

The Influence of Academic Credit System on Interpersonal Relationship in Chinese Colleges

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Abstract. Academic credit system has dominated higher educational administrations in Chinese colleges after decades of exploration and development. Credit system has brought some problems, such as less friendly relationship among students as well as between students and their professors, albeit it has made some progress in terms enhancing the quality of education. Moreover, it even made the relationship pattern between students and teachers changed from that of traditional one. The study takes Shantou University as a case, the students in Shantou University as the objects to investigate interpersonal relationship at colleges in China by using anthropological approach. The findings indicate that academic credit system adopted by the Chinese colleges had generated certain influences on interpersonal relations that in turn had impacts on the quality of higher education in China.

Keywords: Credit system; Business Anthropology; Classmate Relationship; Teacher-student relationship

Introduction

The academic credit system reforms initiated in China since the end of the 20th century have played a significant role in higher education administration reform (Lv 2013). The academic credit system is an educational management system that allows students to self determine certain electives to take and how many credit hours to take in a semester. Due to distinctive features of teaching and learning, most scholars focus on its influence on the academic learning of college students but ignore the changes to interpersonal relationships under the academic credit system (Bai 2013). This research primarily explores the new trends of interpersonal relationships in Chinese colleges under the academic credit system, and finds out influences of the academic credit system on interpersonal relationships in colleges so that more positive solutions can be assumed in the construction of harmonious campuses.

Interpersonal relationships in colleges not only affect student minds throughout school life, but also play an important role in their state of learning. In addition, since college students are in a significant period of development, it is crucial to maintain good interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, good relationships between teachers and students are an important guarantee to promote teaching quality in higher education as well as the basis to train highly-competent personnel (Emery, Kramer and Tian 2003). Previous researches showed that the academic credit system in colleges play a significant role in strengthening teacher-student relationship (Xu 2011).

As a teaching management system, the academic credit system should be explored with regard to its nature as well as its educational theory and implementation principles from different perspectives (Bie 2013). For reference, the academic credit systems in European countries are the result of external force stressing learning load and final results, and its dynamic mechanisms are policy documents with certain legal effect. The academic credit system in the United States on the other hand is driven by internal force stressing teacher-student contact and teaching input, namely its dynamic mechanisms toward the educational needs of the American public (Haskell 1997, Qin and Chen 2013). Therefore, according to the actual situation in China, the academic credit system should serve to coordinate between internal management restriction force of higher education system and external demand reform force of the market economy for positive interaction so as to construct generation logic of the academic credit system in domestic colleges (Qin and Chen 2013). In addition, the characteristics of different colleges should be taken into sufficient consideration in the design and measurement of specific GPA (Xia and Fan 2014). For particular colleges such as higher vocational colleges, student employment status should be taken into full account for a rational arrangement of the academic credit system (Wang 2012). Some scholars also reach similar conclusions through research on independent colleges (Lv 2013).

Research Design and Method

Taking Shantou University as an example, the research explores the influence of the academic credit system on interpersonal relationships in colleges based on qualitative research methods of business anthropology including participant observation and in-depth interview as well as quantitative research methods such as questionnaire survey (Tian and Zhou 2012), investigating the teacher-student relationship and classmate relationship. The primary data needed for the research are collected through the above methods and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition, constructive suggestions are made for further improvement and development of the academic credit system. The details of the academic credit system adopted by Shantou University: independent course selection as mechanism, credit and GPA as units of account to measure the quantity and quality of student performance, certain credits and GPA as the standard for graduation and obtaining a degree; for the convenience of course selection, in principle, 16 weeks are scheduled for theory courses, experimental courses and dispersed practice courses, and another 2 weeks for examination during each fall and spring semester.

Participant observation Participant observation is a major research method for anthropologists, which allows the researchers to collect observational data from the research subjects in their everyday life in a nature way. In this case the participant observers are students and teachers at the university; the period of the participant observation is about 15 weeks. During the 15-week observation period we observed the behaviours and expressions of students and teachers in class and after class, noting subtle actions, taking instant record, summarizing, and analyzing data upon observation.

