Reform and Practice of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” Course Under the Blended Teaching Mode*

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The blended teaching reform of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course is theoretically based on the community of inquiry framework and oriented by solution of teaching problems. In the reform, a blended teaching design plan was developed, course content was reorganized and updated, online learning resources were constructed, and the syllabus was re-planned. The community of inquiry was built and maintained by the use of effective management mechanisms, such as incentives, teaching assistants, group cooperative learning, etc. The effect of students’ blended learning was evaluated by combining online and offline evaluation, tracking learning data through online learning platforms, and using online evaluation tools for classroom evaluation as well as evaluation rubrics, etc. These reform measures have helped to improve the in-depth learning of the students.

Keywords: blended teaching, course reform and practice, environment creation

Introduction

With the advent of the “Internet +” era, online learning has emerged as a new learning method, especially during the Covid-19 epidemic. In China, teachers have used information technology to carry out online teaching activities, and teaching has gradually shifted from traditional offline classrooms to an online and offline integration. More and more teachers are trying to combine online and offline teaching in their practice and research. According to China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI) search results, the research on blended teaching in the past five years has shown a gradual upward trend in China. In 2015, there were only 536 related articles, and by 2019, there were 3,688 related articles. Exploring an effective model for blended teaching to improve the quality of education has become a hot topic in research on teachers and teaching. However, some teachers, due to lack of a systematic and profound understanding of blended teaching, only blindly follow the trend to carry out blended teaching reform and would often use technology for the sake of using technology. For this reason, blended teaching has not achieved the expected results. The researcher believes that the focus of blended teaching reform should not be on technology, but on students’ learning experience. Therefore, based on the theory of the community of inquiry framework, this research constructs a student-centered “online + offline” in-depth blended teaching mode, combines the advantages of real and virtual learning experiences to provide effective learning support for students, so as to promote them into high-level thinking and learning.

*Acknowledgements: This article is the research result of the 2018 Jiangxi Province Teaching Reform Research Project “Research on the Blended Teaching Mode of the Curriculum ‘Kindergarten Environment Creation’ in the Context of ‘Internet+’” (Project No.: JXJG-18-23-4).
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Theoretical Basis

Garrison, based on his years of blended teaching practice and also the theory of constructivism, built a framework of community of inquiry that includes three core elements of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. It is a circular model as shown in Figure 1 (Randy & Norman, 2019).

![Figure 1. Community of inquiry framework.](image)

Social presence refers to open interactions, intimate responses, and emotional connections. The construction of social functions is the main focus of the community of inquiry at its initial stage. Social relationships give participants a sense of belonging, support their free expression, and maintain community cohesion. Cognitive presence is the heart of the community of inquiry. It refers to the process by which learners obtain and confirm meaning through sustained reflection, interaction, and discourse. The teaching presence is a means through which teachers can regulate, guide, and direct students’ learning by designing and organizing blended teaching activities. The researcher has used this framework to design and implement blended courses and explore effective strategies for blended learning.

The Purpose of Blended Teaching Reform

Teaching reform sets out to solve teaching problems, and the same is true for blended teaching reform. As Liz Arney (2017) has pointed out, “Learning itself is more important than any technical tools”, the introduction of network technology is for the purpose of solving teaching problems. Therefore, blended teaching not only requires strong network technology support, but also requires teachers to start from a problem-solving mindset to re-design their teaching plans and explore suitable teaching methods combined with network technology, in order to promote students into in-depth learning.

The researcher has found the following problems in the offline classroom teaching of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation”. First, the class is dominated by lecture of teachers, which accounts for 70%-80% of the class time with low student participation. Second, there are relatively few effective and interesting interactions between teachers and students, and students are prone to learning burnout. Third, students are weak in independent learning, not active in pre-class preparation, and poor at finishing homework after class. Fourth, there is a lack of targeted guidance and communication between teachers and students after class. These problems have caused students’ learning to stay at a shallow level, making it difficult to meet the requirements of the undergraduate golden courses to be high-level, innovative, and challenging.
To solve the above problems, the researcher, based on the characteristics of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course, took into consideration the actual situation of students, used online learning platforms, such as Xueyin Online MOOC Platform, Chaoxing Xuexitong APP, WeChat Group, etc. in the teaching process, and built an appropriate “online + offline” blended teaching mode, so as to enhance teacher-student interaction, improve students’ enthusiasm for independent learning, and meet students’ individual learning needs through blended teaching.

