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Enculturation through *Reading Course*

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ABSTRACT

Examination-directed and book-centered education in primary and secondary schools left a strenuous task—enculturation of students. Is it possible for higher education to fulfill the unfinished job? First, the article argues that education today forecasts the future of a nation, and combining enculturation with lectures in the colleges and universities becomes inevitable. Second, it explores the approach of enculturation through a reading course in the university.

Keywords: enculturation; socialization; performance level; anomie

1. Introduction

The examination-directed education exposes itself with a defect - inadequate enculturation of students, which may result in anomie. Recent years, reports on student suicides and violence are more often found than ever before, which indicates the absence or inadequacy of enculturation and caused nationwide attention. Not only pressure and depression and other external causation but also purposeless and absence of values could be the cause of social anomie. As long as the primary and secondary education is examination-centered, the fundamental task of education—the enculturation of students is left to higher education.

2. Definition of enculturation

Enculturation is the process where the culture that is currently established teaches an individual the accepted norms and values of the culture or society in which the individual lives. The individual can become an accepted member and fulfill the needed functions and roles of the group. Most importantly the individual knows and establishes a context of boundaries and accepted behavior that dictates what is acceptable and not acceptable within the framework of that society. It teaches the individual their roles within society as well as what is accepted behavior within that society and lifestyle.

The process of enculturation is related to socialization. Socialization is a term used by sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists and educationalists to refer to “the process through which people learn the attitudes, values, and actions appropriate for members of a particular culture.” (Schaefer 2006:91) Humans spend more time on the process of enculturation and socialization than any other animal by far. Our youngest today spend often 18 years or more under supervision, among which 12 years or more are under school education. Owing to her vital task of enculturation, education has been recognized by some jurisdictions as a right of every youngest.

3. Social importance of enculturation

It is widely recognized by human beings that children are our future. Students will be social actors that

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will cope with the effect of human creativity - society. "Education is a special social institution that deals with special products: Actors, who were, are or will be state elites, reformers, revolutionists, innovators and so on". (He 2008:208) Enculturation is the main task of education. It helps mold a person into an acceptable member of society and prepares for society the future actors. Enculturation inadequacy of these actors will lead to social anomie. According to Emil Durkheim, anomie is a term meaning "a rule that is a lack of rule," "derangement," and "an insatiable will" (Mestrovic 1988:56). American sociologist Richard T. Schaefer believed that "the state of anomie occurs when people have lost their sense of purpose or direction" (Schaefer 2006:10). An absence or diminution of standards or values, and an associated feeling of alienation and purposelessness will cause a lot of social problems such as suicide.

Every year, about six million high school students would pass the entrance examination and enter the universities they dreamed of with excitement and happiness. But they would soon find out that life in the university and the life in high school are completely different. In the universities, there are no parents to arrange daily life for them, and no professors "watch" their study, what's more, there is so much free time and they don't know what they should do and could do. The very tragedy is that without examinations every other day, some students even lose their aim of study and motivation to study. The phenomena unfold an important fact - that is the inadequate enculturation of university freshmen. The enculturation in their primary and secondary education does not enable them even to study and live independently. Higher education is the last stage of mass education. If we could not reduce the gap of enculturation left by the primary and secondary education, we might lose a whole generation.

4. Cause of enculturation inadequacy

It has been found that enculturation inadequacy has much to do with the examination - centered education. Enculturation in school usually goes through the whole education process from kindergarten, primary school, junior high school, senior high school to university. The fact is that the previous educations before higher education are all examination-directed and book-centered. For the students, the knowledge and skill they've learnt are narrowed to a few books, the most important social values they've learnt is to pass examinations, and the most useful social behavior they've learnt is learning from textbooks. There left limited room for the enculturation of students. In schools, teachers make detailed plans for the study of the students inside class and outside class. At home, parents take good care of their children and arrange everything including making beds, washing clothes, preparing food and of course, making decisions for them. All the students need to do is to follow the arrangements of the teachers and parents. Once the students are left free, such as to live in the university without the guidance or prearrangements, they would get lost or puzzled with their life and study which is normal daily life and study.

