

## **Multiple Purposes in the Traditional Chinese University Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally, the Chinese classroom has been a place where lecturers transmit knowledge to learners. However, with the revolution in modern information technology, the traditional Chinese classroom has been systematically replaced by a virtual and multiple-function classroom where students and their instructors have more opportunity to exchange views on topics jointly set by the learners and instructors. So far the so-called “three-in-one classroom” has emerged from cooperation between higher learning institutions and their industrial counterparts. This paper addresses some critical issues related to this new pedagogical approach, where students are much more actively involved in industrial production as well as traditional learning. It touches on issues concerning teaching effectiveness, assessment, the changing role of teachers, integrating textbooks with information available online or in the workplace, and the complementary roles of faculty and industry experts in student training.

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## **Introduction**

The so-called “three-in-one classroom” has its roots in the concept of learning by doing, advocated by Kenneth Arrow in his design of endogenous growth theory to explain effects of innovation and technical change after the Industrial Revolution. It is currently being implemented in the Chinese classroom, where students used to be traditionally taught. With the successful implementation of model higher vocation institutes, created as a response to growing demands from the working world for graduates with practical skills, the school authority has adjusted its teaching goals and curriculum. As a result, the traditional “walled” classroom has seen its walls breached and now functions also as a working company for production purposes.

Meanwhile, teachers are allowed to work as employees in the related industry during the school year in order to enhance their practical knowledge of the working world. As a result, the traditional classroom dominated by the teachers has been systematically replaced by a more production-oriented methodology with learning and teaching activities focused on mirroring conditions in the real world of industrial production. In addition, more professionals coming from local industries have been invited to join in the classroom for student tutoring. A joint program among schools, local industries, and local government has been established for developing a new curriculum, providing production guides for the classroom and creating shared training bases either on campus or in joint ventures.

## **The Three-in-One Classroom**

Based on the principle of “learning by doing,” the so-called three-in-one classroom represents an educational revolution in Chinese pedagogy, where students learn in a simulated working environment with occasional guidance from their facilitators.

Meanwhile, full-time professionals from local partnership enterprises are invited to become visiting experts on campus, where they serve as technical advisors to the students working in the classroom. Students in co-called “practical workshops” are expected to produce genuine products from their work and receive a certain amount of compensation from the industrial enterprises. As a result, the traditional role played by the classroom has been completely changed into that of a production and practice base for the academic students, aiding them more easily to become professionals ready for their future working careers. There is no longer any need for them to complete their academic work with additional, in-house training in the workplace once they graduate. At the same time, students are more active and motivated to learn while in school.

If they meet with difficulties in their learning, instead of automatically asking for help from their teachers, these Chinese students turn more often to their textbooks or the Internet for needed information. Of course, their teachers are still present to help in working out the joint plan and other practical problems that may arise. Compared with the traditional classroom, students in three-in-one classes are much more active and energetic in their performance and more willing to challenge their teacher or the textbook—though textbook use is still mandatory at the tertiary level. On the other hand, the teacher is encouraged to lead his/her students to test textbook theories against the

students' personal experiences in individual tasks. From the visiting experts, drawn from local enterprises, the students learn how to apply their textbook knowledge in the real world. Thus students are consciously or unconsciously acquiring the skills that are required in a real working environment. As a result, much time and energy can be saved because of the individual participation in a classroom that has been transformed into a workplace.

### **Effectiveness and Evaluation**

The collaborative roles played by full-time teachers and part-time experts in the three-in-one classroom have also helped student-practitioners to learn more effectively and efficiently. An initial survey has revealed that those who received training in three-in-one classrooms are doing better in terms of both operational skills and academic knowledge than those who are studying in the traditional classroom. Industry recruiters now tend to hire graduates from three-in-one classrooms rather than students coming from a traditional classroom.

Students who are in the three-in-one classroom are obviously more aware of the actual working environment than those who are just studying in the traditional classroom. However, the assessment of their performance has lacked official sanction from governmental educational authorities. Fortunately, thanks to the joint efforts of the college and the local industrial association, which have direct links with the local city government, a contract has been drafted and officially recognized by local governments. It is acknowledged to be a binding agreement between the contracting college and local industries, in which students' performance will be evaluated for both theoretical,

textbook knowledge and achievements in the workplace. Student records will be stored in the students' files in the local talent market where university graduates have to register after their graduation. As a result, purely academic assessment has been successfully replaced by quasi-credentials recognized by the local industries. Students in three-in-one class enjoy priority in joining the labor market without any further job interview. Meanwhile, they can change their jobs if they are not comfortable with the employers, provided that the breach of the contract is in the side of the employer, which means the graduates from three-in-one classes have more career choices beyond their current employment. These students are free to find more suitable jobs according to their own desires and abilities.

### **Changing Roles Played by the Teachers**

Strictly speaking, teachers in the three-in-one classroom are no longer simply academic researchers. Instead they have become consultants, helping their students to acquire knowledge from textbooks in conjunction with cooperative teamwork with the experts from the local industries. Thus the teachers' traditional role in the classroom is changing from dispensing wisdom from books to helping students to search for answers—whether by surfing the Internet or consulting textbooks at the assembly line on campus or random guidance from the experts from local industries. A teacher may find that he/she is occasionally interrupted in the midst of a lecture by students who bring immediate problems to class, arising from their first-hand experience in the working environment. Since the dividing line between classroom and workplace is increasingly blurred, the teacher himself/herself must now possess professional training along with the academic

qualifications.

However, the three-in-one classroom requires flexibility. For example, students who are majoring in mass media will be required to take their work out of the classroom for fieldwork. Each of them will take a PC and then upload their work on the computer, so that the teacher can judge students' work by comparing their upload with the set scene online. In other words, the learning process is mobile and draws on various sources including but not restricted to traditional textbooks. The combination of various learning materials—Internet and textbook and other printed learning sources —will become increasingly important in the three-in-one classroom.

### **Impacts of the Three-in-One Classroom on Traditional Education**

The three-in-one classroom is not simply replacing the traditional classroom. Its existence implies a broader change in the conception of modern education in vocational institutions. First of all, from the perspective of the teacher, faculty are now “forced” to gain more technical know-how from the working environment, with cooperation from the visiting experts from the local industries. On the other hand, teachers have to work as a part-time staff in the companies or factories in order to acquire more practical knowledge from the working world. From the perspective of the students, they are “freed” from their textbooks and have access to a greater variety of learning environments, including the Internet. Students will be more involved in project-based learning activities with teamwork rather than to finding solutions in the textbook individually. Thus the process of learning in the three-in-one classroom is based on cooperation between students and teachers as a whole.

Accordingly, the managerial systems in schools have been obliged to integrate new steps into supervision and guidance in routine teaching activities, on which teachers' performances and students' records are based. Especially for the graduates, the three-in-one classroom can serve as a launching platform from which to enter into the real working place with no need for further training. Thus the transition from academe to the real world has been successfully realized by means of three-in-one classroom scheme. In the eyes of educators, the three-in-one classroom scheme will sooner or later replace the traditional classroom in the educational world of modern China. Meanwhile, the philosophy of academic-oriented education will tend to fade and be replaced by the philosophy of practice-based education paralleling to the needs of development in the modern world.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the individual classroom remains an indispensable teaching unit in Chinese higher education. But it is clear that China's higher education has had to confront the challenge of renewing its educational system in order to keep pace with China's dynamic economic growth. Provided that the system of the three-in-one classroom is properly managed, the future of higher education in China will include more efforts to introduce the working world into the classroom as a simulated environment for the joint benefit of both teachers and students.

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