

A Cross-cultural Comparative Analysis between U.S. and Chinese Undergraduate  
Education in University and Application of Project Management Thinking in Teaching

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**A Cross-cultural Comparative Analysis between U.S. and Chinese Undergraduate  
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**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In an increasingly complex world, problem-solving and teamwork skills are more and more necessary. To meet this challenge, new integrative curricular models and educational practices are needed (e.g., Axley and McMahon, 2006). The action-oriented teaching method described here uses various techniques, assignments, and experiences, presented in a timely manner, to facilitate conceptual learning and skill development in both problem solving and teamwork. The skills are presented and developed at the time during the group or problem-solving stages when the students most need those skills. Furthermore, they are reinforced within the course using increasingly complex exercises and assignments, and they are also reinforced in later courses. The success of the teaching method rests not only on the sequencing of topics, but also on the focus on both a real problem project and actual group development. These aspects present a messy, emerging learning process, stimulating a more holistic treatment of teamwork and problem solving that is also more reflective of actual work situations (Sonia M.G. 2008) .

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
TITLE PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv

## CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Definition of Terms .....	1
Delimitations of the Research.....	2
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	2
The Comparison between U.S. and China in College Undergraduate Education .....	2
Action – Oriented Teaching Method .....	6
What actual job requires for undergraduate students .....	8
Why Action-oriented teaching method is good .....	11
How to implement action-oriented teaching method .....	15
Case description .....	18
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	22
IV. REFERENCES.....	23

# **A Cross-cultural Comparative Analysis between U.S. and Chinese Undergraduate Education in University and Application of Project Management Thinking in Teaching**

## **I. Introduction**

In higher education, we find ourselves facing the challenges of attempting to satisfy the expectations of the next generation of students, who have grown up with immersive, computer-mediated experiences as a norm. As educators, we understand at an almost innate level that learning takes place in a number of ways. Simply telling students something does not mean they will learn or understand complex theoretical or social phenomena (Mumford, 1993). Facts and theories are dry and one-dimensional and they will not take “seed” unless they are put into context, brought to life, and practiced (Moesby, 2004).

### **a. Statement of Problem**

This paper is going to make a comparison of the differences of college education between U.S. and China, by analyzing each one’s advantages and disadvantages, analyzing new teaching methods, and explaining how to apply project management theories in education, by taking teaching as a project and using PM skills to do it well.

### **b. Definitions of Terms**

*Education*, for purposes of this study, is defined as an act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life. It could be a certain degree, level, or kind of schooling. It is training which implies a discipline and development

by means of the special and general abilities of the mind or training by which people learn to develop and use their mental, moral, and physical power or skill. It is a gaining experience, either improving or regressing. Education means to learn in every mean in order to reach certain goals.

*Project Management* is defined as the discipline of planning, organizing, and managing resources to bring about the successful completion of specific project goals and objectives.

*Teaching Method* is the principles and methods of instruction

### **c. Delimitation of Research**

The research will focus on teaching methods in the business department in college education.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **a. The Comparison between U.S. and China in College Undergraduate**

#### **Education**

Education is a cultural phenomenon, different education methods are reflected in different social and cultural connotations. Therefore, comparing education methods in different countries must be based on a comparison of social and cultural backgrounds. It is precisely because of the differences in social environment and cultural traditions that different education systems in different countries and societies result. The educational tradition of the United States is consistent with cultural traditions of the United States, and similarly, the traditional Chinese education is certainly rooted in Chinese cultural traditions.

Following are four most prominent points of comparison between U.S. and China in

college education:

*Similarity:* The undergraduate students can choose their courses freely both in the United States and China. Differentiated teaching is implemented in every top and general university. Schools provide a large system of undergraduate courses and freedom of choice for students. The university curriculum system is composed of required courses, limited optional courses, and elective courses to meet the learning needs of all students. Students formulate and adjust their curriculum personal portfolio according to their individual interests, academic, and professional direction requirements. A free elective system can meet the students' different searching needs and is propitious to mobilizing the enthusiasm of study, as well as avail the diversification of knowledge structure of talents. Each student is different, everybody has a unique personality and independent views, and the education community increases the opportunities for innovation and progress.

