Article

Exploring the Practice of Issue-Based Instruction in Senior High School Ideological and Political Education from a Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract: Issue-based instruction is a pedagogical approach employed within the senior high school ideological and political curriculum. It emphasizes achieving teaching objectives through the interaction between teachers setting issues and students engaging in thoughtful discussion of those issues. Grounded in student-centered learning, this approach utilizes issue design and contextual scenario creation to foster students' problem awareness and inquiry skills, thereby cultivating their disciplinary core competencies and enhancing the instructional effectiveness of the course. From a constructivist perspective, this article seeks to illuminate the unique educational value of issue-based instruction in ideological and political education. It analyzes the core concepts of constructivist theory and issue-based instruction, along with their inherent connections. Building upon this analysis, the article proposes recommendations for implementing issue-based instruction in senior high school ideological and political education to advance the high-quality development of the curriculum.

Keywords: Constructivism; Senior High School Ideological and Political Education; Issue-Based Instruction

1. Introduction

The *General High School Ideological and Political Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020)* explicitly state that high school ideological and political education should be centered on issues, designing "activity-based disciplinary curriculum teaching" (Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 2-3). Issue-based instruction is a teaching model that leverages high school ideological and political disciplinary knowledge, with issues as its core expression. It constructs activity-based disciplinary courses by creating authentic problem situations, aiming to cultivate students' disciplinary core competencies. This approach exhibits profound inherent compatibility with constructivist educational theory, rooted in their shared understanding of the nature of knowledge construction. How to utilize issue-based instruction, based on constructivist theory, to stimulate students' subjective initiative and enhance the effectiveness and innovativeness of curriculum implementation is a significant current challenge in senior high school ideological and political education. Therefore, analyzing and exploring the connotations and intrinsic connections between constructivist theory and issue-based instruction is crucial. The core objectives of the senior high school ideological and political curriculum lie in cultivating students' core competencies, including political identity, scientific spirit, rule-of-law awareness, and public participation.

Teachers should base their practice on constructivist theory and adhere to the requirements of the new curriculum standards, using issue-based instruction as a vehicle to deepen textbook analysis, integrate and expand teaching resources, and innovate teaching methods and practical pathways. By optimizing instructional design and constructing activity-based disciplinary courses, teachers can effectively enhance students' core competencies and cultivate a new generation capable of shouldering the mission of national rejuvenation.

2. The Core Concepts of Constructivist Theory and Issue-Based Instruction

2.1 Constructivist Theory

From the perspective of its psychological origins, significant contributions to the development of constructivism were made by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and American psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner. Piaget, often regarded as the originator of constructivism, stated: "Knowledge does not originate solely from the object nor solely from the subject, but from the interaction—the actions (activities)—connecting the subject and the object" (as cited in Zou, 2009; Cheng, n.d.). Constructivism posits that everything exists objectively, but an individual's understanding of objective things is determined by the individual. Different individuals, possessing different prior experiences, will thus interpret the same thing differently. Constructivist learning theory holds that learning guides students to build (construct) new knowledge based on their prior experiences (Liu, 2008). In essence, the core tenet of constructivism is that knowledge is constructed within the interactions between subject and object. Within specific socio-cultural environments, learning is an active process where learners integrate information on the basis of their existing knowledge and experience to construct knowledge (Zhou, 2006). Constructivist learning theory emphasizes key elements: context, the teacher as facilitator, the student as the central agent, and the convergence of knowledge. It aims to enable students to construct knowledge by activating their initiative, creativity, and enthusiasm. This theory underscores the "dynamic nature of knowledge, the richness and diversity of students' experiences, and the active, socially interactive, and situated nature of learning" (Zhou, 2006, p. 122).

Scaffolded instruction is based on Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). Vygotsky proposed that in assessing a child's intellectual development, at least two levels should be identified: the child's actual developmental level and their potential developmental level. The region between these two levels is the ZPD. Instruction should start from the child's potential level, continually creating new ZPDs (Slavin, n.d., pp. 254-289). The "scaffold" in scaffolding should be established based on the student's ZPD. By creating conceptual frameworks, introducing students to problem situations, encouraging independent exploration, facilitating group discussions, and enabling the construction of meaning, it guides students' intellectual development from one level to a higher one (Slavin, n.d.). This theory views learning as a process where learners form meaning and construct understanding based on their prior knowledge and experience, often occurring

through interaction with the socio-cultural context. Distinct from traditional learning theories and teaching concepts, constructivist theory plays a vital guiding role in the innovation of instructional design. The "interactive activities between subject and object" in the teaching process constitute the logical starting point for innovating issue-based instruction in ideological and political education and the theoretical premise for transforming teachers' pedagogical concepts, heralding a revolution in traditional teaching methods.

