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Reform and Practice of Blended Online and Offline Teaching in the International Law Course from the Perspective of Cultivating Foreign-Related Rule-of-Law Professionals

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Abstract: Universities are the primary institutions for cultivating foreign-related rule-of-law professionals, and local undergraduate universities share this responsibility. International Law is an essential course in the education of such professionals. However, outdated teaching approaches at local universities have hindered their development. Blended online and offline instruction offers a viable approach suited to the Internet era. Focusing on the distinctive features of the International Law course and the problems encountered in its current delivery, this study examines the reform from three perspectives: the reconstruction of teaching objectives, the implementation of teaching reform, and the evaluation of reform outcomes. It establishes a new set of course objectives encompassing knowledge, competence, quality cultivation, and patriotism, and implements reforms through the integration of ideological-political education, a three-stage blended teaching model covering pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities, and a comprehensive, diversified assessment system throughout the learning process. The reform has yielded several positive results, although a number of challenges remain. Further exploration is therefore needed to identify effective pathways for continued improvement.

Keywords: Foreign-related Rule-of-law Professionals; International Law Course; Blended Online and Offline Teaching; Local Undergraduate Universities.

1. Introduction

On November 27, 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, while presiding over a collective study session of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, that strengthening the rule of law in foreign-related affairs is both a long-term necessity for advancing the building of a strong country and the great cause of national rejuvenation through Chinese-style modernization, and an urgent task in promoting high-standard opening-up and responding to external risks and challenges. The key to accomplishing this systemic task lies in cultivating a large cohort of high-caliber foreign-related rule-of-law professionals. Their cultivation constitutes an important foundation and safeguard for advancing the rule of law in foreign-related affairs. Universities are the primary institutions responsible for this undertaking. At the 10th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the 20th CPC Central Committee, General Secretary Xi Jinping further stressed: "We must strengthen the training of specialized professionals and the development of professional teams. We must uphold the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and promote the integrated cultivation of moral integrity and legal competence; strengthen disciplinary development; improve legal education; and refine practice-oriented training mechanisms, so as to cultivate, at an early date, foreign-related rule-of-law professionals who have firm political convictions, strong professional capabilities, a sound command of international rules, and proficiency in foreign-related legal practice." [1] These requirements set out clear objectives for universities in cultivating such professionals.

For many people, the notion of foreign-related rule-of-law professionals may seem highly specialized and remote. Some assume that their cultivation requires outstanding student cohorts and the resources of Double First-Class universities, and that local undergraduate institutions lack the conditions and capacity to undertake this task. From this perspective, international law courses at such institutions need only meet the Ministry of Education's basic requirements, with helping students pass the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination as the principal objective. This view is mistaken. China currently faces a substantial shortage of foreign-related rule-of-law professionals. Local undergraduate universities should respond to regional circumstances and, guided by the principle of "rooted in the region and oriented toward the whole country" cultivate regionally grounded professionals who handle foreign-related legal disputes. At the very least, undergraduate study of International Law provides a foundation for the cultivation of such professionals. One of the students taught by the author, for example, was admitted to Shenzhen University's master's program in international arbitration. Local undergraduate universities should therefore not shy away from this responsibility, but should actively participate in the cultivation of foreign-related rule-of-law professionals. Nevertheless, the current state of International Law teaching at local undergraduate universities in China falls short of these contemporary demands. Traditional approaches present several problems, including the difficulty students have in following fully English-medium or bilingual instruction and the heavy burden this places on teachers, as well as an excessive emphasis on theory at the expense of students' practical abilities. Reform of the International Law course is therefore imperative. As an emerging instructional approach, blended online and offline teaching offers new ideas and pathways for reforming the course. Drawing on the reform of

the International Law course for the 2022 cohort of law undergraduates at East China Jiaotong University, this paper seeks to explore a blended teaching model suitable for local undergraduate universities.

