

Research on the Application of Progressive Project-Based Teaching in Visual Communication Design Based on the Principle of "Competition-driven Innovation"

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of reform in higher education design pedagogy, this study explores an innovative pathway to effectively enhance the teaching quality of graduation projects in visual communication design major, addressing the issues of fragmented knowledge and practical disconnection inherent in traditional teaching methods. By combining theoretical analysis with case studies, this study constructs a progressive project-driven teaching model of "competition-driven innovation". It integrates the discipline competition system into the entire teaching process and conducts teaching experiments and effectiveness analysis using the "Graduation Design" course in the visual communication design major at H University as a practical case. Case studies demonstrate that this teaching model significantly enhances students' learning initiative, innovative awareness, and practical abilities. Students have achieved outstanding results in design competitions at various levels, and their graduation projects show notable improvements in both creativity and practicality. Integrating competitions into a progressive project-driven teaching process helps enhance the systematicity and effectiveness of graduation design instruction, demonstrating strong applicability and value for promotion.

Keywords: Visual communication design; Progressive project-driven teaching, Competition-driven innovation, Graduation project.

1. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of continuous reform in higher design education, the visual communication design major, as a core component of the art and design discipline system, has gradually become an important link in measuring the quality of undergraduate education and the effectiveness of practical education through graduation design teaching. This section is not only a systematic aggregation of the knowledge learned by students over the past four years, but also a concentrated reflection of their innovative and comprehensive practical abilities. In recent years, project-based learning (PBL) has received widespread attention in the field of art and design education, emphasizing "project-based and problem-oriented" approach, which can effectively enhance students' problem-

solving abilities and learning initiative.[1] The traditional "phased" teaching structure of visual communication design majors can easily lead to a lack of connection and continuity between courses, resulting in fractures and fragmentation in students' knowledge construction process. It is urgent to explore a new teaching path with the characteristics of "hierarchical progression and project integration". Since the launch of the "Double Ten-thousand Plan" for the construction of first-class undergraduate courses in 2019, the country has clearly proposed the construction of "golden courses" that reflect advanced, innovative, and challenging aspects, and promoted the transformation of curriculum reform from "content oriented" to "ability oriented".[2] At the same time, the popularization of outcome-based education (OBE) educational philosophy further emphasizes the design of a teaching loop that is output oriented

and student-centered, with the goal of aligning with professional graduation requirements and achieving consistency between teaching objectives, teaching activities, and learning outcomes.[3]

2. THE EVOLUTION FROM CURRICULUM STRUCTURE CHANGES TO TEACHING LOGIC

The "Graduation Project" course is often regarded as the endpoint of a professional teaching achievement. With the continuous deepening of the curriculum system reform, its functions and expected effects are quietly changing. With the increasing emphasis on the "high level" and "challenge" of undergraduate education quality at the education policy level. The "Double Ten-thousand Plan" proposed by the Ministry of Education, the construction of first-class undergraduate courses, and the creation of "golden courses" all aim to shift the focus of university courses from "knowledge imparting" to "ability shaping". This shift is not a formal adjustment for design majors, but a fundamental change in teaching logic and structure. At the same time, the OBE concept requires the design of course objectives to be traced back to students' actual output and ability performance. This "reverse deduction" teaching design method requires teachers to clarify the ability structure that students should ultimately possess when designing the teaching process, and organize teaching content and activities accordingly.[4] In the field of visual communication design, the "Graduation Design" course is not only about evaluating students' ability to independently complete a project, but also about whether students truly possess the ability to integrate design thinking, systematically analyze problems, and solve real-world problems. The task of a teacher is not only to "teach", but also to "construct" a curriculum space that can support students' growth, including a reasonable curriculum chain, phased goals, evaluation methods, and other aspects.

From the perspective of teaching practice, the introduction and development of project-based teaching mode provides a new feasible path. For design students, this approach has a natural fit, as design problems are often difficult to solve through standard answers and rely more on students' judgment and response to specific situations. However, project-based teaching also exposes the problems of fragmented stages and difficulty in sustained progress in practical operation, especially

in situations where the curriculum structure is unclear or the goals are set vaguely. Students are prone to falling into a tired state of "doing projects for the sake of projects" and "virtual projects".