In addition, because the data collectors were college students who could directly obtain reliable internal observation data without fitting in with the respondents through a long period of time, there were favourable advantages for participant observation. At the same time, as the dormitories of Shantou University gather students of different grades from different schools, we have much easier access to diverse observation data. Furthermore, the observations are not confined to classroom and campus life, but also include various emerging online virtual communities.

In-depth interview In-depth interview is a critical step of the research, which aims to look into the influence of the academic credit system on student interpersonal relationships. In order to obtain the most authentic and valid information, the questions are designed and determined by business anthropological experts after discussion according to research topic and contents. Approximately 100 undergraduates in Shantou University were selected for in-depth interview with questions of different dimensionalities illustrated in the tables below, which were primarily open-ended.

Questionnaire survey Questionnaire survey is a research approach which intentionally collects relevant realistic conditions regarding research subjects is capable of effectively obtaining a large quantity of authentic data in a planned and systematic approach. Based on acquired information and references as well as our own observation, we designed a targeted questionnaire, which covers teacher-student relationship and classmate relationship, as well as students' attitudes toward the academic credit system and toward course selection as those attitudes may influence their behaviours at the school. Undergraduates in Shantou University are taken as research subjects, and the questionnaire contains 25 questions and variables included student information such as gender, school, place of origin, and financial condition. A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed with 348 returned, and the response rate is over 90%. It was therefore an effective questionnaire.

Results and Analysis

Based on the literature review (such as Bai 2013, Jiang 2008, Lv 2013, Wang 2010, Xia & Fan 2014), as well as our field work experience, we determined that three aspects should be analyzed to evaluate the new trends of interpersonal relationship in colleges under the academic credit system. These three aspects are the relationships between teachers and students in specific contexts, the influence of curriculum evaluation on

teacher-student relationship, and the classmate relationships under the academic credit system.

1) Manifestation and analysis of teacher-student relationships in specific contexts

Traditional morality and higher education management systems used to function together to maintain the development of such an educational tradition. With the profound development of structural reform of higher education based on a market-oriented economy, and in particular the implementation of the academic credit system, under such new contexts, teacher-student relationships in colleges are transforming. An urgent question for management personnel in colleges is how to construct a harmonious teacher-student relationship based on actual situations in the larger environment of a harmonious society. Although there are various aspects that should comply with certain rules in terms of teacher-student interaction in colleges, and the positioning of teacher and student under different contexts, we can nonetheless always uncover phenomena that violate standards.

The phenomenon described in Circumstance 1 is not uncommon on this campus according to our observation and research. Compared with teacher-student relationship under the traditional system, the communications between teachers and students under the academic credit system incline to be diversified and approaches to improve relationships are not confined to the classroom and teaching. Sometimes dining together is the norm.

The phenomenon described in Circumstance 2 is also quite common on campus. Under the academic credit system, some students intend to get high scores by fawning on their teachers so that their scores might not tally with the facts, which might lead to speculation and mental inclination to gain without any labor.

Circumstance 1: time: 9:00-10:00 p.m. May 8, 2012; location: corridor of Dormitory #E.
 Interviewer: I've heard that you had night snacks with teachers that evening!
 Interviewee (girl): Yes! We had a good time with them (male teachers)! J and I drank a lot of beer!
 Recorder: Wow, you're so lucky! How many teachers?
 Interviewee: Three, and they're all very nice and talkative.

Figure 1: Circumstance 1

Circumstance 2: time: 8:00-9:00 p.m. May 9, 2012; location: campus road of Shantou University

Interviewer: Actually, I think many teachers in our school are very nice.

Interviewee: Yeah! For example, W is quite talented and teaches well. S is also very nice and kind to students. She also gives us high scores!

Interviewer: Well, only D and I have much to talk about, and I usually chat with him. He is very humorous. I find that American teachers are all full of enthusiasm!

Interviewee: For me, I only get close to J, and he is easy to interact with.

Interviewer: Is the teacher bound to help you? The teacher can't help you if you do a bad job on your homework and team reports.