2.2 Issue-Based Instruction

Issue-based instruction originated in Western countries, where it is often termed the "issues-centered approach" (Liu & Hang, 2020). It is characterized by "starting from controversial issues, comprehensively utilizing discussion and inquiry methods, fostering a democratic, open, and orderly teaching atmosphere, encouraging students to think from multiple perspectives by combining their own experiences and interdisciplinary knowledge, and guiding students to collect data, analyze, and explore the causes of social problems based on acquired knowledge and theory, proposing solutions or pathways" (Liu & Hang, 2020, p. 5). This highlights the debatable nature of issues themselves.

In sociology, "issue" (议题, *yiti*) has a relatively specific connotation, often referring to "matters open for deliberation and discussion." However, its precise meaning within the field of education requires further refinement. Some experts define it as a "question that integrates specific disciplinary content and fundamental value judgments, possessing openness and leading characteristics. While bearing key teaching points, it addresses teaching difficulties and is inherently debatable" (Han & Zhu, 2018, p. XX). In China, Shen Xuechun proposed in *A Brief Discussion on Issue-Based Instruction* that "issue-based instruction is a teaching method using issues as the link, contexts as the carrier, activities as the path, and disciplinary core competencies as the ultimate goal" (Shen, 2018, p. XX). This is currently a widely recognized definition. The issue is the core of issue-based instruction. In the educational process, it must not only be debatable but also grounded in authentic contexts that motivate learners to actively "discuss" (议, *yi*). Therefore, we can define an issue as an empirically grounded, debatable, and actionable question that stimulates discussion and inquiry in the classroom.

As the reform and innovation of ideological and political education deepen in the new era, particularly with the systematic development of integrated teaching practices across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, issue-based instruction has gradually evolved into a significant teaching model for innovation. In practice, it demonstrates unique pedagogical value. Compared to other teaching methods, issue-based instruction emphasizes issue setting, context creation, the unfolding of disciplinary activities, and task assignment. Teachers create authentic problem situations to build activity-based disciplinary courses, enabling students to master disciplinary knowledge related to the issues and form correct values, thereby cultivating their disciplinary core competencies. Thus, Issues, Contexts, Activities, and Tasks constitute the four essential elements of issue-based instruction.

3. The Intrinsic Relationship between Constructivist Theory and Issue-Based Instruction

3.1 Constructivist Theory as the Philosophical Foundation of Issue-Based Instruction

Constructivism emphasizes that learners form cognitive structures through active exploration and meaning construction. Piaget proposed that the interaction between a child and the environment involves two fundamental processes: "assimilation" and "accommodation." Assimilation refers to absorbing external information and incorporating it into the child's existing cognitive structure (or "schema"), essentially integrating new information into existing schemas. Accommodation occurs when the external environment changes and the existing cognitive structure cannot assimilate the new information, leading to the reorganization and modification of the child's cognitive structure – a process where the individual's cognitive structure changes due to external stimuli (Zou, 2009). This aligns perfectly with the "student-centered" design of issue-based instruction. For example, in discussing the "Boundaries of Online Speech," students actively construct their understanding of "rule-of-law awareness" through independent case analysis and viewpoint debates, rather than passively receiving legal provisions.

Constructivist theory further branches into individual constructivism and social constructivism, differing primarily in their views on the relationship between the individual and society in the learning process. Individual constructivism fully affirms personal subjective initiative, emphasizing that learning is an active process of meaning-making with the external world, gradually forming one's own cognitive structure. Social constructivism, conversely, posits that learning requires not only individual initiative but also the existence of social organization. Since individuals exist within collectives, only through mutual cooperation within a team can individual learning be effective. Vygotsky's "sociocultural theory" highlights that learning requires social interaction for knowledge internalization (Zhou, 2006). Issue-based instruction similarly emphasizes the student's central role in learning. Its diverse "issue-learning" (议学, *yixue*) activities guide students to explore, communicate, collaborate within groups, engage in viewpoint clashes, gain new understanding, achieve deep learning, and enhance their disciplinary core competencies. Therefore, issue-based instruction and constructivist learning theory possess inherent points of convergence.

3.2 Issue-Based Instruction as the Practical Pathway for Constructivism

3.2.1 Contextual Creation: From Abstract Theory to Authentic Problems

Constructivism advocates for "situated learning" (Zhou, 2006). Issue-based instruction creates authentic and vivid teaching situations based on students' real-life scenarios and potential problems, integrating course content, linking knowledge points, and demonstrating their relevance in the real world. Through case studies and discussions, students learn how theoretical knowledge is applied to solve practical problems, ensuring logical connections between teaching activities and revealing the internal links between different knowledge points. Teachers should anticipate multiple outcomes during lesson preparation, consider potential problems, regularly reflect on teaching practices, and make adjustments based on student feedback and learning outcomes to create authentic, life-close contexts that help students build a disciplinary knowledge framework. For instance, when analyzing the pros and cons of waste classification policies, students need to draw on multi-disciplinary knowledge

(geography, economics, law) to achieve cross-modular meaning integration within a specific context.