It is in this context that the "progressive" teaching structure has gradually been adopted and reconstructed by some universities. The "progressive project-driven" teaching path attempts to address the systematic lack of teaching content through the internal structural logic of the curriculum system. By stratifying the course content and sorting project tasks according to cognitive difficulty and execution depth, a teaching chain has been constructed that progresses from basic courses to graduation projects. The key to this approach is not how many "projects" are introduced, but rather emphasizing the correlation and accumulation between projects, thus forming a two-way evolution trajectory of "horizontal expansion - vertical deepening" in students' knowledge structure.[5]

On this basis, some colleges and universities have begun to try to incorporate professional competitions into their teaching process, in order to introduce a "real situation" beyond the course content. The evaluation mechanism and outcome requirements of competitions not only provide students with clear task goals, but also to some extent replace the lack of "external feedback" in traditional teaching evaluation. By incorporating tasks such as the College Student Innovation Competition, Challenge Cup, Huacan Award, Daguang Competition, and NCAD into the curriculum, students' engagement and originality can be significantly enhanced. After the competition's initial review and evaluation, students' works often return to the classroom with a high level of completion. Competitions are no longer just "extracurricular activities", but a part of the teaching process, incorporated into curriculum design, forming a teaching mechanism of "competition-driven learning" and "competition-driven teaching".

These changes do not occur locally in the teaching process, but more like an overall transfer of teaching logic. Curriculum is no longer just the arrangement and combination of content, but has become a structural design for students' growth paths. From policy driven to conceptual evolution, from teaching methods to evaluation structures, the graduation design courses of visual communication design majors are gradually moving away from the "terminal" teaching structure and towards a

process-based system that can be generated, accumulated, and feedbacked. The key to this system may lie in establishing a platform structure that connects course objectives, learning processes, and external practices, allowing students to "promote learning through doing" at every stage, and ultimately form a natural growth aggregation of achievements in their graduation project.

3. DESIGN AND PRACTICE PATH OF PROGRESSIVE PROJECT-DRIVEN TEACHING MODEL

The current higher education reform emphasizes the cultivation of students' innovative spirit and practical ability. It is necessary to enhance the high-level and innovative nature of the curriculum, increase the challenge level of the curriculum, encourage the integration of research-oriented and project-based learning into the teaching process, in order to cultivate students' comprehensive ability to solve complex problems and the spirit of innovation. In this context, colleges and universities are actively promoting practical teaching reform, with "competition-driven innovation" becoming one of the important directions. The national policy clearly proposes to "adhere to competition-driven teaching, competition-driven learning, and competition-driven innovation", enrich teaching content through various levels and types of college student competitions, and enhance students' innovation and entrepreneurship abilities.[6]

The visual communication design major has strong practical application characteristics, requiring the teaching process to closely integrate theory and practice to enhance students' design skills and innovative thinking. Therefore, this field needs to explore new teaching models that are suitable for professional characteristics. In recent years, the "project driven" teaching method has been valued for emphasizing students' learning in real projects, and is believed to help stimulate students' initiative and creativity. Especially the "progressive project-based" teaching model, which gradually unfolds project-based teaching according to gradient difficulty, has attracted increasing attention. This model allows students to accumulate experience and deepen knowledge through gradual project training, completing a series of design tasks from easy to difficult, achieving independent exploration and ability improvement. Building a progressive project-based teaching model based on the concept of "promoting innovation through competition" is expected to further stimulate

students' innovative potential. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically design this teaching model from the aspects of teaching objectives, course content, project implementation path, and teaching evaluation mechanism.

