

Enhancing Students' Innovative Abilities through Project-Based Learning in International Economics: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract: This study investigates the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in the International Economics course to enhance students' innovative abilities. Traditional teaching methods in International Economics often neglect individual student engagement and the integration of theory with real-world practice. In contrast, PBL engages students in authentic, complex projects that require the application of economic theories to practical problems. Through the construction of a comprehensive teaching resource repository, optimization of course content, development of interactive teaching models, and adjustment of the evaluation system, this study aims to foster students' innovative thinking, practical skills, and teamwork abilities. The case study of "The Impact of Sino-US Trade Frictions on China's Export Enterprises and Countermeasures" illustrates how PBL can effectively stimulate students' enthusiasm, enhance their problem-solving capabilities, and promote innovative solutions. The findings indicate that PBL significantly improves students' understanding of economic theories, their ability to apply knowledge in practical scenarios, and their overall innovative capacity. This research highlights the potential of PBL as a transformative teaching method in higher education, particularly in economics-related courses, and suggests its broader application in cultivating high-quality, innovative talents for the future workforce.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PBL); International Economics; Innovative Ability; Teaching Reform; Practical Skills.

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of China's technological revolution, new technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and blockchain have given rise to new industries and business models characterized by cross-boundary integration. Against this backdrop, the concept of "new liberal arts" has emerged, which calls for a re-examination and integration of traditional liberal arts educational resources, with a greater emphasis on cultivating students' innovative thinking and practical abilities in the teaching process. The cultivation of innovative abilities has become an urgent need for teaching reform in the context of the new liberal arts. It is related to the ability to cultivate high-quality talents who can meet the challenges of the future society, lead cultural inheritance and innovation, and thus better serve China's major strategies for building an innovative country and developing new-quality productive forces.

International Economics, as a core course in the major of International Economics and Trade, is highly theoretical, covering various aspects such as international trade theory, economic and trade policies, and multinational corporations. It demands high levels of analytical ability, decision-making ability, and international vision from students. However, there are currently some problems in the teaching of International Economics. For example, the traditional lecture-based teaching model neglects the individual levels of students and classroom interaction. The content of textbooks has not been able to keep pace with the latest changes in China's and global trade policies, limiting students' ability to integrate theory with practice. Project-based learning, as a student-centered teaching method, can promote students' active learning and the development of their innovative abilities by engaging them in the process of solving real-world, complex problems. It can inject new vitality into the course of International

Economics and meet the needs of applied talent cultivation.

This study aims to explore the reform and practice of project-based teaching in International Economics for the cultivation of innovative abilities. By constructing a teaching resource repository, optimizing course content, developing teaching models, and adjusting the course evaluation system, this study integrates project-based learning with the cultivation of innovative abilities to enhance students' international vision, innovative thinking, and practical skills. This research not only has theoretical significance in enriching the theory of project-based learning and providing theoretical support for teaching reform in the context of the new liberal arts but also has practical significance in providing practical experience and references for the teaching reform of International Economics in colleges and universities, and in cultivating innovative talents to meet social demands.

2. Literature Review

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a student-centered teaching method that has garnered significant attention in the field of education both domestically and internationally in recent years. Its core lies in engaging students in real, complex, and challenging project tasks to facilitate the learning of knowledge, the development of skills, and the enhancement of capabilities through the process of solving practical problems. The theoretical underpinnings of PBL primarily stem from constructivist learning theory and situated learning theory. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the process of knowledge construction, positing that learners actively build knowledge through interactions with their environment (Ansari et al., 2015). Situated learning theory, on the other hand, asserts that learning should occur in authentic contexts, with students acquiring knowledge and skills through participation in real tasks (Saad & Zainudin,

2022). PBL is based on these theories, promoting a deep understanding and application of knowledge by involving students in actual projects.

PBL is characterized by several distinct features. First and foremost, it emphasizes authenticity, with project tasks typically originating from real-life or workplace issues that students need to address in simulated or actual scenarios (Zhao et al., 2020). Secondly, PBL is comprehensive in nature, encompassing knowledge and skills from multiple disciplinary areas and requiring students to integrate their learning for analysis and problem-solving (Li et al., 2022). Additionally, PBL places a strong emphasis on collaboration, with students usually working in groups to complete tasks through division of labor and cooperation, thereby developing teamwork and communication skills (Hitchcock & Mylona, 2000). Lastly, PBL highlights inquiry, as students are required to independently explore, identify, analyze, and propose solutions to problems during project implementation, fostering critical thinking and innovation (Lasauskiene & Rauduvaite, 2015).

PBL plays a crucial role in the development of students' capabilities. By participating in projects, students not only deepen their understanding and mastery of knowledge but also enhance a range of skills, including problem analysis, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication (Zhang et al., 2015). Moreover, PBL promotes students' autonomous learning abilities, as they need to independently plan their learning progress, select learning resources, and methods, thereby cultivating self-directed learning skills (Hosseinzadeh & Hesamzadeh, 2012). On a societal level, PBL enhances students' understanding of the social value of knowledge and fosters a sense of social responsibility and mission by involving them in the implementation of real projects (Ertmer & Simons, 2005).

