

“Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of Luoja” General Knowledge Contest— Innovative Practices and Implications of General Education

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Abstract: General Knowledge Competitions, as an innovative form of academic competition, have gradually become wide-spread in the higher education fields in recent years. It aims at cultivating students' comprehensive abilities, stimulating their interests in learning and enhancing teamwork through interdisciplinary knowledge contests. This paper starts from the background, value, practices and challenges of general education competitions in universities, discusses its important role in higher education, then takes Wuhan University “Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of Luoja” General Education Contest as an example to put forward corresponding suggestions for improvement and provide references for the development of general education in universities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of General Education

General education is an approach to learning guided by the spirit of free inquiry, emphasizing a comprehensive understanding of knowledge that transcends specific disciplines. Rather than focusing on vocational utility, it aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals with a balanced personality, critical thinking, and a free spirit. As highlighted in *The Harvard Redbook* (Harvard Committee, 1945), general education should equip students with the ability to think effectively, communicate clearly, make sound judgments, and discern values. Similarly, Paloma and Banta (1999) stress that general education should enhance critical thinking, communication skills, and cultural exploration while fostering personal growth. Higher education also has a responsibility to ensure that general education outcomes complement specialized expertise, preparing students to address modern societal challenges (Aloi et al., 2003). The ultimate goal of general education is to help students understand the world, navigate life's complexities, and build confidence in their self-worth, thereby contributing meaningfully to society.

1.2 Significance of General Education

The implementation of general education is a significant initiative in the current wave of reforms in Chinese universities, with profound implications for transforming the approach to talent cultivation in higher education.

1.2.1 Enhancing Students' Comprehensive Abilities

General education competitions in universities cover a wide range of disciplines, including literature, history, philosophy, science, and the arts. These competitions require participants to possess extensive knowledge and the ability to synthesize and analyze information. Through participation, students not only reinforce what they have learned in the classroom but also actively explore unfamiliar fields during preparation. This process fosters creativity, cultivates aesthetic appreciation, and enhances critical thinking and perceptual abilities.

1.2.2 Cultivating Teamwork Skills

General education competitions often involve team-based participation, requiring students to divide tasks, collaborate, and leverage each other's strengths. Team members must integrate their individual knowledge and skills within a limited time frame to compete effectively. This cooperative

approach not only strengthens students' communication skills but also nurtures their ability to work as part of a team.

1.2.3 Stimulating Learning Interest and Self-learning Capacities

The competitive nature of these events naturally attracts students, sparking their interest in learning and healthy competition consciousness. During the preparation process, students are motivated to conduct independent research on extensive materials and delve deep into topics, thereby developing self-directed learning habits and skills. Such stimulation of learning motivation will be crucial for their long-term academic performance and personal growth.

1.3 Practices of General Education Contests in Colleges and Universities

1.3.1 Formats and Organizational Models

Currently, there are various forms of general education competitions in universities, including knowledge quizzes, case analysis, and thematic presentations. The content often integrates current affairs and interdisciplinary knowledge, aiming to assess students' ability to apply knowledge comprehensively. In terms of organization, these competitions are typically led by the university's general education center and coordinated in collaboration with various academic departments.

1.3.2 Student Participation

In practice, general education contests have received wide attention and active participation from students. Many participants report that these events have not only broadened their knowledge but also allowed them to connect with like-minded peers and gain valuable learning experiences. However, some students face with challenges such as insufficient knowledge reserves or lack of teamwork during the process.

1.4 Challenges of General Education Contests in Colleges and Universities

General education competitions face several challenges from low student participation due to perceived irrelevance and insufficient promotion, difficulties in integrating diverse knowledge systems, limited resource support, to a lack of innovative formats. Addressing these issues is crucial to enhancing the effectiveness and appeal of general education contests in higher education.

1.4.1 Insufficient Student Participation

One of the primary challenges is the limited participation of students in general education contests. Many students perceive these contests as having little relevance to their major fields of study or academic performance, leading them to prioritize competitions and activities more closely aligned with their disciplines. Additionally, inadequate promotion and publicity of general education competitions further contribute to low student engagement.

