

Exploring the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in Art History Courses from a Student Perspective

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Abstract: Critical thinking, as an important component of the core competencies in higher education, serves as a key carrier for the "education through beauty and culture" goal in art history courses. Currently, academic research on university art history courses and the cultivation of critical thinking mostly focuses on the supply-side perspectives such as course design and teacher practice. However, as the learning subjects, students' perception of the course's effectiveness, their demands, and suggestions regarding the course have not yet been systematically summarized. This study takes the "student perspective" as the core entry point, and from three dimensions: the current perception status of students on the cultivation of critical thinking in art history courses, the key influencing factors from the student perspective, and the optimization demands and suggestions proposed by students for the courses, it systematically reviews the existing research results. The study finds that students have "cognitive differentiation" regarding the value of critical thinking cultivation in art history courses. The main constraints are the fixed teaching methods, the single course content, and the rigid evaluation system. While "strengthening interactive discussions", "enriching diverse historical materials", and "reforming the evaluation methods" are the most core optimization demands of students. Finally, this paper points out the deficiencies in method integration and subject specificity in current research, and proposes prospects to provide references for subsequent empirical research and curriculum reform.

Key words: Student Perspective; College Art History Course; Critical Thinking; Curriculum Cultivation

1. Introduction

The art history course, as an important branch of humanities education, essentially involves interpreting art works, historical contexts, and cultural trends to guide students to break away from a single perspective, question established conclusions, and construct their own cognition-this process is highly consistent with the core essence of critical thinking, which includes "questioning, analyzing, arguing, and reflecting" [1]. However, there is often a deviation between the "training goals" of the course and the "learning experiences" of students: some studies show that although university art history courses generally include "cultivating critical thinking" in their teaching syllabi, the actual perceived improvement in thinking among students varies greatly [2]. Current research can be roughly divided into two categories: one is "theoretical construction type", focusing on the theoretical logic of art history courses in cultivating critical thinking, such as through image-based historical verification, style analysis, etc., to design teaching modules and deduce the path of thinking cultivation; the other is "teacher practice type", summarizing teaching experiences from the teacher's perspective, such as case teaching, project-based learning, and their application in cultivating critical thinking. However, from the "student perspective", studies exploring how students perceive, experience, and evaluate the effectiveness of course training have remained fragmented and scattered, and have not yet formed a systematic review.

As the direct experiencers of the course, students' perspectives not only reflect the "real validity" of the course implementation but also provide "demand-oriented" practical basis for course reform-if the students' perception is ignored, even if the course design is theoretically "perfect", it may still be difficult to be implemented due to its deviation from the actual learning situation of students [3]. Based

on this, the main core issue addressed by this study is: First, what is the current perception of students regarding the cultivation of critical thinking in art history courses? Second, from the student perspective, what are the key factors affecting the training effect of the course? Third, what specific needs and suggestions do students have for course optimization?

2. Students' Perception of the Role of Art History Courses in Developing Critical Thinking Skills

2.1 Positive Perception

The art history course provides an effective carrier for the development of critical thinking through specific teaching modules [4]. This perception mainly focuses on three aspects. First, "breaking through the perspective in image analysis". One of the core contents of the art history course is the interpretation of art works' images, and high-quality image analysis teaching often guides students to go beyond "intuitive appreciation" and enter "contextual thinking". Second, "questioning awareness in historical material comparison". Art history research often involves different historical records of the same artistic phenomenon, and the discussion of such "historical material conflicts" in the course can effectively stimulate students' questioning spirit. Third, "expanding thinking in interdisciplinary connections". With the cross-disciplinary development of the art history discipline, some universities have introduced interdisciplinary perspectives such as sociology, psychology, and communication studies into their art history courses. This course design enables students to break through "single-disciplinary thinking" and learn to analyze problems using multiple theoretical tools.

