

## **Some innovations in teaching a subject using the integrated strategy in Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching at university level is an extremely interesting, useful and important job that helps students gain more knowledge and skills to enter life with the most solid luggage. Quality assurance is always a requirement, a challenge for researchers, educators, employers and students themselves. Therefore, updating, innovating and applying modern teaching methods will be an indispensable requirement of lecturers in order to improve the quality of students' learning outcomes according to Vietnam national qualification framework and to meet social needs as well. This paper outlines some innovations in teaching process by using integrated method in Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture demonstrated through these following contents: understanding integrated method, analyzing the issues of knowledge and skills integrated, presenting sub-methods applied and experiences accumulated during our teaching-learning process. Integrating and nesting knowledge and skills in university curricula are inevitable trends in the world in order to improve students' knowledge and professional skills in the ever-changing and fiercely competitive labor market.

**Keywords:** integrated method, teaching strategy, learning outcome

### **1.Preamble**

Teaching at university level, in Vietnam particularly speaking and in the world generally speaking, is a fun, interesting, and never an easy job. Being a profession, teaching needs constant innovation and creativity, teachers themselves need this quality more than ever, especially in ever-changing technology and ever-increasing social needs. In Vietnam, conferences, workshops and seminars have always been organized to disclose really effective teaching methods. It can be said that the quality teaching is always a difficult problem for educational researchers and educators.

Innovation in teaching is not only the teacher's own needs but also the requirement from universities, society, and the government. All assures that education will not derail but constantly develops to serve society. Decision No 1982/QĐ-TTg on “Approving Vietnam National Qualification Framework”, Decision No 436/QĐ-TTg on “Promulgating the implementation plan of Vietnam's National Qualifications Framework for higher education qualifications, period 2020 – 2025”, Circular No 17/2021/TT-BGDĐT on “Regulating standards for training programs; formulating, appraising and promulgating training programs at higher education levels”... are some good examples from the government. The purposes of the Circulars, Decisions, Decrees or legal documents promulgated are to form important legal basis for universities, faculties, and majors to adjust, improve and update training programs to meet the needs of the modern society.

After all, to achieve teaching quality and meet the goals of students, first and foremost the matter is the factor of people, not programs, curricula or means. They are inherently supportive, not decisive factors. When mentioning humans, method is still one of the most important factors. Because method will determine the goal, the purpose that have been established and to what extent they can reach. However, regardless of the teaching approach and method, its ultimate purpose is

to help students apply knowledge, skills, autonomy competence and responsibility to work and co-live. All modern methods of teaching today are aimed at this purpose. Depending on the specific subject or major, the learning outcomes can be differently assessed or emphasized, focused on this criteria instead of another.

In this paper, the authors would like to introduce and analyze what and how we have applied integrated teaching strategy to improve and master the quality of learning outcomes in our University of Culture.

## **2. Who are we - Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture?**

Ho Chi Minh City University of Culture is an over 40-year-old institution consisting of two campuses in Thu Duc City (one in Thao Dien ward and one in Phuoc Long B ward) of Ho Chi Minh City. The university has 8 faculties training different majors in these fields: Tourism, Museology, Information - Library Science, Culture-Art Management, Cultural Studies, Publications Business, and Communications Studies. Every year, about 1000 students enroll in the university to study above majors. With the number of staff is about 120 people including teaching and administrative forces, it is a public university, under the management of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Despite the average-size scale, this university has constantly adjusted, improved and updated training programs to grow step by step in order to reach wider vision and higher position.

Circular No 17/2021/TT-BGDĐT requires every training program at university level of the above-mentioned majors meet learning outcomes based on three aspects: knowledge, skills (including soft skills and professional skills), autonomy competence and responsibility. Thus, in addition to professional knowledge, the training program has been planned to gain these learning outcomes divided into these aspects:

### **Professional skills**

- Doing research, planning strategies, planning production and organizing cultural/professional activities
- Criticizing, analyzing, evaluating and disseminating Vietnamese cultural programs and products in domestic and international markets

### **Soft skills**

- Communication, negotiation, persuasion, presentation
- Individual work and group/team work

### **Autonomy competence and responsibility**

- growth mindset
- self-responsibility
- professional ethics
- respect for national cultural identity and cultural differences and diversity

In order to evaluate these learning outcomes, faculties in the university have recently applied Bloom's 6-level scale.

