

OUR COMMUNITY



Liberal Studies, Liberal Interpretations

by Tang Hau-ling and Winnie Tse

“But it is hard to twist students’ mentality of seeking model answers.”



Li Chan-wing teaches Liberal Studies in a tutorial school with his experience in news media.

When Liberal Studies was implemented under the New Senior Secondary (NSS) Curriculum this September, various tutorial schools started offering Liberal Studies courses for students, but their effectiveness is questionable.

Under the new syllabus, students are required to nurture their ability in critical and independent thinking and to broaden their knowledge base. Many tutors claim that they can teach students essential thinking skills to tackle the public exams in Liberal Studies.

Li Chan-wing, a former news reporter and anchor who works as a consultant for various companies, started offering Liberal Studies video courses at Ever Learning Education Center. He believes his framework of thinking can help students take the Liberal Studies examination.

“Students need to learn how to learn. The most important point in studying Liberal Studies is to catch the framework of analysing problems.” Mr Li said, “Liberal Studies is about using different angles to look at one issue, and trying to compare different angles in multiple ways.”

The idea is with these thinking skills, students will be able to handle problems in different conditions. “There is no same model answer for everything but there is the same

model framework across all spheres of society,” Mr Li said.

Leo Cheung Chun-yin, who teaches English at Ever Learning, also started offering Liberal Studies courses from this academic year.

“I took some general education courses when I was at university,” Mr Cheung said, “Also, both Liberal Studies and English are related to current issues, so I am able to handle the two subjects.”

Mr Cheung believes his strength in language can help students taking Liberal Studies because he can spot their problems of expressing ideas in public exams. He also faces fewer restrictions than school teachers do in teaching Liberal Studies.

“Teachers in schools with a religious background may avoid talking about sensitive issues like homosexuality, so they cannot adopt an unbiased attitude in looking at issues from different perspectives,” Mr Cheung said.

Some secondary schools lack resources to train new Liberal Studies teachers, according to some tutorial school managers. “Many school teachers have not studied Liberal Studies before. They only have expertise in subjects like History or Chinese History,” said Fred Chan Yiu-fai, the Chief Executive Director of Orange Education, “But with Liberal

Studies, we need to have different teachers to handle different issues like globalisation. A team is required.”

Mr Chan plans to set up a team of six teachers to be responsible for the six areas under Liberal Studies in the NSS Curriculum and appoint a co-ordinator to maintain consistency across the areas. He also plans to invite some famous intellectuals to hold talks for students.

As for students themselves, they seem to hold different opinions about the Liberal Studies courses offered by tutorial schools.

15-year-old student Chan Ka-yiu has taken courses taught by Costa Chan, a Liberal Studies teacher from Modern Education. He found the class useful because he could learn how to think by analysing different questions.

When asked about reasons for taking the tutorial courses, Mr Chan said he was worried because school teachers might not be able to prepare students for exams. “Liberal Studies is extremely new to school teachers. Textbooks used in schools do not tell us the marking criteria of the examination questions,” he said, “I believe tutors

“Liberal Studies is extremely new to school teachers. Textbooks used in schools do not tell us the marking criteria of the examination questions.”

know more about the required skills in tackling the public examination.”

However, Law Kam-fong, another 16-year-old student who does not take any tutorial course, disagrees. “I think what the tutors teach doesn’t differ much from what Liberal Studies teachers teach. They both use newspapers as teaching material.”

Another student, Li Mat-yi, 15, shares the same view. However, she added that she would take a tutorial course, especially the one offered by Li Chan-wing, if she does not do well in the school examination.

But students are not the only group who voiced their doubts about the usefulness of tutorial courses in Liberal Studies.

Kwan Chi-ki, vice-president of the Hong Kong Liberal Studies Teachers’ Association, questioned the value of Liberal Studies tutorial classes.

“Liberal Studies has been an elective subject in the Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary Level Examination for more than 10 years,” he said, “If Liberal Studies is really so difficult to handle, why have tutors only started to show up in recent months rather than decades ago?”