3.2.2 Collaborative Inquiry: From Rote Memorization to Deep Learning

Constructivism opposes one-way transmission. Issue-based instruction guides students through a process of "deconstruction-reconstruction" in collaboration, via a complete chain of "issue decomposition → data collection → viewpoint debate → solution design." In senior high school ideological and political issue-based teaching, course design and teaching activities should center on student needs and development, encouraging active participation, stimulating learning interest and inquiry spirit. This approach provides opportunities for students to pose, analyze, and solve problems, cultivating their critical thinking skills. Teachers should encourage small-group collaborative learning, fostering teamwork and communication skills through exchange and cooperation, thereby effectively cultivating students' ideological and political core competencies and healthy personality development. For example, around the "Rural Revitalization Strategy," students need to investigate rural conditions, write research reports, and simulate policy debates – a process compelling them to actively connect theoretical knowledge with real-world problems.

3.2.3 Assessment Shift: From Outcome-Oriented to Process-Generated

Constructivism values the dynamic nature of the learning process. Assessment serves as a means to effectively promote teaching activities and achieve objectives through feedback. Issue-based instruction places classroom performance at the core of evaluation. It emphasizes recording students' learning mind maps, discussion transcripts, practical outcomes, and other process-oriented materials, focusing on whether post-class practice integrates with theoretical knowledge. It replaces traditional standardized testing by highlighting reflection and meaning generation during the learning process.

3.3 Value Alignment: Both Aim at Cultivating Core Competencies

Constructivism emphasizes that "knowledge is a product actively constructed by the learner" (Zhou, 2006). Issue-based instruction, through issue inquiry, prompts students to transform Marxist principles into analytical tools for real-world problems, thereby developing core competencies like political identity and scientific spirit. Constructivism advocates that "learning is a process of social negotiation" (Zhou,

2006). Issue-based instruction, through activities like inter-group debates and simulated public hearings, cultivates independent thinking while strengthening social responsibility awareness, achieving the educational goal of "socializing individual competencies." Therefore, from a constructivist learning perspective, issue-based instruction provides strong support for enhancing the effectiveness of senior high school ideological and political education; the two possess inherent points of convergence.

4. Analysis of Practical Pathways

4.1 Creating Authentic Contexts to Engage Students Rapidly in Issues

Constructivism advocates "situated learning." However, in practical teaching, most authentic issue contexts cannot be fully replicated or presented with absolute realism. This necessitates that teachers vividly and intuitively simulate real situations or select enlightening relevant materials to present the complexity of issues, mobilizing students' senses to genuinely perceive problems within the context. This allows students to immerse themselves in the dilemma presented by an issue, sparking their interest in and sense of responsibility for arguing it. For example, in teaching *The Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics*, the issue "Dilemmas of Democratic Decision-Making in Villager Autonomy – The Controversy over Collective Land Contracting Plans" cannot involve on-site visits to village committees. Teachers need to provide students with reports, papers discussing land contracting decision-making procedures, and present expert interpretations of news reports on villagers' joint protests against land contracts. This helps students recognize the issue's controversial and dilemmatic nature, leading to a profound understanding.

4.2 Providing Combinatorial Scaffolding for Scientific Argumentation Around Big Ideas

Teachers should provide scaffolding before student learning: learning resources like data search paths, evidence-gathering techniques like interview design points, and

question chains that drive the formation of big ideas. This enables students to conduct scientific argumentation around big ideas. When students encounter difficulties, teachers, through dialogue and keen observational skills, determine if and what kind of help is needed, providing appropriate scaffolding to advance the argumentation and guide students out of difficulty. Taking "How to Become a Participant in National Governance" as the core issue, it can be decomposed into sub-issues like "In what dimensions is the superiority of the socialist system manifested?" and "How can young students exercise democratic rights in community governance?" Through scenarios like simulated CPPCC proposal deliberations or grassroots democratic consultation meetings, students engage in role-playing to perceive the logic of institutional operation, completing the transformation of understanding from Marxist state theory to the significance of community deliberation rules. Context design must adhere to the ZPD principle, e.g., first establishing a legal cognition framework through *Civil Code* case analysis before extending to complex issues like "Cyberspace Governance."

4.3 Constructing an Assessment Continuum to Aid Knowledge Mastery and Personality Development

Earl (2013) categorized assessment based on its relationship to learning: *Assessment for Learning* (to advance learning), *Assessment of Learning* (to evaluate learning levels), and *Assessment as Learning* (to help students learn to evaluate during the learning process). In senior high school ideological and political issue-based instruction, the evaluation of student learning outcomes should focus on the practice of cultivating disciplinary core competencies, emphasizing student agency, the development of critical thinking, and social growth. Issue-based instruction facilitates the formation of class groups and team organizations. The interaction within individuals and groups, and between groups, jointly promotes knowledge construction during learning. Evaluation should prioritize examining students' problem-solving abilities in authentic contexts, the quality of argumentation during collaborative inquiry, and their role contributions within teamwork. By dynamically tracking students' cognitive and practical achievements and the internalization of values during issue inquiry, a three-dimensional evaluation system targeting the four core competencies (political identity, scientific spirit, rule-of-law awareness, public

participation) should be constructed. This aims to unify students' mastery of disciplinary knowledge with the development of a healthy personality.

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