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Review Article

Teaching Reform in Microeconomics Based on the Problem-Based Chain Teaching Method

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Abstract: As one of the core foundational courses for economics majors, the Microeconomics curriculum plays a critical role in laying the groundwork for subsequent specialized study. In actual teaching practice, three common phenomena have been observed: students lack enthusiasm for pre-class preparation, their participation in class discussions is low, and they lack sustained learning and reflection after class. An analysis of these phenomena reveals that the majority of students lack both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for active learning. Furthermore, the absence of prior preparation means that students have few questions to raise in class; consequently, when asked questions by the instructor, they can only reflect briefly and struggle to develop systematic perspectives. Due to a lack of the habit of approaching problems from an economic perspective, students also find it difficult to spontaneously connect theory with practice after class. Therefore, this paper proposes teaching reform measures based on the problem-chain teaching method: by linking the knowledge points of each lesson into a problem chain, posing questions before class to stimulate students' curiosity, encouraging students to speak boldly during class, and encouraging them to supplement the problem chain after class to guide them toward continuous and in-depth learning.

Keywords: Microeconomics, Problem-Chain Teaching Method, Teaching Reform.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Microeconomics is a vital component of the Western economic framework and one of the core courses for economics-related majors. At this university, the course is primarily offered during the second semester of the first year; its primary participants are students from all programs within the School of Management and Economics, as well as selected students from the School of Information Engineering. The course comprises 48 class hours and is worth 3 credits. The course has three primary objectives: first, a knowledge objective to master the fundamental principles governing the operation of a market economy and to understand that the price mechanism is the decisive factor in achieving resource allocation; second, a competency objective to apply acquired theoretical knowledge to conduct in-depth analyses of various social phenomena from an economic perspective, thereby fostering students' independent thinking and capacity for sustained, self-directed learning; and third, a quality objective to develop dialectical and innovative scientific thinking, as well as a sense of social responsibility and commitment to serving society and the public interest.

Through observation during the teaching process and face-to-face interaction with students, it has been widely observed that students generally lack initiative in their learning and exhibit low head-up rates in class. The problem-chain teaching method uses questions as its starting point and employs interconnected “problem chains” to guide students toward active learning, thereby addressing the teaching challenges of insufficient active thinking among students and limited teacher-student interaction[1]. Based on this, this paper explores how to use the problem-chain teaching method to establish a practical mechanism for teacher-student collaboration, promote teaching reform and innovation, and help students transition from passive reception to active exploration in their learning, thereby achieving the three major objectives of this course.

2. Analysis of Common Teaching Phenomena in Practical Teaching and Their Underlying Causes

In previous online platform and offline classroom teaching settings, observations and interactions with students have revealed that the following three types of phenomena are primarily

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present. Their manifestations are described below, along with an analysis of their underlying causes.

2.1 Lack of Enthusiasm for Pre-Class Preparation

Pre-class preparation is a relatively proactive learning approach that can enhance learning efficiency. By familiarizing themselves with the key concepts of a lesson in advance, students not only help establish a preliminary learning framework and identify areas of difficulty, but also become better equipped to engage in targeted discussions and exchanges with teachers and classmates during class, thereby fostering mutual learning and mutual reinforcement. However, offline interactions with students have shown that even when teachers preview the content of the next lesson at the end of the previous one, very few students continue to make proactive pre-class preparations. The absence of this preparatory phase directly impacts the quality of classroom interaction and the degree to which knowledge is internalized.

There are two primary reasons for this. On the one hand, students generally report a lack of motivation for previewing; many do not choose this major out of interest or curiosity and therefore lack the desire to actively explore the field itself. On the other hand, students believe that the final examinations for most courses are not particularly difficult and therefore prefer to pass them through short-term intensive review. In the absence of both intrinsic motivation and external pressure, it is naturally difficult for students to develop an interest in previewing their coursework.

2.2 Low Level of Participation in Class Discussions

Although there are already abundant learning resources available online, face-to-face instruction in offline classrooms still holds an irreplaceable value. Students who have participated in both online platform-based instruction and offline classroom teaching generally report that, while online classes are delivered via live streaming and allow them to type questions and engage in interaction with teachers and classmates at any time on the public screen, the teachers' body language, eye contact, board writing, and the dynamics of peer learning in offline classrooms are more effective at influencing students and encouraging their engagement in learning. Consequently, sharing ideas, communicating with one another, and exchanging perspectives in offline classrooms are important ways to promote mutual learning among students.

In actual teaching practice, however, students generally are reluctant to raise their hands to ask questions or participate actively in discussions. One reason is that students have traditionally been accustomed to a teaching approach centered on the teacher's lecture; changing this habit will require time and guidance. More importantly, classroom questions often involve immediate questions and immediate answers, leaving students insufficient time for careful reflection, let alone for organizing and articulating their views in language. This lack of thorough reflection also causes many students to worry that their answers may be inadequate, making them even less willing to speak in front of their peers. Over time, the classroom can easily become a one-way delivery model in which the teacher provides information while students have insufficient opportunity to engage in critical thinking. Therefore, to enhance students' willingness to express themselves, it may be necessary to give them sufficient time to reflect and develop their own perspectives, enabling them to have something to say and to feel motivated to participate.

2.2 Lack of Sustained Learning and Reflection after Class

In the syllabus for Microeconomics, one of the course objectives is to cultivate students' dialectical thinking and lifelong learning capabilities. Without sustained, in-depth study and reflection after class, key concepts remain confined to the level of the textbook; not only do they become more likely to be forgotten, but students also find it difficult to use an economic perspective to examine real-world issues. The disruption in post-class activities further prevents the formation of a complete learning cycle spanning before, during, and after class.