5. Enculturation through reading course

Reading Course for English language majors owns rich and colorful contents, covering a wide range of knowledge including all aspects of our life such as society, politics, economy, culture, literature, history, religion, sport, medicine, environment, folklore, scientific knowledge etc. and provides topics on which the aims, habits, knowledge, skill, customs and values could be discussed, and Western culture and Chinese culture could be compared. Let's take three units for example.

5.1. Goals for study and for Life

Reading Course is given to the freshman on campus from the second semester. The course starts with Unit 1—*University Student Life*. It focuses on two important texts: *On Being a Student* and *Getting the Best Value for Time*. When the students were asked to say something about their university life in their first

semester after reading the texts, the professor got the following answers:

- We have too much spare time in the university; we don't know what we could do and what we should do. We lost our target gradually.
- In the high school I had a dream, which was to become a university student, now I don't know what to do; I have no motivation for my study.
- There is only one examination for each course each semester - that is the final exam. I don't know if I'm making any progress.
- In high school, our teachers had plans for our time; in the university, our professors would never arrange our living and after-class study.
- I talked to my friend in another university; we suppose there was not much to be learnt in the universities.
- We have so many challenges in the university, we have to make beds and wash clothes all by ourselves

These answers revealed that the students are not prepared to live and study independently, not to mention the understanding of the real meaning of higher education. The aim of study and the goal of life need to be discussed together with standards or values—attitude, academic skills, awareness, accomplishment, self-discipline, initiative, and breadth of interests, an open mind, and a critical habit of mind, objectivity and humility. Professor could begin the discussion by asking the following questions:

- What is your real interest?
- What would you like to do for life without regrets?
- If you don't know what you are really interested in, how could you find it out?
- Would you like to keep your interest as your future career or just a spare time hobby?
- Is it possible to keep your interest as a job or you could just keep it as a hobby?
- What kind of job would you like to take after graduation?
- What academic skills would help you in finding the job you want?
- Are you able to do things without being told?
- Are you able to see through false claims and deceptions?
- Are you able to take good care of your parents when they get old?
- If you have a plan, could you stick to it?

By answering these questions, the students were encouraged to think about and search for the meaning of one's life and set plans for their future and for their study. The discussion helped the students to understand the social expectation and responsibility as a university student as well as a citizen. It clarified confusion and usually led to more objective and practical study and life plans although different students might want different things for their future.

5.2. Open-mind and flexibility

Unit 2 is about *Culture Shock*. After reading the text, the students realized that some of their daily confusions might be caused by culture difference and wanted to share their own experiences in adapting to the new environment of their university, which was usually a city away from their home town. The students would describe how they lost their way on the first day of their arrival, the strange feeling they had when they had to speak mandarin to their schoolmates instead of their dialects, how they missed their private desks in high schools while in the university, attending different classes in different classrooms with no fixed desk for anyone, as well as their anxiety, loneliness, and confusion when facing different environment, values and

behaviors. The contrasts of a second culture or different cultures provided a mirror in which one's own culture was reflected. Discussions and proper guidance would help students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and of the society that helped to shape their character.

5.3. Creativity

Unit 5 is on *Business*. The story about *Levi Strauss & Company* led to heated discussion on what was needed for a successful business. It was agreed that loving life, following people's need, sound using of information, flexibility, responsible for customers, especially creativity were vital for business success. A reflection on the economic situation and business potentials in Chinese market had also been made. Some students even talked about the call by government on university students to "Start an Undertaking" and tried to explore the potential job or employment opportunities. These discussions helped students to realize that there laid ahead huge tasks for them. There was no time to waste. Because taking their future plan into consideration, they could accomplish only little every day. They are now adults and they have responsibilities both for themselves and for our society. They need to know that they should take initiative instead of waiting for others to tell them what to do. Good business is in their hands. Their future is in their own hands and four years are quite short to make good preparations for one's future.

6. Summary

The inadequacy of enculturation of the students in primary and secondary education endows the university professors with a strenuous task – the enculturation of university students. The case of *Reading Course* is a very tiny example that enculturation process could be combined with the teaching process in the universities. If every professor could keep in their minds the enculturation of students and make full use of each textbook and each hour of teaching, they would greatly benefit both our society and our future—the next generation.

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