

The Paradox Between "Heads-up Rate" and "Hearts-in Rate" in University Ideological and Political Education under the Framework of Embodied Cognition Theory: Manifestations, Causes, and Countermeasures

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Abstract. In ideological and political education in Chinese universities, while the “heads-up rate”—referring to superficial engagement—has improved through teaching reforms, a notable gap remains between this and the “hearts-in rate,” which reflects genuine value recognition and emotional resonance. This discrepancy substantially undermines teaching effectiveness. Based on embodied cognition theory, this study examines the causes of such disconnections in current teaching practice, including the separation of body and mind, the disjuncture between knowledge and action, overreliance on technological spectacle, and the lack of contextual immersion. Correspondingly, a four-pronged teaching strategy is proposed: shifting instructional objectives from knowledge transmission to value embedding, designing content to foster situated and immersive experiences, introducing action-oriented teaching methods, and implementing process-focused evaluation. The findings highlight the significance of incorporating embodied cognition into ideological education to strengthen student engagement and promote internalization of values. This study also offers a transferable model for the localization of teaching innovation within the context of socialist education with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Embodied Cognition, Ideological and Political Education, Teaching Effectiveness, Value Internalization, Pedagogy Innovation

1. Introduction

Under the background of high-quality development in current Chinese higher education, the construction of Ideological and Political Education courses (Ideological and Political Education courses, as compulsory courses in the Chinese higher education system, aim to cultivate students' political identification, national consciousness, and socialist core values) is facing a profound transformation from "formal resemblance" (i.e., focusing on formal completeness and external indicators) to "spiritual arrival" (pursuing spiritual compatibility and internal effectiveness). In recent years, with the implementation of important documents such as "Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform and Innovation of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Schools in the

New Era," significant achievements have been made in the teaching reform of Ideological and Political Education courses. The classroom "heads-up rate"-----a quantitative indicator representing student classroom attendance and surface-level attention-----has shown a steady upward trend. However, teaching observations and related empirical research indicate that, in sharp contrast to students' external performance, their internal degree of value recognition and emotional resonance, i.e., the "hearts-in rate," has not improved synchronously. This significant paradox between the "heads-up rate" and the "hearts-in rate" has become a core obstacle restricting the improvement of the teaching effectiveness of Ideological and Political Education courses.

As a pivotal development in second-generation cognitive science, Embodied Cognition Theory has fundamentally challenged and reshaped traditional disembodied perspectives of cognition. It posits that cognition, emotion, and volition are not abstract processes detached from the body; rather, they emerge from dynamic interactions between the body and its environment. Research in neural representation further supports that the formation and sustainability of cognitive systems depend on characteristics such as being embodied, embedded, active, and affective [1]. Which offers a new theoretical framework for analyzing and resolving the paradox between "heads-up rate" and "hearts-in rate" in Ideological and Political Education.

Introducing Embodied Cognition Theory into the study of Ideological and Political Education holds particular theoretical and practical significance in the Chinese context. On one hand, its emphasis on "body-mind unity" aligns inherently with the subjectivity and practicality stressed in Marxist epistemology. On the other hand, its principle of "environmental embeddedness" resonates theoretically with China's educational approach of "Three-wide Education"—an integrative model advocating all-round, whole-process, and all-staff education.

Based on the specific context of Chinese higher education, using Embodied Cognition Theory as the analytical framework, and following the logical approach of "phenomenon description, theoretical analysis, and path construction," this study systematically explores the disjunctions between "body" and "mind," "knowledge" and "belief," "action" and "context" in the teaching of Ideological and Political Education courses in universities and their integration paths. Focusing on the specific form of Ideological and Political Education courses, it deeply analyzes the internal relationships between bodily participation, environment creation, and value internalization in the teaching process. It aims to provide theoretical support and practical reference for promoting the transformation of Ideological and Political Education course teaching from "knowledge transmission" to "value guidance." By exploring the construction of an "integrating body and mind" embodied teaching model for Ideological and Political Education courses, it provides new ideas for resolving the current teaching dilemmas.

2. Theoretical perspective: the core connotation of Embodied Cognition Theory and its teaching implications

2.1. The core essence of Embodied Cognition Theory

Embodied Cognition Theory challenges the traditional view of the mind as an abstract symbol-processing mechanism. Its core arguments can be summarized through three interconnected dimensions. First, it adopts a body-mind monist stance, rejecting Cartesian dualism by asserting that cognition, emotion, and volition emerge from the dynamic interaction between the body and its environment. Second, the theory emphasizes the embeddedness of cognition, arguing that it is not confined to the brain but is situated within physical, social, and cultural contexts. Finally, it underscores the action-oriented nature of cognition, maintaining that cognition both guides and is

refined through action. This perspective provides a scientific basis for "learning by doing," affirming that active experience and practice are essential to cognitive development [2,3].

