

The Practice of a Workshop-Model-Driven Think Tank Report Writing Course: Oriented Toward Serving the National Strategy through Country and Region Studies

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Abstract: Based on the talent-cultivation demand of Country and Region Studies for serving the national strategy, this paper discusses the application of the workshop model in the think tank report writing course. This approach directly solves the problems of traditional courses, which privilege theory over practice and fail to provide sufficient think tank writing training. The course takes real policy issues as its research subjects. It builds a collaborative mentoring mechanism involving theoretical mentors, practical mentors, and local mentors, and adopts a teaching approach that integrates knowledge instruction and practical discussion in parallel, guiding students through the full training cycle of topic selection, research, writing, revision, and defense. Teaching practice shows that this model helps improve students' abilities in interdisciplinary analysis, field research, policy expression, and teamwork. Some of the outputs have been adopted by executive departments, and the training outcomes have been recognized by employers. However, the course development still needs continuous improvement in areas such as mentor collaboration, technical support, international cooperation, and results-reporting mechanisms.

Keywords: Country and Region Studies; Think tank reports; Workshop model

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1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization and the rise of China's international discourse power, Country and Region Studies, as an emerging interdisciplinary field, undertakes the mission of serving the national strategy for international cooperation. Domestic universities have successively established relevant research institutions, and the scale of talent cultivation has been gradually expanding. The disciplinary position of Country and Region Studies determines that students should be equipped with the ability to study realistic

issues and serve national needs ^[1]. Practice-based think tank courses have been incorporated into the graduate core curriculum system, aiming to shorten the distance from campus to actual work positions.

However, there exists a significant gap between the traditional teaching model and this training goal. In the traditional teaching model, students acquire systematic theoretical knowledge but have limited opportunities to apply it in practice. Most of their learning outcomes stay at the coursework level and are rarely turned into products useful for decision-making ^[2]. Meanwhile, single-discipline training makes students accustomed to thinking within the conceptual framework of their own discipline, but when it comes to realistic problems involving politics, economy, and culture, they often lack the ability for comprehensive analysis ^[3]. In addition, some course content is not closely linked to the national actual needs; students have limited understanding of the policy-making process, and there is a gap between writing training and the demands of practical work ^[4].

In response to these issues, this paper combines our recent practice of the Workshop model think tank report writing course. It discusses how teaching approaches can be improved to cultivate interdisciplinary talents with interdisciplinary perspectives and competence in international communication, so that Country and Region Studies can better serve national strategies. It also aims to provide a reference for the development of similar courses.

2. Objectives of think tank talent cultivation and the value of the course

First of all, think tank talent in Country and Region Studies needs to possess strategic analysis abilities. This means that students shouldn't be content with collecting scattered knowledge. Instead, they must develop a systematic understanding of the political, economic, cultural, and social conditions of the specific country or region, combine quantitative analysis with qualitative data from field research, connect historical backgrounds with current issues, and make relatively accurate judgments about their research subjects. Such ability requires students not only to master solid theories and analysis methods, but also to maintain long-term attention to their subjects and form their own judgments accordingly.

The second is cross-cultural practical abilities. Students should not only master the target country's language and be familiar with its local history and culture ^[5], but also gain a deep understanding of local society through long-term field research. This enables them to develop an intuitive feel for the local political environment, social psychology, and decision-making processes, so that they can offer policy recommendations that fit local realities ^[6,7]. Compared with indirect knowledge from literature, the understanding built on firsthand observation and long-term contact is more reliable and better able to find practical problems that documents cannot capture.

Next is the think tank writing ability. The value of think tank talent lies not only in presenting their viewpoints, but also in translating them into practical policy schemes ^[8]. This requires them to understand the realistic constraints in policy-making and policy implementation, to convert academic language into administrative language that is easily acceptable to decision-makers, and to preserve necessary flexibility in policy design. Compared with academic papers, think tank reports have different demands in terms of problem awareness, efficiency of expression, and practicality, which all need specific training.