3. Implementation of Project-Based Learning Reform in the Course of International Economics

To implement project-based learning (PBL) reform in the International Economics course, we aim to comprehensively enhance students' innovative and practical abilities by constructing rich teaching resources, optimizing course content, developing effective teaching models, and adjusting the course evaluation system. The specific strategies are as follows:

(1) Construction of Teaching Resources. To facilitate the smooth implementation of PBL, we have established three sub-libraries: the professional knowledge sub-library, the case sub-library, and the empirical data sub-library. The professional knowledge sub-library collects extended and empirical research papers or reports on classical economic theories, providing students with a solid theoretical foundation. These materials cover not only the core theories of international economics but also cutting-edge research results, helping students understand the development and application of theories. The case sub-library gathers economic events and phenomena from around the world, with each case offering detailed background information, key issues, and possible solutions. Through these cases, students can integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world situations, enhancing their ability to analyze and solve problems. The empirical data sub-library integrates the latest international economic data from authoritative institutions, such as

national statistical yearbooks, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, providing students with abundant data resources for empirical analysis in their project research.

(2) Optimization of Course Content We have carefully designed and reasonably divided the content of the International Economics course to clarify the applicable content and implementation boundaries for PBL. Based on this, we have carefully selected project-based topics related to current economic policy hotspots and combined them with teachers' research directions to guide students in determining their project topics. For example, topics such as international trade cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and the economic impact of Sino-US trade friction have been introduced into the course to stimulate students' research interest. At the same time, we have organically interspersed discussion-based content such as case analysis and basic methods for project research, such as data analysis, literature sorting, and analytical discussion, into the course. This content arrangement not only provides theoretical support for students to carry out projects but also cultivates their research and innovative thinking abilities.

(3) Development of Teaching Models. The PBL teaching model is divided into three stages. In the first stage, teachers guide students to explore projects by sharing their own research topics, stimulating students' curiosity and desire to explore. The purpose of this stage is to cultivate students' problem awareness and help them understand the basic process and methods of scientific research. In the second stage, students carry out projects in groups, and teachers provide tracking guidance for the research process. Teachers offer specific guidance in the formulation of research frameworks, literature reviews, and practical research to ensure that students' research directions are correct and feasible. In the third stage, students independently complete the writing and presentation of project research reports and can effectively discuss the project topics. This stage aims to cultivate students' independent research and innovation abilities, enabling them to apply the knowledge they have learned to solve practical problems.

(4) Adjustment of Course Evaluation. To comprehensively reflect students' learning achievements and ability development, we have adjusted the course evaluation system. Firstly, we have reduced the weight of the final exam and increased the weight of regular grades, focusing more on students' performance in the learning process. Secondly, we have established evaluation indicators for project-based learning from three aspects: the completion of project topics, the learning process, and the level of knowledge mastery and skill application. The completion of project topics mainly examines students' final results, the learning process focuses on students' participation and progress in the project, and the level of knowledge mastery and skill application is assessed through students' specific performance in the project. In addition, we use digital tools and platforms to track students' learning process and provide timely feedback. This evaluation method not only encourages students to actively participate in learning but also helps teachers adjust teaching strategies in time to improve teaching quality.

Through the above measures, the PBL reform in the International Economics course can not only enhance students' knowledge level and practical ability but also stimulate their innovative thinking and team spirit. This student-centered teaching model provides strong support for training international economics and trade professionals who

meet the needs of the new era.

4. Analysis of the Effect of Project-Based Learning on Students' Innovative Ability Cultivation -- Case Study Based on the Course of International Economics

In the project-based learning (PBL) reform of the International Economics course, we selected the case study of "The Impact of Sino-US Trade Frictions on China's Export Enterprises and Countermeasures." This project is closely tied to current hotspots in international trade and holds significant practical and research value. Students are required to analyze the background, impact mechanisms, and challenges faced by China's export enterprises due to Sino-US trade frictions and propose corresponding countermeasures. This project not only involves core theories of international economics but also demands students to employ methods such as data analysis, literature review, and field research to comprehensively assess their ability to apply knowledge and innovate.

4.1. Project Implementation Process

Before the project commenced, teachers organized students for an introduction to the project background and a review of relevant theoretical knowledge. Through classroom lectures, case analyses, and group discussions, students gained a preliminary understanding of the background, causes, and main impacts of Sino-US trade frictions. Meanwhile, teachers guided students to consult relevant academic literature and policy documents to help them build a solid theoretical foundation. Based on this, students divided into groups to determine their respective research directions, such as the impact of trade frictions on specific industries and corporate countermeasures.

Students conducted project research in groups, with each group focusing on a specific research direction for in-depth analysis. Each group collected data and information through various channels, including consulting domestic and international databases, collecting corporate annual reports, conducting questionnaire surveys, and field interviews. During the data analysis process, students utilized their learned statistical knowledge and data analysis software to organize and analyze the collected data, extracting valuable information. Additionally, each group reviewed relevant research literature both domestically and internationally, and combined with their research findings, proposed innovative viewpoints and countermeasure suggestions.

