the only goal of studying is no longer for college entrance examination. In the process of achieving new goals, students need to communicate with and ask for help from the outside world to meet the needs of learning, especially from teachers and classmates. Then different social skills should be used to achieve the goal of interaction with others.

After graduation, fostering competence of self-knowledge is conducive to college students' self-check. As a survey reported, embarking on the job, the graduates cannot coordinate the interpersonal relationship over a long period and adapt to the new environment because of the lack of social skills, which makes their development of studying and working affected easily. At the beginning of their career, they do not have a clear understanding of their character and position in the working environment (Zhu, 1997)[18]. As all-round self-awareness can only be achieved through sociability, which means college students who do not perform well in their career after graduation lack of sociability or interaction with different people in their university.

In sociability, a certain interpersonal communication makes students directly observe themselves, fully understand themselves, then have a definite understanding of their characters and position so as to achieve good role cognition. This cognition provides the psychological preparation for college students to embark on a job, adapting to more complex interpersonal relationships (Zhu, 1997). Knowing well about oneself, his or her potential communicatee and also the environment of interaction would probably prepare oneself well for interaction next. That is the reason why the cognition would support the usage of different interactive skills with precondition to some extent.

4.2 The significance of social skills to internationalization of college

Arum and Van de Water (1992) proposed that internationalization refers to "the multiple activities, programs and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation". Regardless of international studies, international educational exchange or technical cooperation, there could not be only one person involved in the whole activity, program or service. Internationalization must include other people or, at least, an institution. 'International' means at least two countries. To make sure the success of the activity, program or service, the sociability ought to be treated correctly. Then it comes to the usage or enhancement of social skills in sociability.

The definition of internationalization raised by Arum and Van de Water focused on the overall process. While the definition of internationalization put forward by Knight stressed the constituent parts. Internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is defined as "the process within which an international, intercultural or global dimension are integrated into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" by Knight (2003). Of the international, intercultural or global dimension in higher education, the essence lies in the communication between domestic students or staff and international students or staff. It could be the interaction of students or staff that complete the whole international, intercultural or global process. Nevertheless, the only bond or bridge in cooperation might be the communication between them of which the smooth progress could be guaranteed by social skills. In addition, for the students or staff in higher education, their successful social participation or performance due to their superb social skills would probably bring the name of their universities into the public horizon.

5. Students' sociability at university

5.1 Classroom

Classroom interaction-after lecture, it's the most widely used instructional strategy in education (Jay, 2015). Typically, classroom participation is a vertical exchange between a teacher and a student. But group discussion in the classroom is the process of idea exchange among students, which is a common way of studying in university. It takes place in the presence and involvement of others. Then in terms of role shift, the social skills of a college student could be enhanced mainly from the interaction with a domestic student or academic staff and an international student or academic staff.

5.2 Exchange

Believed to provide participants with intercultural experiences, the opportunity

to learn about different cultures, lifelong learning skills, and opportunities for academic and personal development, the exchange program, is considered to be very instrumental for participants (Bakioğlu & Certel, 2010). With regard to intercultural experiences, as a domestic student, college students would be provided with the chance to cooperate with international students while as an international student, they would be provided with the chance to cooperate with home students.

An exchange student may temporarily assume a sojourner's posture to experience the culture, communication and language skills, and habits over one semester or a year (Takahiro & Samuel, 2015). He or she would face a struggle whereby he need to achieve his academic goals and objectives through developing positive social relationships with various domestic classmates. Hodge et al. (2012) found in their research study that these exchange students struggled to overcome academic and social transition, which means that although they behave appropriately based on their cultural norms and upbringing, their classmates with different cultural backgrounds might become frustrated and respond to their behavior adversely. Culturally, these students had difficulty in making the transition to domestic academic and social norms (e.g., collectivism vs individualism). Concerning the difficulty in academic and social transition, the cultural differences in the exchange program would push the students to cultivate their social skills.

5.3 Internship

Internship is another way for college students to train themselves which is offered by the company or enterprises in society. The jobs and workplace experience of educational media and other professionals are being viewed to be complex interactions among the skills and talents of groups of workers and between workers and the goals and missions of their larger work environments (Christ& Blanchard,1993).

By this way, college students would be in the transition from students to workers or even leaders. Then social skills could be trained through the contact between colleagues, between worker and leader and even between leader and leader.

5.4 Extra-curricular activities

In higher education, as the extension and supplement of the classroom, extra-curricular activities play a vital role in improving college students' social skills. Extracurricular activities could create a specific working environment and context, so that students might cultivate their subjectivity and creativity.

Dwell Hymes, an American sociolinguist, argues that social skills encompass not only the understanding and mastery of the linguistic form of a language, but also the understanding and mastery of the knowledge system in which, when, where and how to socialize with the appropriate language (Jin, 2014). The correct way we use to socialize is what we regarded as social skills.

College students could have many types of choices in meeting their needs of sociability, including college students' community, which is one of the most important forms of college students' extracurricular activities (He & Qin, 2008). Clubs and organizations organized by college students are an example of the college students' community, in which students mainly need to socialize within a certain environment including domestic or international students as club members, domestic or international academic, logistics and administrative staff helping the club or organization develop within school rules, and even the sponsors from outside campus.

As a mutual benefit organization, the college students' community belongs to extra-curricular activities as well. Of all sorts of extra-curricular activities, the voluntary activity would be worthwhile to be analyzed here. On the one hand, students could achieve practical goals out of classroom. On the other hand, the college students' community could help the public in a specific area, such as the members of Spring Hope in UNNC work as volunteers to teach students in Chunhui Primary School in Ningbo province.