3.1 Teaching Objective Design

Progressive project-based teaching is actually more like helping students "clear the line", not relying on a single course "assault", but gradually exercising their ability to deal with complex problems through a set of progressive project chains. In this mode, art and design are no longer isolated operations, but must be considered in conjunction with various factors such as digital technology and social culture, with a structured and logical mind. In daily teaching, teachers not only teach skills, but also guide everyone on how to express ideas using visual language, how to layout and explain information clearly, so that design can speak. Especially, the curriculum is not limited to classroom "named composition", but constantly encourages everyone to participate in competitions and engage in real projects, allowing students to learn how to identify problems and release ideas in uncertainty. This process is not always linear, and sometimes it can be chaotic and stuck, but students gradually realize that they are no longer just "doing homework", but truly capable of coming up with a decent plan. From a "trainee" in the classroom to a "designer" who can handle an entire project on their own, ultimately it is the change that this model truly wants to bring.

3.2 Curriculum Content Setting

The curriculum content revolves around the main line of the project for system design and gradient optimization. The teaching unit arranges a series of interconnected design project tasks in order from easy to difficult, achieving a gradual and in-depth approach. For example, relevant research can be used to divide course modules into three levels: basic design training, competition topic training, and comprehensive design expansion, gradually enhancing students' abilities from conceptual creativity to complete solution implementation. The tasks of each project are interrelated in terms of knowledge points and gradually improve in skill requirements, achieving organic integration and expansion of textbook content, avoiding the problem of students' knowledge being isolated, fragmented, and unable to integrate. The course emphasizes authenticity

and cutting-edge content, integrating the actual needs of the market into teaching, allowing students to directly participate in the design practice of real enterprise projects or competition propositions, strengthening the practicality and challenge of the course content, and achieving "real questions and real work". Such content not only enables students to understand the latest industry trends and design processes, but also provides a platform for them to showcase their creative talents, inspiring higher learning investment and innovation motivation.

3.3 Project Implementation Path

In the process of progressive project-based teaching, the role of teachers is also changing, from traditional knowledge transmitters to project guides, focusing on creating heuristic and interactive learning situations for students.[7] There is a must to provide guidance and support to students' needs, monitor their learning progress in real time, help them build confidence and develop the ability to solve practical problems, encourage students to form project teams to research and create together, and cultivate teamwork spirit and communication skills through discussion, division of labor, and communication. As the main body of learning, students complete various design tasks through independent exploration and team collaboration, truly achieving the combination of "teaching, learning, and doing".

In the process of advancing the course, the teachers brought the competition into the classroom in advance, with the aim of making everyone's graduation project not just a classroom assignment, but truly able to connect with external professional competitions. At the graduation stage, students are encouraged to directly choose competitions such as the Huacan Award and the Daguang Competition as their design projects, and the entire process should be as close to the rhythm of the competition as possible - research, conceptualization, modification, and presentation, with each step being numerous. This approach is actually quite effective. The original state of doing design for the sake of passing on assignments has undergone significant changes. Students know that this is not a "submission of an assignment", but a "comparison of works", and the level of investment is also different. In a sense, this arrangement makes the "wall" between the teaching site and the real industry needs thinner, and in some cases, it can almost be "penetrated" directly.

3.4 Teaching Evaluation Mechanism

In order to make the evaluation more comprehensive, instead of relying on the teacher alone, this course invited outside industry tutors to watch the work together. At the same time, it also added such links as mutual evaluation between students and group evaluation. Rather than just focusing on the final product, teachers pay more attention to how students think and act throughout the entire process, including initial research, mid-term presentations, and mid-term modifications and adjustments, which are basically included. When rating, it's not just about whether the work is beautiful or not, but also takes into account whether they have participated in the team, their enthusiasm for promoting the project, and their participation in the competition. The evaluation among students is quite interesting to be honest. Everyone has seen more of what others have done, and their judgment on design is gradually improving. This approach is not just about focusing on the "final result", but actually makes students more willing to immerse themselves in the entire process, knowing that every step is seen, and more receptive to genuine feedback. Overall, this kind of evaluation from multiple perspectives is indeed more flexible and warmer than the previous one that gave a one-shot rating.

4. CASE ANALYSIS OF THE "GRADUATION DESIGN" COURSE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN

This case study takes the "Graduation Design" course of Class 02, 2021 of the visual communication design major at H University as an example. Within 18 weeks, 31 students were guided by a guidance group consisting of the main lecturer, two tutors, and external mentors to advance their graduation designs in stages and embed them into subject competitions. The course adopts a "mentor group + students" model, focusing on students as the main body and teachers as guidance, integrating real projects with competitions, stimulating creative potential, and enhancing professional abilities.