*Differences:* First, American students are not in blind pursuit of high academic degrees. Americans don't have the concept which is very common to Chinese students, parents, educators, and the society on a whole --- good students should go on with their study for master's and doctoral degrees. The majority of American students who continue to study for a higher degree are focused in medicine, engineering, and the academic-research students (students only focus on their research and not on any benefit to society). Through a number of personal interviews, in America, the perception of career oriented students, or students focused on corporate organization and management, generally put their career aspirations. This learning strategy is not only related to the emphasis on living independently to United States undergraduate students, but also because they attach great importance to updated knowledge. According to statistics, the Harvard Business School and Law School, graduate students are at the average of 27 years old at enrollment, and almost everyone has work experience. It is more likely that a student with actual business experience will be admitted to

the better business schools. The consensus here is, after working for a few years, it became clear what they need to further study in order not to waste the expensive fees and timing. This conclusion applies equally to undergraduate students. However, things are very different in China. The vast majority of Chinese undergraduate students go on with their study for a master's degree and a doctor's degree directly after graduation.

Second, American undergraduate students have many opportunities to take an internship or a part time job. Universities in the United States advocate breaking away from the campus and society, to teach the students in the real social environment. Harvard and Yale are typical in this regard, there are even no school gates. As long as the students actively participate in various extra-curricular activities (including community activities, school work-study programs and being a casual laborer during summer vacation), every year they can gain a certain job experience to improve their skills and abilities. Then when they apply for the candidates of the summer vacation jobs as a junior trainee, or a senior trainee candidate after graduation, they won't face the "no job experience" problem which many Chinese students experience because most Chinese undergraduate students don't take an internship or a part time job in spare time.

When choosing internship opportunities, American students pay much attention to coordinate their work experience with their development, in order to save energy for the next phase of competition. For example, those who want to be academics or scientists spend more time in their studies because they need to have top-notch grades to impress the professors with their academic ability when they apply for master's and doctoral degrees, so that a professor is able to write a persuasive letter of recommendation (which is often a decisive role). People who want to enter business are different, they need to invest more time in the field work because when they apply for an MBA to business schools, what is valued most is

not their test scores, but their actual work ability.

Third, undergraduate students of the United States can gain their funding through various channels. The researcher observed that there are a lot of opportunities for undergraduates to apply for funding for their service learning projects from all sections of society. As long as the projects are valuable or potential, and the students are also good at marketing, then usually the students are able to find some funding from the community to help them achieve their ideas. Therefore, the United States students' extra-curricular activities and applied learning opportunities are many.

As we know, the motivations of the sponsors who invest in the students' service learning projects are varied: some help in order to establish a corporate image; some help in order to share the fruits of success in the future; some help only in order to meet some special requirements (or desire). Sadly, there are fewer conditions and opportunities for Chinese students to turn their originality and ideas into reality. That's why some American professors think that Chinese students have strong learning ability but lack initiative and creativity.

Dr. Yang Zhengning has also compared the education philosophy between China and the United States, saying: "the Chinese philosophy of education for thousands of years is focused on discipline, but the educational philosophy in United States is focused on inspiring" (Science Times, 2005). He believes that China's educational philosophy is better for the students at an average level, but the United States' philosophy is a better way for the students at a higher level. He also shows a table to explain the reason why he thinks so (See Table 1).

Table 1

China	America
Narrowly drilled	Wide
Solidly drilled	Spottily trained
Step by step	Jumps around
Quiet	Exuberant
Timid	Bold
Diffident	Confident
Passive	Aggressive
Humble	Hubristic
Modest	Arrogant

Based on the above analysis, how to explore a teaching method which can both adapt to Chinese society and absorb the essence from worldwide education mode is a major focus of educational research. In short, educators need a modern teaching method combining localization with internationalization.

