

# *An Initial Exploration of “Knowledge” and Student “Life” in the Course of Ideological and Political Theory*

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**Keywords:** Ideological and political theory course, teaching, moral learning, knowledge, student life

**Abstract:** The curriculum reform in China’s basic education system advocates a reconnection with students’ lived experiences. The course “Ethics and the Rule of Law” is a direct moral education course implemented during compulsory education. In order to gain a deeper understanding of knowledge dissemination and moral cognitive development of students in the teaching of “Ethics and the Rule of Law”, we conducted classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, aiming to explore the current situation. We discovered that teachers primarily focus on imparting knowledge through rote memorization, while students’ lives are often detached from the classroom. In moral education, students’ individual life experiences serve as the foundation for their moral growth and development. Thus, it is necessary to integrate knowledge into students’ personal lives in order to implement the teaching reform concept of “reconnecting with students’ lived experiences”. The classroom should be transformed into a space where students not only learn but also live and flourish morally.

## 1. Background

The core issue of morality and moral education is the fundamental question of “how to become a person” in terms of essential ways of existence, rather than specific behavioral norms [1]. As Tuergan also suggested, “existence is action, is life” [2]. This indicates that life and morality are inseparable, implying that without moral individuals, life cannot be sustained, or rather, life without morality ceases to be truly human, as morality is an integral part of life. As Dewey stated, “morality is closely related to the factual nature of existence, and as a moral foundation, it originates from the closely cooperative activities among individuals, arising from the interrelated outcomes of desires, beliefs, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions in their lives” [3]. When detached from life, moral learning becomes a mere recitation of lifeless codes, abstract concepts, and principles. Life is the fertile soil of morality, as morality originates from life itself. Dewey argued that moral ideas are those concepts and knowledge that can influence and improve human behavior, while ideas or knowledge about morality that are generated from an understanding of moral activities cannot be equated with morality itself [4]. He believed that children should not be forced to march straight towards pre-existing knowledge, nor should teachers inject ready-made textbooks into them. Such a

transmission-based approach, detached from the needs of children, leads to a lack of genuine learning experiences for children, inevitably resorting to coercion or enticing compliance through the use of sugar-coated bullets by teachers [5]. Indeed, with the transformation of the modern understanding of knowledge, the theoretical realm has expanded its understanding and cognition of knowledge beyond the object aspect. “Knowledge” can also be defined and divided from the subject aspect and the relationship between subject and object. In his theory of the “Continuity Framework for Civic Education”, renowned British educator David Kerr divided civic education into three levels: education about citizenship, education through citizenship, and education for citizenship [6]. Zhong Xiaolin and Zhu Xiaoman argued that there are three types of knowledge: moral knowledge, knowledge about morality, and knowledge that contributes to morality [7]. It is evident that the development of students’ morality is a process that integrates knowledge learning with moral experiences based on their life foundation. Discussing the issue of “knowledge” and “life” in the teaching of ideological and political theory courses can help teachers transform their teaching concepts, improve teaching quality, and enhance the effectiveness of education. As a way of life, morality is predominantly practical in nature. Aristotle posited that virtue is not defined by one’s essence, but rather by the manner in which one acts [8]. In Dewey’s philosophy, “experience” encompasses both “doing” and “undergoing”, and the ways in which we experience things extend beyond mere action to include observation and reflection. In our lives, we “encounter” a multitude of experiences, many of which are not necessarily validated through experimentation. This aligns with the perpetual nature of experience, which is inherently intertwined with our being [9]. “Reconnecting with students’ lived experiences” does not oppose the learning of knowledge, but advocates that students should not learn knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself. Instead, they should use the knowledge they have learned to deal with various relationships in life. It emphasizes that teachers’ teaching should integrate disciplinary knowledge around the themes of students’ lives. This does not deny the significance of knowledge learning for individual moral growth, but opposes treating objectified knowledge as the sole element of students’ moral development. It also opposes teaching that overly relies on simple instructions such as concepts and rules, and particularly rejects evaluation methods that measure the amount of knowledge memorized. [10]

## **2. Deep Description and Explanation of a Lesson on “Morality and the Rule of Law”**

In class, Teacher W led the students in reviewing the previous lesson on “compliance with the law”. The students collectively recited the “standard answers” to questions such as “What is the law?” and “What constitutes a violation of the law?” from their textbooks. This type of review primarily focused on the memorization of concepts and knowledge points, indicating that the students had already committed these points to memory. During the introduction of the new lesson on “crime prevention”, the teacher followed along with the PowerPoint presentation, reading through one case after another. A small portion of the students also followed along, reading the contents of the PowerPoint aloud. Throughout this process, many students furrowed their brows and displayed expressions of confusion. However, the teacher paid little attention to the students’ reactions. After finishing the case studies, the teacher asked the students to raise their hands and answer questions such as “What is criminal law?” and “What does criminal law entail?” One student recited the content directly from the textbook, and the teacher then instructed the other students to underline this particular section. Next, the teacher posed questions such as “What is a crime?” and “What are the meanings and characteristics of crime?” The students collectively recited the content from the textbook, and once again, the teacher asked them to underline them. The teacher’s intention in doing so was to ensure that the students could memorize the relevant content and be able to provide answers during exams. It was observed that many students, while underlining,

also wrote down the aforementioned questions alongside them. Regarding the “inquiry and sharing” section in the textbook, the teacher instructed the students to read it on their own, and subsequently, the students collectively recited the content from the book. Following this, the teacher presented two case studies in an attempt to help the students comprehend the relevant material. However, the students did not engage in thorough discussion or reflection on the cases. Instead, they quickly copied down some additional knowledge points that were not covered in the textbook, as instructed by the teacher, onto the blank spaces in their books. Lastly, the teacher provided a mind map summarizing the key concepts covered in the lesson. The students swiftly transcribed the relevant content onto the empty spaces in their books. Once the students finished copying, the teacher summarized the lesson’s content and presented a practice question for the students to answer. The teacher then reinforced the memorization of knowledge points based on the answers provided.