**Blended Teaching Design and Preliminary Preparation**

Prior to carrying out the blended teaching reform, the teaching team of the course should design and plan the blended teaching. It is not enough to construct the design plan for blended teaching, reorganize the course content, and provide abundant online learning resources only. Teachers also need to develop the syllabus to guide students in their preparation for learning.

**Develop a Blended Teaching Design Plan**

“Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers” has pointed out that “environment creation and application ability” is an important professional ability that kindergarten teachers must master. The “Kindergarten Environment Creation”, as a compulsory course for pre-school education, is designed to cultivate students’ professional ability with both theoretical and practical guidance for students. In response to the problems existing in offline classroom teaching, the researcher has taken the online advantages of Xueyin Online and ChaoxingXuexitong APP to practice the problem-oriented, ability-based, and student-oriented teaching concepts with a purpose of “establishing a scientific view, cultivating awareness, mastering skills, and solving problems related to environment creation”, and constructed the blended teaching design scheme as shown in Figure 2 under the guidance of the Community of Inquiry framework.

**Reorganize and Update Course Content and Develop Online Learning Resources**

The researcher has learnt from useful information from the “Kindergarten Environment Creation from Children’s Perspective” by Wang Haiying, the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” edited by Yuan Ailing, and the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” and “Handcrafts Making Tutorial” edited by the teaching team of the course, and reorganized and updated the content of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course. Extracting important knowledge points from these textbooks, the content system of the course is finally determined. The course content, with emphasis on both theory and practice, is divided into two major modules of theory and practice with a total of forty knowledge points. The content of the theoretical module includes basic concepts of environment creation, basic ideas, and specific methods of environment creation, while the content of the practical module includes themed environment creation practice and material production for kindergarten environment creation. The course content system is shown in Figure 3.

Based on the principle to provide sufficient and applicable knowledge to make students capable and proficient, the content of the theoretical part of environment creation is streamlined, while the methods and practices of kindergarten environment creation are highlighted. The theoretical part reflects the frontier knowledge of the subject and is explained in simple terms supplemented by a large number of kindergarten environment pictures and video resources. The practical part shows excellent cases of environment creation and highlights the problem solution in environment creation with strong operability. At the same time, teachers organically integrate ideological and political elements, such as preschool teachers’ professional ethics, Chinese
traditional culture, environmental protection, and humanistic spirit into the knowledge points of the course to help students establish a correct outlook on teacher ethics and environment, to fully reflect the latest development requirements for professionals of the preschool education major in the new era.

Secondly, the researcher committed to the construction of online learning resources, has provided students with a wealth of practical learning resources that reflect the frontier knowledge of the subject. Each online chapter includes a self-learning task list, the content to be learnt, a chapter test, and extended learning resources, etc., which aggregate to form a relatively complete online course system. Micro-lectures, videos, and pictures related to kindergarten environment, PPT courseware, electronic textbooks, and other resources, which are provided to show the basic knowledge points of the course, constitute parts of an online characteristic learning database that provides students with rich visualized kindergarten environment resources. In this way, online learning content becomes interesting and easy to understand, allowing students to experience the real kindergarten environment intimately, so that they can apply what they have learned in practice.

![Diagram of blended teaching design](image-url)

**Figure 2.** The blended teaching design of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation”.
COURSE UNDER THE BLENDED TEACHING MODE

Re-Plan the Syllabus to Guide Students in Their Preparation for Study

The implementation of blended learning is not possible without online learning resources. Based on the constructed online learning resources, the teachers have redesigned the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course and re-planned the syllabus. The blended syllabus includes the following content: basic course information, ideological and political design, course objectives, teaching content arrangement, teaching methods, course assessment and evaluation, etc. All these parts must be re-planned around blended learning. Taking course assessment and evaluation as an example, process assessment plays an important role in the courses implementing blended teaching model, especially the assessment and evaluation of students’ online learning situation, including online watching of micro-lecture videos, online participation in discussions, and quality of submitted online homework, etc.