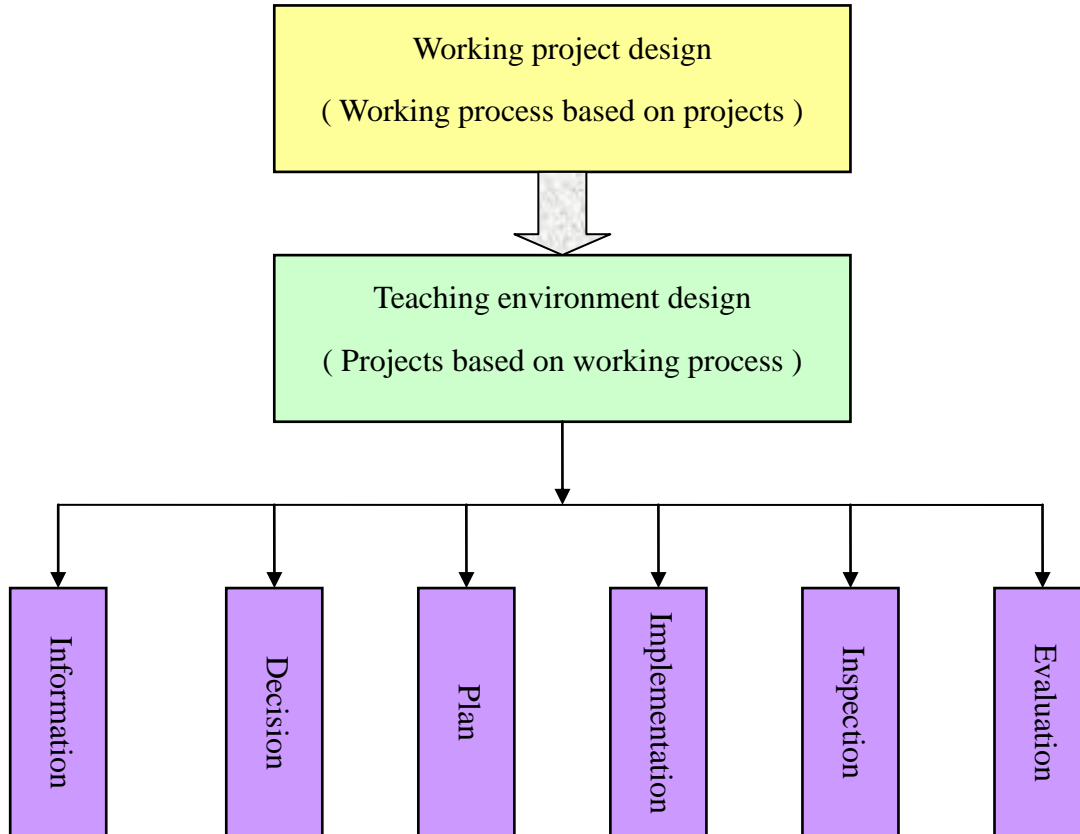
### **b. Action – Oriented Teaching Method**

The ultimate aim of education is to learn to meet practical needs. As to undergraduate students, the most realistic aim is to find a good job. Therefore, the best teaching method should be able to help students gain the ability and qualifications that actual job requires. Action-oriented teaching is the method that can fulfill the requirement. It is a competence-based education style, emphasizing helping the students to achieve their full

potential. Students are expected to apply what they learned to actual experience.

This teaching method has been trying to be applied to classroom teaching by many teachers in China. Besides, project management is widely used in many areas nowadays. It should be a good idea to put project management thinking into education. Educators can treat a course as a big project, with the teacher as the project manager, and students as the group members. Teachers make the teaching plan for the whole semester and design teaching environments based on an actual job. They carry out teaching activities in the project management way, which divides a teaching environment into six parts: Information → Decision → Plan → Implementation → Inspection → Evaluation. (See Table 2)

**Table 2**



- **What an actual job requires for undergraduate students**

In the information age, there is constant change, and an employee must be able to engage in problem-solving activities (Zorn, 2002). In addition, work teams dominate industry largely because business decision making is more effective when teamwork is used (Guzzo and Shea, 1992). This is especially the case when team players have good interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Bamber, Watson, and Hill, 1996; LaFasto and Larson, 2001). Thus, many businesses, professional associations, and other groups consider interpersonal and problem-solving skills to be core competencies and often assess these as part of the interview or accreditation process (e.g., American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 1999; Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). Similarly, the Greater Expectations National Panel Report (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002) calls for the development of international students in university education who have mastered critical skills such as communication, creative problem solving, and working in diverse teams, and who can integrate and adapt these skills from one setting to another. In addition, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2006) identifies five key indicators of effective educational practices, one of which is “active and collaborative learning.”

However, even as problem solving and teamwork have become widespread in management education, the teaching of these skills in business schools has not been sufficient according to business leaders, who have complained that new recruits are technically proficient but professional ill equipped and unable to solve everyday organizational problems

(Bailey, Saporito, Kressel, Christensen, and Hooijberg, 1997; Holt and Willard-Holt, 2000).

There are numerous explanations for these problems, such as college teachers emphasizing individual over group achievement (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1997), assigning students to team projects without teaching interpersonal skills (Cox and Bobrowski, 2000), and using very structured problems rather than messy problems that are more characteristic of organizations (Bigelow, 2004). For instance, a survey at one university revealed that 72% of faculty in the College of Business assigned students to project teams in at least one class, but 81% of these provided modest, limited, or no teamwork guidance (Bolton, 1999).

Young people (aged 18 to 24 years), who may have been exposed to rich and engaging digital learning experiences during their compulsory education, find a very different picture at universities. Keen to harness the perceived benefits of electronic forms of delivery through e-learning, universities have embraced virtual learning environments as a support tool but have not necessarily harnessed their potential.