From this lesson, it is evident that the teaching objective was primarily focused on ensuring that students memorize the concepts, principles, and other knowledge points that may be tested in exams. The teacher maintained complete control over the classroom, and the examples chosen by the teacher, which attempted to relate to students’ lives, were largely irrelevant to them. They were merely the teacher’s “subjective choices”. Throughout the entire lesson, Teacher W led the students in either reading the content on the PowerPoint slides or reciting the content from the book. The teacher had minimal awareness of the students’ feedback. Although the teacher made efforts to use diverse case studies to help students develop a more intuitive understanding of criminal law and crime, the selected cases were far removed from the students’ lives. As a result, the students’ comprehension of the characters and events in these cases did not meet the teacher’s expectations. In class, the teacher required students to recite, underline, and memorize concepts, characteristics, principles, and other knowledge points. These were precisely the objectified knowledge about morality, such as “concepts of morality” and “knowledge about morality”. This type of knowledge is aimed at moral cognition and behavior, and it is abstract and conceptualized. Although this knowledge is easy to transmit through words and can be standardized for evaluation, it cannot replace “moral concepts” and “moral knowledge”, let alone substitute for moral learning. The teacher’s teaching cases were far removed from the students’ life experiences. For example, the teacher neglected to pay sufficient attention to the vivid life experiences and life lessons of students, such as “crossing the road” and “running a red light”. The teacher merely completed their own teaching plan, and the students merely memorized some concepts, characteristics, principles, methods, and other knowledge points.

### 3. Conclusions

Upon analyzing this lesson, it becomes apparent that the teacher’s instruction still primarily focuses on knowledge acquisition, failing to implement the pedagogical principle of “reconnecting with students’ lived experiences”. Moral education has transformed into a mere study of “knowledge pertaining to morality”. Thus, moral learning should be achieved through action and practice. In other words, within the realm of moral education, the acquisition of subjective knowledge should take precedence. Of course, this also encompasses the acquisition of objective knowledge. Moral education necessitates the integration of knowledge into individuals’ lived experiences, as moral learning should be rooted in their personal worlds.

The lives of students are concrete, diverse, comprehensive, and open. Students’ individual life experiences serve as the foundation for their moral growth and development, as each student constructs their own morality based on their personal experiences. Students are active and autonomous individuals, and their experiences exhibit an enduring quality. This organic experience holds significant meaning within students’ moral learning. As complete individuals, when we

deconstruct the conceptualized notion of “life” to its individual components, students’ lives become rich and vivid. Students’ lives encompass various dimensions such as social, academic, and familial, as well as domains including politics, economics, and culture. These different dimensions and domains of life are not isolated within students; rather, they are interconnected, interwoven, and overlapping. The myriad of specific experiences constitutes the complex and holistic lives of students. Similarly, it is precisely these complex and intertwined lives that constitute the unique individuality of each student. Even within the same classroom, different students enter with different life experiences. Their perceptions and reflections on relationships between peers and between teachers and students vary, as do their feelings and evaluations of the same lesson. Therefore, in the process of moral learning, teachers should pay attention to the individual life experiences of students. The individual life experiences of students, or spontaneous experiences, play a crucial role in their moral learning. Education, on the other hand, is a conscious activity. To guide students from spontaneous experiences to conscious experiences, special means and methods need to be employed to awaken and activate their experiences. This enables students to connect their past, present, and future experiences, serving as a reference for their current and future lives.

The core proposition of the new round of moral education curriculum reform is to “reconnecting with students’ lived experiences”. Under this concept, teachers are required to integrate curriculum content and organize classroom teaching according to the logic of students’ lives, rather than the knowledge system based on disciplinary logic. In teaching ideological and political theory courses, “reconnecting with students’ lived experiences” means using students’ real-life experiences as a medium for learning. In this way, students not only have a strong interest in learning but also can apply what they have learned in practical situations. To enable students to live a “moral life”, the classroom should become an environment for students’ life and growth, where they can expand the quantity of their experiences and enhance the utility of their experiences. Such a classroom should be “student-centered”, which does not mean that teachers can slack off, but rather that they need to invest time and energy, be good at thinking, and possess profound knowledge and a spirit of seeking truth from facts. Only when teachers have noble character and extensive knowledge can they create a classroom environment that is in line with students’ lives and guide students to transform their experiences through life more effectively.

## Acknowledgements

Supported by the General Topics of Pedagogy in the 13th Five-Year Plan of the National Social Science Foundation “Construction of a Long-Term Effective Mechanism for Precise Control of School Dropout and Promotion of Education in the ‘Three Districts and Three States’” (Project Approval Number: BMA190034), the General Program in Humanities and Social Sciences, Ministry of Education “Research on the Promotion of National Identity among Students in Ethnic Regions of Northwestern China through School-Based Psychological Health Education” (Project Number: 17YJC880004); the Annual Project of Education Science Planning in Gansu Province in 2020 “Research on the Innovative Reform of Teaching Methods for Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Gansu Universities in the New Era” (Project Number: GS[2020]GHB4760), as one of the staged outcomes.

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