

Subtle Nourishment: Reflections on Course Teaching and Graduate Student Mentoring

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Abstract

This paper aims to share experiences in course instruction and graduate student cultivation. First, the initial three paragraphs introduce the motivations, challenges, and six preparation methodologies for developing the course “Information Users and Services Research.” Second, the fourth paragraph elaborates on selecting the most appropriate presentation formats based on pedagogical objectives. The fifth paragraph reflects on the ideological and political elements of the curriculum and its practical implementation plans. The sixth and seventh paragraphs provide methods for stimulating student enthusiasm along with corresponding considerations. The eighth and ninth paragraphs expound upon teacher-student relationships and their respective responsibilities. Finally, three insightful experiences of mutual growth through teaching are shared. Through these shared experiences, this paper seeks to offer valuable case analyses for course instruction and graduate student training, thereby fostering improvements in educational quality and advancements in academic research.

Full Text

Preamble

Moisturizing Things Silently: Experience Sharing in Course Teaching and Graduate Training

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Abstract

This article shares experiences in curriculum teaching and graduate training. The first three sections introduce the original intentions, challenges, and six

preparation methods for the course “Research on Information Users and Services.” Section four explains how to select the most suitable presentation format based on teaching objectives. Section five reflects on the integration of ideological and political education and practical implementation plans. Sections six and seven provide methods and considerations for stimulating student enthusiasm. Sections eight and nine elaborate on the proper relationship between teachers and students and their respective responsibilities. Finally, three interesting experiences of mutual learning are shared. Through these reflections, this article aims to provide valuable case studies for improving educational quality and advancing academic research.

Keywords: Graduate education; Library science education; User research; Talent-strong nation; Ideological and political construction

1. Enthusiasm and Methods in Research Services

The course “Research on Information Users and Services” aims to stay close to readers, users, and service objects—not merely providing resources and services, but more importantly, solving specific problems for researchers. Without scientific research methods and the habit of reflecting on what we can do, what else we can do, and what we still need to improve, we easily find ourselves going in circles. Therefore, one of the teacher’s responsibilities is to inspire students with abundant enthusiasm and passion for research, even if starting from research support services. “Moisturizing things silently” represents the optimal state of mutual growth in teaching and learning. How can we achieve this? Many great scientists and predecessors have emphasized the importance of passion. Infusing rich emotions into career development is paramount—finding joy and value in one’s work rather than engaging in passive labor or merely completing tasks. Those who love life and the people around them are less likely to get stuck on minor obstacles, conflicts, or setbacks, and are more likely to transcend their current perspectives, gradually solve problems, and build steadily over time.

2. Challenges in Graduate Course Design

At the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS), course design faces numerous challenges. First, how to distill the broad theme of information user and service research into content most suitable for students to absorb, digest, and apply. Second, how to manage the transformation of students’ thinking patterns when they first encounter this course and address variations in course content. Third, how to respond to the constantly changing information environment, users, and services, requiring the teaching materials to be rewritten and revised annually. Fourth, how to add new content without creating excessive pressure on students, necessitating appropriate summarization and simplification. Fifth, how to address three problems when catching up with international developments: fewer truly novel ideas from abroad, increasingly prominent con-

traditions arising from insufficient foundational training, and the neglect of new developments emerging from local practices. These challenges require teachers to develop countermeasures and implementation plans, including systematically organizing course content to enable students to grasp key points, conduct in-depth research, and maintain an overview of the entire field. Ultimately, students should at least be able to distinguish between professional and amateur work and possess the ability to make professional judgments after completing the course.

3. Preparation for the Graduate Course “Research on Information Users and Services”

First, while courses on user research and information services or information services and user research exist domestically, this integrated course on information users and services research is unique. Its objectives, approaches, and methods differ, requiring reference to existing courses while distinguishing itself through designs tailored specifically for our students and the characteristics of the Academy of Sciences—necessitating extensive research and deeply resonant content.

