A study on the application of PBL teaching method in the blended learning of Brand Image Design

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Abstract: Since 2020, due to the impact of the epidemic, blended teaching has gradually become the mainstream development direction of course teaching. Based on the special attributes of creative thinking, online classes are difficult for design disciplines. This study takes the course Brand Image Design of Shanghai Sanda University as a practical object, and explores how to improve the efficiency and student acceptance of blended teaching by combining problem-oriented PBL teaching mode, online course website, online real-time collaborative design platform and other Internet tools.

1. Introduction

PBL (Problem-Based Learning) is a problem-based approach to teaching and learning, and is a real-world, student-centred approach to education. The application of the problem-based model in design teaching enables students to discuss problems in real-life situations, which is a continuous learning process and promotes the improvement of students' participation skills.

The course of Brand Image Design is a highly comprehensive course. As a main subject in design, it is closely related to social, cultural and economic factors, and is highly practical. In addition to the importance of cultivating students' aesthetic awareness, the course cultivates students' self-innovation and theoretical application ability. Therefore, the course needs to fully mobilise students' initiative, create an immersive learning atmosphere for students and fully explore their creativity and imagination. This characteristic is consistent with the concept of PBL, and therefore the PBL teaching method is conducive to the cultivation of students' divergent thinking.

At present, although the PBL teaching method is involved and applied in design courses, there are still shortcomings. First of all, the theoretical teaching part is still dominated by the teacher's lecture, some students do not have strong learning initiative and lack sufficient independent thinking ability, they tend to rely on the teacher's explanation and guidance in class and can only barely finish their design assignments. When faced with actual projects or professional events, they will look difficult and their creativity lacks character. Secondly, although the PBL model is beneficial to the teaching of the course, its emphasis on "situational teaching" is often compromised in the online teaching environment due to epidemic conditions. This project aims to explore how a PBL-based blended teaching model can be more effectively applied in the design discipline, using brand image design as the core course.

2. Status of domestic brand image design courses

2.1. The contradiction between conceptual pluralism of expression and the content of a single course in higher education

Brand image design is a core course in visual communication design, which has been offered in China since the 1980s and continues to be taught today. With the development of the times, digital technology innovation and artificial intelligence have become the development trend of the whole society, and brands need to be constantly updated in terms of connotation and design strategies, therefore, the construction of brand image design courses in universities should also keep pace with the times in terms of content and technology to meet the needs of society.

Historically, brand identity has its roots in the early days of livestock branding, when livestock were branded with their own marks to distinguish them. [1] In the late 1990s, branding came into full development and the connotations of branding became more diverse. International branding guru Wally Olins mentioned that a brand could be a product, a service or even a person. [2] This statement expands the meaning of branding and emphasises that the carrier of a brand is not limited to the commercial sector. At present, regional cultural branding is developing rapidly in China, with many regions using local folk culture to develop tourism and thus drive local economic development, while more and more traditional Chinese folk culture has been included in the intangible cultural heritage list. Cultural innovation has also promoted the construction and

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development of cultural brands, and traditional brand image design courses are facing new challenges. [3]

According to data from Consumer Reports 2021, the cultural category has seen a rise in branding discussions but is not well known and lacks novelty in its format. In current brand design courses in universities, project-based commercial brand identity design dominates, and there is a lack of research on cultural categories. Moreover, according to statistics from China Knowledge Network, the number of teaching and research papers related to brand image design courses is low, indicating that there is still much room for exploration in this field. Students in China also have a limited concept of branding, staying at the more intuitive level of visual identity (VI) and logo (Logos). Therefore, brand identity design courses in universities need to expand on the content and themes, and students need to enhance the connotation of their work and enrich their understanding of the concept of branding. This requires a focus on developing students' independent research, problem identification and problem-solving skills in the course.

2.2. Problems in blended learning

Although blended learning has become mainstream, we focus more on the creation of learning resources, diversity of resource sharing, and interaction with learners when implementing blended teaching, as online courses are a new segment for teachers. The online teaching session becomes an assembly line model of teachers posting resources - students learning resources - teachers and students interacting. [5] This situation often lacks a unified design of teaching methods, teaching strategies and teaching activities, and can lead to a discontinuity in what students have learned. In the case of Brand Image Design in Shanghai Sander College, for example, it involves a lot of theoretical knowledge about research, creativity and post-implementation, and requires students to build up a "whole chain of brand" thinking through a large theme design and continuous practice. The integration of the PBL concept into blended teaching is therefore conducive to the effective implementation of the current curriculum and the linking of online and offline course content.