2. Current State of International Law Teaching and Existing Problems

2.1. Current State of International Law Teaching

International Law is one of the "10+X" core courses for undergraduate law programs prescribed by the Ministry of Education. It plays an important role in cultivating foreign-related rule-of-law professionals who possess an international outlook and are familiar with international rules. The course has traditionally been a compulsory subject for undergraduate law students and is generally offered in the first semester of the third year. The author has taught this course to law undergraduates since 2016. Under the curriculum in place at that time, the course was delivered bilingually; this requirement was subsequently removed from the training program. Classroom instruction has mainly taken the form of teacher-led lectures, supplemented by past questions from the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination and discussions of international law cases. The course was initially classified as an examination-based course. Following revisions to the training program for the 2016 cohort of law undergraduates, it has been classified as an assessment-based course. The final grade consists of 30% coursework and 70% end-of-course examination.

A review of the International Law syllabi of several universities indicates that their teaching methods generally rely on Chinese-language classroom lectures, supplemented by classroom questions, case analysis and discussion, and short papers. Assessment likewise tends to place primary emphasis on the written final examination.

3. Problems in International Law Teaching

3.1. Fully English-medium And Bilingual Instruction Makes it Difficult for Students to Follow the Course and Places a Heavy Burden on Teachers

English is the working language of foreign-related legal services and has become a key component of cultivating foreign-related rule-of-law professionals at universities specializing in political science and law. Drawing on several cohorts of bilingual teaching, the author has found that the results have been unsatisfactory. At local undergraduate universities, both students' and teachers' English proficiency is often limited. On the one hand, students struggle to understand fully English-medium or bilingual lectures and are even less willing to participate in communication. Many have not passed neither CET-4 nor CET-6, and already regard legal English as a considerable burden, let alone an entirely English-taught professional course. Almost all third-year students are preparing for the legal professional qualification examination. If they cannot understand the professional content delivered in class, they may effectively disengage from International Law lectures, spending class time looking down at their phones or skipping class altogether. On the other hand, fully English-medium instruction also places a burden on ordinary course instructors. Many teachers at local universities have no overseas study experience, making fully English-medium instruction extremely difficult. It is therefore urgent to explore a model of International Law teaching, including bilingual instruction, that is appropriate for ordinary local universities.

3.2. Classroom Teaching Emphasizes the Teacher's Delivery, While Students Lack Interaction and Opportunities for Critical Thinking.

The International Law course covers a substantial body of content. According to the textbooks compiled under the Marxist Theory Research and Development Project, the course comprises 18 chapters, which cannot possibly be covered in full within only 32 classroom hours. Moreover, the topics tested in the legal professional qualification examination are dispersed across the field of international law. In an effort to cover as much material as possible, teachers often lecture continuously, leaving students insufficient time for interaction and reflection. This undermines students' initiative, engagement, and creativity in learning international law. Some may point out that flipped classrooms have become common, allowing students to think independently and share their views. In practice, however, poorly implemented flipped classrooms can turn into the very kind of low-value course students dislike: teachers refrain from teaching and simply ask students to prepare and deliver in-class presentations. Students often fail to understand the material and are consequently unable to engage in in-depth thinking.

3.3. Teaching is Predominantly Theoretical and Neglects the Development of Students' Practical Abilities.

Law is a practice-oriented discipline, yet practical activities are relatively scarce in International Law teaching. Students often perceive state diplomatic conduct, the International Court of Justice, and international disputes as remote from their everyday lives, while the development of their practical abilities receives insufficient attention. This problem is not unique to International Law. However, compared with subjects such as Civil Law and Tort Liability Law, which are closely connected to people's daily lives, students' practical experience in international law is particularly limited. Some students may never have read an international legal instrument, watched a heated debate at the United Nations Security Council, or personally taken part in a simulation that allows them to experience and role-play such proceedings.

3.4. A Narrow Course Knowledge System Restricts Students' International Outlook

The content of International Law courses is generally determined by the textbooks selected by instructors. This may be sufficient to fulfill the requirements of the syllabus, but it limits students' horizons in studying international law and, to some extent, restricts their opportunities to explore related and advanced knowledge. Existing course content is often designed primarily to help students pass the final examination and the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination. As a result, students are exposed to only a small part of the vast field of international law and remain unaware of the wider, rapidly changing world beyond the classroom.

