

Study on the Development of Non-academic Continuing Education

-- From the Perspective of Educational Ecology

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Abstract

Along with the great variation of international relationship, the importance of education is increasingly apparent since it is the power that ensures the scientific and technological development of a country. As “life-long education” and “education for all” policies have been carried out, and “learning-oriented society construction” is being steadily carried out, Non-academic continuing education has entered the era of rapid development. It has more chances to develop, but meanwhile, it is faced with many problems. In this paper, we will analyze Non-academic continuing education from the perspective of ecological education. Non-academic continuing education ecosystem is an independent and complete ecosystem embedded in natural ecosystem, and exchange energy with it through input (perspective students) and output (trained talents). The ecological problems facing it include the external ecological environment in which it is carried out and the problems about communities within its own ecosystem. On the basis of above analysis, proper strategies are proposed to solve these problems, thus to realize the balance of Non-academic continuing education, as well as to promote its healthy and sustainable development.

Keywords

Educational Ecology; Non-academic Continuing Education; Strategies; Development.

1. Introduction

The United Nations issued “Change our world ---sustainable development plan in 2030”, and proposed “To ensure inclusive, fair, and good-quality education; to promote the chance of life-long education for all people”, which shows that life-long education has become the key task and it has been carried out worldwide. With globalization and ever-changing international relationships, it is easy to realize that the development of a country depends greatly on the improvement of science and technology, while the development of science and technology depends on its education. It is undeniable that higher academic education plays a crucial role in cultivating talent, but it will be influenced and constrained by time, places, ages, and so on. Therefore, it is essential to promote Non-academic continuing education for its easy access, variable forms, free arrangement, and age tolerance.

Non-academic continuing education started comparatively late in China; therefore, it requires great effort to improve and perfect its system and quality. In recent years researches on it has increased steadily in China, but it still lacks thorough analysis and corresponding strategies. So we will probe into the status quo of Non-academic continuing education from the view of educational ecology, analyze the positive ecological environment it requires and then analyze the ecological problems it is faced with. Strategies will be proposed to promote the Non-academic continuing education ecosystem to achieve sustainable development.

Educational ecology was first proposed by L.A Cremin in 1976 in *Public Education*. In the view of educational ecology, Non-academic continuing education is a complete artificial ecosystem,

embedded in natural ecosystem (as shown in Pic. 1 below). Like other ecosystems, it is influenced by environment, economy, markets, policies, and so on. Its ecological communities interact with each other, transfer energy, and then realize its output to the external environment (fostering its talent). In Non-academic continuing education ecosystem, energy is transferred through students input, information transmission, trained talent output, and so on. It will develop and evolve while realizing its talent training.

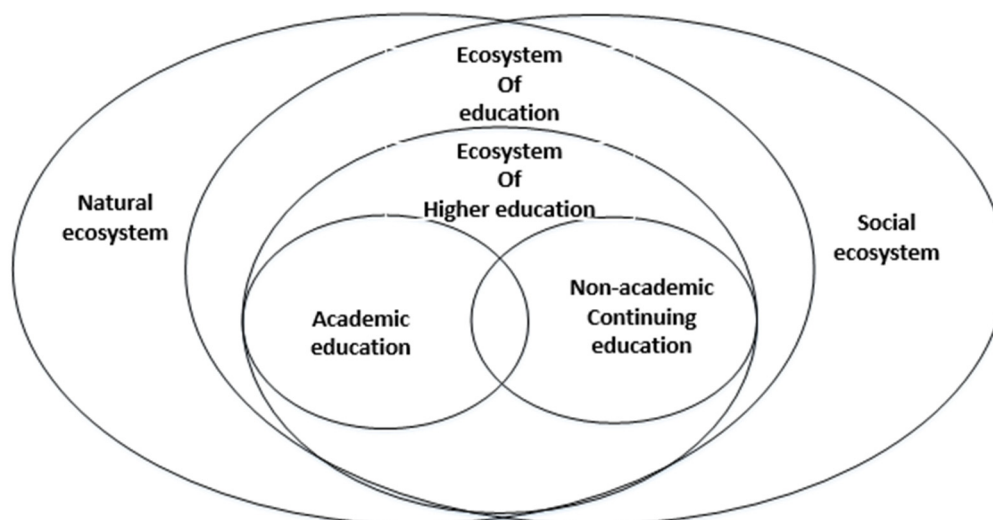


Figure 1. Ecosystem of Non-academic Continuing Education

2. External Ecological Environment Need to be Improved

The development of an ecosystem depends on the ecological environment in which it lives. The ecological environment of Non-academic continuing education includes economy, education budget, policies, and so on.