2.3. Advantages of the PBL method and implementation issue

PBL (Problem-Based Learning) is a problem-based approach to teaching and learning, and a real-world, student-centred approach to teaching and learning. The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model is an innovation in a wave of paradigm change, pioneered in 1969 at McMaster University in Canada by Howard, an American professor of neurology. [4]

As art and design majors have high requirements for course teaching, it is a profession with strong practicality. In addition to teaching basic theoretical knowledge in the classroom, teachers also need to focus on theoretical practice, to link the course closely with the current social industry reality, and to focus on cultivating and

improving students' ability to identify, analyse and solve problems as well as their ability to think creatively about design. Therefore, the PBL teaching mode has also been applied in art and design professional courses in recent years, but it is mostly used for offline teaching, with little integration with the hybrid teaching that is currently being hotly debated. In addition, the PBL teaching method focuses on building complete problem clusters based on the whole course, with students acquiring knowledge through discussion in the context of created scenarios. Therefore, problem design is crucial to the overall course construction, which requires teachers to string together the theoretical and practical parts of the course with a series of questions upfront, rather than simply targeting only one part of the course.

3. The application of PBL teaching method in blended teaching - A case study of brand image design course in Sanda University

Based on the above, this study takes the course Brand Image Design in Sanda University as an example to explore the application of PBL teaching method in the blended teaching of design courses.

3.1. Key issues to be addressed

3.1.1. 'Pipeline' blended learning

Currently, the entire course is taught offline, supplemented by online resources. However, due to the comprehensive content of the course, the emphasis on theory and practice, the relatively high level of knowledge, the need to correlate and internalise all knowledge points, so a single theory + practice teaching model is likely to lead to problems such as scattered knowledge points, difficulties for students to remember and poor connection with the practical part.

As online courses are a new module for teachers, we may focus more on the creation of learning resources, the variety of resources shared, and the interaction with learners when implementing blended learning. Online teaching sessions become an assembly line of 'teachers posting resources - students learning resources - teachers and students communicating'. This often results in a lack of consistent design of teaching methods, teaching strategies and activities, resulting in a disconnect between what students are learning and the need for consistent and logical teaching strategies to support it. [6]

3.1.2. Formality over research

Design research is a key part of the design discipline and determines whether the subsequent design solution is scientifically sound. [7] As a service discipline, design is not intended for an individual audience and therefore the acceptability of a design solution to the general public is key. Some students prefer to design in one step, without a solid track record of the process, resulting in many

solutions being 'taken for granted' and having weak application value. Research has shown that focusing on logo design at the expense of communication is not user-oriented, and that focusing on communication at the expense of design leads to a lack of aesthetic appeal. Accurate communication is the key to brand identity design and is the 'first principle' of brand identity design. The designer therefore needs to identify the characteristics of the recipient of the message and choose an expression that can be understood by that person. Therefore, it is essential to improve design research skills for this course.

3.1.3. Less effective group discussion in online course

Communication is key to generate design inspiration. Online courses often bring design sessions to a standstill, with students unable to engage in group discussions in the same space. The Mood Board is a key part of the solution. Group members have a short time to brainstorm on a topic, but online courses prevent this from happening effectively and reduce the sense of a real workplace experience. Group discussions are less effective.

In summary, the author applies the PBL teaching model to the blended learning of the Brand Image Design course, bridging online and offline content through a big question with a unified series of activities designed to improve the teaching efficiency of this course.

3.2. Teaching and learning strategies

Based on the above statement of key issues, the author has developed the following teaching strategies.

3.2.1. Reconfiguration of course content

The whole course is based on one big question - How to implement a complete brand identity design, and forms a series of sub-questions from both theoretical and practical aspects, linking the online and offline content. [8] The theory is linked into a complete framework and can be applied in practice. Therefore, the course progresses through the whole VI design workflow, including preliminary research, design practice and results testing.

Table 1. Contents of the course.

