

# Research on the Teaching Philosophy of American Community College

Huihui Hu

Nantong Shipping College, Nantong, China

huhh@ntsc.edu.cn

**Keywords:** Community college, Teaching philosophy, Heartland College, Teaching mode

**Abstract:** The function of American Community College is similar to that of Chinese higher vocational education. Community colleges in the United States have experienced a hundred years of development, and their teaching philosophy and modes are relatively mature. The teaching idea of “students first” and diversified teaching methods provide reference for the development of Higher Vocational Education in China. This paper takes Heartland Community College as an example to study the teaching management concept, teaching methods and teaching implementation of Community College in the United States.

## 1. Introduction

There are two types of American Higher Education: two-year community college and four-year university. Community colleges account for about one-third of American universities. They originated from President Kennedy's tenure and have a history of more than 100 years. At present, there are more than 1130 community colleges in the United States, with more than 13 million students each year. Community college aims to provide a cheap, convenient and comprehensive university education for high school graduates, while providing a re-education function for the community. Two years community colleges and four-year universities in the United States implement the “2+2” transfer system. Graduates of community colleges can either directly participate in work or choose to continue their studies in four-year universities.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the United States, community colleges are very common and self-contained. Compared with four-year universities, they have the following advantages: a) relatively low tuition; b) relatively low admission conditions; c) general education oriented, focusing on helping each student succeed; d) providing more personal guidance and out of class consultation, and having transfer guidance center. The main functions of community education in the United States include: a) providing entrance service; b) continuing education for social personnel; c) vocational skills training; d) community education service; e) personalized customized training.<sup>[2]</sup>

Community colleges in the United States have experienced a hundred years of development, with mature development in all aspects, and their functions are similar to those of Higher Vocational Education in China. In recent years, I have done a lot of research on community colleges in the United States based on my experience of attending bilingual teaching and training in the U.S. in 2015 (Bilingual Teaching and training program 2015IITL in Heartland Community College). This paper takes the HCC (Heartland Community College) as an example to explore the teaching mode of American Community College, so as to provide some reference for the development of Higher Vocational Education in China.

Founded in 1990, Heartland community college is a public two-year university, which belongs to the discipline of Arts and Sciences and has the right to issue higher degree certificates. The university has five branches: health and medical services, humanities and art, mathematics and science, society and business, science and technology. It is a representative comprehensive college.

## 2. Teaching Management Concept

Both in teaching and management, American colleges and universities attach great importance to “philosophy”--that is, once the concept is established, it will not be easily compromised. Community

colleges in the United States mainly have the following basic teaching management concepts, and each university will have its own personality concepts.

## **2.1 Wide Entry and Strict Exit**

Leniency in and strictness in going out means that the admission conditions of the school are relatively loose, while the graduation conditions are relatively strict. Community colleges in the United States have low admission conditions, mainly for students who have not been admitted to the four-year university, students with slightly poor economic conditions, and foreign students. Taking HCC as an example, the school's admission requirements are very low, which basically requires only financial certification and language scores, but the school's graduation is strictly in accordance with the credit system, and students are not allowed to graduate without full credits. The purpose of this is to provide learning opportunities for some students with poor foundation, and strict graduation standards are the guarantee for the society and the 4-year university to deliver qualified graduates with high quality. The school will adopt a series of teaching measures and means to ensure that students can reach the graduation level. The specific measures will be introduced later. Because of the situation that students can't finish their studies or repeat their studies, all the students who enter the school work very hard and form a good learning atmosphere.

## **2.2 Progressive Teaching**

### **2.2.1 The Curriculum System Embodies the Concept of “Progressive”**

The step-by-step teaching embodies the requirements of detailed objectives and gradual progress. Although the admission conditions are relatively low, the school will test the freshmen. The main subjects of the test are language and Mathematics (including geometry and function). If the language performance is not up to the standard, language training will be carried out. If the mathematics score is not enough, the students need to “re-study” first, that is, take the corresponding mathematics course and pass the test.