## **3. What is integrated method?**

We know very well that in dynamic global economy today, it is imperative to focus on developing, cultivating knowledge and skills, mastering and integrating a number of subjects. Creativity, adaptation, criticism, and collaboration are highly valued skills. Fostering those skills in class is a mandatory requirement to assist students with integrated knowledge and skills in many aspects to grasp and apply in practice.

What is integrated method?

Integration is not a combination like pure calculation. Integration, definitely, is the combination of two or more things in order to become more effective. In fact, it is the intertwining that allows learners to discover, collect, process, refine, and present information on the topics they want to investigate without being constrained by traditional barriers. The integrated method, project-based method, or blended method, sometimes referred as the interdisciplinary method that may create "positive educational outcomes" for learners.

More specifically in the field of university education, integration is defined as synthesizing in one unit, one lesson, one assignment, many areas of knowledge and skills related to each other so as to enhance the effectiveness of education simultaneously improve quality and save learning time for students.

Integrated teaching method is a concept aimed at forming and developing in students the necessary competencies, especially the ability to apply knowledge to effectively solve practical situations. Applying this method, teachers will integrate educational contents into available subjects while through learning activities organized and guided by teachers, students not only know how to collect, select and process information, but also apply knowledge and skills to actively solve problems related to their learning and real life (Wiki technology, 2021). This method empowers students to actively coordinate and exploit the knowledge, skills, and previous living capital and cultural experience available from other modules to use in the subject being taught aimed at improvement in quality performance of class hours and the whole course to meet the requirements and objectives.

Douglas Cruickshank's research report on the integrated curriculum shows that when applying this teaching method, students improve the following skills and/or knowledge (Douglas Cruickshank, 2008):

- An increase in understanding, retention, and application of general concepts.
- A better overall comprehension of global interdependencies, along with the development of multiple perspectives, points of view, and values.
- An increase in the ability to make decisions, think critically and creatively, and synthesize knowledge beyond the disciplines.
- The increased ability to identify, assess, and transfer significant information needed for solving novel problems.
- The promotion of cooperative learning, a better attitude toward oneself as a learner and as a meaningful member of a community.
- Increased motivation.

Moreover, the ILA website confirmed this method to teach English, "Learning through projects is an advanced method in the world, helping students access 4.0 education. Through the project, learners were both fluent in English and trained in 6 soft skills including creativity, critical thinking, communication skills, cooperation skills, self-improvement and technological knowledge. The sooner they are exposed to this learning method, the easier it is for them to integrate into the education of developed countries and become global citizens" (ILA, 2018). In fact, this method is proven to be effective not only in teaching languages but also in teaching other subjects.

From the arguments and benefits of the above-mentioned integrated teaching method, we have applied, practiced and now we wish to share the strategies of teaching in the integrated orientations as follows:

#### **4. What is integrated in our teaching strategy?**

##### ***4.1. Imparting knowledge integrated with training soft skills***

As mentioned above, integrated method makes students become active learners who research, explain, communicate and process learning for themselves and help each other. From a student-centered teaching strategy, university lecturers should teach students self-study methods by assigning additional tasks to students. In teaching – learning process, teachers can create various activities or plans to ask students to participate in pairs or groups or individually: giving presentations, performing plays, playing games, making a product using any things or methods they can. Such activities or plans can help to reduce boredom in the classroom and increase students' creativity, train the necessary skills of a future employee - a global citizen.

When designing curricula, we divided into different learning outcomes to see and assess easily; while teaching, knowledge and skills are intertwined or nested, blended together according to each content or subject. The skills we usually focus on are communication, negotiation, persuasion, presentation; individual work and group/team work. What is more, depend on the subject and the teacher's creativity, some other skills are also emphasized like public-speaking skill, problem-solving skill, time management skill, emotion management skill... These skills have been focused and integrated during teaching process despite inside or outside classroom.