4.1 Teaching Organization Structure

The teaching team for this case course includes both on campus and off campus mentors. On campus teachers are responsible for course design and daily guidance, while industry mentors serve as invited experts to provide professional advice at

critical junctures. The joint guidance of "on campus + off campus" broadens students' horizons and ensures that project topics and work forms are closely aligned with industry trends. For students, the graduation project is mainly based on personal creation, but the competition encourages students to form teams or participate individually with 2-3 people as needed. This not only ensures that each student has independent works, but also cultivates a sense of teamwork. The course holds a weekly workshop for all students to exchange project progress and share ideas. Teachers provide centralized feedback and guidance at the seminar to promote mutual learning and inspiration among students. This organizational form enhances teaching interaction and lays the foundation for introducing competitions.

4.2 Project Phased Promotion Mode

The case adopts a progressive project promotion strategy, dividing the task of "Graduation Design" into three main stages and gradually unfolding them. Each stage focuses on different goals and is interrelated, guiding students to complete the design creation from shallow to deep.

4.2.1 Designing Concept Planning Stage (Weeks 1-4)

Students conduct data research and determine their respective research directions based on competitions or local business needs. The teaching team held a topic guidance meeting to guide students to pay attention to social hotspots, cultural heritage, and user needs, and to explore valuable design topics. Each student submits a "Graduation Design Proposal", including topic background, design objectives, creative sketches, etc. The teacher group will conduct centralized evaluation and feedback to help students focus on the topic and improve their ideas, laying a foundation for subsequent design.

4.2.2 Designing Creation Stage (Weeks 5-12)

Students engage in visual creation based on the plan, including graphic creativity, layout design, illustration drawing, interaction design, animation design, and other specific practices. During this period, the teaching team arranged a series of specialized workshops, with external mentors teaching case studies and guiding practical implementation to enhance students' professional

skills. Around the 10th week, a mid-term project exhibition and evaluation will be held, where all students will showcase their interim achievements. The mid-term judges will be composed of on campus mentors to provide feedback. Through simulated competition evaluations, students will receive validation and feedback in the mid-term, which will stimulate their motivation for improvement and enhancement.

4.2.3 Designing Enhancement and Improvement Stage (Weeks 13-18)

During weeks 13 to 18, students had already developed a relatively complete design prototype, so they began to make slight adjustments based on previous reviews and feedback from teachers. From color to layout, to overall presentation logic, the refinement of details became particularly crucial. In the 15th week, the school invited several designers and corporate mentors from outside the school to conduct a simulated defense session. Students need to introduce their designs as if they were facing real clients, and experts provide on-site evaluations that both affirm and point out many issues. Although the scene was quite tense, many people said it was the most valuable segment. In the last week, attending the public graduation project exhibition, not only teachers and classmates, but also some people from external institutions came. The whole process was both the end and the starting point for students to move towards the next stage.

4.3 Competition Embedding Method

A national design competition was embedded in the graduation project process to achieve the goal of "competition-driven innovation". The teaching team also specifically incorporated several national level design competitions into the curriculum this time. The selected competitions are all from the A-class competition directory of the Ministry of Education, such as Huacan Award, Daguang Competition, NADC, Milan Design Week and other events have topics that are closely related to the industry, and the schedule coincides with the courses. This arrangement allows students to have a more challenging goal while completing course tasks. Many students ended up showcasing their entries as their graduation achievements, and the response was quite positive. Compared to the previous graduation project that was "done and done", this approach of "taking the work to practice" is more like a true design training.

4.3.1 Integrating into the Topic Selection

In the conceptual planning stage, students are introduced to various competition proposition directions and encouraged to connect their graduation project topics with competition themes based on their own interests. For example, some students' public service advertisements or creative topics for intangible cultural heritage happen to coincide with the competition topic. By integrating the competition proposition into the opening topic, students have made it clear from the beginning that the creation not only serves the graduation requirements, but also meets the real needs of the competition, enhancing the purpose and challenge of the project.