Second, some students have previously taken similar courses, and shifting their mindset abruptly can be uncomfortable. The differences lie not only between graduate and undergraduate levels but also in methodology and epistemology, with each student’s situation being unique. Many students, encountering this content for the first time, enter a narrow gate only to discover a vast space beyond, feeling momentarily overwhelmed. When they hear classmates who have taken similar courses express uncertainty (because this course is substantially different), their confidence may falter further. At such times, appropriate guidance becomes crucial.

Third, the information environment is constantly evolving, as are information users and services. This means new content emerges almost every year, requiring the teaching materials to be rewritten and revised annually. The text materials completed in 2020 and distributed to students in 2021 amounted to 300,000 words, already employing a concise, non-elaborative style. However, 2022 saw substantial additions and deletions, with original materials becoming more refined while incorporating new developments.

Fourth, while adding new content annually is necessary, the sheer volume inevitably creates pressure on students, requiring appropriate summarization and simplification. My personal requirement is to teach well when I teach, avoid discussing matters without personal experience, and never repeat what has already been covered. This approach has resulted in nearly 1,000 presentation slides and recorded lecture videos that allow me to repeatedly critique and revise my own materials. The more time teachers invest, the more time students save, and vice versa.

Fifth, as time progresses, international developments accelerate rapidly. While

catching up was initially easy, we now face three problems: fewer truly eye-opening ideas from abroad, increasingly prominent contradictions arising from insufficient foundational training, and our past focus on acquiring whatever existed overseas while neglecting what new developments could emerge from local practices. We must learn to identify genuine innovation versus pseudo-innovation and help both domestic and international colleagues and service recipients recognize not only that something is new but also that it is valuable. These are issues we have been exploring in practice at our institutes in recent years, hoping to extract and distill new content from these experiences. Students may not need to understand the complex background factors of course design, material arrangement, and teaching formats—they only need to know what content will be taught, how it will be taught, and how they will be evaluated. However, as responsible teachers, we must consider these new changes and crises and develop countermeasures and implementation plans.

Sixth, in summary, the course requires a systematic organization based on relatively stable and solid knowledge points as anchors. This organization should present a concise, outline-based form that enables students to grasp key points for future in-depth research without getting lost in the forest of information, while also maintaining an overview when stepping back from specific topics. This way, they won't forget the content after the course ends, and if they do, they can quickly pick it up again. This systematic training represents the greatest gap between professionals and amateurs. While laypeople watch the excitement, insiders understand the craft. Through years of teaching experience at UCAS and professional experience between institutes and libraries, I have developed a methodology to "simplify the complex" and enable students to "master complexity through simplicity." Therefore, what appears simple at first glance reveals profound depth upon reflection—this is what I aim to impart. Since entering the gates of the Academy of Sciences, one must achieve professional competence and at least be able to distinguish between professional and amateur work.

4. Selection and Application of Online and Offline Teaching Methods

First and foremost, offline classroom teaching remains primary. For instance, the key to "Research on Information Users and Services" is passion—abundant emotion toward people. Without this, no amount of theories, charts, models, formulas, tools, or processes can be more than going through the motions, merely formalistic. How can this passion for people be transmitted? The classroom format, being face-to-face, facilitates this transmission effectively.

Second, we cannot have passion without direction, methods, and approaches. Without these "substantive contents," passion remains confined to the classroom, lacking operability, sustainability, and practical possibility. Therefore, theories, charts, models, formulas, tools, and processes are essential components that must be taught thoroughly—these are indispensable elements of systematic

training.

However, depending on different purposes and materials, either online or offline methods may be employed. For example, information dissemination theory can be summarized using charts, but the key lies in contextualization. At such times, either the teacher performs an impromptu skit or students and teachers stage a short play together, which enhances memory and application efficiency. Yet this only achieves interest arousal; to truly master these theories requires reading original texts rather than memorizing outlines or reading translations. The best approach would be to stand beside the teacher and observe the reading process, but this is impossible for an entire class. Therefore, I use a projector to let students witness my reading process in real-time—they can both experience my reading live and see through the projector how I interact with the text, moving back and forth between different translations, commentaries, and my own notes.