	Online	Offline	Teaching and Learning
Research Section	**Understanding the brand concepts**. e.g. What is a brand? brand positioning, audience, how to make such brands discoverable to the general public	Increase in design research content narrative, e.g. **qualitative and quantitative analysis**	1.Flipped classroom and online discussions 2.Submit a full research report
practice section	**Complete brainstorming and sketch exploration**	complete all the design output content, including logo, standard font design, colour design, etc., finally **generate a complete brand visual identity manual**	Online collaborative design platform- Canva, Padlet Wall, etc.
Testing section	Teachers assess students' works	lead other students in discussions	**Reflection.** Through continuous discussion and feedback, until a relatively sound solution is proposed.

3.2.2. Reconfiguration of teaching method

• Conversational interaction and situated learning

This course uses the Treenity platform to build a curriculum that takes a design theme or project as an entry point, and designs the Brand Identity Design course with theoretical questions such as 'What do you think is a brand?' 'What are the roles of a brand image?' 'How do you build a good brand image?' etc. The teacher then conducts a problem situation (project/competition), for example, 'A project has been required the design team to design a complete visual identity manual', and the teacher guides the students in a group discussion to respond to the design needs from both subjective and objective perspectives and to produce a complete research report. During the process, the online teaching tool is used to visualise and provide feedback on the effectiveness of teaching and learning,

so that teaching strategies can be adjusted in a timely manner.

• Optimising group discussion models-scenarios and roles

To better reflect process-based teaching and learning, students need to establish an inquiry-based discussion mode to research and plan with the design topic. [9] Based on the theme, students work in teams and communicate to develop planning and design solutions that will enhance their professional ethics, communication and teamwork. From concept to result, different approaches to brand identity design are explored. During the design process, students work in teams and use research and literature analysis to gain valuable insights into various aspects of the topic, including historical, social, cultural and business contexts, to effectively enhance their brand planning skills, master the brand identity design process and

related specifications, and become proficient in using multiple forms of design language for practical projects.

The course covers the complete brand identity design process, from pre-research to post-design, including brand positioning, audience analysis and competitor analysis, etc. [10] Students are required to divide the work in small groups, simulate the working environment of a real design company and collaborate to complete the design. This transfer of life situations is useful in strengthening students' memory and logical organisation of the relevance of knowledge, as well as enhancing their practical working skills. To ensure efficient group discussions, live online classes require the use of online tools for grouping and the implantation of online design collaboration platforms such as Canva and Padlet Wall, where students can share a canvas at the same time, assist in creation, brainstorm when they are unable to meet and form a visual mood board to facilitate subsequent design solutions.

• **Integration of cultural branding themes**

Using regional culture as a background enables students to research the clothing, food, housing and transport of a region in a holistic manner, mobilising students to take the initiative and motivation to research the local culture, rather than passively accepting certain established information, in order to design a brand image that best represents the characteristics of the region. Therefore, incorporating the theme of cultural branding helps students to improve their research skills, break the single brand perception and enhance their interest in the study of brand image. [11]

• **Testing and reflection**

Based on the work, the teacher makes an evaluation of the students' stage results and leads other students to participate in the discussion, commenting on other groups' work and developing the students' ability to think about problems from multiple perspectives. Finally, there is reflection, through continuous discussion and feedback until a relatively sound solution is proposed.

The final evaluation of the course is based on the work, which is assessed from multiple perspectives as it involves research, group work and other indicators. The course is based on the Rubric assessment tool, which is used to assess students' complex performance or work, incorporating a 'peer review' component. [12] This will increase student engagement and change the role from designer to audience.

4. Conclusion

According to the concept of student-centred education, the classroom is a learning activity that encourages students to engage in reflection, collaboration, inquiry and innovation, and to consciously cultivate and develop their problem-solving, collaboration and innovation skills, so that they can learn to identify, research and solve problems, to work with others, to seek help and resources, and to become critical and innovative practitioners. The PBL teaching method is combined with blended learning in the Brand Image Design course, and the two can play a complementary role. By creating

scenarios and posing questions, the teacher can design a series of questions based on theoretical and practical knowledge and ask students questions related to the knowledge, avoiding the knowledge gap that can occur with blended teaching and making the research process more complete and the results more convincing. In addition, the various tools available for online teaching can compensate for the lack of contextual experience due to environmental deficiencies.

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