Interviewee: The teacher is very nice, and he will surely give me a high score!

Figure 2: Circumstance 2

Based on the above phenomenon, in-depth interviews are conducted to answer relevant questions. The question is designed as: "Compared with other traditional educational approaches, what do you think are the differences in terms of teacher-student relationships under the current credit system?" with follow-up questions such as: "Could you explain this phenomenon according to your own experience? What is the influence of such changes? What should be improved?" The typical answers are:

- (1) "I think the relationship between teachers and students in colleges is more alienated than that in high schools. After all, teachers leave once the class is over. It is very difficult for them to remember every student unless they are major teachers."
- (2) "There is little exchange between teachers and students. Generally teachers leave once the class is over. And we cannot find teachers after class."
- (3) "Take general-knowledge courses as an example. There is little exchange with teachers. We neither answer questions in class nor ask questions after class, and only meet with teachers in class. We therefore have basically no exchange with them."

From the above responses, we can get the main ideas as follows: the relationship between teachers and students is relatively distant; since there is little exchange between them in class and after class, their relationship is not in harmony; students know little about teachers when choosing courses and ask for more detailed introduction of teachers under the academic credit system; it seems that teachers must cater to students so that more students might choose their courses, which is akin to the relationship between customer and commodity; teacher character and teaching style will also affect the teacher-student relationship.

Table 1 Teacher-student relationship

Question	Option	Number	Percent
The academic credit system helps improve the teacher-	agree, strongly agree	62	19%
	no idea	120	35%

student relationship.	disagree, strongly disagree	161	46%
If a teacher once offended students, students might retaliate during teacher evaluation.	agree, strongly agree	85	25%
	no idea	127	37%
The teacher evaluation system makes some teachers loosen management and requirements of students in class.	disagree, strongly disagree	132	38%
	agree, strongly agree	145	42%
	no idea	110	32%
	disagree, strongly disagree	89	25%

*Only valid data are selected.

As previously mentioned, a total of 100 undergraduates in Shantou University were selected for in-depth interview with questions of different perspectives, which are primarily open-ended. The first five most representative interview records from each individual are selected as the most influential issues for further analysis. Based on the interviews, it is clear that most students think the teacher-student relationship is not good under the academic credit system. Compared with traditional teaching patterns, the academic credit system leads to weakened teacher-student relationships. Through in-depth interview, we find that teacher character, teaching attitude, teaching method, teaching quality and instruction would also impact the relationship between teachers and students.

Table 2 Familiarity of teachers and students

Question	Option	Number	Percent
Which can best reflect your own familiarity with your teachers?	A. Quite familiar with a small portion of teachers, also have contact after class	19	7%
	B. Mediocre, but would ask teachers if there are questions about study	43	15%
	C. Not familiar with most teachers, seldom have contact after class, only greet them when meeting	120	41%
	D. Basically entirely unfamiliar with all of them, and do not greet them when meeting	108	37%

*Only valid data are selected.

Therefore, through in-depth interview, we have found that the academic credit system definitely influences teacher-student relationships, which is inclined toward more negative effects. In order to more deeply explore the influence of the academic credit system on teacher-student relationships, quantitative research methods such as questionnaire survey are also employed as a supplement to participant observation and in-depth interview.

Table 1 and Table 2 reveal that approximately 80% of students are not familiar with their teachers, most students and teachers are not familiar with each other, even feeling strange and do not greet when meeting under the academic credit system. In addition, only 18% students hold that the academic credit system helps improve the teacher-student relationship, 35% claim they have no idea, and 46% disagree with the statement that "the academic credit system

contributes to interaction between teachers and students and improves the teacher-student relationship". This indicates that most students believe the academic credit system does not substantially help promote the teacher-student relationship.

From Table 1, we can learn that over 40% of students believe the teacher evaluation system results in some teachers loosening management and requirements of students in class. Only 25% disagree with the opinion. Thus it can be seen that course evaluation under the academic credit system has a great impact on classroom discipline, which is also an important manifestation of the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, classroom discipline under the academic credit system has certain impacts on the teacher-student relationship.