2.2. The relevance of Embodied Cognition Theory to this study

The basic viewpoints of Embodied Cognition Theory are highly congruent with the inherent demands of the teaching reform of Ideological and Political Education courses in universities, providing solid theoretical support. The essence of teaching can be defined as a carefully designed environmental activity that can effectively elicit students' active bodily participation and trigger their deep emotional experiences [1]. Knowledge acquisition is no longer the one-way passive reception of information from teacher to student, but must be a constructive process in which the learner actively invests and personally "embodies and recognizes" [2]. Following this logic, for Ideological and Political Education course teaching to be truly internalized within students, i.e., to achieve "entering the heart," it must fundamentally transcend mere theoretical knowledge indoctrination and shift towards an "embodied" teaching practice that deeply integrates bodily perception, emotional experience, and environmental interaction [3]. Therefore, Embodied Cognition Theory not only provides a key theoretical analytical tool for profoundly diagnosing the paradox of "heads-up rate" and "hearts-in rate" in Ideological and Political Education courses but also points out a clear direction for systematically constructing teaching paths to resolve this dilemma.

3. Realistic manifestations: the specific presentation of the "heads-up rate" and "hearts-in rate" paradox in Ideological and Political Education courses

3.1. "Body" present but "spirit" absent: the coexistence of physical presence and mental absence

Observations in the teaching settings of university Ideological and Political Education courses reveal that the student population commonly exhibits the phenomenon of "the body is in Cao Camp but the heart is in Han" (this is an allusion originating from the Chinese classical novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," meaning that while the body is in one place, the mind and attention are elsewhere). Although universities employ some management systems to ensure students' physical presence, students' cognitive activities show significant absence. Students exhibit physical presence but mental absence, such as using mobile phones or being distracted. This phenomenon of "pseudo heads-up rate" reflects deep-seated problems in current Ideological and Political Education course teaching. From the perspective of Embodied Cognition Theory, such a state of body-mind separation stems from teaching activity designs failing to follow the embodied laws of cognition. In traditional lecture-based classrooms, students' bodies are simply regarded as objects needing restraint, teaching interaction is limited to one-way auditory transmission, and there is a lack of teaching segment designs that can mobilize multi-sensory participation. This teaching model, which excludes the body from the cognitive process, makes it difficult for students to form a deeply engaged learning state, and the body is alienated from the subject of cognition into a container requiring discipline.

3.2. Much "knowledge" but little "belief": the gap between knowledge reception and value recognition

Within the Chinese education system, significant achievements have been made in the construction of Ideological and Political Education courses. However, a noteworthy phenomenon occurs in actual teaching: students can systematically master relevant Marxist theoretical knowledge and skillfully

use professional terminology for expression, showing good results in standardized exams, but this knowledge accumulation fails to effectively translate into internal value recognition. Cognitive science research confirms that the understanding of abstract values requires the support of bodily experience [4]. Current Ideological and Political Education course teaching emphasizes the completeness of the theoretical system, and the teaching method is primarily teacher lecturing and student listening, lacking teaching segments that transform theoretical concepts into experienceable and operable elements. Especially when explaining some core concepts, reliance is placed solely on linguistic transmission without creating corresponding bodily participation situations, making it difficult for students' theoretical knowledge to transform into personal beliefs, ultimately leading to the teaching dilemma of "knowing without believing" and "believing without acting" [5].

3.3. "Scenery" optimized but "context" superficial: the embarrassment of dazzling technology and sparse meaning

With the deepening advancement of educational informatization construction, the teaching facilities for Ideological and Political Education courses in universities have significantly improved. Most classrooms are equipped with multimedia teaching equipment, and teachers widely use modern teaching methods, creating rich sensory teaching environments. However, in the actual teaching process, this "optimization of scenery" at the technical level has not simultaneously brought about a deepening of the educational "artistic conception." Consequently, despite sophisticated courseware, students' perception remains superficial, with little value resonance or deep thinking. Educational technology research indicates that advanced media like virtual reality indeed possess the potential to create immersive learning environments, but the effectiveness of technology application depends on its degree of integration with teaching objectives. In current teaching practice, there is a noticeable tendency towards formalism in technology use: some teachers overly rely on multimedia presentations, failing to fully leverage the unique advantages of technology in promoting embodied cognition; when using virtual simulation technology to recreate historical scenes, there is a lack of instructional design that guides students to construct meaning through embodied methods such as role-playing and situational experience [6]. This stark contrast between "dazzling technology" and "sparse meaning" reflects that the current application of technology in Ideological and Political Education course teaching has not yet achieved the transformation from formal innovation to connotative deepening.