2.2 Negative Perception

Some studies suggest that art history courses fail to effectively cultivate critical thinking and even have the problem of "suppressing thinking" [5]. This perception mainly stems from the deficiencies in three types of course practices. First, "dominant role of lecturing-based teaching". Currently, most art history courses in universities still mainly adopt the form of "teacher lecturing", where the teacher arranges the art schools in chronological order and introduces the background of the works, and

students passively take notes and memorize knowledge points-this "filling approach" teaching leaves students without the space for independent thinking. Under this teaching mode, students cannot experience the "active questioning and expression" required for critical thinking, and naturally hold a negative attitude towards the value of the course's thinking cultivation. Second, "closedness of course content". Some art history courses focus too much on "knowledge transmission" and lack discussions on "controversial issues" and the introduction of "unresolved" research results. Studies have found that students believe that university art history courses often take "a certain painting reflects the painter's patriotism" as the core content of the course, but few teachers guide to discuss the multiple perspectives of the interpretation of the works. This "closed content" leads students to form the cognition that "there is only one correct answer in art history", which is contrary to the core demand of critical thinking for "multiple perspectives". Third, "exam-oriented evaluation system". The cultivation of critical thinking requires "process evaluation" to guide, but most art history courses still use "closed-book final exams" as the main evaluation method, with the exam content mostly being "time of art schools, representatives, and characteristics of works" and other memory-based knowledge points. The "exam-oriented" evaluation system leads students to focus on "scoring" rather than "thinking improvement", thereby negating the value of the course's critical thinking cultivation.

2.3 The Core Reason for Perception Differentiation

The "differentiation" of students' perception essentially reflects the "supply-demand" matching problem of art history courses in cultivating critical thinking: when the implementation of the course (teaching methods, content, evaluation) is consistent with students' demand for "thinking participation", students form a positive perception; otherwise, they form a negative perception [6].

3. Key Factors Affecting the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in Art History Courses from the Perspective of Students

3.1 Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are the most direct influencing factors that students can perceive [7]. The core contradiction lies in the opposition between "one-way lecture" and "interactive participation". It is generally believed that "interactive participation-based" teaching (such as group discussions, case studies, role-playing) is the key to cultivating critical thinking, while "one-way lecture" inhibits the development of thinking. Specifically, "group discussions" enable students to encounter diverse viewpoints and learn the thinking method of "listening-refuting-arguing". This "viewpoint collision" directly exercises the "analysis and reflection" ability of critical thinking. While "case studies" can further stimulate students' questioning spirit, for example, discussing "whether a contemporary artist's 'performance art' belongs to art", students need to combine art history theories, social ethics, public cognition, etc. for argumentation. This process enables students to learn "not blindly following authorities but judging based on evidence". Conversely, "one-way lecture" leaves students in a "passive reception" state and lacks the opportunity for thinking participation. It is worth noting the phenomenon of "pseudo interaction"-that is, although the teacher designs discussion sessions, due to "insufficient discussion time" and "lack of guidance", it ultimately becomes "formalism", which not only fails to cultivate critical thinking but also makes students have a negative cognition of "thinking participation being useless".

3.2 Course Content

The influence of course content on critical thinking is reflected in the balance between "knowledge breadth" (integration of interdisciplinary and controversial content) and "thinking depth" (whether it guides students to deeply analyze) [8]. High-quality course content should have two characteristics: First, "openness", that is, including controversial topics and diverse perspectives. Students generally hope that the course content "not only has standard answers, but also has the collision of different viewpoints". Second, "hierarchy", that is, the content design progresses from "basic cognition" to "deep analysis". The course content should not remain at the basic level of "introducing art schools and works' backgrounds", but should further guide "deep analysis", this "hierarchy" design enables

students to learn "from phenomenon to essence" thinking progression, which conforms to the "deep analysis" requirement of critical thinking. Conversely, if the content only remains at the "basic cognition" level, students will think that "what is learned is only dead knowledge and cannot exercise thinking".