For other courses with continuity requirements, the same as above. If the first course is less than 70 points, it is not allowed to carry out the follow-up study of relevant courses. Courses can be selected only after the first course is retaken and reaches the standard. That is to say, only by meeting the requirements of knowledge reserve in the early stage of the course can new course learning be started, so as to ensure the learning effect and enable students to really learn the course content. However, the opening time of each course is set according to the semester, and students need to wait for one semester or one year if they miss the normal course selection time, which prolongs the actual school time of students, and the time cost of failing is too high. Therefore, most students will take every course seriously and study hard. However, China's higher vocational colleges do not have such a rule. They often fail to pass the first course and then carry out follow-up course learning. Due to the lack of knowledge reserve, the learning effect of follow-up courses cannot be guaranteed. This will lead to a new round of failing to meet the standards, which is easy to form a vicious circle.

### **2.2.2 The Teaching Process of the Course Embodies the Concept of “Progressive”**

This kind of step-by-step teaching of community college is also reflected in the single course teaching. Due to the low enrollment conditions of American community colleges and many colleges and universities want to accept foreign students, the basic level of students in such courses as mathematics and reading varies greatly. HCC has specially set up the reading lab and the math lab. The teaching design of these two labs fully embodies the concept of step-by-step teaching.

Math lab is a special online mathematics learning course for new students who fail in the math test. The course is arranged in a special computer classroom, where there are professional instructors, and students can freely arrange time for self-study on the computer. The course is roughly divided into 15 modules. Students can watch videos on the computer for self-study, and there will be a small test at the end of each module. Only after testing is qualified can the next module be studied. After students pass all the modules, they need to conduct a comprehensive online test. After passing the test and obtaining the credits of the subject, they can study other related follow-up courses. Online system

also provides online practice, questions, guidance and other functions, of course, students can also choose on-site guidance.

Reading lab is mainly for overseas students who fail to pass the entrance English reading test. There are many instructors in the laboratory. First of all, according to the test results, students are divided into different levels, each level corresponding to different colors for easy distinction. Classroom teaching is conducted according to the level, with 1-6 students in each group, under the guidance of one teacher. Students with better foundation have more teaching groups. If students have poor foundation, one-to-one guidance is adopted. In teaching, students will be upgraded or demoted according to their learning conditions, and the learning group will be adjusted in time to achieve the best learning effect. The teaching materials and teaching methods of each group are different. The teaching materials in the reading lab are placed in the corresponding level color grid according to the difficulty degree. Students can freely choose the textbook to read in the corresponding color grid according to their preferences. The choice of teaching methods is also different. For the group with poor foundation, there are fewer students, higher participation of teachers, more interaction, demonstration by teachers and follow-up reading by students. In the basic group, each student will send a player with headphones. Students can choose the content corresponding to the textbook for self-study. After self-study, they will read it to the teacher in turn. The teacher will correct and ask questions to ensure the learning effect.

### **2.3 Student Oriented**

During my visit to the United States, one of my deep feelings is that the school embodies the concept of “student-oriented” everywhere, respects and serves students, improves various conveniences for students, and ensures that students can concentrate on their studies.

#### **1) Respect for personality**

The United States is a very polite country, teachers and students respect each other, education and teaching details reflect the respect for students' personality. For example, in the first class of the new course, the teacher will send a name brand to the students, let them write their name information on the brand and put it on the table, and let them introduce themselves when they have time. In each class, the students will take the name brand, so that the teacher can easily name the students and help the teacher remember the names of the students. The barrier free passage, automatic door opening button, special parking space for the disabled, and the convenience of Braille logo in the toilet all reflect the respect for students' personality.

#### **2) Respect individual differences and teach students according to their aptitude**

The reading lab introduced in the previous article fully reflects the teaching according to students' aptitude. According to the students' learning situation, there is no unified scale. Students learn and progress according to their own progress, and finally reach the unified standard. In addition, the American classroom is more free for students to learn in what way. Some students bring laptops, some books, some students only bring a few printed papers, and students use their own way to record learning notes.

#### **3) Support for secondary selection of major**

The second choice of major is similar to the “transfer of major” of Chinese universities. In China, only “top students” have the chance to change their majors. In the United States, the second choice of majors is more common, and there are special teachers in charge of professional guidance and course selection guidance. The second choice of major in the United States is proposed for the following two situations: 1) students can apply for changing their major if they find that their major is not suitable for them; 2) the school thinks that the students are not suitable for their major, and will also advise them to change their major. The first situation is similar to that in China. The second situation refers to that some basic subjects of students are always unable to meet the standards and carry out the study of professional courses. The school will advise students to change majors. For example, general engineering majors (such as Engineering) have higher requirements for mathematics. If students' mathematics level fails to meet the requirements all the time, the school will recommend students to change to other majors with lower requirements for mathematics.