1.4.2 Difficulties in Integrating Different Knowledge Systems

General education competitions encompass a broad spectrum of knowledge, spanning multiple subject areas. A significant challenge lies in designing competitions that can effectively integrate diverse and often fragmented knowledge into a coherent and systematic framework. This complexity poses a hurdle for both organizers and participants in ensuring a meaningful and structured learning experience.

1.4.3 Limited Resource Support

Organizing a successful general education competition requires substantial resources, including human, material, and financial support. However, many universities currently face constraints in providing adequate resources for these contests. The lack of a professional organizing team and sufficient funding not only impacts the scale and quality of the competitions but also hinders their potential for further development and innovation.

1.4.4 Lack of Innovation in Competition Formats

Another challenge is the lack of creativity and innovation in the design of competition formats. Many general education contests fail to introduce engaging or novel approaches, making them less appealing to students. This lack of innovation not only limits student interest but also prevents them from fully utilizing their creativity and problem-solving skills, which are essential components of a well-rounded education.

1.5 Improvement Methods of the “Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of LuoJia” General Knowledge Contest

Wuhan University has launched innovative initiatives to advance general education, including a comprehensive curriculum introduced in 2016. The curriculum is structured around four core areas: Civilization (Chinese Culture and Global Civilization), Science (Science Spirit and Life Care), Society (Social Science and Modern Society), and Arts (Art Experience and Appreciation). Students are required to complete courses in Civilization and Arts, while liberal arts students take a Science course, and science students take a Society course, fostering interdisciplinary learning.

The “Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of LuoJia” General Knowledge Contest, held biennially since 2020, is a flagship initiative. It covers humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, attracting 2,690 participants from within and outside the university, reflecting its success in promoting interdisciplinary learning and intellectual curiosity.

1.5.1 Strengthening Collaborative Advantages and Publicity

The contest is a collaborative effort led by the Wuhan University Library, the Center for Liberal Studies, and 20 student associations. It employs an integrated media approach for promotion, with a WeChat-based platform developed using PHP and MySQL, enabling external participation and significantly expanding its reach.

1.5.2 Optimizing Competition Content and Format

The contest features a creative structure, with preliminary rounds involving original submissions and final rounds adapting these into 12 diverse stage performances, including debates, dramas, musicals, and sci-fi plays. This showcases the university’s general education program and transforms the classroom into an engaging, staged experience.

1.5.3 Providing Resource Support and Guarantees

The collaboration between the library and the General Education Center increased resource allocation, while www.cnki.net provided special funding. The library oversees planning and implementation, and the General Education Center ensures quality by reviewing questions, guaranteeing the contest’s smooth execution and success.

2. The "Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of LuoJia" General Knowledge Contest

The contest is structured into three stages, each designed to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. The Preliminary Quiz, an online general knowledge quiz hosted on a self-developed WeChat platform, welcomed participants from both on and off campus, making it accessible to a broad audience. The Semi-final challenged participants with a creative writing contest themed "When Chinese and International Figures Meet Across Time and Space," encouraging students to explore imaginative and cross-cultural narratives. The Final, which varied in format each year, further enhances the contest’s appeal. In its first year, the Final was a lively quiz show featuring four interactive games, while in the second year, it transformed into a stage play show. During the latter, 12 finalists collaborated with student organizations to adapt their semi-final creative works into engaging stage performances. This multi-stage structure not only provided participants with diverse opportunities to showcase their talents but also fostered teamwork, creativity, and a deeper connection to the interdisciplinary spirit of general education.

2.1 Warm-up

To warm up before the Preliminary Quiz, the library published a four-episode serial story on WeChat and Weibo composed by the Science Fiction Society. The virtual librarian Xiao Bu, who had gained identical human emotions and a holographic projected body, hoped to find friends to talk about everything—from Schopenhauer's irrational philosophy to Einstein's theory of relativity—through one quiz a day. Readers joined the quiz by commenting, and two lucky readers were awarded a prize. The official platform for the preliminary contest was also published in the final episode. The General Education Center and 17 collaborated student organizations' public WeChat accounts joined the promotion. 1861 readers were attracted to join the Preliminary Quiz.

