

The Intention of General Education in Taiwan's Universities: To Cultivate the Holistic Person

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Abstract

The cultivation of the holistic person has always been a topic of concern for general education in Taiwan's universities. Hopefully students can attain a more perfect human nature. So the question is how to practice general education to cultivate the holistic person. This is the focus of this article. After reading and analyzing related studies, the strategies for cultivating the holistic person we identified are as follows: (1) concern about students' knowledge integration and moral manifestation, (2) cultivation of students' human nature, (3) concern with students' life experiences, and (4) general education is as important as professional education. Hopefully the discussion in this article will provide some ideas to help Taiwan's current general education practices, and allow us to realize the ideal of general education, i.e., the cultivation of the holistic person.

Keywords: general education, higher education, the holistic person

1. Introduction

In Taiwan, general education has been advocated since Tunghai University was founded in 1955 as a leader. In April 6th 1956, at the 4th Annual School Assembly Meeting, President Tseng Yue-Nung proclaimed that "the goal of our education and basic policy would be General Education, hoping that all faculties would fully support and study it (Center for General Education of Tunghai University, 2017). The praxis of general education in Tunghai University is the beginning of general education in Taiwan.

The cultivation of the self is always an issue of ultimate concern in the East Asian educational tradition. Thousands of years ago, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Laozi, Zhuangzi and many other ancient philosophers all pondered on the meaning of being a person—what kind of a human being one should be and how one should develop oneself to be such a holistic person, whose psychological, physical and spiritual aspects effect together to cultivate a well integrated personality. Their legacy has produced a unique domain of Chinese or Confucian cultural heritage in East Asia (Hung, 2017).

In fact, the cultivation of the holistic person has always been a topic of concern for general education. Hopefully students can have a more perfect human nature. However, the question is how to allow students to become holistic persons. This is the focus of university general education in Taiwan. For example, NTU's general education emphasizes the importance of dialogue, communication and integration between different academic fields by offering students' opportunities to access a broad set of knowledge. Students are expected to apply the knowledge and skills acquired from general education towards ongoing cross-disciplinary dialogues that will transform knowledge and trigger the discovery of creative insights and innovative ideas in the face of an ever-changing world (The Center for General Education at NTU, 2017).

In addition, based on NTNU's educational objectives and development direction, the university chose the motto "Extensive and Elegant, NTNU Master" as the basis for their general education philosophy, emphasizing the idea of holistic development for individuals. The following two key themes are included: (1) Enabling students to develop their own life, individuality and subjectivity so that they can view the world from different perspectives and understand the objective scenarios associated with different humanistic, social and natural aspects of their own life. (2) Enabling students to participate actively in societal affairs as citizens. Therefore,

when we ask our students to enroll in courses in different disciplines, our objective is not so much to have them gain additional knowledge in another domain or merely let them have fun in the process of learning. Instead, our main purpose is to allow students to gain a different point of view and to enable them to understand their own life and the social environment better through these views, as well as to allow them to contemplate their responses to public affairs issues (The Center for General Education at NTNU, 2017). According to the above discourse, we can understand the intention of general education in Taiwan's universities is to cultivate the holistic person. This leads to the question of how to practice holistic general education to cultivate the holistic person. This is the focus of this article. For this reason, we have explored various strategies by reading and analyzing related studies.

2. Educational Background in Taiwan's Universities

The Chinese exam system emerged in the Han dynasty (201 B.C.—219 A.D.), due to the trend throughout Chinese society to emphasize educational and academic pursuits and the empire's need for intellectuals to serve as public officers. This was the first time that Confucian ideas were tested in national exams. People who passed these exams were assigned by the emperor to be government officers. This open exam system was quite popular, especially for people of the lower classes, since they viewed it as a springboard to increase their social status. Passing the exam had a two-fold meaning. First, passing the exam generated a sudden change of social and economic status, and led to prestige. Second, passing the exam served to honor the student's family and ancestors. Taiwan has inherited this thousand-year history of valuing education. As a result, schools and parents inevitably pay much attention to children's learning from the kindergarten to the university levels (Lai, 2000).

In addition, different university degrees have different kinds of values. This depends heavily on the school from which the student graduates. An excellent student from a university such as National Taiwan University has a better chance to compete with other college graduates to get a good job and to obtain high social status in Taiwanese society. Not surprisingly, parents and schools urge children to be successful in academic life and to get good grades as early as the kindergarten level, and to get good grades so they can attend good schools later. This long-term educational goal looks simple, but it is not so easy to achieve for every Taiwanese child. Students come from various backgrounds and have various abilities and learning styles which make education difficult. Most parents spend extra money to send their children to private tutoring institutions to review their schoolwork and to practice taking tests. By the time the children finish their schoolwork and get home, it is almost 9:00 PM or 10:00 PM at night. This intensive studying schedule both in and out of school is due to the influence of entrance exams (Lai, 2000). Under such a trend, knowledge of learning is often important. Moreover, people are very concerned about obtaining advanced professional knowledge, and finding a good job in the future. Thus, this has become the purpose of university students. Under such influence, professional education is prioritized, while general education is neglected (Shih, 2016). While it is true that university is intended to provide students with the necessary credentials for the career of their choice, it has other important functions as well, especially in this era of globalization (Austin, 2017). So general education should be emphasized.