For recorded lectures, some tool-based operations such as statistical software and literature retrieval are better suited for short video recordings. If students forget a particular operation, they can rewatch the video and follow along to recall the steps. If a teacher spends too much time in class or intersperses too much application explanation, students' attention wanes, and they may find it tedious.

However, this is not absolute. For example, when teaching how to apply the open-source software R language in this course, there are two situations requiring live video: first, guiding beginners through programming practice while letting them see how I handle typos and errors, showing them that mistakes are acceptable and troubleshooting is what matters most; second, programming while singing in class, treating programming as an enjoyable activity rather than a rushed task to complete.

Another situation suitable for live streaming involves using charts. While charts can be animated for dynamic visual thinking expression, such as the decomposition and flow process of literature data, interpreting charts requires a different approach. For instance, when analyzing user survey questionnaire results with R, it is best to combine charts with blackboard use—pointing to specific values on the chart with one hand while writing or drawing on the blackboard with the other. Since students have varying levels of knowledge and require different depths of supplementary information, teachers must respond to student questions by writing formulas or drawing diagrams on the blackboard. These cannot be prepared in advance because insufficient explanation leaves confused students behind, while excessive explanation of fundamentals disrupts the smooth rhythm of understanding between charts.

Therefore, decisions about online versus offline delivery, or using charts versus verbal explanation, should be based on teaching objectives and the most suitable form of expression for those objectives.

5. The Importance of Ideological and Political Education in the Information Users and Services Research Course

The course “Research on Information Users and Services” involves both software operation and classic reading, requiring both statistical foundations for quantitative analysis and skills in tracking the latest literature. Therefore, teaching methodology cannot remain static but must adapt to circumstances. Most importantly, we have recognized a serious deficiency in this area: the integration of ideological and political education. Information user and service research constitutes the very foundation of library and information science. Without readers, without understanding what readers need, and without knowing how to solve readers’ problems or confusions, other endeavors—whether informatization, resource construction, or so-called knowledge services—risk becoming self-amusement or self-deception (not entirely, but dangerously so). However, when truly engaging with frontline researchers and encountering the problems they cannot solve—problems that are numerous, difficult, troublesome, and often complaints directed at us despite not being our fault—whether we maintain enthusiasm to continue working hard, avoid the difficult issues, or merely go through the motions becomes a true test.

For current students, without passion and adequate preparation, this course might as well not be offered. Yet not offering it would be even more problematic, as removing the core leaves only an empty shell—purely technical courses in data analysis or software design, while important, become unnecessary without librarians who deeply love their readers.

Similar courses in other institutions have become rare precisely because they failed to integrate ideological and political education. Early generations of professionals condensed their work experience and knowledge 精华 into several rules, passing them down through generations to create this course. As social change accelerates in speed and scope, those principles sometimes seem less useful when in fact only the methods need updating while the spirit should remain. Many departments have completely abandoned the course because its effectiveness takes too long to manifest, unlike short-term, quick-result training programs that can immediately produce a workforce. I know a few teachers who returned from studying abroad and took on similar responsibilities at their institutions, vigorously introducing American social science methods. While well-intentioned to strengthen existing methodological deficiencies, this approach feels excessive to professionals and academics from the original system, as it becomes Chinese experimentation entirely within Western theoretical frameworks. The results, while valid social science, lack critical thinking grounded in dialectical or socialist perspectives, instead becoming engineering-oriented (but not in the STEM sense) and abstractly inapplicable.

If we consider the difference between entering the community to design products people can actually use versus measuring the community to design products they can afford and are willing to pay for, we can perceive how passion directed

toward people versus money, while using the same methods and techniques, yields different results and reveals the reasons behind what we can and cannot sustain.

These aspects are currently absent from both foreign and domestic textbooks, yet they represent crucial work. I have summarized some experiences in a paper titled “Mutual Growth in Ideological and Political Education in the ‘Information Users and Services Research’ Classroom,” published on ChinaXiv to spark discussion and collective exploration.