#### 4) Establish learning files for students

For courses with large differences in students' basic knowledge, the school will establish learning files for students. For example, each student in reading lab has his own learning file, which records the level of students, teaching materials used in each class, learning time and class scores, and stores the files in color boxes representing different levels. Next class can quickly find their own Archives. Although there are many students studying in reading lab every day, the teacher only needs to simply read the learning files to understand the learning situation of the students, and the teaching efficiency is very high.

#### 5) Fully consider the needs of students

Community College Students' learning foundation is relatively poor, they need more care and guidance in learning, psychology and employment, so the school has set up various learning guidance centers, professional guidance centers, employment guidance centers, psychological guidance centers, students can get guidance free of charge. Take “writing guidance center” as an example. There are many teachers in the center. Students can get free writing guidance here. For professional courses, relevant teachers will also be arranged to answer questions after class. All kinds of guidance centers provide support for poor students' self-study.

In addition to learning support, community colleges also strive to provide students with a variety of life facilities.<sup>[3]</sup> Community college includes social personnel re-education, vocational skills training and other functions. Therefore, the college will have many social personnel to study in the school. In order to provide better services, in addition to the regular facilities, there are all kinds of electrical appliances and cookers in the dormitory. Coffee hall is set up in the teaching building and library. The school also improves the nursery for young mothers. During the class, mothers can sent their babies to the nursery and supervised by a special kindergarten teacher.

### 2.4 Adopt General Credit System

The curriculum standard of the same major and course in American colleges and universities is unified nationwide. The curriculum standard is formulated by a special academic committee, whose members are all experts in the discipline. Once the standard is determined, the teaching process must be strictly implemented and not changed at will. Students of two-year university and four-year university in the same major have the same contents. As long as students obtain corresponding credits, it means that they have mastered the course contents required by the major. Therefore, most four-year universities recognize the credits of two-year universities, which is the general credit system, which ensures the feasibility of the “2 + 2” transfer system from community colleges to four-year universities.

### 3. Teaching Method

In order to achieve the best teaching effect and enable students to study in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, HCC attaches great importance to the selection of teaching methods.

First, HCC adopts a variety of teaching methods. There are mainly three kinds: traditional face-to-face teaching, online teaching and Hybrid Teaching<sup>[4]</sup>. Teachers choose different teaching methods according to the characteristics of the course. The traditional face-to-face teaching is a common way. For some basic theory courses, this way has its unique advantages, reducing the distance between teachers and students, and deepening the process of “teaching” and “learning”. In HCC, the college has set up a network learning platform called “blackboard”, which assigns an account to each student when they enter the school. The platform is very powerful, and students can't learn without this platform every day. This platform has daily course arrangement, learning content, teachers' teaching materials and learning materials for students to download. Students can submit homework and ask questions on this platform, and teachers can grade homework and answer questions online. The network teaching of Higher Vocational Education in China has been put forward for a long time. Many schools also have their own network teaching platforms, but they are not perfect enough. They are basically born in response to the task of teaching reform, not widely used, and the majority of teachers and students are not benefited. Hybrid teaching is also very

common in HCC. All classrooms in the college have computers, projectors, and wireless networks. Teachers and students can access the Internet at any time. In the classroom, teachers will assign some tasks to students to complete in groups. Students can query the information and complete the tasks at any time through the network. The teachers only give some guidance on methods. This kind of teaching method greatly exercises the ability of students to collect data and solve problems.

Second, discussion is widely used. Discussion method is the most commonly used teaching method in HCC class. Teachers and students can have discussion at any time as long as there are problems in the class. There are many forms of group discussion, such as same table, front and back table, group by serial number or group discussion by different selection results. The teacher will also take turns to participate in the discussion of different groups, and send representatives to report the results of the discussion. Group discussion can make students actively participate in the topic, active thinking, and learn from each other in the discussion. This habit of discussion is also very important to cultivate the team work spirit and interpersonal skills in students' work.

In order to ensure the participation and attention of students, American community college mainly adopts small class teaching, and only a few basic courses adopt large class teaching. Generally, the number of small classes will not exceed 20. Many classrooms are equipped with small square tables with 4-6 seats or long tables in a circle to increase the atmosphere of discussion and learning.