After World War II, Taiwan underwent profound economic, social, cultural, political and educational transformation. A major part of the transformation of its higher education system was the introduction of general education programs (Huang, 2016). General education in a university plays an important role; it decides whether the university can achieve its ideals. The functions of general education in a university are as follows: (1). General education is the basis of professional education for a university. (2). General education can enrich the culture of a university (3). General education enables university students to become capable of independent thinking. (4). General education can give students a better ability to adapt to life. (5). General education can make students improve themselves. (6). General education can shape students into good citizens of the 21st century (Shih, 2014).

However, while many students take general education to be at best an inconvenience, and at worst a waste of time, there are several reasons for thinking that such courses are valuable for students, and that a reduction of general education hours is usually a very bad idea (Austin, 2017).

Finally, university education aims to foster professionals. It also has a mission to cultivate "the holistic person" who has a thorough understanding on different academic fields and a capability of synthetic analysis in order to cope with changing society in the future. The diploma is known as a mere formality, which means that the current undergraduates might have broad knowledge, and good communication skills and human relationships, together with logical thinking and cooperation skills. Although general education has been advocated and prompted throughout the universities of our nation by borrowing experiences from foreign countries, difficulties remain on the way to achieving bright prospects. However, the situation is not so gloomy even though frequent

conferences about general education have been hosted by many universities in recent years. These trends show that general education can thrive only if we consider what problems are emerging and practical ways to solve them. In developing the characteristics of each university, previous works have suggested exchanging experiences with one another and learning from prominent experts (Hsieh, 2002).

Despite many problems arising from the implementation of general education in Taiwan, the cultivation of the holistic person has always been a topic of concern for general education.

3. Practicing Holistic General Education in Taiwan to Cultivate the Holistic Person

By reading and analyzing related studies (Austin, 2017; Bidney, 1947; Chen, 2015; Huang, 2017; Hung, 2015; Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi & Liaghatdar, 2012; Shih, 2016; the Center for General Education at NTU, 2017), we have identified the following strategies for cultivating the holistic person:

3.1 Concern about Students' Knowledge Integration and Moral Manifestation

From the viewpoint of instrumental rationality, the interpersonal relationship has become alienated. Moreover, society, which is in want of caring, is rife with a variety of violent events. This social phenomena, which results from instrumental rationality, also results in negative influences on education. In particular, with the impacts of the knowledge economy, society emphasizes the importance of knowledge and technology, and hence schools also stress the teaching of knowledge and technology. Meanwhile, the humanistic spirit of students is seldom emphasized in school (Shih, 2016). Therefore, general education must prioritize students' knowledge integration and moral manifestation. Most important of all, the content of general education must encompass everything about life, and emphasizes the practice of morality in life. In other words, education should nurture students to think about and discover the meaning of life.

Furthermore, general education should train students to understand and reflect on basic issues of philosophy and moral reasoning, and develop the ability to reason well and to differentiate between morals and ethics (The Center for General Education at NTU, 2017).

3.2 Cultivating Students' Human Nature

Man is by nature a cultural animal since he is a self-cultivating, self-reflective, "self-conditioning" animal and attains to the full development of his natural potentialities, and exercises his distinctively human functions only insofar as he lives a cultural life. As contrasted with other animals whose range of development is biologically limited or circumscribed, man is largely a self-formed animal capable of the most diverse forms of activity. Man compensates for his biological deficiencies, as compared with other animals, by his inventive ability, and particularly by his technical ingenuity and his ability to invent social symbols for the purpose of communication. All animals which are capable of learning and teaching one another are capable of acquiring culture. Hence not culture in general, but human culture, as manifested in systems of artifacts, social institutions and symbolic forms of expression, is peculiar to man. In the process of development of human culture, human nature is an important issue to discuss (Bidney, 1947). In education, human nature has always been a topic of concern for general education.

Engaging students in a more-than-human world should be seen as one of the aims of education and be taken into consideration for educational practice and policymaking. Education in contemporary times is about an individual's acquisition of sound knowledge, skills, characters and attitudes about being a citizen in society (Hung, 2015). In other words, cultivating students' human nature is an important issue for contemporary education. However, how do we cultivate students' human nature? We can apply general education to arrive at the above aim, especially general education curriculum planning—(1) natural sciences: this area introduces students to the concepts and methods of the disciplines that study the natural world. It includes courses in the traditional physical and life sciences, environmental science, animal and avian science, plant science, and so on; (2) history and social sciences: courses in this area introduce students to history and to the social science disciplines and their combination of qualitative and quantitative methods; (3) humanities: students fulfilling this requirement take courses on the foundational humanities disciplines that study the history and the genres of human creativity. This includes courses in literatures in various languages, art and art history, classics, and music and music history, as well as the disciplines of linguistics and philosophy, among others (The Center for General Education at NTU, 2017).