6. How to Mobilize Classroom Enthusiasm

Those of us engaged in information user and services research understand that whether we are interviewing to collect data or analyzing existing quantitative or qualitative data, we must not overlook the existence of context and its influence on text. Applying this concept to teaching makes the issue easier to understand.

The phrase “What’s your problem?” can carry three contexts: (1) “Do you have any question?” (a genuine inquiry), (2) “What’s wrong with you?” (a confrontational challenge), or (3) “Are you trying to cause trouble?” (an accusatory threat). Therefore, unclear expression or inconsistency with students’ accustomed learning patterns from childhood will fail to achieve the desired effect. However, even with clear expression and correct text, if the context is wrong, the message still won’t enter the students’ minds for consideration, rendering it ineffective.

To mobilize or improve classroom atmosphere, we must start with context and attempt changes that break conventions but remain measured—neither excessive to the point of disrupting campus order or violating regulations, nor so minimal as to become a mere reflection of personal bad habits. Therefore, I employ playful techniques such as drawing X’s on textbooks or slides when explaining theory, singing while writing R code, or performing impromptu skits when discussing serious topics like informed consent in social science research.

However, these methods cannot replace the original course content, lest we put the cart before the horse, nor should performances be excessive or lengthy. Occasional diversions must immediately return to course content; otherwise, students will only remember the belly dance and not the source of the tearful frustration in serving readers. Excessive performance becomes inappropriate, and too much of it constitutes putting the cart before the horse, resulting in more loss than gain.

Abundant emotion can bring knowledge in books to life rather than turning the teacher into a rigid textbook. Misdirected emotion or applying it to wrong objects causes irreparable errors and harm, while proper direction and application can awaken love for research and personal life. When surrounded by such people, living standards improve and research levels rise, and vice versa.

7. How to Plan and Conduct Teaching?

Ideally, this course should follow a learning-by-doing approach, or discussion while practicing, or even practical implementation followed by problem-solving or results-based discussions, which yields greater improvement and clearer purpose. However, while the ideal is 丰满, reality is stark—first-year master's students often lack these conditions.

Second-best is to continue using a concise, outline-based approach to build foundations and broaden horizons. This involves four basic components: (1) Ideological and political education, not through mechanical application but by returning to fundamental principles. As previously mentioned, this course is about loving the masses and striving to provide readers with more convenient and enriched services, which aligns with ideological and political education content. We simply need to add research ethics and role perspective considerations. (2) Classic theories, which require guided reading of classic works. Good teachers should be able to provide good reading lists, briefly summarize key points, capture essentials, and use lively methods to stimulate reading interest and facilitate discussion. (3) Research methods, which require deep effort. While many methods exist without complex mathematical formulas or operational procedures, few researchers can truly use one or two methods correctly, well, and proficiently. This is an area where we lacked training from undergraduate studies and must immediately supplement at the graduate level to enable higher-level inquiry. (4) Frontier developments, which must be updated annually, such as user experience and artificial intelligence, or information user behavior on social software. Students must know what these hot topics are, how to follow them, and how to judge truth from falsehood.

Third, the course must be organically integrated with other courses. Class time is limited, and every teacher wants to cover everything but cannot. Therefore, we must also consider how to briefly introduce the connections and distinctions between this course and others to help students better grasp its key points.

8. The Way Teachers and Students Get Along

Teachers and students should compete, but not through rivalry, stepping on each other, or back-and-forth attacks. Rather, teachers must continuously learn and progress while 单向输出 to students—this is what it means to cultivate and love students, hoping that one day the talents we nurture will surpass us. Students need not 输出 to teachers at this stage because they haven't yet surpassed them, but if they see where teachers need support, they can revert to earlier stages to share their new discoveries.

Teachers who remain guarded, hold back, or use coercion and inducement, and students who constantly evade responsibility, fear surpassing their teachers, or never surpass them—these represent failed teacher-student relationships.