3.3 Evaluation System

The evaluation system is the "commander", which directly affects students' learning goals and thinking investment-if the evaluation focuses on "result-oriented" (such as final exams), students will focus on "reciting knowledge points"; if it focuses on "process-oriented" (such as classroom performance, papers, project reports), students will be more willing to invest in "thinking participation". Currently, it is widely recognized that "process-based evaluation" has a role in cultivating critical thinking, especially the two evaluation methods of "course papers" and "classroom performance". "Course papers" require students to independently select topics, consult literature, and construct arguments, which can comprehensively exercise the "topic selection-argumentation-reflection" ability of critical thinking. While "classroom performance" evaluation (such as speaking quality, contribution to discussion) can motivate students to actively participate in thinking interaction [9]. Conversely, a "result-oriented" evaluation system inhibits thinking investment.

3.4 Teacher-Student Interaction

The atmosphere of teacher-student interaction directly affects whether students are willing to "question"-the core of critical thinking is "not blindly following authorities", while an "equal dialogue" teacher-student relationship enables students to dare to express different viewpoints, conversely, an "authoritative dominance" relationship will suppress the questioning spirit [10]. Teachers who engage in "equal dialogue" will "encourage questioning and not reject different viewpoints", for instance, when explaining "Renaissance art", students might ask "Was Renaissance art truly 'people-oriented' or was it only serving the nobility?", the teacher does not directly deny but guides the students to consult relevant literature and jointly discuss. This kind of interaction enables students to "dare to question and also learn to support their viewpoints with evidence". On the contrary,

teachers who are "authoritative in control" only "recognize their own viewpoints and do not allow students to refute", in such an atmosphere, students gradually form the mindset of "obeying authority", which is contrary to the "questioning spirit" of critical thinking.

4. Students' Critiques and Suggestions for Optimizing the Art History Course to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

4.1 Teaching Methods

The core demand of students is "reducing one-way lectures and increasing interactive teaching modules". Specific suggestions include: First, "regularly conduct group discussions and debates", and clearly define the discussion topics should focus on "controversial and open issues" [11]. At the same time, teachers should "reserve sufficient discussion time" and "guide students to focus on evidence, avoiding deviation from the topic". Second, introduce "project-based learning", allowing students to complete "art history mini-projects" in groups. From topic selection, research, to report writing and presentation, they participate throughout autonomously. For example, students in an art history major at a certain university conducted PBL research on "the inheritance dilemma of local woodblock prints", not only sorting out the artistic history of woodblock prints, but also analyzing the impact of commercialization and urbanization on it, and finally proposing inheritance suggestions-during this process, students' "analysis, argumentation, and reflection" abilities were significantly enhanced.

4.2 Course Content

Students' suggestions for optimizing the course content mainly focus on two aspects: First, "increase controversial and interdisciplinary content". Students hope that the course can "talk more about 'issues without a standard answer'" such as "whether the criteria for art criticism should be diversified" and "whether contemporary art has the problem of 'excessive commercialization'", and introduce interdisciplinary perspectives such as "using digital humanities methods to analyze art history data" and "using psychological theories to interpret the creative motives of artists". Second, "design 'hierarchical' content modules", adjusting the content depth according to students' grade and cognitive level. This

"step-by-step" design can "avoid low-level students resisting due to overly complex content, and also provide more thinking challenges for high-level students" [12].

4.3 Evaluation System

Students' suggestions for reforming the evaluation system focus on "breaking the exam-oriented approach and highlighting the evaluation of thinking abilities", including: First, "increase the weight of process evaluation", suggesting that the proportion of process evaluation should not be less than 50%, and the evaluation content should include "the quality of classroom participation (whether there are arguments and new ideas)" "contribution to group discussions (whether they actively participated and guided the discussion)" "the quality of course papers (logical reasoning and depth of reflection)". Process evaluation should "avoid formalism", for example, "classroom participation should not only be judged by the number of times, but also by the quality; the scoring of papers should not only be judged by the number of words, but also by whether the reasoning is rigorous". Second, "reform the form of outcome evaluation", suggesting changing "final closed-book exams" to "open-book papers" or "project reports", with questions focusing on "open issues" rather than memorization of knowledge points [13].