2.1. Universities, Enterprises, Governments, and the State are All Ecological Environment of Non-academic Continuing Education Ecosystem

Presently, the governments' involvement in it is ecologically insufficient, and it is manifested in the following aspects. First, unlike higher academic education, Non-academic continuing education lacks relative laws, rules and regulations due to the fact that Non-academic continuing education started comparatively late in our country although we have gained great development in recent years since the government has carried out policies to develop "life-long education" and "education for all". The few laws available are mostly local ones which are unspecific and not systematic. Also, their legal forces are not satisfying and can provide limited constructive guidance to administrations. So Systematically written laws are expected to guarantee, support, and stimulate the construction and development of Non-academic continuing education. What's more, governments play limited roles in coordinating and sharing recourse of enterprises with universities. Nowadays, usually just the stuff of enterprises get trained in universities, but the vast excellent recourse in enterprises are not shared or fully used by universities. So the governments should take up their responsibility to build a better ecological environment. So they are expected to guide and coordinate between enterprises and universities to boost their cooperation. One more problem is that relative policies are not explicit enough because many implicit words are used in policies, such as: should, encourage, proper, support, etc. Consequently, it lacks guarantee and support in carrying out those policies, which is not beneficial in building healthy ecological environment for its development.

2.2. Insufficient Budget for Non-academic Continuing Education

The era of “life-long education” and “education for all” has arrived. Budget is the energy in the ecological environment of Non-academic continuing education. Recently both the state and governments encourage people to get involved in it. But the problem is that its budget is insufficient. Budget is the motivation and guarantee to promote the development of Non-academic continuing education, as well as the guarantee to realize the construction of learning-oriented society. The state has already increased its input, but there is still great demand. Moreover, universities, as the environment in which Non-academic continuing education is carried out, usually will give priority to higher academic education (undergraduate, graduate, and PhD). As a result, Non-academic continuing education is always in a passive situation when it comes to budget. Problems caused by insufficient budget are apparent: lack of equipment, limited classrooms, and slow advances in specialized researches. These problems, in return, will slow down the rate of its ecological system development.

2.3. Lack of Healthy Ecological Environment for Sharing and Competition

Non-academic continuing education depends on universities to develop. While the state encourages the construction of learning-oriented society, universities should make good use of the opportunities and advantages it brings. At the same time, they should also make good use of social resources available. Universities are essential ecological communities in Non-academic continuing education ecosystem, and ecological communities should cooperate and transfer energies within its ecosystem. But currently, the truth is that healthy and advantageous cooperation among universities is rare. Meanwhile, communication about successful education experience and resource sharing are also highly expected among universities. These problems will lead to blind competition that is likely to hinder their development.

3. Ecological Communities Within Ecosystem of Non-academic Continuing Education

3.1. Every Ecological Community Within an Ecosystem should be in a Healthy Situation, and Cooperate with Other Communities to Promote its Development

Presently, Non-academic continuing education is mainly carried out in universities, but in most universities that provide Non-academic continuing education, higher academic education stands in the leading position, while Non-academic continuing education seems to be in a secondary position. But the fact is that over the years, the ecological position of Non-academic continuing education has changed a great deal. To be more specific, originally it only served to assist employment, and later on it was enlarged to general training. But nowadays, it helps enhancing the building of talent resource. This change demonstrates that it evolves from empowering individual capability to participating in strategic services of the state. As the state advocates life-long education now, Non-academic continuing education will be popularized. Ecologically speaking, Non-academic continuing education is an independent and complete ecosystem, and is equal with higher academic education. However, it is now put in a secondary position, which leads to the fact that it can not feature specialty. Consequently this will hinder the quality and quantity of Non-academic continuing education, thus to slow down and influence the development and evolvement of ecosystem of Non-academic continuing education.

3.2. Improper Arrangement in Course Configuration and Curriculum

The ecosystem of Non-academic continuing education is an organic system that requires healthy development, as well as healthy ecological communities that can promote the development of the whole ecosystem.

Course configuration, especially feature specialty course, and curriculum are the most significant ecological communities. Presently, the course configuration of Non-academic continuing education is not independent, which means its course arrangement depends on that of the universities in which it is carried out. Or in other words, it can not provide courses that the universities do not offer for its academic education. All these will lead to the lack of its advantageous courses, as well as lack of feature specialty. Another problem is that the course configuration and major arrangement are easily influenced by market (one of the external ecological environment), thus to cater to market, which will hinder the development of its leading specialty.

