

A Study on the Application of Historical Thinking in the Teaching of "History of Western Civilization"

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ABSTRACT

Historical thinking, as a way of understanding and analyzing historical events, figures, and phenomena, plays a critical role in deepening students' understanding of the developmental trajectory of Western civilization. By establishing critical thinking, chronological thinking, and causal reasoning, the importance of historical thinking in learning the history of Western civilization is demonstrated. The introduction of teaching methods based on historical thinking, such as problem-based learning and critical reading, can effectively enhance students' abilities to understand and analyze history. These methods not only deepen students' cognitive understanding of historical events and figures but also promote a comprehensive grasp of the developmental trajectory of Western civilization. The application of historical thinking in teaching the History of Western Civilization is of great significance. It not only deepens students' understanding of historical events and figures but also cultivates their critical thinking and chronological reasoning abilities, laying a solid foundation for their holistic development. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for the teaching reform of the History of Western Civilization course.

Keywords: *Historical thinking, Chronology, Developmental trajectory of Western civilization, Competence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In senior years of college, offering the course "History of Western Civilization" to English major students serves as an effective means to enhance their thinking abilities and complement their knowledge. The purpose of introducing professional courses at advanced levels is to help students transition from mastering basic English language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing to constructing a systematic way of thinking. The focus lies in developing independent thinking, problem analysis, and problem-solving abilities. The study of the "History of Western Civilization" course allows students to understand the development of Western civilization using English as a tool, thereby strengthening their fundamental language skills. Through the study of reading materials, students can grasp the guiding role of historical thinking and cultivate independent thinking abilities. As students encounter various challenges during the learning process, they are trained to develop a sensitivity to historical and

cultural perspectives, gaining a macroscopic understanding of the stages of civilization's progress. By comprehending the deeper meaning of "development" within a historical context, students are guided to move beyond superficial recognition of historical and cultural phenomena to a more profound interpretation of their underlying significance. Through deep reflection, they form their own viewpoints and insights. This paper explores the application of historical thinking in the "History of Western Civilization" course and analyzes the feasibility of integrating historical thinking into course teaching. It aims to promote students' cognitive development while ensuring consistency with teaching objectives. Additionally, it elaborates on the significance of historical thinking in cultural courses for English major students.

2. CONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK WITHIN THE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Among all things, the irreversibility of time is undeniable. What is "history"? This question serves as an explanation of historical thinking. In general terms, history is the study of all changes and phenomena that occur within the concept of time. The study of history fundamentally concerns the extension of time, which encompasses the past, present, and future. Within these three broad divisions, the changes experienced by historical figures and events can be distinguished in terms of their historical and consensual significance. The historical aspect of time refers to the vertical direction of time's development, while the consensual aspect refers to the horizontal direction of the time process. The specificity of time within the historical context indicates that historical events can be viewed through the sequence of their development — examining the relationships between the past and the present, and analyzing events within a particular time frame from both broad and narrow perspectives. Through this framework, students can organize the main developmental trajectory of Western civilization in chronological order. Starting from the civilization of the Mesopotamian region, to Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and up to the wars and revolutions, the historical timeline becomes clear and coherent. This helps students understand the content of the course and form mental landmarks within broader thematic areas. With a macro understanding of the overall sequence and trends of Western civilization's development, students can better grasp the course material. Therefore, time-oriented thinking and the historical development framework lay the foundation for students' mastery of the subject.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORICAL EVENTS AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CIVILIZATION