Table 3: Frameworks of philosophies of adult education

Student learning style	Purpose(s)	Learning Approach	Teacher Role
Liberalist	A broad approach to stimulate intellectual, spiritual, moral interest and development	A ‘renaissance person’ who always wants to develop and learn and seek knowledge	Leading the learning and development process, transferring knowledge

Progressive	Focused on practical knowledge and skills that enhance individual effectiveness in society.	Individuals have unlimited potential and learning is focused around their needs, interests, and experiences.	Stimulating, instigating, evaluating, and organizing the learning through an experiential process.
Behaviorist	Meeting the needs of society or industry through compliance with identified standards of skill and behavior.	Students are significantly influenced by their learning environment and context.	Managing, predicting, and directing learning outcomes.
Humanistic	Personal growth and self-actualization.	Students are highly motivated to learn and assume responsibility for their own learning.	Facilitating and promoting learning as a partner, but not directing.
Radical	As a catalyst for fundamental social, political and/or economic change in society.	Learning through collective action and reflection on personal history and culture.	Suggesting but not determining the learning direction; equality of teacher and student.

SOURCE: Hannon (2005) adapted from Gilley et al. (2001) and Zinn (1999).

Table 3 shows us that different students have different learning style, which results their different behaviors on their learning approach. In order to help every student achieve

their best success, teachers need to play different roles when facing the students. That's what Confucius, a great Chinese educator, advocate in education --- to teach students in accordance with their aptitude. This education philosophy can also have an excellent explanation in project management way --- put the right person on right place to do right thing. As a project manager, this is one of the basic abilities. As to teachers, they should be able to assign proper role and work to different students in teaching activities.

- **Why the Action-oriented teaching method is good**

Classroom education based in theory rather than practical application can be valuable; however, the combination of coursework and practice is even more beneficial for the transfer of learning (Schank, Berman, and Macperson, 1999). The development of students into competent practitioners through guided practical application is advantageous to organizations because it increases both students' preparedness and knowledge, saving time and money in on-the-job training.

Theory that is supported by practice makes understanding, and hence learning, far more likely. Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb and Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984) contains the four components essential to learning, which are:

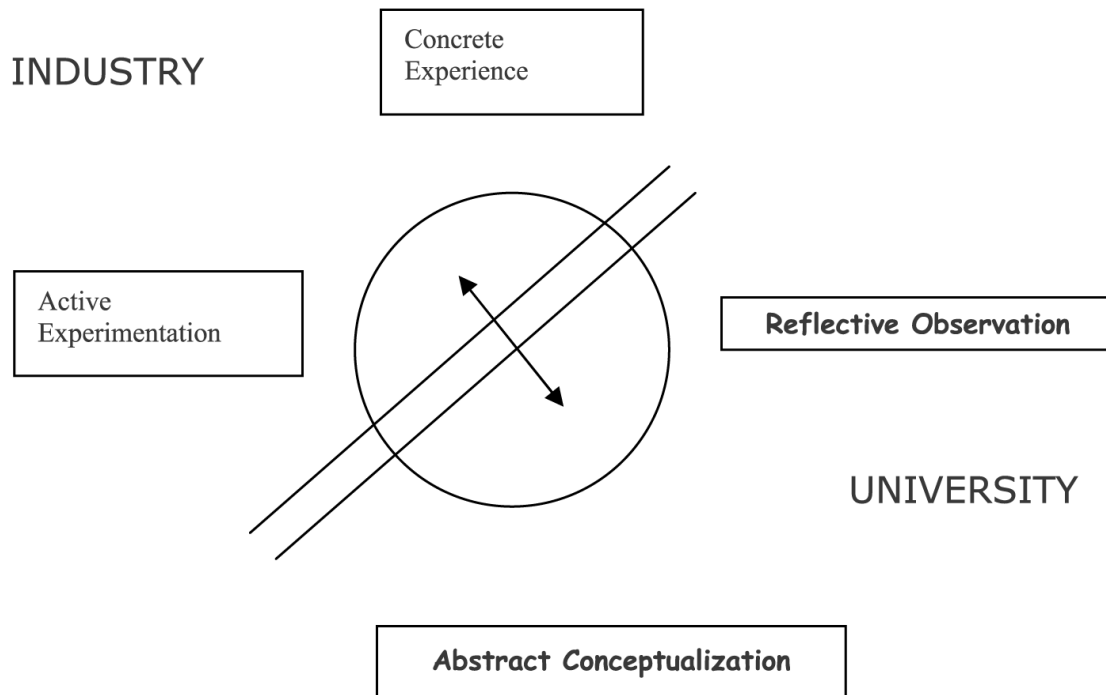
- (1) Abstract conceptualization;
- (2) Active experimentation (also known as simulations);
- (3) Concrete experience;
- (4) Reflective observation.