Third, pay attention to practical teaching. HCC attaches great importance to the cultivation of practical ability. Science and engineering courses will offer a large number of practical courses, many of which are carried out in the integrated classroom of theory and practice. The physics course and welding technology course I watched about how to identify the rock category belong to this kind of course. Take physics class as an example, the teacher plays the teaching video, which introduces the theory and operation methods. In the process of video playing, teachers will pause to ask questions or explain. After the video is played, the students receive the experimental equipment for rock identification, and the teachers tour to guide and answer questions. In the welding technology course, the teaching process is basically the same. Finally, the teacher will demonstrate the welding and guide the students with hands. Teachers of both courses invite me to participate in the practice and discuss with me.

According to my observation, the training room of HCC is not as clean and tidy as expected, and the experimental equipment is not new. The training room is like a workshop, where different training equipment and various processing training equipment are placed. HCC attaches great importance to students' practical ability. All their laboratories and training rooms are free for students, so their equipment utilization rate is very high. This is worth learning. The experimental equipment in many colleges and universities in China is not used badly, but is put out of order. Many laboratory drawings are only for visiting, which does not really play a role in improving students' practical ability.

#### **4. Teaching Implementation**

HCC pays special attention to the cultivation of students' self-study ability. Their teaching idea is that students should learn how to study so as to maintain the motivation and ability of lifelong learning. "Teaching" and "learning" are equally important, and students' learning is highly emphasized. In all aspects of teaching implementation, it is around this goal. During my study in the United States, I found that the teacher's explanation of specific knowledge is relatively simple, often by playing teaching videos. Teachers pay more attention to the introduction of ways and methods, setting up questions for discussion or answering questions for students.

##### **4.1 Pay Attention to Lesson Preparation Before Class**

One of the things I feel deeply about HCC is that it pays attention to preparing lessons before class. In China, preparing lessons is only the work of teachers, but preparing lessons in HCC is the common task of students and teachers. In a seemingly relaxed and casual classroom, teachers need to spend a lot of time preparing and making teaching materials for topics, designing topics for discussion, planning students' homework, and doing a lot of extended homework in their spare time to respond to students' questions. Before class, students need to prepare for the next class, that is, preview, consult a

large number of materials, form their own views, and record the problems they don't understand, so as to have a targeted listening and participate in class discussion.

#### **4.2 Students Are the Main Part of Classroom Teaching**

The concept of “student oriented” is also fully reflected in the class of HCC. The teacher is responsible for organizing the classroom and plays the role of “leading through the needle”, and the students are the main body of the classroom. For most courses, students are required to preview in advance. Therefore, knowledge introduction is not the main content of the classroom, classroom discussion and practical operation are the themes of the classroom, which require students to actively participate, and teachers are responsible for guidance and Q & A. In class, most of the questions of students' Preview will be answered.

#### **4.3 Pay Attention to Consolidation after Class**

In addition to preparing lessons before class and actively participating in class, students also need to consolidate after class to form a learning loop and achieve the best learning effect. The methods and skills learned by students need to be consolidated through practice after class. In addition, students need to preview the content of the next class. Therefore, HCC students have a huge amount of homework. The amount of homework is a little unimaginable for Chinese students.

#### **4.4 Pay Attention to after-School Counselling**

In American universities, students need to have strong self-study ability, but the students in community colleges have relatively poor foundation, so it is inevitable to encounter various problems in the learning process, which requires the school to provide a variety of counseling platforms to ensure the smooth progress of learning. For this reason, HCC has set up after-school counseling centers for various basic courses and professional courses. In order to enable students to practice after class, all laboratories and training rooms are open to students free of charge.

### **5. Conclusion**

China's higher vocational education is an important part of the modern vocational education system. It provides vocational education, continuing education, community education and other multi-functional services for general high schools, vocational graduates, social personnel and other types of students, which is equivalent to the functions of American community colleges. After a hundred years of development, community colleges in the United States have formed a set of mature management concepts in teaching management, teaching methods and teaching implementation. China's higher vocational education can learn from its excellent practices to better develop China's vocational education.

### **References**

- [1] Hangang Bai. (2012).Chinese Vocational and Technical Education, no.12, pp.12-17.
- [2] Hongyi Feng. (2004).The Functions of Community Colleges in the United States and Their Revelations, Fujian Normal University.
- [3] Hexing Liu. (2012). Chinese Vocational and Technical Education, no. 6, pp. 89-93.
- [4] Xiaosi Hu,Zhijuan Tang. (2013). ADULT EDUCATION, no. 4, pp. 127-128.