In the study of history, humanities students often develop fixed ways of thinking through previous stages of learning, such as understanding historical events merely as a chronological

account—describing the time, place, figures, causes, processes, outcomes, and significance of events. In the teaching of the "History of Western Civilization" course, students need to recognize that this traditional way of thinking is just a foundation. The focus of this course should be on the relationship between historical events and the characteristics of civilizations. An event's existence is objective, but the learner (observer) brings subjectivity to it. Under the premise of subjectivity leaning toward consensus, each individual's cognition and perception will vary, and independent thinking leads to new insights. This allows the expansion of an event's associations and the incorporation of personal understanding and analysis, thus raising the height and depth of understanding. For example, when a historical event occurs, although the facts are objective, different people may interpret it from different perspectives. Some may focus on the political background, while others may emphasize the social impact. Through in-depth research and independent thought, these diverse perspectives can be integrated to form a more comprehensive and profound understanding. Take the example of the invention of printing. The origin of Western printing lacks definitive records, but historical research suggests that by the end of the 14th century, printed materials using wood, wooden boards, and copper plates appeared in Europe. By the mid-15th century, the earliest religious books in Europe were printed. After students learn about the origin of printing and its introduction, they should focus on the impact of printing after understanding the basic events. The impact is not merely a one-dimensional description but should be analyzed in relation to the characteristics of civilization. The first-layer impact of printing was the emergence of paper books. The scale and quantity of paper books increased, and they spread throughout Europe, significantly accelerating the spread of knowledge. During the European Renaissance, the widespread use of printing deepened and expanded the dissemination of humanist thought, scientific knowledge, and various artistic works, playing a crucial role in the development of the Western Renaissance and objectively facilitating the spread of knowledge and ideas. Additionally, with the promotion of printing, cultural exchanges between Western cultures became more convenient, leading to frequent cultural interactions between different regions and ethnicities, advancing the blending and diversification of cultures, and promoting the flourishing and diversification of human civilization. Thus, the development of printing

greatly advanced the progress of Western civilization.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT THINKING AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

In the advanced stages of the English major, students primarily focus on developing a systematic thinking framework. At this stage, students gradually build their own knowledge framework through systematic courses and practical activities. To lay a solid foundation for entering society, it is crucial to help students realize that the knowledge they have acquired is an essential tool for solving problems. The internalization of knowledge not only promotes their thinking abilities but also equips them with skills to analyze problems, identify the root causes, and recognize the manifestations of issues, thus enabling them to effectively seek solutions. This is the core significance of forming a thinking system. Critical thinking emphasizes the ability to deeply analyze and evaluate information, viewpoints, and arguments. It is an important cognitive skill that is not about criticism in the negative sense. On the contrary, it requires students to maintain independent thinking when receiving information, avoiding blind conformity. Through rational analysis, reasoning, and judgment, students ultimately achieve objective evaluations of matters. The focus is on analyzing and reflecting on the knowledge points encountered while reading and studying the "History of Western Civilization," forming personal insights and viewpoints. In language learning, students can compare their formed viewpoints with the logical structure of the arguments presented in the text, analyzing the coherence of the logic. They can annotate and explain knowledge points, propose their own views, and compare them with others. Correct viewpoints can be analyzed and evaluated. Additionally, students should learn reverse thinking and reflection. The method of contradiction (*reductio ad absurdum*) can strengthen the learning process. This method challenges conventional thinking, leading to new perspectives. When approaching the same issue, students should think from multiple angles, levels, and perspectives, posing questions and providing answers, while constantly refining their personal viewpoints through reflection. This helps form correct conclusions. For instance, when studying the Industrial Revolution, the focus is often placed on its role in advancing the development of Western civilization. However, if

the environmental impact of the Industrial Revolution is presented as a knowledge issue for students to discuss, they will analyze the problem and understand that issues should be considered from both sides. They will learn not to view only one aspect of a problem, avoid blindly accepting information, and refrain from generalizing from a single point. Instead, they will analyze the effects of historical developments on humanity and society. This will help students make functional assessments of Western civilization's development, learning to use coherent logic and ample evidence to support their viewpoints. Through this process, students will appreciate the importance of critical thinking, experience the joy of learning, and gradually improve their critical thinking abilities.