Kolb argues that learning takes place through this cycle of experience, reflection,

conceptualization, and experiment. The entry point to the cycle is not important, but learning only occurs when the cycle is completed. These four components provide the foundation for teaching. Under the action-oriented teaching method, teachers organize the courses based on a Project Oriented Learning (POL) approach, thus the students can get the opportunity to interact with course content while applying their learning to real circumstances in companies (Packer, 2001; Moesby, 2004). All theoretical aspects taught in the classroom were reflected in practical application. In other words, students working in teams approached a range of companies with the intention of identifying a real problem, analyzing it, and offering a solution (Ormerod, 1997).

By working with businesses, the teachers have responsibilities to help students to bridge the gap between the academic environment and industry. In bringing these two worlds together, a two-way flow of information and knowledge was created, which gave both sides a full view of the arena and made it possible for full learning to occur. The industry sphere will provide the concrete experience to the student while the student will provide feedback to the industry by actively observing its dynamics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Bridging the Industry – University Learning Divide



**Source:** Adapted from *Kolb Learning Cycle*, Kolb & Fry (1975) and Kolb (1984)

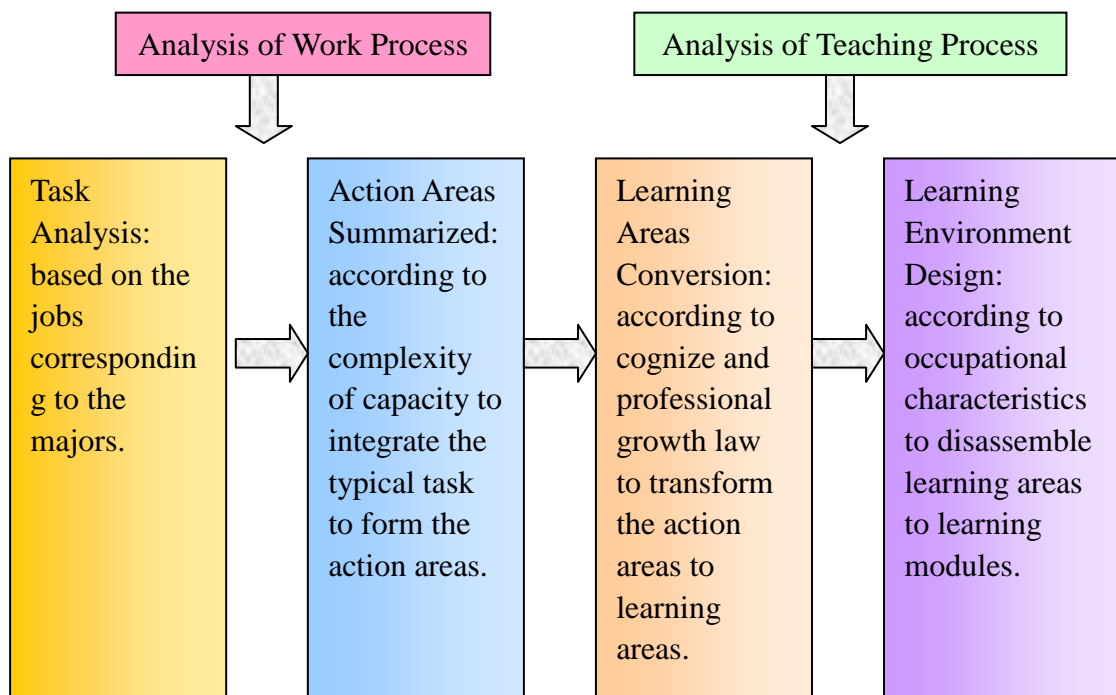
Although surely valuable in several aspects, assistantships or internships may involve students in performing tasks that do not directly relate to those tasks that will consume their time after graduation. Both may place students with busy professionals who do not have time to mentor them to the degree desired by the student, or may relegate them to trivial tasks. Both opportunities often fail to focus on future professional experience. So even with internships, assistantships, and required course offerings, it is possible for students to earn a degree without engaging in the practical applications their careers will require of them.

Since using any kind of authentic problem, however, does not promise an effective learning outcome, Stinson and Milter (1996) suggest that effective problems should be holistic, mirror professional practice, poorly structured, and contemporary to initiate productive group sessions. Savery and Duffy (1995) make similar arguments, suggesting that

students should be engaged in authentic learning activities by confronting problems that do not contain pre-specifications. When problems already contain obvious conclusions and interpretations, higher-order thinking is not likely to occur.