6. Voluntary activity

6.1 Brief introduction of voluntary activity, voluntary organization and volunteer

Voluntary activity is a non-governmental act for unofficial service, in which individuals or organizations utilize personal knowledge, energy and time to provide a wide range of social services voluntarily to reflect their social responsibility and make contributions to social development (Ding & Jiang, 2001). The implementation of the voluntary activity supports the people or social groups who are in need and the volunteers do the job voluntarily.

A voluntary organization is an organization that relies on the spirit of volunteer service to engage in various voluntary activities. Meanwhile, a voluntary organization is non-profit and the main purpose is to run for the public good (Mei, 2008). The volunteers in this essay refer to the college students who voluntarily participate in various planned, organized and unpaid human civilized and progressive causes in which they make full use of their time, energy, skills and experience to help others.

6.2 The benefits of voluntary activity

For the individual, besides enhancing college students' social skills in the company of different people, voluntary activity is also the intermediary of college students' ideological and political education and enriches the content of ideological and political education. The college students' voluntary activity can reflect the topic of promoting and highlighting college students' political consciousness. Meanwhile,

this kind of topic is precisely the important content of the ideological and political education (Wen & Chen, 2016). Through the college students' voluntary activity, the ideological and political education can push the college students to form a good outlook on the world, life and values.

From the perspective of Chinese education, the purpose of Chinese education is to meet people's demand for self-actualization. Moreover, self-actualization has relations with the contribution a person can make to the country or the entire human society (Liu, 2003). As a way of serving or help the human society, voluntary activity is in accordance with the aim of Chinese education. As for its significance to internationalization in higher education, a university need to cooperate with other institutions from overseas in view of its goal of internationalization. Whether sending domestic students out or attracting international students, the university needs to negotiate with other institutions and get their permission in advance. But the difficulty lies in the power disparity among different universities. For a university with low reputation in the international community, it seems that it would be less possible for the university with low reputation to be invited to join in some famous and influential international conferences because the cooperation could only be built on equality. Then the goal of internationalization could not be achieved easily in the small university. But quite differently, everybody is regarded as the same in voluntary activities. Thus, the students and staff in the university with low reputation would have the chance to perform in the same voluntary activity with the students or staff from the university with high reputation. And then the reputation gained would attract sponsors and cooperators from domestic or overseas.

For the nation or even the world, the investment in poverty alleviation will be reduced. With the increase of voluntary organizations, the charity or cause might get more support and accumulate more manpower and resources to help others. Due to fewer and fewer people being in poverty and needing to get less help from government, the financial pressure on the government would be relieved.

6.3 The difficulties in voluntary activity

6.3.1 Motivation and participation

Volunteer motivation can be defined as the drive of the individuals to seek for volunteer opportunities, commit themselves to voluntarily help, and sustain their involvement in volunteerism overextended periods of time (Pearce, 1983). Wu (2005) found that the motivations of the Taiwan undergraduates to participate in volunteer service are participation records and evaluation, professional growth, self-challenges, and easy to learn.

From the sequence of the college students' motivations, we can see that as non-profit activity, not all the people are of strong enough will to join in the voluntary activity. On the one hand, in society, people need a salary to survive and no one can survive for a long term without food, water and so on. On the other hand,

not every college student is willing to help or interact with the people who are poor, disabled or with low social status.

As is an average in developed countries, voluntary activity has become a way of life for citizens and the proportion of citizens participating in volunteer service is more than 30% of the total population, but in China, taking Shandong Province as an example, less than 4% citizens has participated in the voluntary activity (Fang, 2015). The comparative data above indicates that people lack initiatives in China's voluntary activities and to drive the sustainable development of voluntary activity in China, there is still a long way for Chinese government, Chinese education or even Chinese higher education to go.

6.3.2 Operation of the voluntary organization

In the statistics from the NGO of Tsinghua University, there are thousands of voluntary organizations above the county level in China, but there are only two ways of funding resource, including foreign corporate foundations and volunteers who are completely self-funded (Zhao, 2007). For the volunteers joining in the voluntary activity, what they pay for the voluntary activity includes not only the time but the money while what they get from the voluntary activity is only spiritual. Gradually, their initiatives would be lost. And the shortage of professional talents then has become more and more serious.

6.4 Assessment

Voluntary activity enhances students' social skills at home and abroad. No matter what roles college students would like to play, voluntary activity can enhance college students' social skills in situations of both study and work. Voluntary activity covers all roles could be found from classroom, exchange and internship. It could give college students valuable career experience and even the chance of being group leader. Otherwise, good value for money and personality molding would be created in the voluntary activity as for its aim to help people in need voluntarily.

As a non-profit activity, it is evaluated as not mature in terms of the motivation, participation and operation in China. Then being applied in Chinese higher education as the best way of enhancing college students' social skills could be a difficult task.

For the environment in the classroom, exchange, internship or even extra-curricular activities, they could not be completely same in comparison with the real working area for college students after graduation. So the social skills enhanced in those kinds of imitating places could not be adopted and applied in the real working places directly.

7. Conclusion

In current higher education, social skills are worth enhancing for domestic students and international students. Whether in the transition period from high school students to college students or from college students to staff after graduation, social skills are equally important for the college students. In terms of college students' frequent role shift, the skills of communicating with different people which we call interactive skills become the central part of social skills. Then the voluntary activity is proposed in the essay as a possible way of enhancing students' social skills though there are still many problems remaining to be solved.

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