4. Problem attribution: analysis of the root causes of the paradox based on Embodied Cognition Theory

4.1. "Disembodied" instructional design: dismembering the unified cognitive process of body and mind

The current instructional design for university Ideological and Political Education courses still follows the traditional model of "teacher lectures, students listen." This teaching structure essentially exhibits significant "disembodied" characteristics. In specific teaching practices, teachers often regard students' bodies as interfering factors requiring strict control, rather than as positive elements promoting cognitive development. This teaching concept directly leads to classroom management systems overemphasizing bodily stillness and discipline, restricting their natural physical movements, thereby artificially severing the unified cognitive mechanism of body and mind. Based on theoretical models of proprioception, human cognition is essentially multimodal and

sensorimotor, and its effective operation relies on the coordinated cooperation of perception and action systems [7]. Current Ideological and Political Education course teaching precisely violates this cognitive law, by suppressing bodily participation, it deprives students of the embodied basis for cognitive development, which is the fundamental reason for the phenomenon of "body present but spirit absent." Especially in teaching content with strong theoretical components, this disembodied design leaves abstract concepts lacking the support of bodily experience, making it even more difficult for students to form deep cognitive understanding and internalization.

4.2. "Simplified" teaching environment: stripping away the specific contexts where cognition occurs

There is a clear tendency towards simplification in the construction of the Ideological and Political Education course teaching environment, mainly manifested in the confinement of teaching space to standardized classroom venues, lacking effective connection with real social fields. This simplifies the cognitive situation into a single physical space, neglecting the environmentally embedded nature of cognition. Although various universities have actively promoted teaching technology upgrades in recent years, most technology applications still remain at the level of one-way information display, failing to fully realize the potential of technology to create multimodal interactive environments [8]. The simplified design of the current Ideological and Political Education course teaching environment prevents students' cognitive processes from being effectively embedded in specific contexts. Theoretical knowledge, due to the lack of embodied anchors, finds it difficult to transform into internal belief. Although students have mastered theoretical knowledge, they cannot consciously use these theories to analyze and solve practical problems in real social situations.

4.3. "Indoctrinating" teaching methods: depriving students of opportunities to construct meaning through action

There is a widespread tendency towards "indoctrination" in the teaching methods of Ideological and Political Education courses, characterized by teacher-centered, one-way knowledge transmission, severely limiting students' opportunities to construct value meaning through active action. This teaching method places students in a passive receiving position, depriving them of the possibility to explore and construct value through embodied activities such as discussion and practice. Research in the field of organizational learning shows that teaching behaviors can significantly promote the productive application of knowledge by increasing opportunities for reflection and feedback. However, the indoctrinating method in current Ideological and Political Education course teaching directly leads to the disconnection between cognition and action, preventing values from being internalized through personal embodiment and recognition. This deviation of teaching methods from students' cognitive laws inevitably leads to the persistent teaching dilemma of low "hearts-in rate" in Ideological and Political Education courses. Especially in the cultivation of values, mere theoretical indoctrination lacking action support finds it difficult to achieve the leap from knowledge acceptance to belief formation.

5. Coping strategies: constructing an "integrating body and mind" embodied teaching path for Ideological and Political Education courses

5.1. Objective resetting: from "knowledge transmission" to "value embodiment and recognition"

The teaching objective system of Ideological and Political Education courses needs systematic reconstruction, achieving a fundamental shift from focusing on knowledge point transmission to emphasizing value embodiment and recognition. This objective shift requires changing the teaching focus from students' rote memorization of theoretical concepts to the formation of internal value recognition and deep emotional resonance through embodied experience. Specifically, course objectives should clearly reflect the cultivation requirements for students' value judgment ability, depth of emotional experience, and willingness for behavioral practice. Based on this, the teaching evaluation system for Ideological and Political Education courses needs corresponding adjustments, shifting the core focus from "what students know" to "what students believe" and "how students act in practical situations," establishing a new evaluation standard oriented towards value embodiment and recognition. This aligns with the fundamental task of "Fostering Virtue and Cultivating Talents" (literal meaning "establishing morality, cultivating talents," is the fundamental task of Chinese education, emphasizing placing moral cultivation at the center of education) and highly corresponds with the educational goal of cultivating new generations capable of undertaking the task of national rejuvenation.

