

# An empirical study of public spiritedness among university students

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**Abstract:** *The shaping of public spirit should stem more from students' own concern for social issues and empathy for the disadvantaged, rather than relying solely on traditional classroom teaching and teacher indoctrination. Therefore, the cultivation of public spirit among college students needs to strengthen students' social participation and practical experience in order to enhance their social sensitivity and establish social responsibility and social commitment through experiential learning. The project has successfully realised the deep integration of experiential learning and the cultivation of public spirit through the reform of teaching strategies such as context creation, case analysis, knowledge construction and hands-on practice, and has achieved good results. To ensure a more lasting effect, there are some key elements that should not be overlooked. These include the provision of targeted teaching guidance for students, the establishment of a multi-party social network, and the creation of a campus atmosphere oriented towards serving the community.*

**Keywords:** *public spirit, participatory experiential learning, teaching strategies*

## 1. Introduction

The talents trained by universities are the backbone of national development. This means that university students should not only master solid basic theories and professional knowledge, and have the skills to analyse and solve public problems, but also possess the public spirit of "establishing the heart for heaven and earth, establishing the life of the people, continuing the great learning for the past saints, and opening up the world for all times". Public spirit means that in the public life of modern society, individual citizens and groups of citizens have a value orientation that transcends the narrow vision and direct utilitarian purpose of individuals and communities, and takes the survival and development of all citizens and the society as a whole as the ultimate goal, and has the ideological and behavioural attitude of caring for public affairs and interests.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, high-quality comprehensive talents should have both public awareness, team spirit, multidisciplinary knowledge background and practical innovation ability. Taking the Social Work Practice course as an example, the study summarises the course's experience in using participatory and experiential teaching strategies to shape the public spirit of university students. The study aims to provide useful references for the shaping of university students' public spirit.

## 2. Lack of Student Subjectivity: The "Death" of the Traditional Teaching Mode of Public Spirit Shaping

Public spirit is a spiritual concept with social value, as the future of the motherland and the hope of the nation, the moulding of public spirit of college students is crucial to personal growth, and also of key significance to social development and national governance<sup>[2]</sup>. However, the current teaching content and curriculum system of colleges and universities still pays more attention to the construction of the discipline system as a whole, and therefore focuses more on the theoretical and intellectual nature, and relatively lacks of practicality and the cultivation of students' abilities, not to mention the shaping of the public spirit.

### 2.1 *Emphasis on theoretical learning rather than public service capacity development, and students' lack of responsiveness to practical problems*

The traditional teaching mode is mainly "theory-oriented" and pays relatively little attention to social change and public issues, so students generally receive abstract knowledge systems and values

that are disconnected from social reality and are unable to truly feel the impact of social issues on their personal lives and the public. This not only leads to students' reduced sensitivity to social and public issues, but also limits their awareness and ability to solve social and public problems and provide innovative service strategies. In addition, traditional education places more emphasis on classroom performance and academic grades in the evaluation system, with relatively few and low assessments of students' practical abilities. Students tend to focus more on the pursuit of high GPAs and neglect to pay attention to real social problems and the cultivation of problem-solving skills.

## ***2.2 "Teacher-dominated, student-supported" teaching model, students' lack of initiative and motivation in learning***

The unidirectional approach of traditional teaching, in which the teacher is the main teacher and the students are the secondary teacher, seriously affects the active participation of students in the learning process at the cognitive, behavioural and affective levels. Firstly, at the cognitive level, students lack active cognitive processing in learning, only passively accepting knowledge, with little active learning feedback in class and after class. For theoretical knowledge, it is only remembered as a result rather than an object, and the process of internalised memory is lacking. Secondly, at the behavioural level, the most intuitive reflection of students' behavioural participation in traditional courses is the attendance rate, and the assumption behind it is that a high attendance rate means that the teacher teaches well and the student learns well, but this may not be the case in reality. The traditional classroom focuses more on students' external behaviour. Emotional engagement in learning is a more implicit and complex form of engagement. Emotional engagement determines learning outcomes to a large extent, yet this aspect is often neglected in traditional teaching. To sum up, the traditional teaching mode restricts students' independent thinking and innovation space, and it is more difficult for students to form an in-depth understanding of and care for public affairs and social issues.

## ***2.3 Curriculum and teaching methods are more rigid, making it difficult to meet students' personalised learning needs***

At present, standardised curricula are commonly adopted in tertiary institutions. Such curricula do not take into account the individual learning needs of students, which may lead to loss of interest or frustration of some students in their studies, and may also deprive them of the opportunity to pursue in-depth studies in a particular direction of specialisation. A de-contextualised single curriculum tends to merely instil standardised solutions in students, neglecting the development of their critical thinking. In contrast, a diversified contextualised approach to teaching and learning allows students to re-enact and experience social problems, reflect on different views and interpretations, and develop their critical thinking and analytical skills through multiple approaches. In the traditional curriculum, it is difficult for students to assimilate and construct personalised knowledge according to their own social concerns, and to truly understand the complexity, plurality and systemic nature of social problems. They are unable to combine their professional knowledge with social practice to develop professionalism and a more altruistically orientated public spirit.

