

Teaching a General Education Course on Gender in a University in China: Insights from an Innovative Experiential Learning Activity

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Abstract

Gender education has emerged as a focal point in today's pluralistic society, as the construction of gender significantly influences personal identity cognition, well-being, and social interactions. In the context of tertiary education in China, gender-related courses are increasingly being integrated into general education frameworks, reflecting a societal attitude towards greater awareness of gender issues. To align with this educational paradigm, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University (BNBU; formerly United International College) which adopts a liberal arts teaching philosophy, has developed a course named Gender, Family, and Marriage. Within this course, an innovative experiential learning activity, 'Gender Swap Day', has been incorporated to allow students to personally experience through the symbolic adoption of diverse dress codes, the identities conventionally associated with the opposite sex. This initiative aims to facilitate students' understanding of gender as a socially constructed concept. Results from the activity indicate that participants come to recognize that gender roles and expectations are not static, rather, they are socially constructed. This activity has resulted in positive learning outcomes for many students, including increased interest in gender-related issues and the development of a more inclusive consciousness. The activity has its limitations; for example, its design assumes a restricted

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range of ways of expressing gender identity. Nevertheless, the insights garnered serve to inform the development of more diverse pedagogical and teaching approaches to gender education, thereby fostering a more empathetic societal awareness of gender issues.

Keywords: experiential learning, gender education, general education, higher education in China

In recent years, gender education has emerged as a focal point of societal attention. Gender encompasses the expectations, obligations, restrictions, and roles constructed by society for males and females, profoundly affecting and shaping people's own perception and construction of their individual identity, as well as impacting on their sense of overall well-being, and affecting their social interactions. Within China's higher education system, gender-related courses have been progressively integrated into General Education (GE) programs designed to cultivate students' comprehensive skills and competencies (Pang et al., 2020). This development reflects society's evolving attitude toward embracing gender diversity, a move that necessitates adaptations in the educational framework to facilitate the dissemination and cultivation of gender-related knowledge within a socially and culturally acceptable framework. Cultivating students' gender education is particularly essential during the tertiary education phase, which is an essential transitional period, during which students enter adulthood and experience a critical development of their emerging identity. At this pivotal stage, gaining an understanding of the social construction of gender, and the structural inequalities associated with it is significant for fostering students' identity formation, enhancing their social awareness and empathy, and reinforcing

their collective empowerment.

Gender education in China has undergone a complicated process of development and refinement that is highly contingent on social, political, and cultural changes. In traditional Chinese society, thousands of years of agricultural civilization and Confucianism in this country have had a profound and lasting influence on gender roles (Qing, 2020). Since the pre-Qin period, the patriarchal, self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy has been characterized by distinct gender roles, especially in relation to the division of labor, with men typically being engaged in external matters and women being involved in domestic activities such as weaving, sewing, and cooking. The three forms of obedience and four virtues codified by Confucianism further restricted women's social roles and strengthened patriarchy. In ancient China, traditional gender stereotypes and discrimination permeated into society's gender education, which ensured men's access to systematic education while restricting women's roles only to the shouldering of household chores (Cheung, 1996; Qing, 2020). By the twentieth century, Western gender theories and feminist ideas began to percolate into Chinese society, which had remained deeply entrenched in a patriarchal ideology (Menke, 2017). This influx of new perspectives elicited a reflection on traditional gender roles. Thus,

the status of women during this period underwent a complex set of changes. Due to the dynamic and tumultuous political environment, Chinese society simultaneously sought to advance in various domains while attempting to suppress and regulate efforts aimed at promoting gender equality (Hershatter & Zheng, 2008; Kan & He, 2024; Riley, 2019). These dynamics led to the intricate discourse surrounding feminist issues and gender equality in modern China. In the 1950s, the country introduced a family planning policy for the first time, highlighting the significance of sex education within educational institutions (Aresu, 2009; Leung et al., 2019). By the 1990s, the focus of education was to emphasize the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and the dissemination of contraceptive knowledge, which subsequently became integrated into the health education curriculum at universities (Aresu, 2009; Leung et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite the development in sex education, comprehensive gender education during this period was not fully recognized within China's educational system (Leung et al., 2019). In recent years, however, significant social changes within Chinese society, characterized by rapid economic development and increased social mobility, have profoundly affected and reshaped gender roles by promoting gender knowledge, awareness, and equality (Du et

al., 2021; Kan & He, 2024; Qing, 2020).