Mr Kwan also pointed out the limitations that tutorial schools have in teaching Liberal Studies.

“Tutorial classes cover only four lessons per month. They may not be able to teach enough to students compared with secondary schools which have two to three days that cover Liberal Studies per week.”

Another member of the association, Lam Pui-yee, said that tutorial schools may provide a lot of knowledge-based information to students, but they may neglect the spirit of Liberal Studies.

“The most important thing is attitude,” Miss Lam said, “Liberal studies classes should be taught using an issue-enquiry approach. Students are required to have discussions about certain issues. With continuous interaction among the students and with the teacher’s advice, students can generate experience in thinking from various perspectives and learning actively. When they face different problems in the future, they can easily apply what they learnt at school.”

Miss Lam said it takes three years of practice to instill this kind of attitude. She does not think tutorial schools can do it. “In order to cover the cost of preparing courses, tutorial schools will have to admit large numbers of students. One tutor may not be able to cater to all students and give suggestions immediately,” she

said, “It is also difficult for students to interact and discuss with each other in big classes.”

Besides, Miss Lam said that some tutorial courses are short-term in nature. Students will not have enough time to grasp and generate the necessary thinking skills and attitude.

Such are the challenges that even some tutors find difficulties in teaching Liberal Studies.

Lau Kin-yui offers Liberal Studies tutorial courses in Modern Education. He also teaches Chinese Language as well as Chinese Language and Culture there, and has to prepare teaching materials and mark students’ homework himself. Sometimes he even needs to hold talks for students. He finds it hard to handle all his jobs well.

Like Chinese Language and Culture, Liberal Studies does not have any concrete syllabus, and what is more important to Mr Lau is to teach students the skills of independent thinking and integration, rather than to provide model answers or formulae.

“But it is hard to twist students’ mentality of seeking model answers,” Mr Lau said, “Public examination is over-emphasized, even in Liberal Studies. If students do not have model answers or a formula to memorise, they feel nervous.”

This view is shared by another Liberal Studies tutor at Modern Education, Chris Chiu Lui. Before becoming a tutor, Mr Chiu was an Assistant Project Officer of the Quality School Improvement Project run by the Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research. His job involved helping school teachers to prepare Liberal Studies classes and assess their students’ work.

Mr Chiu said, “The goal of teaching Liberal Studies under the NSS curriculum is to let students have experience in cross-sectional learning and attitude to integrate what they learn thoroughly.”

“But the assessment for the subject still focuses on a centralised examination. All things become meaningless if students fail this one-take task.”

Mr Chiu is also worried about the qualifications of teachers and tutors teaching Liberal Studies.

“I appreciate and respect their personal experience,” he said of people teaching Liberal Studies who have backgrounds in other fields such as English, History and even broadcast media, “However, I am afraid that some of them only have informative knowledge, but not the necessary skills to organise and construct answers to the



Some students think tutors in tutorial schools can teach more skills that are essential for public examination.



Chris Chiu Lui says there are difficulties in teaching Liberal Studies in tutorial classes.



Kwan Chi-ki questions the value of Liberal Studies tutorial classes.



Lam Pui-yee talks about the spirit in studying Liberal Studies.

questions. What they teach may be just informative and piecemeal.”

He added tutorial schools have limitations when they offer Liberal Studies classes.

“The learner diversity a tutor faces is greater than what a school teacher faces. A tutor needs to cater students from band-one and band-three schools at one time,” Mr Chiu said. “Also, each tutorial lesson only lasts for about one hour. It is difficult for tutors to give feedback for students’ work.”

Alison Yeung Sau-chu, the program coordinator for the Bachelor of Education (Liberal Studies) programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, thinks that Liberal Studies under NSS Curriculum is still in an exploratory stage.

“I think students and parents should think clearly, what can the tutorial schools give that the day school teachers cannot?” Ms Yeung said, “What can tutorial schools really provide? It’s about students’ and parents’ own critical thinking now.”