

# Teaching Innovation and Practice of “Service Learning” Education Model Based on Growth Groups

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**Abstract:** A student-centered value system is upheld, and in response to the pain points of traditional classroom instruction, participatory teaching methods have been innovated, and the “University Freshmen Growth Training Camp” has been established based on growth groups as a service-learning teaching model. This approach is ultimately achieved with a dual effect: teacher development is fostered, and students’ core competencies are enhanced.

**Keywords:** Growth group; Service Learning; Practical teaching

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## 1. Course Overview and Analysis of Teaching Pain Points

The basic professional course “Introduction to Sociology” consists entirely of theoretical teaching (2 hours) and practical teaching (1 hour). This innovative teaching course is the practical teaching course in “Introduction to Sociology”. In traditional teaching, there are three thorny issues, including the indoctrination teaching model making it difficult for students to understand, the existing course setting overlooking the psychological adaptation problems of university freshmen, and the excessive planning of the traditional teaching model restricting students’ creative learning. To solve these three teaching pain points, this practical course has innovated the teaching model and methods.

This course, as a practical course, mainly adopts the method of service learning, changing the traditional preaching teaching method. Service learning is an educational experiential learning method that combines community service with teaching and reflection, aiming to enrich learning experiences, cultivate a sense of social responsibility, and strengthen community connections. This practical course belongs to in-class service learning, that is, integrating service activities into regular classrooms, combining with course objectives and content, centering on the theme of “self-recognition and growth”, using group social work methods to establish a “University Freshman Growth Training Camp” in a project-based operation among non-social work major students, arranging students to practice in groups, fully exerting students’ initiative and creativity, under the guidance of each group activity theme framework, students design the specific activity plan of each group and lead the implementation process of group activities.

## 2. Innovative Approach

The “growth group” in this course is a professional service that guides students under the guidance of the values, theories, and methods of professional social work, uses group dynamics to assist group members in drawing on the experiences of others in the group to solve their own problems, change behaviors, enhance abilities, and promote self-growth. This course is committed to establishing a “University Freshman Growth Training Camp” through the “service learning model”, carrying out adaptive education for university freshmen from the perspective of “university freshman self-recognition and growth”, and evaluating the practical effects of this model. Up to now, the “University Freshman Growth Camp” has been established in the 2021, 2022, and 2023 grades

of the Ideological and Political Education major, and the “University Student Growth Camp” has been carried out in the 2020 grade. Therefore, the camp model of the “Introduction to Sociology” practical course has been successfully implemented for four rounds. Based on the characteristics of university freshmen and the value concept of “people-oriented, helping people to help themselves”, this course attempts to let university students adopt the growth group model of “self-education” and “peer education” under the guidance of teachers to solve the adaptability problems of university. The specific practice method is that the guiding teacher leads the students to carry out group activities according to the standard of equipping two teaching assistants for each group. The selection of members of each group will consider factors such as gender and personality as much as possible to achieve heterogeneity within the group.

### **3. Innovative Measures**

#### **3.1 Innovation in Teaching Philosophy**

With the core teaching philosophy of “cultivating a well-rounded person”, this course combines the service learning model of participatory teaching with the “four-ization” construction of knowledge structuring, scenario realism, process democratization, and integrated teaching evaluation to cultivate students’ core literacy. It advocates the co-construction of a teaching community, empowers students to participate in the entire teaching process, and transforms classroom teaching from teacher-imposed indoctrination to student participation in decision-making and leading activity implementation, truly embodying “student-centered”.

#### **3.2 Innovation in Teaching Content**

##### **3.2.1 Peer Support: Facilitating “Passing on, Helping, and Leading” Among Group Members**

The “University Freshmen Growth Training Camp” was established, dividing students into several groups. These groups are designed for self-awareness and growth among university students, with five group activities conducted in total. Each group consists of about ten members, with two freshmen assigned as teaching assistants to each group. These assistants are responsible for planning and conducting the group’s activities, achieving a “passing on, helping, and leading” dynamic. Before each activity, the instructors provide guidance and training to the freshman teaching assistants.