2) Analysis of influence of curriculum evaluation on the teacher-student relationship

Apparently, the academic credit system has great impacts on the teacher-student relationship, and most students disagree with the viewpoint that "the academic credit system helps improve teacher-student relationships" and feel unacquainted or even unfamiliar with their teachers. Under the academic credit system, students are required to conduct teacher evaluations. Some students would evaluate according to their relationship with teachers and even retaliate. How do students view the teacher-student relationship under course evaluation, and what are its impacts on the teacher-student relationship?

Circumstance 3 along with widely discussed articles indicates that "Public compulsory courses are different from specialized ones, as the same course is taught by different teachers. Therefore, everyone scrambles for 'kind' teachers at the beginning of each semester" (Liu and Ran 2011, Wang 2010), the author uses an Internet buzzword "RP" (which means personal character) to describe the battle of course selection. So-called good character means that the teacher is kind, gives high scores, and little homework.

The above record is from Sina Weibo, a platform for public social comments, through which teachers and students of this university are able to voice their opinions. From the above information, students have a bad opinion of the teacher, and at least some students disagree with his teaching and evaluation forms. It is hard to imagine that the teacher can get excellent comments during course evaluation.

Circumstance 3: time: 8:00 p.m. May 24, 2012; location: students' Dormitory #E, tree hole in Shantou University
 Participant: XX from School of Business, you are so inhumane! It's not just that you read PPT in class, you should even require us to debate in 14th week and take exam in 15th and 16th weeks. What's worse, the content is not from the book but from a qualification test. Are there any differences with taking examination twice in a row?
 It is learned that many students evaluate the teacher as nice, giving high scores, but always repeating what the book says, straying far away from the subject without much knowledge related to the textbook after a lesson.

Figure 3: Circumstance 3

According to the above observation, we conduct in-depth interview to related students with questions: "Do you think the current teacher evaluation system in Shantou University is rational? If not, what need to be improved?" as well as follow-up questions: "Could you talk about your standards and attitude during evaluation of teaching quality based on your experience? What do you think are the influences that student evaluations have on teachers?" According to the interview, summary and conclusion can be made as follows:

- (1) "The teacher evaluation system is obviously irrational. Students pay little attention to it and do not want to fill it in later in the year. In addition, even if they do fill it in, teachers do not make improvement. Students generally fill in according to their preference of the teacher."
- (2) "Evaluation of teacher performance is too casual. We don't know whether teachers have seen their evaluation and comments and whether they have improvement measures. I think something like a hearing should be held so that students can offer on-site evaluation to teachers."
- (3) "I remember that a teacher for English was fired due to overly strict evaluation. Although supervisory personnel would come to observe the class and teachers would become especially enthusiastic, it is of little effect and cannot essentially change their teaching approach."

From the answers received, key words can be extracted to include: irrational, too casual, no teacher improvement; overly subjective evaluation and difficult to reflect reality; students are not informed about whether their opinions are accepted; the role of supervisory personnel is not obvious; evaluation itself might become a means of retaliation by students.

Based on in-depth interview, it appears that teacher evaluations do not play their intended role. For the preciseness and accuracy of research, we distributed questionnaires on credit systems and teacher evaluation to students so as to explore the relationship between course evaluation and teacher-student relationship through quantitative method.

Circumstance 4: time: 10:10 a.m. April 24, 2012; location: PE class.
 Teacher: Everyone please handin your theory homework.
 Just then, students began to whisper.
 Student A: What?
 Student B: Is there such a thing?
 Student C: What? Is there any homework?
 Student A: Definitely there is, as you see other students have handed it in.
 Student D: You left last class early, didn't you? The teacher assigned the homework before finishing class. Student A, B, C (suddenly understand):
 Oh~~
 Circumstance 5: After warm-up exercises, students exercise separately and in slight disorder. Student B furtively took out a blank test paper and a finished one from the teacher folder when he was not paying attention, and then pretended to "go to the washroom". Student A and C also followed suit. Fifteen minutes later, Student B calmly replaced two finished test paper and later Student A and C also did the same.