For most students, blended learning is a brand-new learning experience. Teachers who want to carry out blended teaching reform must inform students of the importance of blended learning for the course at the very beginning, so that students can recognize and understand blended learning. One to two weeks before the start of the course, teachers should establish the class for the course on Xuexitong, uploads the syllabus of “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course in the panel of class information and ask the students to read the syllabus to understand the basic content of the course. And teachers should also explain the reasons for the blended teaching reform of the course on the class bulletin board, describe the structure and learning objectives of the course, and upload online study guides for students, so as to help the students to get ready for blended learning.

Implementation Strategies of Blended Teaching

Seamless Online and Offline Connection, Creating an Environment for Efficient Blended Learning

Based on the characteristics of blended teaching, the researcher divided students learning activities into three parts: online learning before class, face-to-face learning in class, and online learning after class. Each part was carefully designed and organically integrated to create an environment for efficient blended learning by students.

First of all, centering around the online teaching before and after class, a task list for students’ self-directed learning is developed. The task list includes basic learning objectives, online MOOC learning,
online communication and discussion, and extended learning requirements, so as to guide students who wish to learn more to develop deep learning. Secondly, a reasonable online learning process is designed. The first step is to have students learn key knowledge through micro-lecture videos; the second step is to check students’ understanding of the knowledge through video pop-up questions and online learning tests; the third step is to have them discuss with peers on related issues to deepen their thinking and understanding of key and difficult knowledge; the fourth step is to further consolidate the knowledge students have learnt through online homework or project activities; and the fifth step is to provide them with extended online resources to guide them to learn more extensively.

As the content of basic knowledge that should have been taught offline moves forward as a part of the online learning prior to an offline class, the researcher has re-planned and designed the offline teaching content. The offline teaching is designed to be closely integrated with the online teaching and is implemented on the basis of online teaching. For example, the first chapter of the “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course is about the basic concept of the kindergarten environment. In the offline class, students, who have completed online learning, are guided to think and explore the importance of the kindergarten’s physical and spiritual environments, and the relationship between the kindergarten environment and children’s development/kindergarten curriculum, so as to make them fully understand the connotation of the kindergarten environment. In the first part of the offline class, teachers can have students report on their online learning results in groups and discuss the problems and confusions they have encountered in online learning. In the second part, teachers give answers to their questions and solve the problems encountered by the students in online learning, helping students to summarize the knowledge points of online learning. In the third part, after students have obtained an understanding of the basic knowledge points, teachers focus on “hot and difficult issues of environment creation”, provide stimuli (cases and videos of related content), and use these stimuli to inspire students to ask questions. Teachers can then make rules for group discussion and lead the students to discuss in groups or carry out inquiry activities based on the relevant problems, thus guiding students to think in depth. For example, for Chapter 1 that discusses the physical and spiritual environments of kindergartens, teachers can organize students to debate in groups. Through exchange of opinions in the debate, students can deepen their understanding of the physical and spiritual environments. The learning at the practical level of “Kindergarten Environment Creation” is realized by having students participating in cooperative learning and exploration activities, on the basis of discussion activities, in a kindergarten simulation training room. For example, in Chapter 6, the first section of environment design for the kindergarten corner, the teacher can guide students to discuss the methods to create the corner environment, and at the same time, they can assign group tasks, have the students choose a corner of the kindergarten simulation training room for redecoration. Students record the redecoration process by taking photos or videos, which will then be made into a PPT after class and uploaded to Xuexitong APP. Then, teachers guide students to learn online after school and ask them to select the best corner design team after self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. Teachers can use the online community to lead students to actively discuss on the best corner design selected. What advantages does it have? In what aspects does it need to be improved? In the next face-to-face class, the teacher should analyze and summarize the online discussion of the students.

Create a Community of Inquiry Based on Problem Solving

Offline classes are gradually shifting toward a student-centered teaching mode which is oriented by problem-solving. Classroom teaching rolls out in the process of raising questions—exploring
problems—solving problems. Teachers no longer explain the basic knowledge point by point in detail. Rather, students are guided to have in-depth thinking and learning based on the knowledge points. They are also inspired to think about the problems through cases and videos related to the knowledge point, and organized in groups to have reflective discussion on the problems. In the process of student discussion, teachers should monitor and guide the discussion process, maintain the vitality of the discussion, give students timely feedback, and create a dynamic and energetic real community offline. In the face-to-face real community, teachers can guide the interactions between students and between students and the teacher, so as to enhance emotional connection, establish mutual trust, and form an atmosphere of cooperative learning.