Today, discussions about gender issues on social media, the recognition of gender diversity and the growing awareness of the existence of different communities in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation have heightened local and global interest in gender education (Anindya, 2022; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). The demands and challenges arising from these social changes have no doubt contributed to the rise of gender education in tertiary education institutions worldwide. For instance, in the United States, gender education courses increasingly prioritize the theme of diversity in gender and sexual orientation (O'Malley et al., 2009). A range of pedagogical strategies and resources, such as lectures, films, and discussions, are employed in classrooms to foster students' understanding and respect for such diversity (O'Malley et al., 2009). These approaches encourage students to critically engage with issues of social justice and inclusiveness. Instructors utilize various media, such as movies, to enhance students' awareness of the complexities surrounding gender roles, sexual orientation, and gender identity. These courses place significant emphasis on the role of education in destigmatizing gender diversity and promoting social acceptance of varied gender identities and gendered forms of expression. In Taiwan, various laws

and regulations that strongly support gender equality education were passed during the last decade at the school level (Shih & Wang, 2022). During this period, gender-related courses and programs were incorporated into the Taiwanese higher education system (Shih & Wang, 2022). Hong Kong also placed significant emphasis on the development of human beings, health, and behaviors within its 'sex education' framework. In 2000, the city further integrated gender-related courses into the moral education curriculum, reflecting its commitment to providing students with comprehensive education on these critical topics (Leung et al., 2019). In Chinese Mainland, the government has implemented the fundamental national policy of gender equality, enhancing the protection of women's legitimate rights and interests and promoting equal educational opportunities for women (State Council of China, 2015). However, it can be argued that the courses offered by Chinese universities still fail to address gender adequately, resulting in the ineffective dissemination of knowledge related to gender issues amongst Mainland university students. This situation may be partly attributed to the deeply entrenched, traditional concepts of gender, which continue to foster gender discrimination and prejudice, leading some students to be ambivalent regarding learning, disseminating, and supporting gender-related issues. While the government has undertak-

en initiatives to promote gender equality, primarily focusing on equal opportunities, the support and resources allocated for gender-related courses are still insufficient.

The introduction of the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education by UNESCO brought increased attention to conventional norms of gender and power dynamics (UNESCO, 2018). These guidelines encourage instructors to disseminate gender-related knowledge more effectively through innovative teaching methods and content, thus encouraging students to critically examine the social and cultural norms conventionally associated with gender (UNESCO, 2018). Therefore, it may be that, despite the ongoing influence of gender stereotypes and the long-established resistance to gender awareness within Chinese society, innovative teaching methods and content have the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness of gender education (Lyu et al., 2020). Among these innovative methods, experiential learning (sometimes referred to as 'situational' learning), a method that integrates active learning opportunities into the curriculum, has emerged as an approach to enhancing the effectiveness of communication (Zeng et al., 2014). Experiential education has been increasingly recognized as a vital component of the university environment, playing a significant role in enhancing the quality of students' overall learning (Andresen et al.,

2020; Hawtrey, 2007).

To promote the teaching of gender-related knowledge in tertiary education and enhance students' understanding of the process of how gender is constructed socially, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University (BNBU; formerly UIC), which is committed to the principle of liberal arts education, has established a gender-focused GE course named 'Gender, Family, and Marriage' (GFM). Experiential activities have been introduced in this course, with the aim of intensifying the engagement of students and deepening their understanding of gender concepts, theories, and studies. In order to discuss how gender-oriented general education courses could be taught in a more creative way to engage students in China, this paper describes an experiential learning activity called 'Gender Swap Day' as an example to conduct a detailed case analysis and ultimately offer insights that might help others to deliver creative gender education in tertiary institutions in China.

Learning Environment and Activity Design

The GFM course is available for undergraduates across the institution to take from their second year of study at UIC. The course is divided into three sections, with the first focusing on conceptualiz-

ing gender, family, and marriage. In this section, students primarily engage with the concepts of sex and gender through theoretical frameworks and discussions, reflecting on the concept of the gender binary opposition and examining the definitions of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. During the exploration of the nature of gender, students gain an understanding of its social construction, as well as the role and function of gender within familial and marital contexts. Students recognize that gender is not a fixed biological trait but is instead shaped by the interplay between behavior and societal influences, drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performance (Butler, 2025). The second section examines gender studies in marriage and family, facilitating students' understanding of how gender roles in family and marriage are influenced by cultural factors, as well as the ways in which these roles may constrain or mold personal identity and behavior. The third explores the use of different types of materials (e.g. films, literary works, etc.) to facilitate students' intake of gender-related knowledge and theories. This section presents feminist perspectives, detailing its four waves of development (Rampton, 2015). It challenges traditional binary distinctions between men and women, advocating the view that gender identity and

gender expression should be determined by individual choice and expression.