One of the requirements of educational innovation in Vietnam is to meet social needs with tightly-controlled learning outcomes. In reality, recently one of the weaknesses of students is the lack of soft skills even though they are included in the curricula. Because we can't practice, drill, repeat adequate to form a skill in students with the fullest meaning, most effectiveness, not just introduce them. Unfortunately, some skills are clearly shown the weakness of students at the time they face employers or interviewers in the elimination round.

From a lecturer's perspective, we have managed to integrate soft skills in imparting knowledge to help students firmly acquire necessary skills so as to start entering the labor market or startup by themselves. Every subject has its own advantage and requires different method. Every teacher has their own ways, strategies and experiences. Nesting soft skills with imparting knowledge is certainly not an impossibly difficult challenge that teachers cannot obtain.

#### ***4.2. Imparting knowledge integrated with developing mindset***

No one can deny that mindset or thinking is an essential skill, and that it is not taught in a single subject but blended or accumulated during teaching process of a subject or a series of subjects. Psychologists have distinguished various genres of mindset which can be divided into positive group and negative group. Depending on each subject or faculty's needs, the different mindsets will be selected. From our experiences and vision, we often choose and nest these mindset skills: growth mindset, creative mindset, critical mindset, mind map and positive mindset.

In topics, assignments and questions, students are not only required to have knowledge and language rich enough to express themselves, but also a scientific thinking in the direction of criticism, analysis and evaluation to recognize a phenomenon in two dimensions, two opposing views but not in contradiction or antithesis.

Moreover, some assignments encourage students to apply knowledge or skills of various subjects in humane, social and cultural fields. Thus, this helps to enlarge and consolidate knowledge and skills through combining, analyzing, integrating and evaluating knowledge of previous subjects during the learning process. Caroline Gill - Anthony Fisher (2014, p.14) confirmed that "Interest in curriculum integration has resurged recently as schools seek to bring together knowledge from separate curriculum areas to create a more holistic, integrated learning experience for students to address the demands of 'twenty-first century' learning".

Thus, in order to intertwine and teach public-speaking and writing skills to students, it is necessary to apply Mindmap thinking. This method, if applied effectively, will help students better

brainstorm, better orient, draw and organize ideas, visualize and apply more effective methods and techniques, tools or means to perfect a final product. Teaching students how to “Mindmap” is not only useful for students when learning a foreign language but also helps students develop creative and liberal mindset.

As a result, drilling mindset will help students have a broader perspective, think flexible, creative, suitable for today's rapidly changing social-economic situation. Alike, the liberal, critical, multi-dimensional thinking will help students react faster, more actively, freely to seek new knowledge as well as to construct and pursue truth.

#### ***4.3. Imparting knowledge integrated with training professional skills***

Our University has chosen training and teaching based on applied orientation while some others have based on academic orientation. We strongly agree with the statement “Education without application is just entertainment” (Spanish proverb). Therefore, all subjects have been designed to train skills that have practical usage even with more or less scale, from subjects in general knowledge to foundation courses, intermediate courses and specialized courses. What is more, each subject has more practical duration than theoretical duration, or they are equal, at least. Take the subject “Popular Culture” as an example, it has duration of 3 credits, 60 periods including 30 periods for practice and 30 periods for theory. During teaching process, students were assigned to watch films, clips, artistic events, other popular cultural activities. They had to apply theoretical knowledge in the course to enjoy, sense, evaluate and analyze their features or values. They had to express their opinion, viewpoint, or do the presentation in individual or teamwork. They would form and develop various skills during university time.

We have the concept of practice, it does not only mean students have to go to the plants or factories to produce some products but also consist of fieldtrip; writing scripts for the events; organizing activities, events; singing; dancing; performing arts; watching cultural products or services to understand, enjoy, absorb then analyze, assess them.