## **3. Participatory and experiential learning: a breakthrough in the traditional teaching mode of public spirit moulding**

The research team took the Social Work Practice course as an example and reformed the course by adopting the participatory experiential learning model. After three years of experimentation, students have achieved good results in the cultivation of public spirit. Behind these results, the participatory experiential learning is creditable.

### ***3.1 The Fitness of Participatory Experiential Learning and the Shaping of Public Spirituality***

The concept of "experiential learning through engagement" was developed by Western scholar David Kolb, who used the learning cycle model to describe this type of learning. The model consists of four key steps: participation, observation and reflection, abstraction and action.<sup>[3]</sup> Participatory experiential learning emphasises practical and emotional experience, and by creating specific scenes to trigger students' emotional experience, it helps them quickly understand the teaching content. This teaching method not only improves students' learning, but also stimulates their interest and creativity, making the learning effect more profound. This is in line with the internal logic of public spirit shaping.

The cultivation of public spirit needs to be gradually trained in specific situations, and become a natural way of thinking, attitude and even behaviour through long-term accumulation.<sup>[4]</sup> More importantly, it mobilises the intrinsic motivation of students to nurture themselves<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that the pedagogy of participatory experiential learning is highly compatible with the shaping of public spirit. Through participatory experiential learning, students are able to better understand and internalise the core values of public spirit and apply them in practical actions. This teaching method provides strong support for students' public spirit moulding.

### ***3.2 Contextualisation: embodied cognition based on real cases***

The primary task of engaging in experiential learning requires teachers to purposefully place students in authentic situations. Based on this concept, the project team restructured the curriculum into three segments: the basic preparation segment (16 hours), the self-selected service area segment (24 hours) and the summary and enhancement segment (8 hours). Through this curriculum, it is hoped that students will be able to learn in real situations and combine professional theoretical knowledge with public spirit in practice, with the focus of the curriculum reform in the second segment. The first is the creation of real-world situations through group research. Students independently choose a social service field and team up to conduct social research, with the field divided according to different disadvantaged groups. After determining the field of social service, teachers assist students to focus on a certain problem area of the disadvantaged group, encourage students to enter the group, from a practical point of view, based on specific problems, in a real social situation to find, analyse and understand the problem. Through social research into real-life scenarios, students have the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue and interaction with the disadvantaged groups, and truly understand the dilemmas, problems and challenges faced by these groups. Such first-hand experience not only broadens students' cognitive horizons, but also enhances their empathy and sympathy for the disadvantaged groups.<sup>[6]</sup>

The second is the creation of a simulated service situation through case role-playing. Teachers asked students to write a typical case and design a corresponding social service programme based on the needs of the caseworkers they found during their research. Afterwards, students were required to role-play and record a video so that they could be critiqued in the subsequent classroom discussion. The simulated social service situation enables students to experience the social service process more realistically, learn how to establish effective communication and trust with the service recipients, how to make appropriate decisions and actions in complex situations, and continuously improve their own service abilities through the role-playing and the reflection and critique in the discussion. For students, when facing the disadvantaged groups again, "client-centredness", "unconditional acceptance", "empathy" and "caring" are no longer abstract concepts that are difficult to comprehend in the classroom, and students can truly appreciate what understanding and respect, and the position of the other, mean.

### ***3.3 Case Study: Reflection on Observation Based on Embodied Cognition***

Students in the process of participatory experiential learning not only need to personally perceive, capture and acquire direct experience, but also need to reflect deeply on their own experience, but this does not mean that teachers are just objective bystanders. Teachers need to transform from knowledge instillers in the traditional classroom to collaborators and facilitators of knowledge production, promoting the whole process of participatory experiential learning in a rich, diverse and humane way. This includes value neutrality in the service process, power relations, and the impact of their own life experiences on the service process. By reflecting on these issues, when students return to the social service situation to face social groups in need again, they are able to understand the state of disadvantaged groups and the dilemmas they face more critically. Through continuous introspection in the practice of social service, they are able to look at the various problems in the society in which they live more objectively and rationally. In the face of problems, they will no longer stand by and watch, but actively seek solutions. Students will work harder in social services, change the world with their actions, and make society more just and harmonious. This is precisely the process of the birth of public spirit.