In conclusion, effective authentic problem descriptions should be real-world problems that are relevant for practice and course objectives and do not contain obvious conclusions so that they foster higher-order reasoning skills. Therefore, teachers of problem-based courses should filter performance problems based on the objectives and goals of the course. This is what the Action-Oriented Teaching method is. (See Table 4)

**Table 4**



- **How to implement the action-oriented teaching method**

We can see from Table 4 that the action-oriented teaching can lay a solid foundation of both human survival and human development. Thus, ability cultivation plays a crucial role in this teaching method.

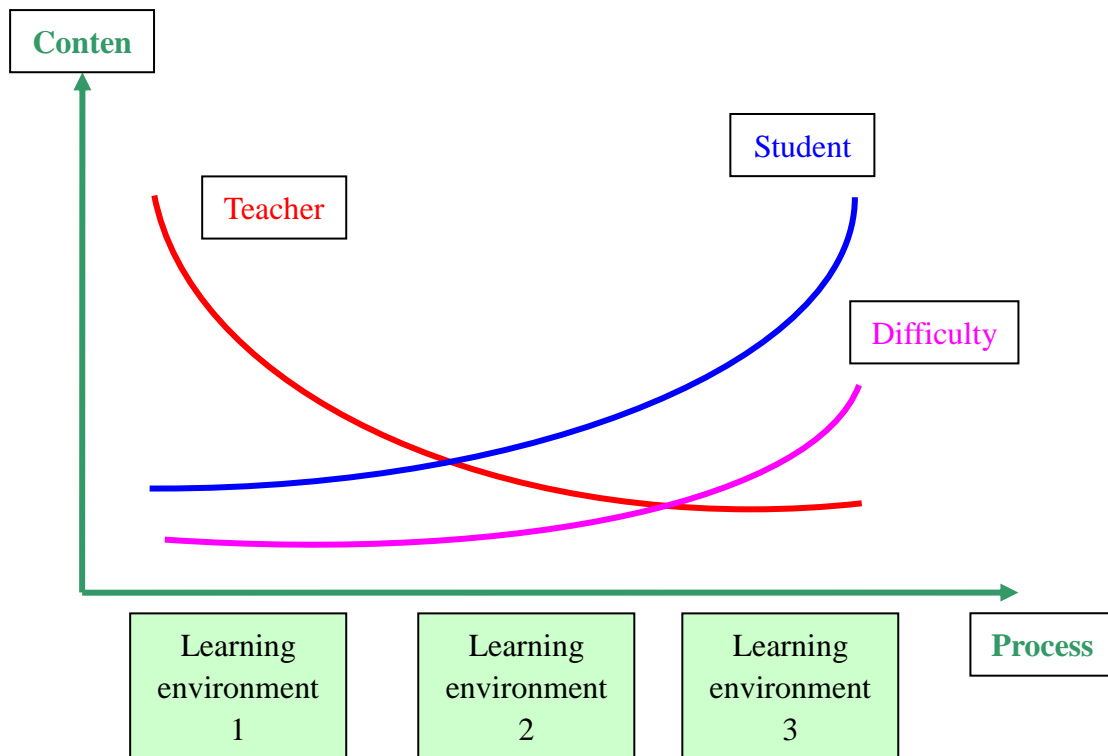
Competence-based college education requires students master three interdependent and organically linked abilities: first, they should learn to make a plan independently, which is predictive, diagnostic work training; second, they should learn to implement the plan independently, which is procedural, formative work training; third, they should learn how to assess the plan independently, which is wrap-up, feedback work training.

Competence-based college education has a particular emphasis on the idea that students that they should transfer their knowledge and practical experience into ability through a philosophical thinking style, which is ‘access – reflection – internalization-practice’.

Teachers divide the teaching process into some learning environments. Take each learning environment as a subproject. In the beginning, teachers may need to do more lecture, so that students can grasp necessary knowledge and general process of project operation. With the time goes on, students become more and more familiar with action-oriented teaching method, then teacher’s role could be weakening, meanwhile students should be the main body in the teaching activities. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

Students are increasingly becoming the main body with the teaching process going on.



Under this teaching method, teachers encourage students to build ownership of the problems. Researchers argue that learning is promoted when students are required to use their new knowledge or skill to solve problems. Problem-based models in instructional design (Jonassen, 1999; Nelson, 1999; Savery and Duffy, 1995; Schank et al., 1999; Schwartz, Lin, Brophy, and Bransford, 1999; van Merriënboer, 1997) emphasize the importance of being involved in solving authentic tasks or problems. Moreover, cognitive researchers point out that a degree of student control is an essential aspect of effective learning environments (Kinzie, 1990; Williams, 1992).