Guided by the community of inquiry framework, teachers make full use of the advantages of online learning and give the advantages of offline learning to full play, in an attempt to integrate the real offline community with the online virtual community, and bring the atmosphere filled with mutual trust and cooperation learning formed in the real community to the online learning environment, so as to build a community of inquiry with sustained blended learning. The teaching team of the course uses the ChaoxingXuexitong App and WeChat group to interact with students anytime and anywhere, observe students’ online activities, monitor the progress of students’ exploration into problems, and provide online guidance to students. Teachers guide and encourage students to put forward original views and ideas in face-to-face discussions and make them further deepened and improved through online discussions, so as to cultivate students’ critical thinking and innovative thinking.

Establish an Effective Management Mechanism to Maintain the Community of Inquiry

After teachers create the community of inquiry by integrating the real community with online community, they should make best use of its various functions, maintain the learning community, and have the students work towards the common learning goal in the community. Teachers should mobilize students’ learning enthusiasm through their teaching leadership and good management of learning tasks, encourage students to work together for the common learning goals, and encourage students to take responsibility and learn independently. Practical experience reveals that there are several effective management measures, including using incentive mechanisms to motivate students to learn actively, arranging online teaching assistants to assist in the community management, and implementing cooperative learning in groups.

Use incentives mechanisms to motivate students to learn actively online. In blended learning, students not only have to learn face-to-face in a classroom, but also need to study online before and after class. They are passionate in online learning at the beginning but will gradually lose interest over time. In this case, it is often not enough for teachers to purely require the students to finish online tasks. They need to use various incentive mechanisms to maintain students’ enthusiasm and interest in online learning.

In the first week of the new semester, teachers should publish the incentive system in the bulletin board of Xuexitong, so that students can understand the rules (see Table 1 for details). The top 10 students in terms of learning times in each chapter, top 10 active in online discussion, and those with high accuracy in chapter tests and excellent performance in online assignments and group tasks, will be announced every month, and teachers will promptly praise and award points to these students in class (Points will be counted into usual performance). The “Online Learning Star” (5-10 students) will be selected once a month based on the overall performance. These are the incentives that can be used to maintain students’ interest in online learning.
Table 1

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<th>Incentive System of Online Learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bonus points</td>
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<td>Online learning program (calculated once a month)</td>
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**Arrange online teaching assistants to assist in management of the learning community.** Each class is designed to have two teaching assistants. Students can volunteer to be an assistant or they can vote for their assistants. After the student assistants are determined, teachers should explain to them their specific responsibilities. Teaching assistants should check whether their fellow classmates have finished online learning, urge them to watch online teaching videos, complete chapter tests and online assignments on time, assist teachers to post online learning notices, organize online discussions, and appraise online assignments. Student assistants not only assist teachers in managing students’ online learning, but also reduce the online workload of teachers, who can then spared more time to guide and promote students’ learning activities. At the same time, student assistants also serve as an important means for students’ self-learning management.

**Implement cooperative learning in groups and strengthen community awareness.** Divide the class into a number of fixed groups according to the principle that groups should be similar to each other while members should be at different levels within a group. Each group has about six to eight students. The group leader, responsible for organization of online and offline learning of the group, should be chosen by the members. There are mainly three types of group learning activities. The first type of learning activities happens before the class. Under the guidance of the teacher, each group searches for articles and resources related to the learning content and posts them to Xuexitong to share with the classmates. The group leader then organizes the group to learn the syllabus and text content of the next lesson online.

The second type of group activities is face-to-face or online discussion of the group. Teachers, based on the learning situation of students before the class, give inspiring and challenging topics concerning kindergarten environment in the discussion area of Xuexitong, ask each group to have preliminary discussion online, and organize in-depth discussion in class. Every group sends a spokesperson to give a report, which can be complemented by other members. The group leader summarizes the opinions and ideas of the group and posts them to the themed discussion area of Xuexitong. The integration of the two forms of discussion can promote the students to explore and solve the problems independently.