Figure 4: Circumstance 4

Table 3 Credit system & teacher evaluation

Question	Option	Number	Percent
I pay little attention to teacher evaluation and think the evaluation has influence on the teacher.	final agree, strongly agree	150	44%
	don't no idea	83	24%
Under the academic credit system, teacher evaluation system weakens authority.	great disagree, strongly disagree	113	32%
	agree, strongly agree	88	26%
	no idea	104	30%
	teacher disagree, strongly disagree	153	44%

*Only valid data are selected.

From table 3, it is clear that nearly half (44%) of students believe course evaluation has little impact on teachers, and only 32% of students disagree with it. It can be seen that students are not serious about course evaluation.

In addition, most students disagree with the statement that "under the academic credit system, teacher evaluation system weakens teacher authority", and only 26% of students agree with it, thus suggesting that most students believe that their evaluation will not affect teacher authority. Thus it can be concluded that most students believe course evaluation has little impact on teachers and they therefore give teachers favourable or unfavourable comments at will, which is likely to dampen teacher enthusiasm and impair teacher-student relationship.

3) Analysis of classmate relationships under the academic credit system

Under the academic credit system, however, although the class system is retained, the free elective system gives more freedom to students and it is quite common to take courses of different departments, majors, and campuses, which leads to class discretization. In addition, inconsistent course arrangement, class

time, and location result in weakened relationships between students as well as less class cohesiveness, which ultimately affects classmate relationships. We delve deep into the real situation to explore the influence of the academic credit system on classmate relationship.

The above phenomenon not only happens at PE class, and such behaviors as leaving early and plagiarism are quite common in colleges. The author holds that the academic credit system is a major cause. Under the academic credit system, students can choose a course they like freely, which means that students of each class have courses together out of interest rather than major and grade. Therefore, mutual supervision between students is quite impossible, which exerts further impact on student learning efficiency and quality.

Circumstance 6: time: 7:30 – 9:00p.m. May 25, 2012; location: D504, committee election of Class 9.

It is the last term of committee election, when only over 40 out of 120 students came one after the next. This was much lower as compared with before the implementation of the credit system. Several class committee members attempted to keep the atmosphere. Several candidates for the monitor position did not show much enthusiasm, and some positions were vacant, which made the atmosphere extremely embarrassing. In fact, election results from only one third of the total number were invalid.

Figure 5: Circumstance 5

Under the academic credit system, class status declines and classes cannot play their normal roles. As students are required to attend class as in “day school” under the academic credit system and they do not form such strong class consciousness as in high school, middle school or even primary school, the sense of belonging declines and class cohesiveness is gravely insufficient. It can be learned that the credit system leads to weak collective concepts and lack of class cohesiveness.

Under the academic credit system, every student can choose their own schedule and teachers, which grants students greater freedom and alternatives. However, this system directly leads to different timetables and schedules of each student so that gathering becomes more difficult. This indirectly affects communication between students. In addition to participant observation, we also further explored the influence of the academic credit system on classmate relationships through questionnaire survey.

Circumstance 7: time: morning on April 16, 2012; location: in a student's dormitory.

A: Girls, I've got a VIP card for "Music Online" and it's hard-earned. Let's go to the KTV one day! (A shows the gold VIP card to her roommates joyfully)

B took a look at the card and said: Great, we have never gone to the KTV together and I've thought about it for a long time.

C: Wow, it's really quite cheap. When shall we go?....

B: I have many courses on Thursday. I'm afraid it cannot be Thursday.

C: Thursday is OK. But I'm occupied on Friday.

B: I can't be sure whether I have time at weekend, as I always have some unexpected work to do....

A: Well, it seems that we can't go out together again. Why does our free time never coincide?!

Figure 6: Circumstance 6

45.5% of students voted against the statement that "the academic credit system promotes classmate relationship", among whom 31.88% of students "disagree" and 13.62% "strongly disagree". Compared with 25.64% on the supportive side, it may be said that the disagreeing side achieved overwhelming advantage. It can be concluded that the academic credit system hinders communication between students to some extent.