4.3.2 Docking Progress

The course progress is adjusted synchronously with the competition timeline. A series of A-level competitions organized by the Ministry of Education, such as Milan Design Week, Daguang Competition, NADC National University Digital Art Design Competition, and China Packaging Creativity Competition, will have a centralized deadline from April to mid-June (around weeks 10-16). Teachers will set up a "Competition Sprint Tutoring Week" in week 9 to provide guidance on improving the entries. The coaching content includes explaining the competition standards, analyzing outstanding works from previous years, simulating evaluation criteria, etc. Students use this as a basis to sprint and polish their designs. Even those who did not directly participate in the competition have broadened their horizons and improved their work standards through observation and guidance. The mid-term project evaluation also invites graduates who have won previous competitions to participate in the evaluation, provide professional opinions, and help students optimize their works before submission.

4.3.3 Incentive Mechanism

The course has set up an incentive mechanism that combines competition and rewards for the process and results. Submitting entries on time will earn extra points for regular grades. Winners, in addition to being recognized by the college, will have their grades converted into additional points for their graduation project. The grades of non-winners will not be affected. The time pressure of real competitions encourages students to be more proactive in polishing their works, and competition

milestones also drive course progress. "Competition-driven innovation" not only enhances students' innovation and practical abilities, but also enriches the teaching experience of graduation projects and expands the impact of achievements.

4.4 Student Feedback

After the graduation project was completed, the teacher team interviewed all students in the class one by one, and the overall feedback was positive. Most students believe that in addition to completing their work, it is more important to learn how to produce efficiently within a limited time and accumulate practical experience. 22 students mentioned that the introduction of the competition allowed them to enter the creative stage earlier and actively polish their works without waiting for the teacher's urging. Periodic tasks make the process more rhythmic, and mid-term exhibition evaluations and simulated defenses are widely considered to be the most helpful, as they can both expose problems in advance and clarify the direction of modification. Many people have expressed that preparing for the competition in parallel with teammates is difficult, but it effectively improves communication and collaboration skills. Four students also felt that synchronizing their graduation project with the competition was a bit tight, and suggested a more flexible schedule. Overall, although the pace of the mode is fast, it significantly increases participation and sense of gain.

4.5 Outcome Output

This graduation project truly incorporated the concept of "competition-driven innovation" into the entire process, and the results were more impressive than expected. Out of 31 students, 27 submitted their entries and ultimately won 18 awards, including 2 national first prizes, 3 second prizes, as well as multiple third prizes and excellence awards. The themes and forms of the works are very rich, from posters and packaging to UI, animation, and infographics, which shows that everyone has made breakthroughs in creativity and expression. At the graduation exhibition, many works not only won praise from teachers and students on campus, but also left a deep impression on foreign audiences and professional judges. Such achievements are not only personal progress for students, but also greatly enhance the influence of the major both inside and outside the school. As a result, the teaching team has successfully applied

for the provincial basic teaching and research office. Some outstanding works have also been invited to participate in subsequent exhibitions, truly realizing the transition from the classroom to a larger stage. For students, this is both an exercise and a motivation.

5. CONCLUSION

Graduation design is never a closed summary, but more like a starting point for continued growth. This attempt to "bring the competition in" actually caused some concern at first that students might be overwhelmed by the double pressure, but the result actually aroused the inner motivation of many people. Some people say that propositions limit creativity, but sometimes turning around in real problems can actually find more specific ways of expression. The projects are progressing one after another, a bit like building blocks. Some are built quickly, while others collapse and start over halfway. However, this process of layer-by-layer stacking is no longer just about "doing it for graduation". People also gradually realize that teaching should not only focus on the results, but also on the emotional fluctuations, collision of ideas, and even the moments of overturning and starting over in the process. Teaching design should not just be a step-by-step schedule, it should be flexible, breathable, and in sync with the pace of students' growth. Whether the final work looks good or not is one thing. Whether students have found their own expression in it is the most important thing in this course.

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