These training goals can hardly be fully achieved through a single course. The development of strategic analysis ability depends on long-term theoretical accumulation and tracking research, while cross-cultural practical ability needs to be gradually cultivated in the actual environment of the target country. None of

these can be replaced by classroom training ^[9,10]. Expecting one writing course to shoulder the entire training task is unrealistic and would only make the course superficial. A reasonable approach is to position the writing course within the entire talent cultivation system, acknowledging its boundaries while giving play to its unique role ^[11,12]. A think tank writing course can, however, provide a concentrated place for practical training. Through intensive, near-combat writing training, students can comprehensively apply the knowledge and abilities in the above aspects in simulated or realistic policy situations, discover the weaknesses in their own knowledge structure and abilities, and, through repeated revision and discussion, stimulate problem awareness, exercise practical abilities, and clarify the direction of their subsequent development. In this sense, the value of the writing course lies not in enabling students to reach the level of mature researchers within a short period, but in opening a channel for them from academic training to policy-practice. This is exactly the core value of the course.

3. Design and implementation of the workshop model

This course takes realistic policy issues as its research subjects and sets a normative think tank report as its basic task. Combining the needs of think tank talent cultivation in Country and Region Studies, and targeting the shortcomings of the traditional teaching model, the course makes corresponding arrangements in three aspects: faculty allocation, course organization, and practical content.

In faculty allocation, the course establishes a mentoring mechanism that combines theoretical mentors, practical mentors, and local mentors. Theoretical mentors are three to five university teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds, who also serve as the main organizers of the course. They are responsible for teaching analysis and writing methods, helping students build research frameworks, grasp the structural contradictions of the target country's political ecology and the internal logic of its economic development, and setting requirements for academic standards in research. Practical mentors are think tank researchers, journalists, and government officials. They mainly help students transform academic outputs into policy products, guiding students to rewrite academic expressions into content that decision-makers can grasp quickly. Local mentors are overseas personnel, including foreign experts, exchange students and teachers, and overseas enterprise staff. They guide students to present their research in ways familiar to the people of the target country, reducing the loss of information in cross-cultural communication. The guidance of the three kinds of mentors has different emphases. Through exchanges with them, students' work is simultaneously tested against academic standards, policy requirements, and the realities of the target country.

In course organization, considering the strongly practical characteristics of think tank report writing, the course adopts an approach that advances knowledge instruction and practical discussion in parallel. Each course includes knowledge modules ranging from basic to specialized to comprehensive, and also arranges a practical stage combining topic selection, writing, and feedback, so that theoretical learning and writing ability can promote each other through the production and revision of stage-by-stage outputs. Students are divided into groups according to their topics, and each group completes one report under the guidance of mentors, combining individual training with teamwork. This arrangement gives every knowledge instruction a corresponding practical task. Students can test what they have learned in application, and when problems arise, they return to the classroom and find the answers in the literature, avoiding the drawbacks of separating learning from practice

In the basic stage, knowledge instruction focuses on the basic attributes and writing methods of think tank reports. Given that think tank reports are highly time-sensitive, problem-oriented, and designed to serve policy-making, the course explains structural elements such as problem definition, background analysis, core argumentation, risk assessment, and policy recommendations, helping students master policy language style, standards for evidence screening, and methods for constructing argumentative logic. Instruction in this stage emphasizes combining it with realistic examples. Mentors usually select excellent reports that have already produced practical impact as samples, and analyze with students their angles of entry into problems, ways of organizing materials, and sense of proportion in making recommendations, so that students form an accurate understanding of what a qualified think tank report looks like. In the same period, the practical stage starts topic selection. Practical mentors bring real policy issues, discuss their research value with students, and help the topics strike a balance between academic significance and practical demand. For example, in the course of 2021, the practical mentors introduced the construction of the Digital Silk Road, and students accordingly confirmed the topic of regulatory barriers to digital payment, a topic carrying both academic value and practical significance.

In the specialized stage, knowledge instruction revolves around each group's topic. It no longer provides general theoretical instruction, but supplies the necessary knowledge and methods for specific research problems. Theoretical mentors guide students in searching for materials and data and determining analysis methods. Practical mentors point out the policy elements and writing styles that deserve attention. Local mentors assist with field research and data collection, and judge whether the relevant expressions fit the realities of the target country. Training in this stage also reflects the disciplinary features of Country and Region Studies, including the use of first-hand literature and data from the target country, the interpretation of cross-cultural information, and the assessment of related risks. Problems encountered by students in this stage are often the most specific. For example, some data are missing from the official statistics of the target country, so alternative sources need to be found in international organizations or local media. Some expressions are unambiguous in the Chinese context but may cause misunderstanding when translated into the target country's language. The process of solving problems is itself an important learning experience.