Table 5 also proves the above conclusion as it is found that only 24.55% of students are familiar with most classmates; 22.46% of students have some impression of classmates, but are not familiar with them; 34.43% of students have close contact with a portion of classmates; and 16.17% of students only know a small part of classmates with little communication.

Table 4 Credit system & classmate relationships

	Options	Number	Percent
The academic credit system promotes classmate interaction and improves relationships.	agree, strongly agree	85	25.64%
	no idea	103	29.86%
	disagree, strongly disagree	157	45.5%

*Only valid data are selected.

Table 5 Familiarity among classmates

Question	Options	Number	Percent
How well do you know your classmate s?	A. I am quite familiar with most classmates and we know each other	82	24.55%
	B. I am familiar with most classmates, but don't know their names and have little communication	75	22.46%
	C. I know some classmates, communicate frequently and maintain good relationship with them	115	34.43%
	D. I know some classmates, but with little communication	54	16.17%
	E. We basically do not know each other	8	2.39%

*Only valid data are selected.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With regard to the teacher-student relationship, the changed teacher evaluation system leads to changed status of teachers and students (Liu and Li 2010), and thus teachers lower their requirements for students, which leads to poor classroom discipline (Jiang 2008). Under the academic credit system, students primarily learn by themselves, which results in less exchange between teachers and students and poorer teacher-student relationships (Jiang 2008). Moreover, under the academic credit system, some students take course evaluation as means of retaliation, and some students pay little attention to it so that the evaluation program becomes arbitrary. The negative effect on teacher-student relationships caused by the academic credit system should therefore be paid sufficient attention. As such, we suggest:

1) Change the mode of course evaluation. The current course evaluation system lacks normalization and student evaluation tends to be subjective, which hinders normal development of the teacher-student relationship. Process evaluation and face-to-face evaluation can be adopted to further promote exchange between teachers and students.

2) Establish a feedback system. After course evaluation, students can witness teacher improvement and offer suggestions through such a feedback system. As another important approach for exchange between teachers and students, a feedback system can provide greater opportunities for communication.

3) Change dimensionality of course evaluation. As most students find it difficult to understand, making the dimensionality of course evaluation easier would help reflect student opinions more accurately and promote mutual progress of teachers and students as well as the harmonious development of teacher-student relationships.

Due to free and dispersed courses and mixed dormitories, students have fewer opportunities to communicate with each other, leading to a reduced sense of class belonging and inadequate class cohesiveness. From a sociological perspective, there would be some impact on their relationships if they are unable to remain in the same class for a long time (Chen 2004). Such impacts primarily include: (1) the academic credit system reducing exchange between classmates so that they are alienated; (2) the academic credit system weakens mutual supervision from students taking the same courses and thus impacts classroom discipline and learning quality (Xiao and Zheng 2013). As such, we make the following suggestions:

1) Students should become more proactive in making friends and class committee members should regularly hold class activities. Under present social contexts, interpersonal relationships are indispensable for success in career. In addition, class committee members should hold class activities regularly, and try to get all students involved so as to increase opportunities for their communication and promote friendship.

2) Under the academic credit system, student schedules and timetables are different, which is an ineradicable phenomenon. Therefore, the only thing we can do is to promote the advantages of the academic credit system. For example, the mixed-dormitory system enables students to learn more about knowledge of other majors, which provides a wider range of ideas and perspectives to view the same problems and have more room to find solutions.

3) Add major elective courses to enable classmates to have more opportunities to meet each other at the same time they have more alternatives. In addition to daily class affairs, class committee members should play a greater role in enhancing communication between classmates and organizing activities to promote friendship.

4) Supervision of students should be strengthened with more inspection of study styles. As the teacher-student relationship and classmate relationship are not close under the academic credit system, it is difficult to form effective mutual supervision. The credit system weakens classmate relationships, reduces encouragement and supervision between classmates, and leads to declined learning quality, which is inconsistent with the objectives of colleges to train excellent personnel. Therefore, it is recommended to (1) increase the frequency of inspection of study style; (2) step up efforts to check attendance rates and strictly enforce relevant punishment measures.

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