After completing their project research, each group wrote and submitted project research reports and presented them in class. During the presentation, students detailed the project background, research methods, data analysis results, and final countermeasure suggestions. Other groups of students and teachers questioned and commented on the presentation content, offering constructive opinions and suggestions. Through this process, students not only exercised their expression and communication skills but also learned how to accept and deal with feedback from others.

4.2. Student Performance and Achievements

During the project implementation process, students demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm and initiative. They were able to independently arrange research progress,

reasonably allocate tasks among group members, and actively seek solutions when encountering difficulties. For example, during the data analysis process, some groups faced issues such as incomplete data and inappropriate selection of statistical methods. They successfully resolved these problems by consulting materials, seeking advice from teachers and classmates. Moreover, students exhibited strong team spirit in the project, with group members supporting and cooperating with each other to complete the project tasks.

The research findings of each group were of high quality and innovative. For instance, one group conducted field research on export enterprises in a coastal city and found that trade frictions led to problems such as reduced orders and increased costs for enterprises, but also prompted enterprises to accelerate the pace of transformation and upgrading. The group proposed countermeasures to help enterprises cope with trade frictions through technological innovation, expanding emerging markets, and strengthening brand building. These countermeasure suggestions were not only theoretically grounded but also highly feasible. Another group analyzed the impact of Sino-US trade frictions on China's industrial structure adjustment from a macro perspective and proposed policy suggestions for optimizing the industrial structure and promoting industrial upgrading. These research findings provided beneficial references for relevant enterprises and government departments.

4.3. Impact on Students' Innovative Ability Cultivation

Project-based learning provides students with an open and autonomous learning environment that stimulates their innovative thinking. During the project research process, students are required to analyze problems from multiple angles and propose unique insights and solutions. For example, when analyzing the impact of trade frictions on enterprises, some students did not confine themselves to traditional cost-benefit analysis but explored from multiple dimensions such as enterprise supply chain management, technological innovation capability, and international market competitiveness, proposing innovative viewpoints. This multi-angle thinking approach helps cultivate students' innovative thinking, enabling them to break through the limitations of traditional thinking and come up with novel ideas and solutions.

By participating in the implementation of actual projects, students' practical abilities have been significantly enhanced. In the projects, students need to apply their learned theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems, which not only deepens their understanding and mastery of knowledge but also improves their practical operation skills. For example, during the data collection and analysis process, students learned how to use statistical knowledge and data analysis software to handle complex data and extract valuable information. In the field research process, students exercised their ability to communicate with enterprises and obtain information. The improvement of these practical abilities lays a solid foundation for their future career development.

Project-based learning emphasizes teamwork, requiring students to closely cooperate with group members to complete tasks. This process not only fosters students' team spirit but also enhances their communication skills. During the project implementation, group members need to constantly exchange ideas, discuss problems, and coordinate task assignments. Through these interactions, students learn

how to effectively express their viewpoints, listen to others' opinions, and leverage their strengths within the team. The improvement of these teamwork and communication skills helps students better collaborate with others in future learning and work to jointly solve problems.

Project-based learning requires students to independently plan their learning progress and choose learning resources and methods, which helps cultivate their autonomous learning abilities. During the project research process, students need to independently search for relevant literature, collect data, and analyze problems, with teachers only playing a guiding and instructing role. This autonomous learning approach enables students to better take control of their learning, enhances their enthusiasm and effectiveness in learning. Through autonomous learning, students can not only acquire more knowledge and information but also learn how to learn, a skill that will benefit them for life.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) in the International Economics course, focusing on its potential to cultivate students' innovative abilities. The findings indicate that PBL can significantly enhance students' capabilities in several key areas.

Firstly, PBL provides an authentic and engaging learning environment that stimulates students' innovative thinking. By requiring students to analyze complex problems from multiple perspectives and propose unique solutions, PBL encourages them to break free from traditional thinking patterns and develop novel ideas. This is evident in the case study of "The Impact of Sino-US Trade Frictions on China's Export Enterprises and Countermeasures," where students proposed innovative viewpoints and feasible countermeasures by exploring various dimensions such as supply chain management and international market competitiveness.

Secondly, PBL significantly boosts students' practical abilities. Through hands-on involvement in real-world projects, students apply theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems, thereby deepening their understanding and mastering practical skills. For example, during the data collection and analysis process, students learned to use statistical tools and software to handle complex data, and in field research, they enhanced their communication and information-gathering skills. These practical experiences lay a solid foundation for their future career development.

Thirdly, PBL strengthens students' teamwork and communication skills. The collaborative nature of PBL requires students to work closely with their peers, exchange ideas, discuss issues, and coordinate tasks. This process not only fosters a strong team spirit but also improves their ability to express themselves effectively and listen to others' opinions. The case study demonstrated that students were able to support and cooperate with each other to successfully complete their project tasks.

In conclusion, the implementation of PBL in the International Economics course has proven to be an effective strategy for enhancing students' innovative and practical abilities. It provides a dynamic and interactive learning environment that goes beyond traditional teaching methods. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of PBL on students' career development and its application in other disciplines to maximize its potential in modern education.

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