3.5. Students' Lack of Regard for International Law Undermines Effective Teaching.

Unlike civil and commercial law, criminal law, and other domestic branches of law, international law may seem distant from students' everyday lives. Furthermore, the International Law component of the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination accounts for only approximately ten points, and some students preparing for the examination even choose to forgo the three core subjects of Public International Law, Private International Law, and International Economic Law altogether. Many believe that merely passing the course examination is sufficient and that there is no need to devote substantial time to the subject. Students at local undergraduate universities often assume that they will not become foreign-related rule-of-law professionals and therefore regard the study of international law as meaningless [2]. This naturally weakens their motivation and commitment to learning.

3.6. Assessment Methods are Limited and Lack Formative Evaluation.

International Law is an assessment-based course, and the final examination generally consists of two essay questions. Students who cram at the last minute can often still pass. The drawback of this approach is that grades reflect students' examination-taking skills rather than their in-depth understanding and mastery of the course content. Coursework grades are also largely based on attendance, with insufficient monitoring of the learning process. Such a narrow assessment system can sometimes produce the awkward result that students' grades do not correspond to their usual learning attitudes.

4. Implementation of Blended Online and Offline Teaching Reform in the International Law Course

4.1. Reconstruction and Optimization of Teaching Objectives

The objective of blended online and offline teaching is to place students at the center of the learning process while positioning teachers as facilitators, thereby stimulating students' initiative in learning. For the International Law course, the reform redefines teaching objectives along four dimensions: knowledge, competence, quality cultivation, and ideological-political education [3].

First, the knowledge objective is to enable students to understand and master the fundamental concepts of international law and the institutional frameworks of its major branches, thereby developing an integrated understanding of the discipline's knowledge structure. In the Internet era, much information can be obtained through a simple online search, which may give the impression that memorization is no longer important, particularly because human memory cannot compete with computers. The opposite is true, however: knowledge acquisition remains a fundamental objective of every course. A novice cannot think about issues the way a professionally trained student does merely by relying on the Internet and AI; foundational knowledge must first be understood and mastered.

Second, the competence objective is to enhance students' combined professional and foreign-language capabilities. First, a practice-oriented approach should enable students to understand international rules and apply their knowledge of international law to analyze and assess international events and China's foreign relations in practice. Students should also be able to use international legal thinking and methods to explore cutting-edge theoretical issues and resolve practical cases. Second, studying the fully English-medium online course should help students improve their English proficiency progressively and naturally.

Third, the quality cultivation objective is to encourage students to follow international developments and major events proactively, examine domestic and international issues from broader and more far-reaching perspectives, and expand their international outlook. Students often ask how they should spend their university years. The author's usual response is that acquiring knowledge is certainly important, but broadening one's experience and horizons may be even more important. Students should explore a world they may not previously have known or understood and learn to examine issues from different perspectives.

Finally, the ideological-political education objective is to take the international rule-of-law perspective embodied in Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law as its guiding principle. It seeks to help students develop a proper understanding of justice and interests and embrace the vision of a community with a shared future for humanity. Students should maintain firm political convictions and be able to tell China's stories through the language of international law. Many students show little interest in international law because they have not witnessed the outstanding contributions made by contemporary Chinese diplomats in their respective fields. Paying attention to international law and major international affairs can genuinely foster national pride and strengthen students' determination and confidence to work for China.

5. Reform Measures

5.1. Integrating Ideological-Political Education into the Course

Ideological and political elements should be incorporated into the teaching process, with course content closely connected to China's foreign policy. Students should be guided to study international law from a Chinese perspective and pay attention to China's practice in international law [4], thereby integrating professional knowledge with patriotic education. The content of International Law is closely related to current international affairs. In class, students may be organized to deliver project presentations on international events in light of China's foreign policy or simulate statements by spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, when teaching territorial issues, instructors can explain the Diaoyu Islands dispute in connection with the acquisition and loss of territory. Students may also be encouraged to watch the film *The Tokyo Trial* to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties surrounding the founding of the People's Republic of China and the trials of Japanese war criminals.

