

From Hands-On Creation to Cultural Belonging: A Task-Driven Folk Art Curriculum of Tantou New Year Paintings

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Abstract: In most regional secondary educational institutions, instruction about intangible cultural heritage is often limited to verbal diffusion or scattered, superficial craft exercises. These pedagogical approaches, which are not connected, are not suitable for building an enduring identification with the indigenous folk traditions of the learners. This paper reports on the application of a curriculum about the Tantou New Year paintings in a middle school in Hunan Province. The instruction design was composed of three articulated parts: interpretation of the cultural symbols, the woodblock printing technique, and the public display, organized around a specific assignment on campus. Based on Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning, the results showed how the students built a real emotional attachment to the culture only when they had completed the processes of carving, printing, and showing their work to real viewers. It was the act of creation that made them become active bearers of the culture.

Keywords: Tantou New Year painting; Project-based learning; Learning by doing; ICH education; Cultural identity

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1. Research background

1.1. The gap between policy and classroom practice

Most of the instructional programs for ICH in schools are still based on didactic lectures, or only provide a few chances for the printing practice. Thus, although the learners see that the Tantou New Year paintings are one of the parts of national heritage, they do not know what is involved in the complicated carving process and also do not understand the deep symbolic meaning of the art. The previous study gave very general theoretical ways, no specific instruction sequence, and no empirical data on the students' responses. As the art class has the limitation of the available time of the class, it is necessary to organize ICH content into production-focused activities that yield concrete student artwork.

1.2. Advantages of Tantou New Year Painting as teaching material

Tantou New Year Painting is from Hunan Province. There are three points that make this art a good material for junior high school students.

First of all, the processes of carving and printing are very suitable for adolescents to learn the basic idea of the craft. In addition, there are a lot of symbolic motifs, and the learners can decode the folk meanings by themselves, so there is no need to be merely taught. Finally, the difference between the traditional theme of New Year and the experience of the campus now provokes the efforts of designing in a new way, which has much more educational value than the copying of the old works.

1.3. Theoretical basis: Dewey's learning by doing

The instructional framework is based on Dewey's theory of experiential learning; real understanding comes from doing and reflecting, and not from watching ^[1-2]. This is very close to the master-apprentice model in folk art. In the curriculum, the students did not just get a lecture on how printing works; they found these principles when they were confronted with problems (for example, dealing with blocks that were not aligned or pigments that were bleeding). Thus, their journey from the feeling of being curious to the feeling of being part of something was shaped by these real, physical experiences.

1.4. Case introduction

All the instructional case studies reported in this manuscript come from the educational program that the study conducted in 2024 at Changsha Zhounan Xueshi Experimental School ^[3]. In the routine front-line teaching process, the research group collected all the materials, i.e., lesson plans, class observations, and the archives of students' artistic works.

2. Internal curriculum design logic

2.1. Core guiding question

The whole curriculum is based on how to tackle a real-life issue: make Tantou New Year pictures more appealing for younger students in campus life. The traditional craft is facing a lack of youth succession at present. If the learning is based on this real-life task, it will promote the students' inner motivation to take heritage preservation not just as homework, but really as a true commitment.

2.2. Three progressive learning stages

The instruction is organized in three phases, all of which have different and well-defined goals.

In the first, the learners deconstructed the artisanal process, looked at how it is seen, its visual characteristics, symbols, and how these are organized in what people could call a cultural gene chart, as a base for the following activities. In the second stage, the participants made the prints in the physical sense, carving the blocks, preparing the pigments, and applying the colors; the assessment was based on how much hand they had in the making, and not on the technical flawlessness of the pictures. In the last stage, turn students into advocates to organize exhibitions on the campus and to show their work in a nearby Intangible Cultural Heritage museum.

2.3. Interdisciplinary integration logic

Tantou New Year paintings are a kind of cultural medium that is naturally beyond the boundary of a single academic discipline. The study of history tells us the origin of this kind of art and its functions in society in the past. The course of labor and technology solves the problems of the carver in carving techniques and in the selection of the material. The course of fine arts helps the contemporary understanding of the traditional symbols and helps in the arrangement of the exhibitions aesthetically.