5. Research Review and Future Prospects

5.1 Achievements and Shortcomings of Existing Research

First, it reveals the "differentiation" characteristics perceived by students, clarifying that "supply-demand" matching degree is the core reason for the perception differences [14]; second, it refines the four key influencing factors of teaching methods, course content, evaluation system, and teacher-student interaction, all based on students' direct experience, with strong practical relevance; third, it collects students' specific optimization suggestions, providing demand-oriented references for course reform. These achievements lay the foundation for subsequent research and also fill some gaps in the "student perspective" in this field. However, existing research still has shortcomings: First, the research methods are single. Existing research is mainly qualitative (such as interviews,

open-ended questionnaires), and quantitative research (such as structured questionnaires, statistical analysis) is insufficient. Qualitative research can deeply explore students' perception and experience, but it is difficult to quantify the "strength of the effect" of different influencing factors and cannot infer the "generalizability" of research conclusions. The singleness of methods limits the "scientificity and rigor" of the research. Second, insufficient exploration of disciplinary specificity. The current research does not delve deeply enough into the "discipline-specificity of critical thinking in art history courses"-what are the differences between the critical thinking in art history and those in disciplines such as philosophy and law? Most existing studies continue to use a general definition of critical thinking and fail to refine its operational definition in light of the characteristics of the art history discipline, resulting in "generalized" research conclusions that cannot precisely guide the practice of art history courses.

5.2 Future Research Directions

First, integrate research methods to enhance "scientificity". In the future, a "qualitative+quantitative" mixed research method should be adopted: first, use qualitative research (interviews, focus groups) to explore students' perceptions, influencing factors, and suggestions, then based on the qualitative results, design structured questionnaires for large-scale quantitative surveys, and conduct statistical analysis (such as regression analysis) to quantify the strength of the effects of different influencing factors; finally, combine the results of both types of research to form a conclusion that is "deep and broad" in nature. Second, deepen the discipline-specificity and construct a "critical thinking framework in the context of art history". Subsequent research should combine the characteristics of the art history discipline to refine the operational definition of critical thinking, for example, breaking it down into four dimensions: "image interpretation ability (identifying visual symbols, analyzing compositional logic)", "contextual analysis ability (interpreting works in combination with history and culture)", "multidimensional perspective ability (understanding different artistic criticism viewpoints)", and "reflective evaluation ability (making independent judgments on artistic phenomena)". Based on

this framework, design courses and evaluation systems [15].

6. Conclusion

This paper takes the "student perspective" as the core anchor point and systematically reviews the existing research results on the cultivation of critical thinking in art history courses. The study finds that students' perception of the effectiveness of critical thinking cultivation in the course shows a significant "diversity" feature: positive perception mainly stems from interactive teaching, open content, and process-based evaluation in the course implementation, which provide students with space for active thinking, diverse exploration, and thinking exercise; negative perception is directly related to one-way teaching, closed content, and exam-oriented evaluation, which restricts the development of students' questioning spirit and independent analytical ability. Further analysis reveals that teaching methods, course content, evaluation systems, and teacher-student interaction jointly constitute the four key dimensions that affect the cultivation effect, and these four factors interact and work together in the process of critical thinking cultivation. At the same time, based on students' learning experiences and needs, the optimization suggestions such as "increasing interactive teaching modules, expanding open course content, and constructing a multi-dimensional evaluation system" not only precisely address the core pain points in course practice but also provide clear demand orientation and operational practical paths for the reform of critical thinking cultivation in art history courses in universities, and lay a "student-centered" theoretical and practical foundation for subsequent empirical research and course construction.

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