The third type of group activities is practical tasks given by teachers on the online platform and students are asked to complete the tasks through group work. Tasks may include developing a design scheme for the theme wall of the class, or design and decoration of the parent-school contact column, theme wall, corner, etc. of the kindergarten simulation training room. The group leader should assign the subtasks properly among the members, urge them to finish the subtasks on time and post the results to Xuexitong in the form of a document or courseware. Various forms of group cooperative learning allow students to share their ideas and experience, and during the mutual learning from each other, the learning community is better consolidated and learning will be more effective.
Combine Online and Offline Evaluation to Evaluate the Effect of Blended Learning

Teaching evaluation aims not just to provide students with a final learning result. Rather, it is used to improve both the learning of students and teaching of teachers. Blended learning with the advantages of the network platform is able to quantify the online learning process of students. The student data provided by the platform can help teachers monitor the learning process of students and track their learning records. Teachers can also publish online tests on the platform to know the mastery of the course content by the students. These labor- and time-saving online evaluation methods not only help teachers give process evaluation and mark the usual performance of the students, but also provide a basis for teachers to further improve teaching. At the same time, teachers can use classroom assessment techniques and evaluation rubrics to further evaluate the effect of blended learning by students (see Figure 4).

Use online learning data to track students’ learning. The Xueyin Online MOOC platform keeps a real-time recording of the data on students’ participation in online learning. The platform can generate a learning report for each student, based on which can learning situation of each student throughout the process, including video viewing, chapter tests, participation in discussions, and homework completion, be tracked. Teachers and student assistants can access students’ learning data via a mobile phone anytime and anywhere to know whether a student has completed online learning. On the one hand, student assistants will inform all their classmates of the learning reports one by one and urge those who have not completed the online tasks to continue learning. On the other hand, teachers can analyze students’ learning data, give awards to those who have actively studied online, and have self-reflection and adjust their teaching plan for the next stage.

Use online assessment tools for classroom assessment. Teachers use classroom assessment tools to understand the classroom learning of students at an early stage and with a high frequency. The purpose of classroom assessment is to allow teachers and students to acquire information that helps to improve teaching effectiveness and learning quality. Conventionally, classroom assessment activities are carried out at the beginning, middle or end of a class through paper-and-pen tests. This kind of assessment is time-consuming and entails heavy workload, as teachers need to spend a lot of time collecting, reading, and sorting out paper materials for assessment. In the blended teaching reform, teachers can use online tools to carry out classroom assessment. Prior to a face-to-face class, teachers can require students to take the online test on the learning
platform, and the results of the online tests will be immediately reported back to teachers. In a face-to-face class then, teachers give timely feedbacks to the students concerning the test results, and discusses with the students the difficulties they encounter in the online test to help them consolidate what they have learnt online. After the class, teachers initiate a questionnaire on the learning platform to understand the students’ mastery of the lesson, which the students can fill in after class. Teachers read the answers of students through the Internet to understand how well they have understood what has been taught in the classroom.

Use evaluation rubrics to make evaluation more targeted. To facilitate the self-evaluation and mutual evaluation of students, while teaching the course, teachers have formulated evaluation rubrics for group tasks, online discussions, homework, etc. Evaluation rubrics function as a scoring tool with a list of evaluation indicators, and students can evaluate the learning situation of themselves and their peers by comparing against the indicators. For example, the teacher assigns a group task to make a design plan for a class activity room in a kindergarten. The teacher uploads the excellent design plans made by the previous groups and relevant evaluation standards to Xuexitong, so that each group can understand the requirements for the task by reading the design plan and evaluation standards. Thus, they will be able to complete the task with high quality. In short, evaluation rubrics not only guide students to better complete learning tasks, let them know the quality of tasks completed by themselves and their peers, and guide them to reflect on their own learning, but also reduce the time spent by teachers on evaluation students’ learning tasks and improve the teaching efficiency.

Conclusion

The “Kindergarten Environment Creation” course adopts student-centered “online + offline” in-depth blended teaching mode. Online, students watch micro-lecture videos, complete tests, and conduct discussions. Offline, under the guidance of problem and practical cases, students participate in critical discussion and carry out group cooperative learning. Teachers construct inquiry community and effectively support students’ deep learning. At the same time, teachers use a variety of online and offline evaluation methods to evaluate students’ learning effectiveness, and constantly improve teaching to enhance students’ learning effect.

References