5.2. Developing a Blended Online and Offline Teaching Model

5.2.1. Integration and Innovation of Teaching Content

To meet the objectives of cultivating foreign-related rule-of-law professionals, blended teaching reform in the International Law course requires the integration and innovation of teaching content. The proposed structure

combines a fully English-medium MOOC from "China University MOOC" platform with offline courses designed to improve practical competence.

The online component adopts Professor He Zhipeng's fully English-medium course, "International Relation and International Law," available on the "China University MOOC" platform. An asynchronous SPOC course was also established on the platform in accordance with the Marxist Theory Research and Development Project textbook and the course syllabus. Several considerations informed this choice. First, Professor He has established academic authority in international law and has made substantial scholarly contributions to international law and the cultivation of foreign-related rule-of-law professionals. Second, the course covers a broad range of topics, systematically addressing the subjects of international law (including states and international organizations), its objects (including territory, the law of the sea, and air law), legal acts, the settlement of international disputes, and state responsibility and other core issues. Its content can therefore be aligned with offline instruction. Third, fully English-medium instruction enables students to engage directly with cutting-edge international legal literature, cases, and rules, avoiding delays and information loss caused by translation and improving their ability to interpret international legal texts independently. Fourth, the online course is concise: videos are no longer than 15 minutes, with some lasting only one or two minutes. This reduces the likelihood that students will give up because of difficulties. Students can pause the videos to reflect and replay them as often as necessary. Finally, many videos adopt a question-and-answer format in which students raise questions and the professor responds. This problem-oriented approach is likely to arouse students' interest, resonate with their concerns, and facilitate interaction [5].

5.2.2. Establishing a Three-Stage Blended Teaching Model: Pre-Class, In-Class, and Post-Class

The blended online and offline teaching model consists of three stages: pre-class, in-class, and post-class. Both pre-class and post-class activities take place online. Although these stages are separated in time, they are closely interconnected in terms of content and learning outcomes. Omitting any one of them would undermine the overall effectiveness of teaching.

1) Pre-Class Online Learning

Since students at ordinary local universities generally have limited English proficiency, measures are needed both to ensure effective pre-class study and to reduce their workload. Accordingly, a translation task was assigned in the first class and incorporated into the coursework grade. Each student was responsible for translating five to eight minutes of video from the online course using the *iFLYTEK Tingjian* application and producing a bilingual Chinese-English transcript. During online study, students could watch the videos without a transcript if their English proficiency allowed, or follow the videos using the bilingual transcript. Students with stronger language skills could even memorize the English transcript to improve their ability to express international legal concepts and terminology.

2) In-Class Offline Learning

The in-class stage takes place in the physical classroom and is designed to facilitate the transfer and internalization of knowledge, with the aim of developing students' comprehensive abilities to analyze and solve problems. Based on the online course content, instructors can assign various offline tasks, such as case analysis, group activities, project presentations, and Model United Nations simulations. Students are required to collect and organize substantial documentary materials and engage in group discussion and analysis. These activities encourage active learning and critical thinking, integrate theory with practice, and improve students' independent thinking, oral communication, and writing skills. In this reform, four types of offline activities were primarily organized. First, four groups comprising 28 students simulated press briefings by spokespersons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Second, 17 students participated in a simulation of a United Nations Security Council meeting based on the widely discussed "United Nations iconic moment: the double moment of silence." To ensure that the proceedings followed the Council's agenda, students were required to watch an analytical commentary video uploaded by a creator on Bilibili. Participants assumed the roles of the UN Secretary-General, the representative of Ukraine, and the representatives of the 15 Security Council members. Third, a group of five students delivered a PowerPoint presentation tracing the historical background and development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, 20 students, each representing a different UN Member State, discussed the need for Security Council reform and presented their respective countries' positions, with particular attention to whether the number of permanent-member seats should be expanded.

3) Post-Class Online Consolidation

Post-class activities focus on online testing and interaction to consolidate knowledge. They take the form of online quizzes, question-and-answer sessions, and discussion forums. When conditions permit, the course may further explore a post-class competition model combining online and offline activities and organize students to participate in various international law competitions, such as the Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition.