In the comprehensive stage, the focus of the course shifts to the integration and revision of outputs. Through multiple rounds of discussion, scenario simulation, and repeated argumentation, research results are revised into normative policy briefs or research reports. Accordingly, the practical stage arranges presentations and defenses, with practical mentors as reviewers. They evaluate and give feedback from such angles as the accuracy of problem grasping, the practicality of the analytical framework, the innovativeness and operability of recommendations, the clarity of expression, and the value of the outputs as reference for decision-making, so as to train students' ability to respond on the spot and communicate persuasively. The defense stage deliberately creates pressure close to that of realistic work. Questions raised by the reviewers often go beyond what students have prepared, requiring them to organize answers on the spot. Some excellent outputs are also submitted to relevant executive departments, providing initial social benefits.

Special attention should be paid to the focus and difficulty of topic selection. Limited by the one-semester course cycle and the stage of students' ability development, topics should be of moderate difficulty. They should neither be current political hotspots requiring immediate response, nor theoretical puzzles requiring long-term accumulation. Instead, they should focus on meso-level issues that have sustained strategic significance, require comprehensive analysis, and have relatively far-reaching impact, such as

the evolution of digital governance rules and the compliance path of Chinese enterprises, and the conflict between customary law and modern law in the allocation of transboundary water resources. Judging from the experience of past courses, whether the topics are appropriate largely determines the effectiveness of training. This is also why mentors invest the most effort at the topic selection stage, and when necessary require students to narrow down or adjust their original topics, so as to ensure that the research problems can be completed within the course.

4. Outcomes and implications of serving the national strategy

In terms of teaching effects, through realistic problem guidance, interdisciplinary knowledge integration, and local verification, the workshop model has solved several problems of traditional teaching. Teachers and students from different disciplines work together on the same realistic problem, each contributing the analytical perspective of their own discipline. Students with an economics background come to understand the political role of religious and cultural factors, while students with a linguistics background master the analysis methods of energy geopolitics. The boundaries between disciplines are broken down, and students' knowledge structures are expanded. Realistic information from the target country prompts students to confront the gap between what the literature records and what is actually happening on the ground, correcting the cognitive biases formed by relying solely on second-hand materials. This awareness will have a long-term impact on their future research. Components such as simulated consultations and defenses connect policy research with policy expression, training students to present research conclusions accurately and concisely, and bringing the outputs closer to the requirements of realistic work.

After six rounds of teaching practice, the course has achieved some visible results. Interdisciplinary papers written by students account for 79 percent of the total, showing that most students have been able to go beyond the limits of a single discipline in their research. Six research reports have been adopted by provincial- or ministerial-level departments, indicating that the quality of outputs has been recognized by executive departments. Among graduates, 33 percent continue to pursue doctoral degrees, and 37 percent work in think tank institutions. Employers generally recognize that graduates combine language advantages, regional research ability, and policy transformation ability. These results show, from one aspect, that writing training centered on realistic problems can help students develop comprehensive abilities that meet the needs of actual work.

The course still needs further improvement. Some problems have also been exposed in the course implementation. For example, the time commitment of local mentors is limited by their overseas work, so the continuity of guidance is hard to guarantee; the difficulty of topics among groups is not fully balanced; and the channels for submitting outputs are still insufficient. At the technical level, the application of big data and artificial intelligence assistance should be strengthened to improve the efficiency of data retrieval and analysis^[13,14]. At the resource level, channels for international academic cooperation should be expanded, and collaborative training mechanisms should be established with foreign universities and research institutions to make up for the lack of local experience. At the mechanism level, co-construction with national high-end think tanks and decision-making institutions should be strengthened to promote the routine production of think tank reports^[15], giving students' training outputs more opportunities to be tested in practice. Through these improvements, it is expected that the course can serve the needs of the national strategy more

effectively and embody the value of Country and Region Studies as an emerging discipline in the new era.

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