Through the exploration of these concepts and theories, and in order to achieve one of the important ‘course intended learning outcomes’ (CILOs) that students should be able to understand how gender is socially constructed and assess gender-related structural inequality, an activity called ‘Gender Swap Day’ was designed. This activity was held during the GFM class time in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year at UIC. 57 undergraduate students including 5 fourth-year students, 1 third-year student, and 51 second-year students registered for this course. Among these students, 15 were male and 42 were female. These students were from different programs affiliated with Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS), Faculty of Business and Management (FBM), School of Culture and Creativity (SCC), and Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) respectively. In order to carry out this activity, male students were encouraged to dress in the way that females would usually dress in daily life to perform female gender identity. For instance, they could wear a dress, high heels, a wig or other hair accessories, and they could put on makeup. Similarly, female students were encouraged to perform male gender identity by dressing in the

way that male students would usually do. Therefore, female students could wear an oversized T-shirt, a business suit, a sports outfit, etc. This activity was held at the end of the semester after all the lectures were delivered so that students could be more sensitive in noticing and realizing how different factors that they had studied formally, now worked to inform their gender performance.

Reflections and Insights

Positive Learning Experiences

This innovative activity aroused students’ keen interest and curiosity in terms of learning gender, and facilitated their achieving of the aforementioned CILO. Feedback obtained from the students related to their consequent knowledge intake, the enhancement of their learning interest, and their increased awareness of gender diversity.

First, the students reported that this activity enhanced their understanding and intake of knowledge by giving them an opportunity to experience what factors come into play to affect their gender performance in terms of their outfit. Students themselves observed that social expectations, cultural practices, and mainstream values, together with their personal preferences shaped and restrained their selection of apparel. The brief experience of dressing according to

the norms of the opposite gender allowed students to understand, in a fast and direct way, how gender was cultivated, taught, and reinforced. Particularly, throughout this activity, students gained insight into societal expectations and norms surrounding gender roles, such as women being expected to wear clothes that conform to the “feminine” characteristics. When students dress in ways conventionally associated with the opposite sex, they may well experience discomfort or feelings of shame when their choices do not conform to traditional gender roles. Even so, students were able to express a complex understanding of the intended learning outcomes; for example, although there is a general understanding of the normative dress codes that people feel constrained to follow in a given society, individuals are still able to subvert these codes in order to show their personality, and even challenge traditional gender perspectives. If the challenges to the normative codes are nuanced, they show the wearer’s personality without necessarily posing a threat to the predominant discourse of gender upheld by their society.

Second, as a result of the activity, students’ interest in further pursuing gender-related studies was aroused, and their capacity for doing interdisciplinary research was enhanced. As students who registered for this course were from var-

ious disciplinary backgrounds, and most of them had never studied gender systematically before, this activity spurred their curiosity to explore other gender-related topics such as the male gaze, the beauty standards characteristic of a patriarchal society, the social construction of femininity and masculinity, etc. Moreover, this activity motivated them to integrate the knowledge they learned in this course with their own background, which mobilized and elevated their interdisciplinary learning and research skills. For instance, one student from FHSS initiated a study on how gender discrimination was subtly embedded in the fandom of China’s entertainment industry.

Third, the positive values of embracing diversity, respecting each other, and building up collective empowerment were realized through this activity. By literally putting themselves into others’ shoes, the students all reported feeling the difficulties and pressure the other gender would encounter in a given society. Male students realized the inconvenience of wearing a dress and the pressure of following the mainstream beauty standards set up by society when they prepared their apparel, as they consciously paid attention to a selection of clothing that would make them look appealing, slender, and young. Female students felt a strong constraint in performing male identity when they selected male cloth-

ing, compared with their previous personal shopping experiences, as they found male fashions to be limited in style, color, and design. The sense of inter-relatedness within gender relations was raised for both male and female students, and they appreciated each other for supporting the preparation of apparel before the activity. The sense of collective empowerment was built and promoted through students' practices after class. One female student held an activity on campus to support the destigmatization of the use of sanitary napkins by setting up posters and banners to illustrate how the shame of menstruation was socially constructed and how male and female students should try to foster a non-binary perspective to not only perceive gender-related issues but other matters as well, and she also gave sanitary napkins for free to other female students.

Limitations

Though this activity was enjoyed by the majority of the students, there are several limitations in terms of the design of the activity and students' engagement.