To support students in building ownership, researchers suggest several strategies. Jonassen (1999) stresses that students assume ownership only if the problems to be solved are interesting, relevant, and engaging. Offering more student control is related to the degree of scaffolding (Greening, 1998) and can be expressed by more freedom in the choice of problems and learning goals, and by working more independently from a teacher. Scaffolding is instructional support provided for students by external agents. The nature of scaffolding is that it provides assistance at critical times in the form of skills, strategies, and links that the students themselves are unable to provide to complete the task. Gradually the support is removed until the student is able to stand alone (Collins, Brown, and Newman, 1989; Greenfield, 1984).

Students in the action-oriented course have chances to reflect on the process often through team meetings and by using the teacher as an outside consultant to the project. It would be nearly impossible for students working on a project to be engaged but not reflect on their actions. Although students learn and practice a systematic process, it is a new experience that requires much thought and reflection for a well-designed, developed, and executed plan of action. The teacher encourages students to discuss problems they may have had with clients in simulate projects, in gaining access to data, or in generating solutions. These consulting sessions with the teacher help students reflect on their actions in preparing or conducting the analysis.

The teacher is available both inside and outside the classroom for advice, guidance, or a slight prod in an acceptable direction. Regular presentations of progress along with classroom discussions help students reflect as well. After finishing each major phase of the

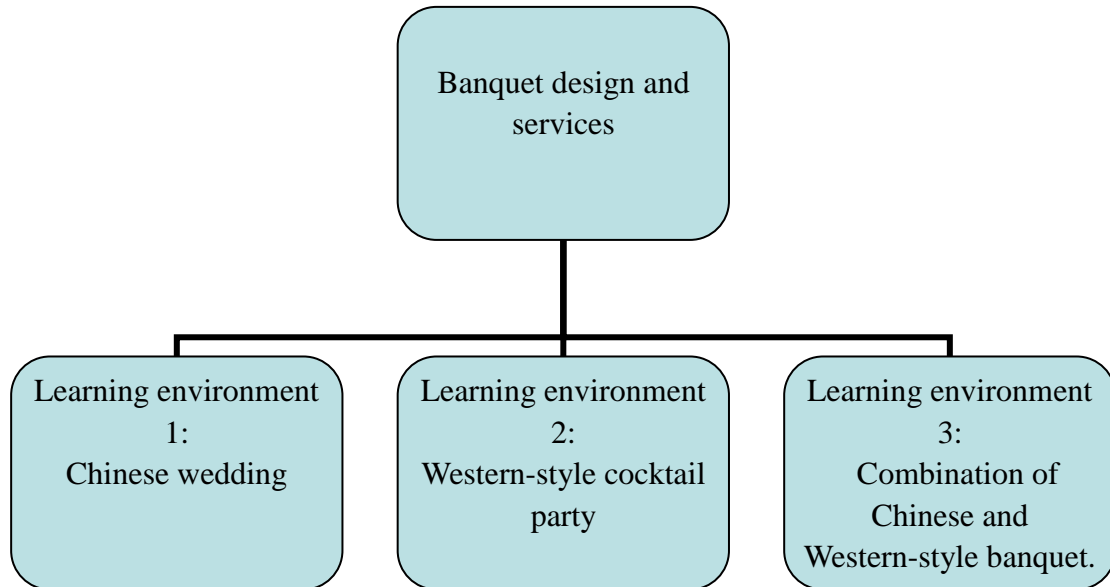
project, each group presents its progress on the project and discusses future plans and lessons learned which aids in the metacognition of the course activities. In addition, collaboration is essential in starting and guiding the reflection process of the group to benefit future learning experiences. Collaboration is a large part of the underlying principles of action-oriented teaching and goes beyond reflection. (Marc P.K. 2005)

- **Case description**

In project management, there are five project management process groups required for any project: initiation process group, planning process group, executing process group, monitoring and controlling process group, and closing process group. These five process groups have clear dependencies and are performed in the same sequence on each project. They are independent of application areas or industry focus. Individual process groups are often iterated prior to completing the project.

When this project management idea is applied in to education, some restructuring and change are needed in order to gain a better effect, and coordinate better with the development of the teaching process. In action-oriented teaching method, teaching process are divided into six parts: Information → Decision → Plan → Implementation → Inspection → Evaluation. (See Table 2)

Following is a simple case of how action-oriented teaching works in project management way:



Course: Banquet Design and Services

Introduction: Projects are frequently divided into more manageable subprojects, although the individual subprojects can be referred to as projects and managed as such. Subprojects are often contracted to an external enterprise or to another functional unit in the performing organization.