3.3. Unstable Ecological Chain

In the Non-academic continuing education ecosystem, teachers, students, and administrative staff are the main ecological communities. Presently these three ecological communities all need to be improved because they can not form a complete, organic, and healthy ecological chain, which leads to its instability.

First, teachers are the basis that ensures the stability of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem. Nowadays, Non-academic continuing education mainly depends on teachers who work in the universities for higher academic education, which means lots of the teachers are not full-time teachers of its own. And the few full-time teachers are usually transferred from other departments, without professional and systematically training experience. But as Non-academic continuing education ecosystem is flexible and highly market-orientated, this will lead to the fact that it can hardly meet the requirement of markets because the staff available can not meet the increasing requirement of present markets. Hence there will be problems like unstable staff recourse, high mobility of teachers, improper teaching methods, and so on. In such a situation, it is difficult to maintain the stability and integrity of the ecological chain of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem.

Second, students are the principal part of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem, but presently, life-long education has not been fully popularized yet, and learning-orientated society has not been realized yet, so under the influence of markets, the quality and quantity of students can not be guaranteed. There is great variation among different regions and different professions. Also, students differ greatly in educational background, learning ability, aims of study, and age. All these will lead to the instability of ecological chain of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem.

Then, administrative staff is the ecological community that is expected to connect and communicate. But nowadays, most of the administrative staff in Non-academic continuing education ecosystem are not professional enough because some of them are transferred from other departments. They will copy some of the models they use in higher academic education ecosystem which may not fit into Non-academic continuing education ecosystem. And this will eventually make it hard to stimulate the initiative of the staff, and also, the staff will not be familiar with the requirement of the market. All these will lead to the breakdown of the ecological chain.

4. Strategies to Promote the Development of Non-academic Continuing Education Ecosystem

4.1. Promote the Improvement of Outside Ecological Environment

The steady development of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem requires the joined effort and cooperation of external ecological communities: state, governments, enterprises, communities, and universities. The state and governments carry out relevant laws, rules and regulations which provide strategic guarantee and support. To be more specific, the state and governments should promote the legislative process, and let universities make their own decisions to some extent. Local governments should regulate the local Non-academic continuing education markets so as to provide better policy support, as well as a better ecological environment for Non-academic continuing education ecosystem. On the other side, the state and governments should increase the budget for Non-academic continuing education and research, so that it is no longer dependent on higher academic education. Universities should ensure the position of Non-academic continuing education and ensure the independence and integrity of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem as an independent and complete ecosystem. We should grasp the opportunity of popularizing education among citizens and build more practical platforms with the aid of Internet and information technologies, especially when AI technology is advancing rapidly. We should make good use of all these to make a better ecological environment for Non-academic continuing education ecosystem.

4.2. Enhance the Balance of Non-academic Continuing Education Ecosystem and Strengthen the Stability of its Ecological Chain

Any ecosystem, in order to realize a healthy development and recycling, need to achieve its balance between its input and output. When it comes to Non-academic continuing education ecosystem, we need to make sure that each ecological community is in its best condition. First, improve the rules of teacher-recruiting, ensure professional teaching staff that is administrated by the Non-academic continuing education system, and ensure the quality and quantity of teaching staff, not to share teachers with higher academic education. But excellent recourse in the university should be utilized to push forward the development of Non-academic continuing education ecosystem. Meanwhile, teachers are expected to acquire new skills and improve their own ability. So it should be encouraged to employ professional teams and experts to further develop it. Second, the quality of Non-academic continuing education need to be improved, especially that of talent-training. Each university should develop its own feature specialty and brand, as well as enlarge its scale, but at the same time, quality should be guaranteed. There should be a balance between the quality and quantity of students in Non-academic continuing education ecosystem. Still, it is important to boost the professional ability of administrative staff. The administrative staff deals with businesses including administration, sales, consulting, assessment, course configuration, curriculum design, media support, and so on. So these aspects should be considered to explore the potential of the administrative staff so as to improve their professional ability. Meanwhile, a scientific and reasonable ratio of administrative positions should be achieved to avoid waste of human resources. What's more, the administrative staff are expected to promote curriculum design, develop feature specialty majors, and work out the optimal educational program, so as to manage the Non-academic continuing education ecosystem.

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