First, in terms of the design of this activity, only two gender identity performance options were made available for students, which was that male and female students should dress as members of the opposite sex. The primary reason for the course instructor to design this activity in

this way was for students to experience the alternate gender identity that they most frequently socialize with in their daily life. Moreover, the contrast between male and female apparel was most striking as society imposes almost diametrically opposite expectations on how males and females should dress to perform their gender identity. Men's clothing emphasizes simplicity and strength, while women's clothing is characterized by softness, which serves to reinforce societal understandings of traditional gender roles. Other existing but less frequently encountered gender identities such as transgender, genderfluid, and genderless identities were not included in this activity. Moreover, even within a gender category, like 'female', there exist several sub-types like denim, butch, etc. Focusing the activity on stereotypically normative gender identities arguably hindered students from forming a more profound understanding of the diversity of identities within a particular gender category. It might also reinforce students' gender-binary perspectives and their stereotypes of a certain gender. During this activity, male students unanimously chose to wear skirts or dresses and long-hair wigs to perform female gender identity, whereas female students primarily chose T-shirts, shorts, and fake beards to showcase masculinity.

Second, though the majority of the students maintained a keen interest in this activity, gender difference was detected in light of the engagement level of male and female students. Compared with male students, female students indicated higher interest in this activity generally, and they were more passionate about apparel selection to perform male gender identity. Even though female students indicated that the choices of men's apparel were comparatively limited, they spent considerable effort in finding accessories to match their outfits in order to perform masculinity. In contrast to the enthusiasm for the activity expressed by the female students, the male students tended to be reserved and conservative in their choices. The majority of the male students only selected unisex T-shirts or T-shirts with cartoon figures to perform female gender identity. One thing that set the male students apart from the female students was that they tended to focus more on using small accessories such as necklaces, bracelets, and brooches, which could satisfy the activity requirement partially but not too obviously, as they remained quite shy about performing female gender identity. Again, this difference in gendered behavior during the activity was indicative of social expectations determining the performance of male and female identity. Female students might consider the perfor-

mance of masculinity to be empowering in a patriarchal society, while male students might well consider the performance of femininity to be uncomfortably disempowering, indeed 'emasculating'.

Insights

Gender-focused general education courses are essential but it remains a challenge to design engaging, creative, and appropriate content for university students in China. Several insights are gained from having the activity Gender Swap Day in GFM.

First, when promoting gender awareness in GE courses, it is essential to understand the social, cultural, and historical context of gender in China. The curriculum should address traditional views while promoting modern perspectives on gender equality. The content should on the one hand be geared to the state-of-the-art gender development globally while respecting the taboos, sensitivities, and social practices of China.

Second, developing materials that reflect diverse gender identities and experiences is crucial. An inclusive curriculum fosters a supportive environment for all students, which helps to build up a safe and engaging learning space for students to engage themselves in the class, in light of sharing, participating, and interacting. Moreover, the design of an inclusive curriculum should also take students' study background into

consideration, as a general education course is usually offered to all undergraduate students in a university, thus the contents, materials, and resources used for the course design should better be from an interdisciplinary perspective. This broadens students' perspectives and demonstrates the relevance of gender issues in diverse fields.

Third, active and collaborative learning strategies should be adopted to enhance students' engagement in experiences that challenge stereotypes and expectations associated with gender role. This approach can enhance a sense of collective empowerment among students, which is critical in studying gender. Encouraging discussions, debates, and group projects require students to interact with each other in greater depth. These active forms of learning also foster students' critical thinking and allow students to engage with gender topics more profoundly. Promoting collaborative projects that encourage students to work together should be integrated into course design as well, aiming to highlight gender fluidity.

Conclusion

The incorporation of experiential learning activities into gender education courses represents an innovative approach to merge gender-related issues with broader

general education. As gender education has been increasingly playing a critical role in shaping students' comprehensive development in Chinese universities, it is essential to emphasize the principles of openness and inclusiveness within the teaching process. This requires fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and creating an environment that promotes sharing and support among students of diverse gender identities. Through a comprehensive exploration of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of gender, university students are expected to critically engage with long-standing traditional norms with regard to gender issues, while actively promoting gender equality and diversity. The design of experiential learning activities integrates practical application with course content, thereby encouraging students to explore gender from multiple perspectives, and thus deepening their understanding of gender-focused issues.

In conclusion, the integration of gender education into the general education curriculum in China's tertiary education institutions, along with the innovative experimental learning activities, is instrumental in motivating new generations of students to serve as advocates for a more inclusive, stable and harmonious society which recognizes and works on addressing gender-related challenges.

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