Post-class online consolidation is an essential component of blended online and offline teaching. At this stage, students can complete tests on the online platform to assess their mastery of the knowledge covered in class. The platform also provides question-and-answer and discussion functions, through which students can raise questions encountered during their studies and receive timely assistance from teachers and peers. Such interaction not only helps students resolve difficulties but also stimulates their interest and motivation. In addition, students can share their learning experiences and reflections in discussion forums, promoting communication and collaboration among peers.

To ensure the effectiveness of post-class online consolidation, teachers should regularly monitor and evaluate students' learning progress and outcomes. Platform analytics can be used to review learning data, including test scores and the frequency of participation in discussions, enabling instructors to adjust teaching strategies and methods in a timely manner. Students who fall behind can receive individualized guidance and encouragement through the platform to help them keep pace with the course.

5.3. Establishing a Comprehensive and Diversified Assessment System throughout the Teaching Process

Course assessment should not be confined to the summative evaluation represented by the final examination. It should also incorporate formative assessment, with the two components jointly providing a comprehensive evaluation of

teaching and learning outcomes. Many universities seek to achieve this by introducing coursework grades. However, no well-established approach has emerged for determining the composition of these grades. Some students even believe that teachers assign grades entirely on the basis of their personal impressions, making the process overly subjective and unfair. Formative assessment is therefore necessary, and its indicators should be as objective and equitable as possible. They should encourage students to participate more seriously in the course and provide evidence of their learning attitudes. In general, formative assessment should cover pre-class preparation, in-class activities, and post-class learning, thereby evaluating the dynamic process of students' independent learning both online and offline. The overall course grade is calculated as: formative assessment (50%) plus final-examination-based offline performance (50%). Formative assessment includes MOOC video learning, in-class exercises, attendance, thematic discussions, post-class assignments, and group discussion reports. These components primarily assess students' ability to recall, understand, analyze, and apply international law knowledge. The final assessment may take diversified forms, such as a course paper or case analysis, with an emphasis on students' ability to use international legal reasoning to analyze and resolve problems, as well as their patriotic commitment. Under the reform implemented in this course, the overall grade likewise consists of formative assessment/online performance (50%) and the final-examination-based offline performance (50%). The formative assessment, worth 100 points, is composed of attendance (20 points), the translation task (20 points), online learning (40 points), and group tasks (20 points). The online learning component includes video study, online discussions, and the end-of-course test. Because scores are generated automatically by the platform according to each student's level of completion, this approach makes the assessment relatively objective.

6. Outcomes and Reflections on the Blended Teaching Reform of the International Law Course

6.1. Outcomes of the Reform

Observations of students' classroom performance, end-of-course grades, and post-course interviews indicate that the blended teaching reform of the International Law course has achieved several positive outcomes and that its objectives have largely been realized. First, students' initiative in learning has been stimulated. They have become more actively involved in pre-class preparation, in-class discussions, and post-class review, and have developed a deeper understanding and stronger command of international law. Having gained an initial understanding of fundamental concepts through online study, students enter offline classes with questions in mind. Classroom interaction further encourages them to participate actively, changing their previously indifferent attitudes toward international law. Second, students' practical abilities and international outlook have been broadened. They have begun to apply international law knowledge to the analysis of international events and to pay closer attention to major international issues. In addition, the integration of ideological-political education has produced positive results: through studying international law, students have strengthened their commitment to the vision of a community with a shared future for humanity and enhanced their national pride. The following are excerpts from students' reflections on the blended teaching reform of the International Law course: "I used to think that the practical application of international law was far removed from our lives, and that few members of the public followed UN General Assembly resolutions on their own. However, the simulated statements delivered by the groups in class made recreating international legal scenarios interesting and gave me an experience I had never had before"; "The combination of online and offline teaching allows us to communicate face to face with the teacher while also immersing ourselves in English-language instruction and experiencing the appeal of international law. The various classroom presentations enable us to participate directly—to learn through role-play and to role-play as we learn"; "My group's classroom presentation simulated a press conference with a spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I played the role of a journalist. I had to understand the current international situation, formulate questions, and then develop answers in light of China's current foreign policy. It gave me a strong sense of involvement."