3.3 Concern with Students' Life Experiences

Although it is widely acknowledged that undergraduate students should receive general education, it is not clear how to implement the appropriate model designed for each particular group of students in different cultural, historical, economical and educational contexts. However, as current GE is developed with regard to the

drawbacks of planned economy, and it has mainly been introduced from the Western modern universities, it has been focused too narrowly on knowledge transmission and “skills” (shu) mastery, rather than personhood development and enlightenment of “the Way” (dao). The Western culture, due to its massive knowledge development and predominant utilitarianism in social life, understands GE mainly from the perspectives of ontology and epistemology, attempting to integrate knowledge of various fields and to solve social problems with education. The Chinese culture, in comparison, pays more attention to the life view, the value system, as well as the historical and aesthetic aspects of GE, in order to pursue never-ending perfection in scholarly life, human wisdom, and moral development in doing things and being a person (Chen, 2011).

Further speaking, holistic general education encompasses a wide range of philosophical orientations and pedagogical practices. Its focus is on wholeness, and it attempts to avoid excluding any significant aspects of the human experience. It is an eclectic and inclusive movement of which the main characteristic is the idea that educational experiences foster a less materialistic and a more spiritual worldview along with more dynamic and holistic views of reality. It also proposes that educational experience promotes a more balanced development of—and cultivates the relationship among - the different aspects of the individual (intellectual, physical, spiritual, emotional, social and aesthetic), as well as the relationships between the individual and other people, the individual and the natural environment, the inner-self of students and the external world, emotion and reason, different disciplines of knowledge and different forms of knowing. Holistic general education is concerned with students’ life experiences, not with narrowly defined “basic skills” (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, & Liaghatdar, 2012).

3.4 General Education as Important as Professional Education

General education requirements have many important purposes. It is in the interests of students, employers, colleges and universities, and society at large to keep this important element of a university education (Austin, 2017). With a rapid changing technological society, general education plays an important role in encouraging the general public to participate in social issues and cultivating a more mature civil society (Huang, 2017). Since 2012, the Ministry of Education of Taiwan promoted the “The project of core competencies to develop modern citizens” with expectations of bringing positive benefits. One of the critical challenges of the project has been the lack of teaching ideas, teaching architectures and teaching methods of general education. More importantly, its sustainability for future development with consistency and efficacy has also elicited concern from the general education community. Drawing on innovative teaching ideas, both “general education” and “professional education” should strengthen university students and shape their characters. This means students should focus on both character and knowledge. Each of these should be developed by combining the interdisciplinary approaches general education and professional education to allow students to accomplish their personal “spiritual awakening” and have the opportunity to become a holistic person (Chen, 2015). So, general education is as important as professional education.

4. Conclusion

As the foundation of university education, general education aims to develop the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes required for students to become capable citizens equipped with key competencies. The current general education policy has been implemented for more than 30 years and there are both advantages and disadvantages that need to be addressed in Taiwan (Wu & Wang, 2017). In fact, general education plays a critical role in helping all students understand, pursue, and develop the proficiencies needed for work, life, and responsible citizenship. Students should be active participants in creating an educational plan in which they identify and produce high-quality work on significant questions relevant to their interests and aims. University education should enable students to understand the intellectual and personal capacities they are developing. The capacities will help them achieve their educational and professional goals, enrich their lives, and guide them to act in principled and constructive ways, both as individuals and in their roles in society (The Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).

Secondly, the cultivation of the holistic person has always been a topic of concern for general education. Hopefully students can attain a more perfect human nature. For this reason, by reading and analyzing related studies, this article aims to explore the strategies for cultivating the holistic person in Taiwan. Based on this exploration, we identified the following strategies:

- (1) Concern about students’ knowledge integration and moral manifestation. In this way, students attain broad knowledge, and become a good citizen.
- (2) Cultivation of students’ human nature. In order to do this, general education curriculum planning should include different disciplines.

(3) Concern with students' life experiences. Students' life experiences are the base of learning. Teachers should avoid excluding any significant aspects of students' life experiences.

(4) General education is as important as professional education. Both "general education" and "professional education" should strengthen university students. In this way, students can acquire the holistic learning.

Finally, hopefully the discussion of this article will provide some ideas to improve Taiwan's current general education practice, and allow us to realize the ideal of general education, i.e., the cultivation of the holistic person.

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