For students, the difficulty in linking theory with practice lies in the fact that their living environment is primarily centered on the campus and the family; this environment is relatively simple, making it harder for them to draw insights into economic phenomena from their own experiences. Developing a way of thinking about real-world issues from an economic perspective requires both sustained practice and the ability of teachers to identify cases and contexts that are relevant to students' lives and suitable for linking theory with practice; through continuous questioning, teachers can guide students in continually asking why.

3. Practical Teaching Measures Based on the Problem-Chain Teaching Method

Based on observations of pain points in actual teaching and an analysis of their underlying causes, the problem-chain teaching method is adopted, with the following three teaching measures implemented before, during, and after class, respectively. These three measures are interconnected and are designed to create a complete closed loop for problem-chain-based teaching.

3.1 Send a Question Chain Covering the Key Concepts of This Lesson before Class to Encourage Students to Preview the Material Proactively

The key concepts in each subsection are interconnected with one another, and each subsection maintains contextual links with preceding and subsequent content within the overall knowledge framework of the textbook. By designing the key concepts as progressively layered questions, students can

be guided to reflect on the logic underlying each concept and its position within the entire textbook, thereby enabling them to see both the individual trees and the forest as a whole. Before class, the key concepts of the subsection can be shared in the class's WeChat group in the form of a question chain, allowing students to consult them at any time and facilitating mutual exchange and discussion.

For example, when teaching Section 1, "Demand" in Chapter 1 of Microeconomics, "Demand, Supply, and Equilibrium Prices" the key concepts in that subsection can be organized into the following question chain. When students see a series of questions related to the next class, they naturally become curious. When they encounter questions they do not understand, they can consult their textbooks or online resources, or promptly discuss them with their classmates. Consequently, a pre-class question chain not only reduces the randomness of preparatory study but also makes it more engaging and targeted.

3.2 Use a Chain of Questions to Connect the Knowledge Covered in This Lesson during Class and Organize Student Discussions and Sharing Activities

In the classroom, a question chain provided to students in advance serves as a framework to encourage them to answer questions. In accordance with the requirements of the Microeconomics curriculum, regular course grades consist of attendance, assignments, and classroom performance; points for classroom performance can be earned by answering questions. Because students have sufficient time before class to reflect on and discuss potential answers, they are more willing to participate during lectures. At the same time, since every student has considered the same question, they are more likely to resonate with one another or draw inspiration from a classmate's response, which in turn stimulates the thinking of other students. Through this approach, the classroom shifts from a one-way lecture by the instructor to a collaborative discussion between teachers and students, which is expected to enhance students' sense of engagement and cognitive activity. Question-chain instruction emphasizes the construction of knowledge through a dynamic process of "questioning—critical reflection—resolving doubts": the instructor transitions from being a provider of answers to becoming a guide for critical thinking, expanding the boundaries of reflection through follow-up questions and rhetorical queries; meanwhile, students break through fixed patterns of thought through the clash of perspectives and deepen their understanding by drawing on multiple viewpoints [2].

3.3 After Class, Students Should be encouraged to Continue Asking Questions Based on the Problem chain and to Engage in Deeper Reflection through Practical Application

After class, students are encouraged to observe relevant phenomena in everyday life and supplement the problem chain based on the key concepts and questions covered in the lesson. For example, some students noticed that for the same brand and type of shampoo, the unit price differs between large-capacity bottles and small-capacity bottles; large-capacity bottles often have a lower unit price. This observation sparked a lively discussion among classmates. In class, teachers can then use this real-world observation as a basis for discussing the concept of price discrimination in the textbook. The target customer groups for large-capacity and small-capacity shampoo bottles have different demand elasticities: the demand elasticity of the target group for small-capacity bottles is relatively lower, making them more likely to command a higher unit price. Thus, the post-class problem chain can encourage students to connect theoretical knowledge with their lived experience and deepen their understanding of economic principles through ongoing questioning and discussion.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined three recurring challenges in Microeconomics teaching that limited enthusiasm for pre-class preparation, low participation in classroom discussions, and insufficient sustained learning and reflection after class. It has traced them to students' weak intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, inadequate prior preparation, and lack of an economic perspective for connecting theory with practice. To address these issues, this study proposes a problem-chain teaching method implemented as an integrated before-, during-, and after-class mechanism.

Before class, instructors design the key concepts of each lesson into a progressive question chain and share it through the class WeChat group, so that students can preview with clear direction and curiosity. During class, the same question chain serves as a framework for discussion and sharing; because students have had sufficient time to reflect and prepare, they are more willing to answer questions, compare viewpoints, and participate in collaborative inquiry, shifting the classroom from one-way lecturing to teacher-student interaction. After class, students are encouraged to observe real-life phenomena, supplement the question chain with new questions, and connect textbook principles with lived experience, thereby extending learning beyond the classroom and fostering continuous reflection. Together, these three stages form a closed loop of "questioning-critical reflection-resolving doubts-further questioning" which is expected to stimulate learning interest, improve classroom engagement, and cultivate habits of active exploration and sustained reflection.

The approach also supports the course's knowledge, competency, and quality objectives by helping students master the fundamental principles of a market economy, analyze social phenomena from an economic perspective, and develop dialectical and innovative thinking together with a sense of social

responsibility. Although the discussion is based mainly on teaching observations and practical analysis rather than large-scale empirical testing, it offers a feasible and transferable reform path for Microeconomics and similar foundational courses. Future work may further evaluate the method's effects through systematic data collection and refine the design of question chains for different topics and student backgrounds.

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