

The alternate way of ‘Learning by Practice’

A Buddhist approach to new education.

Abstract

Responding to changing environments, higher education needs to develop more contextual strategies. New educational philosophy is needed to fulfill universities’ social roles in a modern world adequately. This paper introduces a rather different approach to the well-known ‘Learning by Practice’ educational strategy, based on the Buddhist philosophy implemented by Tohoku Fukushi University in Japan. By this approach Learning theoretical knowledge and acquiring practical skills are considered to be natural, intrinsically motivated processes of personal growth. The university is committed to this philosophy by creating integrated educational space to enable horizontal intercommunication between students, teachers, researchers, practitioners and the community, and by enriching the personality development process at the university with Zen practices and sensory learning and development.

‘Learning by Practice’ is by no means a new educational strategy. It has been successively employed in many universities across the globe in order to link thesis based learning with practical experience in a workplace. The purpose of ‘Learning by Practice’ is to expand and promote professional education activities in both educational and practice settings, in order to enhance practice competencies. This educational strategy has emerged out of demand for the theoretically and practically competent workforce in a competition driven modern labor market. ‘Learning by practice’ strategy is particularly broadly applied in Social Welfare, Nursing and Medical education, as these fields, apart from solid specific knowledge, require strong attachment with actual settings. The traditional approach to the application of ‘Learning by practice’ strategy implies the presence of links between theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquisition in order to improve the student’s professional competence both academically and practically. The planned outcome is to create a highly competitive professional who is able to make his social contribution with the highest level of competence. Thus, ‘Learning by practice’ strategies are traditionally evaluated on the basis of social contribution they provide by bringing up professionals. The education philosophy, in this case, is focused on “creating good for society;” university – society outward vector.

However, even with analogical results, this is not the only possible philosophical understanding and interpretation for the highly efficient ‘Learning by practice’ educational strategy. In this paper we would like to introduce and discuss an alternate viewpoint on the philosophy of ‘Learning by practice’ using Tohoku Fukushi University’s educational concept.

Tohoku Fukushi University is a private university specializing in Social Welfare, located in Sendai city, Japan. It was founded in 1875 as a school for Buddhist priests. After more than 130 years since its establishment, Tohoku Fukushi University has become one of the leading authorities in Social Welfare education and research in the country. It has faculties of Comprehensive Social Welfare, Child Science, Health Science, Comprehensive Management, and post-graduate faculties in Social Welfare and Welfare Psychology, as well as a doctorate course in Social Welfare and a distance education department, which all together facilitate about 9000 students from all over the country.

As it was mentioned above, the university was established as a school for Buddhist priests by the Soto Zen School. According to philosophical doctrine, the exploration of one’s own mind and searching for harmony rejoice in being of service to society. Tohoku Fukushi University has implicated this philosophy into its growth and development strategy on institutional level.

The very base of the Tohoku Fukushi University education philosophy is that every single creature has its own identified value and exists with meaningful and mutual links in the state of nature. Therefore, knowledge means to know the state of nature and the values of each individual creature. This is done through practice with observation, to interpret with senses the meaning of the human life process (i.e. receiving life, aging, being in illness, and death and dying) and to innovate the existing stressful social cultural environment to better the wellness of human beings. This concept of integration and connection was applied to learning in form of the *Gyou-gaku ichi nyou* principle, or “integration of knowledge with practice”. This concept, with roots in Buddhism, served as a fundamental idea for the university functioning and development. Tohoku Fukushi University upper level management has committed to the fusion of theoretical

knowledge with practical skills on a strategic planning level. Social Welfare is interpreted as a continuous whole process, which refers to the human's life span from birth to death and the university is committed to extend the education-research-practice integration into all fields that constitute the quality of life during the whole life span. This is the philosophical basis for the planning of new programs and courses.

Built on the mentioned above philosophy, the educational strategy regulating the whole education program, teaching practice, R&D activities, and social relations of Tohoku Fukushi University is "Learning by Practice, Practice for Creativity." It means the amalgamation of knowledge for each individual member of the University through knowledge acquisition/creation and his or her purpose related socio-clinical practice. This knowledge should improve the quality of learning by giving deeply rooted understanding in ordinary human needs and by originating dynamic innovation from subjective observations of real-life situations.