5.2. Content reconstruction: creating "embeddable" embodied teaching situations

The teaching content of Ideological and Political Education courses needs structural reconstruction, focusing on developing embodied teaching situations that can promote students' cognitive embedding. In specific practice, teachers should break through the limitations of traditional teaching and should include diversified teaching modules such as project-based learning and case analysis. These modules should integrate abstract theoretical knowledge with specific situations that have dramatic tension, conflict, and are easily perceivable, enabling students to understand the theoretical connotations through situational interaction. This approach is supported by evidence that augmented reality (AR) environments can significantly enhance the quality of learners' interactive experience through embodied cognitive interventions [9]. In the teaching reform of Chinese Ideological and Political Education courses, characteristic venues such as "red resource sites" (referring to memorial sites, museums, etc., related to Chinese revolutionary history and the Communist Party's journey) and "patriotic education bases" (specific educational places aimed at cultivating citizens' national identity and patriotic feelings) can be fully utilized. Combined with VR/AR technology to recreate important historical scenes, allowing students to deeply experience the historical background and practical value of theory formation through "immersive" experiences, achieving deep integration of cognition and emotion.

5.3. Method innovation: designing "action-promoting" embodied teaching activities

The teaching method system of Ideological and Political Education courses needs comprehensive innovation, involving embodied teaching activities that can promote student bodily participation and action experience. Teachers should break through the limitations of traditional lecture methods and widely adopt various methods such as situational teaching, creating teaching opportunities for

students to "move" and "do." This research conclusion provides important inspiration for Ideological and Political Education course teaching: through carefully designed bodily participation activities, students' thinking activities and value reflection processes can be effectively activated. Research on gamified learning also shows that combining "learning by doing" and "learning by playing" can effectively promote students' creative learning experiences. In the practice of Chinese Ideological and Political Education course teaching, typical cases from the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics can be integrated to design embodied teaching activities, allowing students to deepen their understanding of theoretical knowledge through role-taking and action experience, achieving the teaching goal of "Unity of Knowing and Acting" (Chinese philosophical thought, emphasizing the unity of knowledge and action, theory and practice).

5.4. Evaluation shift: focusing on "processual" embodied learning performance

The assessment system for Ideological and Political Education courses requires reorientation toward a process-oriented approach that values embodied learning. Reforms should reduce the weighting of final written examinations while increasing focus on student performance in practical activities, classroom engagement, and collaborative work. Timely feedback during the learning process is essential, as it fosters reflection and supports students' personal development. Research in organizational learning corroborates that well-defined teaching objectives enhance learning outcomes by creating opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Informed by these insights, a diversified process-based evaluation framework should be established, focusing on shifts in students' attitudes, value judgments, and behavioral inclinations during embodied learning. Practically, this can be achieved through maintaining individual learning portfolios that document performance in social practice and other activities, and by adopting multi-source evaluations that incorporate teacher, peer, and self-assessment. Such an approach captures holistic growth throughout the value internalization process. This shift in evaluation supports the transition of Ideological and Political Education from knowledge accumulation to value identification, better serving its fundamental mission of fostering character and talent.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the paradox between superficial engagement and genuine internalization in university Ideological and Political Education. Through the lens of Embodied Cognition Theory, it identifies the limitations of traditional "disembodied" teaching approaches and proposes a paradigm shift toward an integrated mind-body teaching system. The research demonstrates how embodied cognition—emphasizing physical engagement, environmental embeddedness, and experiential learning—offers a theoretical foundation for enhancing teaching effectiveness.

The study contributes to the field in two key aspects. First, it introduces Embodied Cognition Theory as a new framework for understanding cognitive formation in ideological education, thereby expanding both the theoretical basis of political education and the application scope of cognitive studies. Second, it advances the localization of educational theory within China's context by bridging Western cognitive science with Chinese pedagogical practice. The theory's emphasis on body-mind unity aligns with Marxist concepts of subjectivity and practice, while its environmental focus resonates with China's "Three-wide Education" principle.

The proposed four-dimensional strategy—redefining objectives, reconstructing content, innovating methods, and reforming evaluation—provides a comprehensive framework for implementing embodied teaching. While primarily conceptual, this framework translates abstract

principles into actionable teaching practices. Further empirical validation is needed to refine these strategies.

Future research should focus on three directions: empirical testing of the embodied teaching model across different institutional contexts; dialogue between embodied cognition and Chinese educational traditions such as the "Unity of Knowing and Acting"; and exploration of how emerging technologies like artificial intelligence can enhance embodied learning environments. These efforts will strengthen the theoretical foundation and practical guidance for achieving the fundamental mission of fostering virtue and cultivating talent through Ideological and Political Education.

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