2.2 Preliminary Quiz

The cross-disciplinary question bank for the Preliminary Quiz, containing 1200+ questions from 15 disciplines, was built by student organizations, librarians and teachers from the General Education Center. The questions were first proposed by respective student organizations, then reviewed by librarians and teachers of according disciplines. The platform was a web-based application on Wechat (Shenzhen, China) developed by PHP and applies MySQL (Stockholm, Sweden) as the database for the question bank, quizzes and user information. The vivid visual and language style of the platform also provides a gaming experience.

Participants logged into the platform with their WeChat account to start the quiz. There were 30 multiple-choice questions randomly drawn from the bank, including two for each discipline. Participants were given 30 seconds for each question and two chances for the quiz. The record with higher marks and shorter used time goes into the contest chart, which renews in real time. These questions ranged from professional knowledge to life skills, bringing bits of surprise and fun.

During the quiz participants were provided with auxiliary tools like countdown and amplifier. On finishing, participants could check out their scores, mistakes as well as corrections. A special comment would be given according to the level of score: By scoring 0-9, the participant was invited to watch stars with the Italian astronomer Galileo. By scoring 10-59, the participant could take a walk with the Greek philosopher Socrates. Scoring 60-79 meant to have some tea with the Chinese tea sage Lu Yu; 80-99 meant to go to the theatre with the English dramatist Shakespeare; 100-119 meant to travel with the ancient Chinese geographer Xu Xiake; the full mark 120 brought a dream with the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi. Participants could also return to the contest charts at any time and enjoy the exciting competition.

The top 100 participants were awarded with unique cultural products designed by librarians and student assistants in the library, including printed canvas tote bags themed on the virtual librarian Xiao Bu, "Sea of Knowledge contest" custom bamboo boxes, pens, and key rings.

2.3 Semi-Final

The top 50 participants in the preliminary contest got to compete in the semi-final. In this round, participants chose from the two given topics to produce a piece of creative work, free of form or word count. The topics for the first year were "Confucius' Group chat in WeChat" and "Time-traveller Euclid in Wuhan University", and for the second year were "Sima Qian's Letter in Prison to Socrates" and "Zhuangzi and Huizi Debate in Wuhan University". These topics encompassed Chinese and Western cultures, aimed to stimulate creativity and imagination and provide readers with immense space for creation.

Participants submitted impressively imaginative works including, for example, Time-traveler Euclid in (Wuhan) Zhongnan Hospital from a medical student Zeyu Ouyang; Group Chat of Confucius and Eight Wuhan University Important Alumni from a history student Zicheng Zhu; Zhuangzi and Huizi Debate on 'Chinese and Western Medicine in the COVID' by Zirui Yu; Three Letters from Sima Qian to Socrates Found in a "One-day-tour of Ancient Prison Celebrities" by Peng Fang. Participants from various disciplines showed their knowledge, skills and talent through interesting content in diverse forms, including short stories, poems, classical Chinese writings, economic reports, clinical reports, etc.

The online promotion mode of the semi-final works included online exhibitions and popularity voting. The voting mechanism, which awarded the most popular work a bonus in the coming final, was a key to traffic increase. The articles were viewed by 16300 readers. There was also a large increase in the views of other library articles.

2.4 Final

The Final of the first Contest was a Game Show consisting of four rounds: 2 Versus 2 Game, Magical Reverse Game, Couple Helper Game and Top-6 Championship. In the second Contest, the Final was upgraded to be a Stage Play Show. 12 contestants worked with 12 student organizations to adapt their original pieces in the Semi-final into stage plays, including the Graduate Student Association, the Shakespeare Drama Society, the Micro Reading Club, the Zone-in Drama Club, the Medical School Student Association, the Musical Society, the Astronomy Club and the Science Fiction Club. The stage plays had diverse forms, including debate, comedy, tragedy, musical, sci-fiction play, escape room, etc.