Here, take this course as a project; teacher needs to make a teaching plan for the whole semester. In order to facilitate the description, we only list three kinds of banquets as three learning environments or subprojects: ① A Chinese wedding, ② A western-style cocktail party, ③ A combination of Chinese and Western-style banquet.

Project groups and group leader are also need to be set up in advance. Group activities can not only cultivate students' team spirit, but also arouse their sense of competition, to mobilize students' enthusiasm to participate in the projects. Role assignments need to go with students' characteristics and their learning styles. (See Table 3)

Taking learning environment 1 as a project, we need six phases to accomplish this

project. The teacher gives guidance when necessary in the process.

1. Information: make the project background information clear and personnel allocation ready in this step.

After the teacher's lecture of basic knowledge and skills about banquet design and services, students collect useful information separately by groups. Each group has a group leader (line manager) who is in charge of the whole group, with the responsibilities of role arrangement, task distribution, relationship coordination, time control, supervision and management, and feedback to teacher (project manager) directly. Other group members do the preparation according to their roles.

2. Decision: defines the project phase in this step. A preliminary project scope statement needed to be developed. This is the process necessary for producing a preliminary high-level definition of the project. This process addresses and documents the project and deliverable requirements, product requirements, boundaries of the project, methods of acceptance and high-level scope control.

Each group makes the final decision after discussion and talking with clients. Make sure what the theme of this wedding is; what kind of effect you will present ultimately, how much the acceptable budget range is, and so on.

3. Plan: defines and refines objectives, and plans the course of action required to attain the objectives and scope that the project was undertaken to address. Many things need to be done in this step --- developing a detailed project scope statement, create the project schedule, cost budgeting, quality planning, human resource planning, risk management planning, purchases planning.

Each group makes a plan with details to explain how their visualization becomes true. Send the plan to clients to see whether they agreed to it. If not, revise the plan until clients are satisfied with it.

4. Implementation: integrates people and other resources to carry out the project management plan for the project. Normal execution variances will cause some replanning. These variances can include activity durations, resource productivity and availability and unanticipated risks. Such variances may or may not affect the project management plan, but can require an analysis.

Each group carries out their plan on time (material procurement, room set-up, food preparation, service training and so on).

5. Inspection: in this process, the project performance is observed and measured regularly to identify variances from the project management plan, potential problems can also be found out in a timely manner so that corrective action can be taken, when necessary, to control the execution of the project..

Performances, the simulation wedding show, are presented group by group. When one group performs, other groups are responsible to do the observation to see whether they are performing in accordance with their project management plan, and if there are any problems exist.

6. Evaluation: formalizes acceptance of the product, service or result and bring the project or a project phase to an orderly end.

Each group makes a self evaluation and peer evaluation, also with the evaluation from clients (which is the most important part). Outstanding performance group will be awarded.

### **III Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

Real-world experience prior to entering the job market is invaluable for aspiring professionals. Working with a client under time constraints to solve a real-world problem provides much more practical application than would typically be allowed within a strictly theoretical class. This factor is important so that students do not enter the professional world equipped solely with theoretical backgrounds. A course based on the action-oriented teaching method provides a scaffold environment in which students can learn by doing.

In addition to the above-mentioned advantages of the action-oriented teaching method, it is appropriate to mention an advantage that is less obvious and not often discussed: the fact that these real world learning environments provide students an opportunity to experience what they may be taking on as a career. It is these opportunities that allow students to make educated choices regarding their career options. Recent graduates are often unhappy with their chosen career shortly after entering the workforce, and subsequently they feel trapped after engaging in several years of higher education devoted to that field. Action-oriented based courses give students exposure to the realities of the occupation before commencement, and through this individuals have a chance to adjust their educational path to be more consistent with their interests and proclivities. Better that students realize their dissatisfaction during an action-oriented course rather than after taking on sizable student loans.

Internships, in theory, are useful tools to prepare individuals for the workforce; however, they often are not the experience that they should be. Students may find themselves doing administrative work or running errands during an internship, rather than participating in the core tasks that will be required of them. The mentoring process is a difficult one for busy professionals supervising interns; in turn, fulfilling and functional educational opportunities may be wasted. Action-oriented teaching can provide students a more accurate picture of what their future endeavors might be like. (Marc P.K. 2005) It is carried out in project management way, students can master the abilities what a real job required through the simulate projects. Though there are many differences between college education in China and U.S., they are still in common in some aspects. Maybe action-oriented teaching method can works well in both countries.

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