### ***3.4 Knowledge construction: abstract generalisations based on observation and reflection***

Unlike traditional public spiritedness, participatory experiential learning focuses on pragmatic

concerns and believes that knowledge is generated through "action" rather than "books". Through experiencing, observing, feeling and reflecting in social contexts, students make sense of abstract knowledge such as fairness and justice and try to construct new knowledge. The generation of this new knowledge is inextricably linked to contextual practice. Teachers encourage students to put their personal experience of social service in action into dialogue with social reality and existing theories in order to stimulate critical thinking and to develop practical knowledge based on personal experience. Practical knowledge is usually less grandiose and abstract than most classical knowledge, with a greater emphasis on in-depth reflection, practicality and applicability. Compared to book knowledge, these practical theories can have a more lasting impact on students' cognition and actions, and are knowledge that students truly recognise and internalise. Because they are based on the observation and reflection of specific situations, abstract and generalised knowledge, practical knowledge is not only social and contextualised, but also diversified and uncertain.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, practical knowledge involving public spirituality may also evolve and be updated in response to changes in problematic situations and reflective arenas.<sup>[8]</sup> Nevertheless, the practical knowledge of concepts such as social solidarity, public well-being, rational participation and cooperative governance developed in social service has been internalised as values and codes of conduct for students.

### ***3.5 Practising in the field: a practical test based on the construction of knowledge***

In order to enable students to apply their learning experiences and practical knowledge in real-life actions, the programme provides students with a series of practical experience sessions, including short-term casework, group service, community volunteering and long-term internship practice arrangements. These practical activities are interconnected and progressively deepened. During the course, the lecturer invites social service experts to fully interact with the students to help them understand the experience they have accumulated in social context research. Under the guidance of the experts, student groups repeatedly discuss and adjust their service programmes. For the protection of service recipients, the case service programme and the group service programme were first simulated and implemented in the classroom, and were evaluated by the classroom teachers, experts and practitioners. When the student groups are relatively mature in the simulated service situations, they will enter the real community to provide volunteer services. Compared to the immersive "seeing" and "asking" in social situations, volunteering is a real "doing" experience for students. In addition to the above short-term practical experience, the programme is also integrated with professional practice arrangements. During the summer holidays, the university has set up 800 hours of internship for students, who are assigned to different social service organisations to carry out social services under the dual guidance of teachers and supervisors of the organisations. Through a series of service practices, students have been able to participate in a full range of cognitive, affective and behavioural experiences, cultivate care for the disadvantaged, deepen their understanding of social issues, and implicitly cultivate the initiative of social participation and commitment to social responsibility..

## **4. Reflections and Insights**

### ***4.1 Providing "targeted" pedagogical guidance***

Participatory experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasises students' practice and first-hand experience, but if the curriculum design lacks clear objectives and focuses only on students' "sense of experience", it is easy for students to be confused and unable to integrate their experiences and knowledge to form a meaningful practice of public spirituality. In order to avoid these problems, teachers should ensure that the teaching objectives are consistent with the core values of public spirituality when designing the curriculum. At the same time, the designed practical activities should also correspond closely to the teaching objectives and provide students with opportunities and contexts to shape public spirituality. In addition, in this teaching model, the teacher is no longer the leader of knowledge production, but still plays the role of an experiential learning guide. Teachers should help students identify and overcome weaknesses in their public spirituality practices and provide concrete suggestions and strategies to stimulate their thinking, understanding, and problem-solving skills. Teachers should also encourage students to reflect on their actions and experiences to help them gain deeper understanding and grow from them.

#### **4.2 Building "multi-stakeholder" social networks**

The establishment of a "multi-party" social support and resource network is crucial to the shaping of public spirit among university students. On the one hand, colleges and universities can bring in professionals from different fields into the mentoring team by "inviting them in". With their unique perspectives, professional knowledge and experiences, they can provide students with diversified viewpoints and inspirations, share different insights and service experiences, help students understand the core values of public spirit and its practical application, stimulate students' thinking and guide them to take action. On the other hand, colleges and universities can also cooperate with social organisations, foundations and relevant government departments in the way of "going out". They can provide opportunities for college students to participate in social service projects, provide funding and guidance for public service entrepreneurship, and even inspire their awareness and determination to contribute to society.

#### **4.3 Creating an atmosphere of "service to the community" on campus**

Colleges and universities should foster more public service student clubs and set up special campus public service funds to encourage students to participate in public service and promote the sustainable development of public service activities in schools. At the same time, schools should set up appropriate public service awards and recognition mechanisms to recognise students' public service achievements. In addition, schools can make use of the power of campus media and social media to increase the publicity of public service. Through organising promotional activities, thematic lectures and exhibitions, the achievements and impact of public service projects in which students have participated can be showcased. At the same time, professionals in related fields are invited to the campus to deliver lectures to convey the value and significance of public service and to stimulate students' enthusiasm and motivation for participation. Such a campus atmosphere is also more conducive to the development of students' empathy, sense of social responsibility and awareness of public service, so that they can gradually develop values and codes of conduct that are concerned about social issues and the well-being of others as they grow up.

### **5. Conclusions**

The shaping of public spirit should stem more from students' own concern for social issues and empathy for the disadvantaged, rather than relying solely on traditional classroom teaching and teacher indoctrination. Therefore, the cultivation of public spirit among college students needs to strengthen students' social participation and practical experience in order to enhance their social sensitivity and build social responsibility and social commitment through experiential learning.

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