5. PROMOTING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND EXCHANGE FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The study of the "History of Western Civilization" is not just about learning Western history, but about viewing the development of Western civilization as the main thread of learning. Through this course, students can grasp the core ideas of Western civilization and expand their understanding beyond the boundaries of European history, exploring the interactions between different civilizations from a global perspective. They will learn about the processes of communication, collision, and understanding between different civilizations. With the establishment of historical thinking, students will better understand the similarities and differences between Western civilization and other civilizations, recognizing the diversity and pluralism of civilizations. In the course of human history, this diversity and pluralism are crucial. Students will learn the history of Western civilization with an objective, rational, and developmental viewpoint, exploring the multicultural factors that have shaped Western civilization's development.

6. ESTABLISHING AWARENESS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY THINKING

In teaching the "History of Western Civilization" course, instructors not only teach the historical events in the development of Western history but also integrate knowledge from various disciplines. This involves literature, philosophy, art, architecture, and cross-cultural communication. Through the process of interdisciplinary integration,

students gain rich content and understand the potential for the blending and interconnection of knowledge points in the context of new liberal arts. The fusion of knowledge from different disciplines can cultivate students' ability to apply interdisciplinary knowledge comprehensively. Optimized teaching methods in such activities are beneficial to the development of students' interdisciplinary thinking. For course-related issues, students can apply knowledge from political science, economics, history, and other disciplines. Collaborative learning, reading feedback, and case analysis can enhance students' innovative abilities and the formation of critical thinking as they engage with knowledge points.

7. CHALLENGES IN APPLYING HISTORICAL THINKING IN THE "HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION" COURSE

In interdisciplinary teaching, the establishment of historical thinking faces many issues and challenges. From the perspective of instructors, they must first have a comprehensive background in parallel and integrated knowledge across disciplines, which serves as the foundation for teaching. The clarity of historical thinking helps instructors divide long periods of history into manageable segments and guide students to connect historical events with other knowledge points and the development of civilizations, ultimately summarizing the characteristics of civilizations and their functions. Secondly, optimizing teaching methods is a key factor in ensuring the quality of the teaching content. Rational and efficient teaching methods can motivate students and ensure the comprehensiveness and integrity of the content. Instructors must not only teach students the most important historical events, figures, ideas, and characteristics in the "History of Western Civilization," but also design effective teaching strategies based on the content and the students' actual learning situation to stimulate their enthusiasm and interest. Finally, adjusting the course evaluation system is critical. Traditional evaluation methods often focus on assessing students' mastery of knowledge goals, while the evaluation of students' abilities is sometimes overlooked. The goal of the "History of Western Civilization" course aligns with that of higher-level courses, and the evaluation should focus more on assessing thinking processes to improve students' comprehensive abilities. For students, the common perception is that history learning is rigid and

mechanical, neglecting its flexible and variable aspects. The internalization of knowledge is interconnected. Students' learning backgrounds influence their ability to change thinking patterns, adjust learning attitudes, and adapt to the way of thinking and knowledge system in the "History of Western Civilization". Additionally, differences in students' knowledge reserves and individual learning styles can affect the quality and effectiveness of their learning. Teachers should encourage students to expand their reading and learn how to create mind maps, helping them actively participate in teaching activities and work with the instructor to complete learning tasks. Finally, the objectivity of learning ability plays a role. Learning ability involves multiple factors, including personal cognitive capacity, learning motivation, emotional control, study habits, and self-discipline. Therefore, instructors must consider students' subjective conditions flexibly and comprehensively, reasonably arrange learning content, and improve teaching quality.

8. CONCLUSION

The application of historical thinking in the English major's "History of Western Civilization" course contributes to enhancing students' language skills through reading English materials, such as expanding vocabulary, deepening understanding of syntactical structures, and improving fluent expression. The integration of interdisciplinary content, such as knowledge from literature, philosophy, and art, complements students' knowledge structures and broadens their intellectual depth, enabling them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the development of Western civilization and its impact on modern society. At the same time, it encourages both teachers and students to reflect on and improve teaching activities. For example, through discussions and debates, it stimulates critical thinking and fosters innovation. This not only strengthens students' overall abilities and competencies, such as problem analysis, teamwork, and cultural sensitivity, but also contributes significantly to the improvement of teachers' quality and their cultural and humanistic development.

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