'Learning by practice' strategy application in Tohoku Fukushi University consists of 5 integrated fields with shared recourses and functions: field of education (covers all undergraduate and postgraduate courses on-campus and distant modes, practice oriented learning courses, social education courses), field of practice (includes university related care facilities and nursing homes, mental hospital, special education support center, volunteers center, counseling services, etc.), field of research (includes Kansei Research Institute, Dementia care research center, knowledge cluster project, Center for International Academic Exchange), field of public relations (includes corporative relations and connections with community), field of development (includes project based services development and implication) . These fields are integrated and interrelated which enables a horizontal movement of specialists, university teachers, students, researchers, practitioners between the fields. As the initiative covers the institution as a whole, all functional parts of the institution (5 faculties, postgraduate school, 6 specialized centers, 2 counseling rooms, research institute, hospital, 8 university affiliated care and nursing facilities) are involved in 'Learning by Practice'.

Teachers and teaching teams are encouraged to undertake research in their field of interest by university policies. The practicing process of the general strategy is rather in

an autonomous way for each teaching team. Preconditions to such autonomy are; firstly, shared in-depth understanding of the content and context of the strategy at the level of each teaching staff member and secondly, the nature of the studies that both staff and students jointly learn. Every university teacher and research worker from the research institute has lecturing duties as a part of their workload, where they can introduce their research work results. Undergraduate and postgraduate students registered for a particular seminar are able to directly participate in research work as well. Through this work, students are able to see what happens in real situations outside of the classroom and are therefore able to form new research ideas and develop original ideas based on this research.

The strategy encourages students to be involved in the community through their studies. This helps them to gain essential life-skills that will help them with their studies and with finding employment after graduating. For example, undergraduate students are practicing care for the elderly at University affiliated care facilities in order to understand the human nature for innovating ideas and methods of caring for the elderly. They gain knowledge not just from expertise, but also from actual practice. This affords them opportunities of reporting and receiving feedback from instructors on a frequent basis. Showing prospective students the implication of the strategy in action helps to give them a chance to see the actual potential of learning at the University. Also, through the implication of 'Learning by Practice', the school has opportunities to become well known through its work and effort in the local community. Everyone working together in the University and the local community heighten cultural awareness through the different ideas and methods that are communicated.

The reflection of this strategy for the students reveals an emphasis in teaching on acquisition of practical skills to work with and for people in our society. However, Social Welfare needs not only skills. Humanity to use skills and understanding of human beings are even more important aspects. The University would like students to learn a respect for humanity through their work. Students are given a chance to enhance their humanity while participating in student activities. Successful learning and actions are achieved through proper use of "knowledge and intuition", "theory and practical application", and "university and field work", respectively. The incentive to build a

quality culture is implicit in the nature of the university educational philosophy.

In the attempt to prompt motivation for self-development the University focuses on sensory learning and development. The school sets up meaningful programs and facilities so that students and staff can appreciate meaningful communication. Coinciding with this, an art museum and music hall have been built to improve social communication. This creative input helps to facilitate creative output. During the whole educational process, mental awareness and concentration on intrinsic motives for self-development are encouraged. The University traditionally has a course for educating Buddhist priests; many of the teaching staff are Buddhist monks. This does not mean all students need to study Buddhism, but it allows employing *zazen* (meditation) practice in learning, which helps students to focus and achieve a mental balance. The University has special space for meditations and a teahouse, which is not only a tribute to the widely known Tea Ceremony tradition, but also a place for communication and active meditation, which the Tea Ceremony actually is.

The University commitment to the Buddhist philosophy of searching for harmony, self-creating, and self-fulfillment through serving others creates a fundament for unique educational space, where learning is an intrinsically motivated process of individual development as a personality. Although supplying the individual with baggage of practical skills and theoretical knowledge, the University reaches the same goal as other 'Learning by practice' strategies, but in doing so it is not ruled by the social contribution pragmatism of producing a competitive workforce, rather it is concerned with each individual's growth as a human being. In this context the role of the university in 21st century may be reviewed not only as an institution giving specialized knowledge and preparing for the challenges of life, but also as a place flourishing with personal growth and development.

Although 'Learning by Practice' in Tohoku Fukushi University proved to be a successful development strategy, it encounters three major difficulties:

First, an effective evaluation system still has to be developed. Traditional university assessments are able to evaluate the parts of the system, but fail to comprehend it as a whole. As personality growth is an individual phenomenon, there are no viable scores to

mark the university's contribution in this sphere. It has also been difficult to evaluate each individual student's progress because of the social nature of the studies. The University is looking for ways in which to evaluate the progress of students' moral, educational, and individual growth.

Secondly, to become more effective, 'Learning by practice' initiative needs more resource input in international and national collaboration spheres to improve its competitiveness by sharing the information with other global and national players.

Finally, It also needs better linkage and more effective cooperation with local and national authorities to strengthen its 'practice' field.