##### **3.2.2 Thematic Group Projects with Diverse and Creative Activity Plans**

In the “University Freshmen Growth Training Camp,” centered around the theme of “Self-Awareness and Growth,” members of each group independently design and conduct five group activities. The central themes for these activities include: Meeting New Friends, Who Am I, Loving Family, Ideals and Reality, and My Future is Not a Dream. Each group activity plan is highly diverse, showcasing the creativity of each group. Starting with the 2023 cohort of university students, a “Group Brand Plan” is implemented to motivate each group to strive to create a unique and high-quality activity for each session.

#### **3.3 Innovation in Teaching Methods**

##### **3.3.1 Adopting group work teaching techniques to transform students from passive learning to active service**

The “University Freshman Growth Camp” is used as the practical project carrier for service learning, with project-based teaching running through the overall teaching design, highlighting the participation and initiative of students. Different thematic teaching projects are designed based on the teaching content, with work tasks set under each project, and students cooperate to complete them in groups. The project-based teaching method has the function of driving teaching, each work task is sequentially connected, interrelated with each other, and can fully mobilize the enthusiasm of students.

##### **3.3.2 Using experiential teaching methods and online and offline resources to highlight the participation and initiative of students**

To address pedagogical requirements effectively, it is imperative to achieve full integration of informational teaching modalities and a multiplicity of instructional resources. The pedagogic design of service learning, which is student-centric, leverages online platforms such as Tencent Meeting, WeChat groups, and Questionnaire Star to bolster collaborative discourse and evaluative processes among student cohorts. Concurrently, it harnesses the potential of accessible open areas, including school playgrounds and public squares, to forge a conducive environment for experiential learning. This strategy is instrumental in nurturing an ethos of proactive engagement and fostering a culture of innovation among learners.

#### **3.4 Innovations in Evaluation Models**

This course adheres to a combination of formative and summative evaluations.

Formative Evaluation. Full advantage is taken of online technologies and resources such as Questionnaire Star and WeChat groups to conduct formative evaluations. These evaluations include teacher assessments, peer reviews, and self-assessments by students. The measurement and assessment of various elements in the group process are carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Assessment tools include: the Williams Creativity Tendency Test, the Chinese College Student Adjustment Scale,

a self-made questionnaire for peer feedback on group activities, and reflections on the group activity process.

Summative Evaluation, which is based on the students' final reports at the end of the course. University students from the 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts have all written practice course final reports.

#### **4. Teaching Effectiveness**

First, this practical teaching course has provided an important platform for teacher development. Taking the practice project "University Freshmen Growth Training Camp" from the "Introduction to Sociology" course as a case study, the lead teacher has shown notably outstanding performance in both project application and teaching quality.

Second, it has enhanced the theoretical comprehension, self-confidence, and psychological adaptability of university freshmen. The training camp's teaching model has established a solid peer support network, fulfilling the social relationship needs of the group members. Assessments comparing the situation before and after the group work intervention found a significant increase in members' ability to adapt to new environments, a deepened understanding of the theories related to the course, and strengthened confidence in university life. All group members expressed their willingness to recommend this practical project to their juniors.

Third, it has heightened the sense of social responsibility and service consciousness among university students. After participating in the "University Freshmen Growth Training Camp," four students from the 2020 cohort felt a heightened sense of responsibility to serve others. In 2022, they went to Xinjiang for a six-month teaching stint and have now successfully completed their teaching mission and returned to school.

Fourth, it has sparked the creative potential and social participation confidence of university students. The training camp model has shifted from the traditional teacher-led classroom teaching to a student-centered approach with teachers providing directional guidance. According to scale tests, group members showed significant improvements in initiative, creativity, and communication skills after participating in the training camp. Two students published their own articles in the school newspaper for the first time based on the research assignments from this course.

#### **5. Value of Dissemination of Results**

The innovative practice of the service-learning model has demonstrated that group social work interventions for students outside of the social work specialty have a unique advantage in aiding university freshmen with campus adaptation. Growth groups, based on games, utilize various games and communication-sharing activities to manifest the power of cooperation and identification, enhancing university students' skills in dealing with academic, interpersonal, and adaptability issues, thereby increasing their resilience. Therefore, the training camp model is not only applicable to this course but can also be extended to the cultivation of university students' psychological literacy, career planning, organizational leadership development, and participation in social services.

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