In the flat world that requires flexible and integrated transformation today, it is no coincidence that the specialized faculties in our university have determined the learning outcomes for students upon graduation: the professional skills. These are close to the actual career in which students will work when they finish university degree. On the term of occupational skills, the learning outcomes include many criteria that require students to:

(1) Research, plan strategy, plan production and organize cultural/professional activities and events

(2) Criticize, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, disseminate Vietnamese cultural programs and products in domestic and international markets

(3) Preserve and promote national cultural identity while respecting cultural differences and diversity;

(4) Obtain autonomy competence and responsibility that consists of growth mindset, self-responsibility, professional ethics

(5) Apply new achievements in science and technology to solve real or abstract problems in the professional field.

Definitely, these skills are certainly not only trained by one subject or one course, but require many courses to contribute to their formation. In contrast, a course cannot be designed to teach only one learning outcome or one skill. Thus, right from the design of the framework and rubrics, each module or course itself is already integrated and blended.

### **5. How do we apply this teaching method?**

#### ***5.1. Some sub-methods we have applied***

In our university, we have applied these sub-methods in this teaching strategy for each lesson and the whole subject/course with the role division and ways to gain the targets as followings. Through some small survey we did, these were evaluated bearing some extent benefits.

| <b>What are Sub-methods?</b>  | <b>Who does it?</b> | <b>How to do it to get targets?</b>   |
|---|---------------------|---|
| 1.Raise/give questions or problems                                  | Teacher or students | Speak out, watch a movie, sending via email or messengers                         |
| 2.Brainstorm, synthesize previous information, knowledge and skills | Students            | Think, rethink and remember (individual, group)                                   |
| 3.Explain, debate, discuss  | Teacher<br>Students | Interact, exchange (individual, pair, group)                                      |
| 4.Visit, survey, research, and investigate field                    | Students            | Assign and Organize (individual, pair, group)                                     |
| 5.Assign homework/Give assignments                                  | Teacher             | Do homework/assignments as required   |
| 6.Do project presentation   | Students            | Prepare/do the presentation (individual, pair, group)                             |
| 7.Present the results   | Students            | Implement in classroom (individual, pair, group)                                  |
| 8.Assess and comment results  | Teacher<br>Students | Interact, exchange<br>Listen and learn from experiences (individual, pair, group) |

### ***5.2.Some experiences we have accumulated***

Currently, the orientation to apply the integrated teaching method in our university is based on rules as follows:

1.Integrate between different knowledge in cultural field, between equipping basic or professional knowledge with training skills in the same subject.

2.Integrate knowledge from many aspects among closely related subjects (Ex. We asked students to remember and apply knowledge and skills in these subjects like *Introduction on Cultural Studies, Cultural Semiotics, Folklore, Business Culture* when they studied *Popular Culture*)

3.Integrate some important and prominent topics into the subjects: cultural exchange, internet or media phenomena, gender equality, personal brand/company...

4.Require teachers to update and integrate what they need for the subject

5.Prepare, design lessons and the course well in advance

6.Organize lessons and the course effectively during the teaching-learning process

7.Open our heartsets and mindsets to encourage students to present their new ideas and welcome and accept the new ideas

8.Learn new things in authentic reality and learn from each other

### **Conclusion**

Nowadays, universities focus on training future human resources by imparting the knowledge, training skills and competencies required by the labor market. This urgently demands to reorganize programs, courses, effectively improve, apply up-to-date teaching methods to fulfill their tasks and missions.

The current trend is an unavoidable fact that emphasizes the application of integrated methods has become the dominant idea of modern education. The outcome standard of each discipline in a training field is only the first threshold, which universities can commit to achieve with students and society through evaluation criteria. Students are standard outcome products of the university training process, but are cumulative and inherited products from a series of teaching activities in which each subject or module only contributes a small fraction on the academic path to form students' career baggage. From the concept of "turning the wind into a storm", teaching any courses at university level necessitates applying the integrated strategy. Hopefully, what we have shared and presented will modestly contribute to our platform's success. We also would love to hear your comments and learn more from you.

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