Moving from paper onto the stage, these interdisciplinary works were aesthetically pleasing, academic and imaginative. Although the works shared the same theme, the unlimited imagination and creation of contestants and student associations brought about very different shows, and audiences enjoyed all of them. At last, the musical *Choice* from contestant Wang Chao from Traditional Chinese Culture Research Center and the Zone-in Drama Club won the first prize. Zhuang and Hui's Debate on Chinese and Western Medicine from medical student Yu Zirui and the Medical School Student Club won the second.

The "Sailing in the Knowledge Sea of Luoja" General Knowledge Contest left a lasting impression on its participants, offering a unique and enriching experience that transcended mere competition. As Yang Chunhao from the School of Surveying and Mapping reflected, "The entire contest, a competition over knowledge and thoughts, has been a wonderful experience". The contest also fostered a spirit of collaboration and intellectual exchange, as highlighted by the Wuhan University General Education Student Association: "The show was a valuable experience to us. By watching the performances of other contestants and student associations, we were released from our way of thinking and gained more perspectives on the same thing. We inspired each other."

The library today serves not only as a resource hub but also as a breeding ground for creativity. The General Knowledge Contest exemplifies this by encouraging students to move beyond mechanic learning, broaden their perspectives, enhance self-expression and foster innovation. It also provides a platform for students to showcase their talents. With the support of student organizations, the contest is designed to better align with the needs of student readers, as they are not merely participants but also actively contribute to its planning, organization, and implementation. This aligns with Klemenčič's (2018) discussion on the importance of students' voices in quality assessment and improvement, that involving students in such processes fosters self-formation and enhances quality through their active participation in decision-making. By integrating students into the contest's design and execution, the initiative not only empowers them but also ensures that the activities remain relevant, engaging, and impactful.

3. Conclusion

General education aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals with a deep understanding of themselves, their place in society, and their role in the universe (p. 52, Harvard Committee). To thrive in a fast-changing environment, students need more than just knowledge and technical skills within their major disciplines; they must also develop essential competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, and teamwork. These skills are vital for navigating the complexities of the modern global world, ensuring that students are not only academically proficient but also equipped to contribute meaningfully to society.

In response to these goals, Wuhan University has taken innovative steps to enhance general education. The University Library, in collaboration with the General Education Center, has leveraged its resources and organizational strengths to establish and organize the "Sailing in the Knowledge Sea

of LuoJia” General Knowledge Contest. The General Education Center contributes its professional expertise, supported by renowned professors and scholars, to ensure the successful implementation of the campaign. This partnership between the Library and the General Education Center exemplifies a synergistic approach that achieves a win-win outcome and highlights the progress and achievements of Wuhan University's general knowledge education. It also opens new possibilities for advancing general education in universities, demonstrating how institutions can work together to foster holistic student development.

The contest itself embodies the idea that “the world is as large as how far the thoughts can go.” Students and readers are encouraged to broaden their minds, express themselves creatively, and explore diverse perspectives. The contest celebrates different answers and viewpoints and encourages innovation and possibilities for personal and intellectual growth. It not only enriches the educational experience but also adds significant value to the role of libraries in education, transforming them from mere repositories of knowledge into dynamic spaces that inspire creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Through such efforts, Wuhan University continues to prepare its students to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world, equipping them with the skills and mindset needed to succeed in the 21st century.

As an innovative form of educational practice, general knowledge contests in colleges and universities are of great significance in promoting the development of general education. They can not only improve students' comprehensive abilities and teamwork but also stimulate their interest in learning and self-learning skills. However, they still face many challenges in practice, such as insufficient student participation, difficulties in integrating different knowledge systems, and limited resource support. By strengthening publicity and guidance, optimizing the content and form of the competition, and providing resource support and other measures, the influence and educational effect of the General Education Contests should be effectively enhanced. In the future, colleges and universities should further explore the innovative mode of general knowledge contests, take it as an important hand of general education, and provide strong support for the comprehensive development of talents.

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