When a teacher cultivates someone more outstanding than themselves, they may

fall one rank behind in their field, but as a teacher, they are undoubtedly most excellent because their responsibility is to produce better people, and fulfilling this responsibility represents dedication and effort.

Students surpassing teachers requires tremendous effort. Without teachers' selfless sharing, students cannot stand on their shoulders to see further. This represents the traditional concept of "becoming a master" rather than merely "getting a master's degree."

A true master naturally doesn't want anyone to surpass them, yet everyone will inevitably be surpassed. If one cannot avoid being surpassed, having one's own student become the one who surpasses them seems most appropriate. Therefore, we should constantly consider how to cultivate talent. For students, these complex psychological backgrounds are unnecessary to know—they need only pursue their dreams and happy lives, with surpassing their teacher being a choice rather than a mandatory decision. I believe this involves both rational and emotional factors, with emotional factors playing the more dominant role.

9. Three Stages of Training Master's and Doctoral Students

Actions speak louder than words, but another principle I inherited from my teachers is the ambition to surpass them. I have not yet achieved this and may still be in the process, but I am willing to share this possible journey.

In the first stage, students remain relatively dependent on teachers. After all, teachers have read more books, met more people, and possess experiential intuition. At this stage, regardless of what the teacher says, students should take notes without arguing. If unclear, they may ask questions, but they must read the assigned books diligently rather than asking for answers without effort. Whether criticism or suggestions, students should record everything, reflect on it later, consult materials, and for the sake of surpassing their teacher, investigate both what the teacher mentioned and what they didn't, rather than being satisfied with not having to learn what wasn't assigned.

The second stage involves equal exchange, premised on students having sufficient knowledge and skills through continuous effort, mastering what the teacher required and what they didn't require but learned independently through self-study. However, students should not become arrogant or believe they truly possess equal qualifications and abilities for dialogue. They may know slightly more about a single topic at a specific point, but teachers still know much more broadly. Therefore, teachers should appropriately set aside their authority to encourage students, acknowledge they may not be comprehensive, and point out other aspects teachers know but students don't yet realize they should know. At this point, if a teacher no longer guides the original matter, it may be because the student is doing poorly and the teacher has given up, or because the student is doing well and no longer needs guidance, prompting the teacher to remind them of other areas. Within research groups, everyone is given face,

with unspoken understanding, but each individual must grasp their own gains and losses.

The third stage is the respect phase. At this point, students may know more than their teacher about a specific point, problem, or solution because teachers' broad scope naturally prevents them from focusing entirely on one thing, while students can concentrate all their energy on a single issue, with teachers still providing guidance if they stray or encounter danger. Therefore, students may surpass their teacher in a specific area but not comprehensively. Thus, regardless of practical circumstances or gratitude and ethics, conversations with teachers should be more polite and considerate.

10. Teaching and Memorable Interactions

Three interesting incidents, all involving graduates, remain memorable: one who remembered me but not my course, one who remembered my course but not me, and one who knew my course though I never taught him. I feel rather embarrassed about all three.

Once, while on business at the Sanlitun campus and heading back afterward, someone called me “teacher.” After talking, I learned she was nervously waiting in line for an interview. She kept expressing her anxiety, so I suggested she treat the interviewer as an information user—consider what services they need to have created this position and portray herself as the indispensable person for that role. She didn't succeed in that interview but later told me that using this method at another interview two days later, she was hired immediately.

Another young woman, a librarian transferred to a school in western China whom I met during field research, said she had forgotten my full name but remembered my teaching about how service models change under different conditions and could be adapted across regions without rebuilding new models each time. She clearly felt this when moving from Beijing to her new location.

Another time, at an international data conference, someone asked me a question about something I hadn't explained clearly in a video. After I understood their question, it deepened my own teaching.

These interesting interactions made me realize that teaching is not just about imparting knowledge but about interacting with students to inspire their thinking and problem-solving abilities.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.