7. Remaining Problems and Possible Improvements

7.1. Teachers' Capacity for Blended Teaching Remains Inadequate.

Some teachers do not yet have a sufficiently thorough understanding of the principles of blended teaching and lack the ability to design and use online teaching resources. Consequently, they find it difficult to fully realize the advantages of combining online and offline instruction. In the short term, universities can organize training on the application of China University MOOC, invite experts to deliver lectures and provide guidance, and arrange exchanges in which teachers share teaching experience and learn from one another, thereby improving their online teaching skills. During the implementation of this reform, the author also received considerable assistance from staff in the university's Academic Affairs Office and from personnel supporting the "China University MOOC" platform. In the long term, universities should establish a sustainable mechanism for improving teachers' blended-teaching capabilities, incorporate these capabilities into teacher evaluation systems, and encourage continuous professional development. Blended teaching can be applied to a wide range of courses.

7.2. Students Lack Motivation for Independent Learning.

Some students are accustomed to traditional passive learning and lack the awareness and motivation required for independent study. They may therefore procrastinate or engage only superficially in online learning. Several student reflections illustrate this concern: "The effectiveness of online education is uncertain. For students with limited self-discipline, the learning outcomes may be poor." "Blended online and offline teaching is an efficient and effective approach, but it also requires students to have good self-discipline; otherwise, online learning will become a mere formality." In the short term, instructors should strengthen learning guidance, develop detailed study plans and task lists, and remind students to complete tasks on time. Incentive mechanisms should also be established to recognize and reward outstanding performance. In the long term,

universities should cultivate students' habits and capabilities for independent learning. Through improvements in course design and teaching methods, instructors should stimulate students' interest and initiative, helping them gradually adapt to and embrace blended learning.

7.3. Integration of Teaching Resources Remains Inadequate

Online and offline teaching resources are not yet sufficiently integrated. Problems such as duplicated content and poor continuity affect teaching effectiveness. In some cases, the two components are even disconnected: students simply study independently online, while offline teaching proceeds as it did before. In the future, online and offline course resources should be integrated more deeply, and the respective teaching objectives of online and classroom instruction should be clearly defined. Knowledge already covered online should not be repeated in class unless it involves particularly challenging or difficult points. In terms of the overall objective system, online learning should primarily support the knowledge framework and the development of international competence, while offline instruction should focus more on practical capabilities and ideological-political education.

7.4. University Regulations on Instructional Hours are not Yet Fully Compatible with Blended Teaching.

At present, the curriculum plans of most universities specify instructional hours primarily in terms of offline classroom teaching, except in special circumstances. Online components of blended courses can generally be counted only toward coursework grades and do not count toward the prescribed instructional hours. This means that online assignments cannot be too extensive, or students may feel overburdened. Teachers may likewise be reluctant to devote substantial time to online instruction, sometimes doing little more than setting up a SPOC course without consistently monitoring students' progress or responding promptly to their online questions. In the future, universities should allocate online and offline instructional hours more reasonably so that both students and teachers receive appropriate recognition for their efforts and are motivated to engage fully in online teaching and learning.

8. Conclusion

International Law is an important course in the cultivation of foreign-related rule-of-law professionals. At local undergraduate universities, limitations in student recruitment and faculty resources, among other factors, mean that outdated teaching approaches can hinder this endeavor. Blended online and offline teaching offers a viable approach suited to the Internet era. The blended teaching reform implemented in the authors' International Law course has achieved several positive outcomes: students' initiative in learning has increased, and their practical abilities and proficiency in legal English have improved substantially. Students have also recognized blended instruction as an efficient new teaching approach worthy of wider adoption. Nevertheless, several problems remain, particularly teachers' insufficient capacity for blended teaching, students' inadequate motivation for blended learning, the incomplete integration of teaching resources, and the unreasonable allocation of online and offline instructional hours. These issues require further exploration and continued reform.

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