The kind of interdisciplinarity described here is certainly not a blind aggregation of different kinds of academics ^[1]. In the case of every kind of cross-disciplinarity, there is a main purpose, which is that of making artworks that have a cultural value and that are shown to real spectators.

3. Core transformation mechanisms in teaching

3.1. From aesthetic observation to technical exploration

In the first session, students could only observe some features of the preserved Qing dynasty door god paintings in terms of their bright colors. In order to make the students look more at the logic of the craft, not just its superficial visual appearance, the instructors raised two leading questions about the principle of woodblock printing.

The fact that the use of transparent plastic overlays to imitate the overprinting process has shown that the registration holes play a very important role. Using this exercise, the learners discover by themselves that the misalignment in the printing comes from the different interplay between the manual handling, the properties of the substrate, and the conditions in the environment.

3.2. From theoretical knowledge to physical experience

Learning the carving technique only from studying the textbook is not the same as doing woodcarving practice. After the instructor has shown how to carve the Chinese character “Fu” and the three basic knife techniques, the students encounter many difficulties. They may cut too deep and pierce the board, make the line too shallow to get a clear print, and feel the tool resistance when going against the wood grain.

First attempts at overprinting for the vast majority of students are usually wrong, in the sense that the color blocks are not aligned. The instructor then helps the groups have dialogues in order to find the relevant variables for the alignment, and the teams will come up with some plans on how to improve this. The point of education is not necessarily that these plans would be successful, but that the whole cycle of finding the problem, finding the causal chain, finding a plan to solve it, and then finally testing it empirically.

3.3. From learners to cultural promoters

The most difficult instructional part of the curriculum is to organize the off-campus exhibitions and the community outreach. The students have to divide the venue into different parts, like places for the exposition of the culture and places where the visitors can make bookmarks and red envelopes by printing. In this exhibition layout, educators see how the students understand this kind of art through the presentation of the artwork, the craft, and the participation activities.

In the context of local ICH museum exhibitions, the learners are the cultural ambassadors and not the spectators. The learners will manage the exhibition stalls, teach about the tradition of the Tantou painting, and demonstrate the printing techniques on the spot. This kind of pedagogical process changes the main objective

of the learning from the simple acquisition of a certain technical skill to the development of a deep feeling of cultural belonging to the indigenous folk arts.

4. Teaching outcomes and curriculum reflections

4.1. Changes in students' cognition and emotion

Many participants say that each incision made on the woodblocks is a bridge to the history stories and the traditional culture, which is only a textual concept in traditional culture, is changed into a practical one. From the point of view of hands-on experiential education, for students, the most important point is how to obtain complete practical skills and to have a different cultural sentiment. In this sense, the process is to make the fragmentary information into a whole comprehension of Tantou folk art.

4.2. Key curriculum design experience

Above all, educational institutions must build real practical environments. The teaching of ICH must focus on general, practical activities for real visitors, and not on superficial simulated drills. Also, teachers can set progressive stages of learning with different objectives and real results. In this way, the learner is able to perceive clearly the progression and keep confidence during the educational process. At the same time, the instructor must accept imperfect results. Damaged woodblocks, wrong impressions, or disordered exhibition setup are important parts of the learning. By solving these practical problems, the student is able to feel the value of craftsmanship.

4.3. Curriculum limitations and optimization ideas

There are two kinds of limits that this kind of curriculum shows. The first is the time that it takes. To do the entire curriculum, one needs eight to ten art sessions; if one has only one class a week, which is the case for two months, it is hard to organize the time and keep the interest of the students for a long time. The second is that the course depends on certain carving techniques and safety rules. The teachers, without being properly trained, are not able to give enough instruction, so it is not easy to make this same model for other schools. In order to make it in all the schools, it has to be done in an easier way. It can be done with other alternative materials that are cheap and easy to work with, and it must also have instructions from the art teacher.

5. Conclusion

The Tantou curriculum shows that the main problem in the insertion of ICH in school education is not the choice of the content to be taught, but the pedagogy. Adolescents can make a valuable connection with a folk tradition only through the processes of creation, error, adaptation, and presentation of the traditions. The task-based, exhibition-oriented learning makes heavy demands on time and professional training, but it is better than classical lecturing in terms of ownership of the culture.

In the practice of all these practical cycles, the learner learns to decode the folk tradition, to “teach” the technical craft, and to feel such a culture.

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