

# Practical Research on the Application of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in the Teaching of Economic History

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**Abstract.** Economic history, as a core course for undergraduates in economics, contains rich educational content. Based on this, this paper proposes the use of a problem-based learning (PBL) approach in the teaching of economic history. The method involves teachers proposing topics and questions, with students completing the tasks, thereby deepening their understanding of economic history. The results of teaching practice have shown significant effectiveness and provide a reference path for the implementation of economic history teaching, broadening the approach to curriculum implementation.

**Keywords:** PBL teaching method, economic history, curriculum research

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## 1. Background of the Course Setting

In recent years, as our country's "Belt and Road" initiative continuously bursts with new vitality, it has enabled China to deepen reciprocal cooperation internationally in multiple areas, including economics and culture [1]. China's development is rapid, and it occupies a leading position internationally in various domains. Although China today is fundamentally different from the past, the historical perspective conveyed through economic development still provides important insights for our learning and studying of economic issues. Currently, historical teaching generally includes political, cultural, and economic history. In our national teaching practice, there has been a long-standing phenomenon of emphasizing political history over cultural and economic history [2] [3]. A large amount of empirical research over the past two decades indicates that a significant portion of the observed economic prosperity changes around the world can be traced back to historical events. Economic historians focus on how economies change over time, attempting to explain the shifts in human living conditions. In this broad field, economic historians address questions such as why some nations experience economic growth or lag behind, why economic inequalities persist, the reasons behind population changes and migration, and how business organizations shape economic performance. Therefore, economic history is crucial for the study of economics and economy. History provides students with a background to understand the economic decisions being made today. To cultivate students in economics with economic literacy, major financial and economic institutions and departments have widely established courses related to economic history, which possess rich "educational" content.

## 2. Existing Problems in the Current Course Teaching

At present, the "Economic History" courses offered in most management programs total 48 class hours and are usually required courses. At our university, "Economic History" is also a compulsory course, covering both world economic history and the economic history of China. For students, learning economic history requires mastering interdisciplinary backgrounds and utilizing concepts, theories, and skills from a broad range of social sciences to study economic, social, and political developments.

The objective of our "Economic History" course is primarily to guide students in exploring the logic behind the evolution of the world economy and to enhance their understanding of the transformations in human societal and economic development. The main teaching content is divided into five parts: the rise of medieval Western cities, the formation of the world economy since the Age of Discovery; industrialization in major Western countries and the shift of the world economic center; the crises of capitalist economies and the rise of socialist planned economies; the post-war world economy; and an overview of Chinese economic history.

Currently, most "Economic History" courses are primarily lecture-based. Given the range of disciplines involved, students at various academic levels need to develop a series of important skills, including understanding theories, reading evidence, and testing theories with evidence; critical reading, writing, and speaking skills; and quantitative or qualitative methods for collecting and

analyzing information to address issues through relevant social science theories and practices. Therefore, there is a need to cultivate students' capabilities in "Economic History" classrooms, and the following issues in current teaching urgently need to be addressed:

### 2.1. Students Lack Curiosity in Exploring Historical Issues

Teachers need to focus on continuity over time and enhance the interest in their presentations, as students easily become auditorily fatigued in such courses. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the teaching effectiveness of this course and to combine its theoretical knowledge with practical application effectively. Moreover, students often see the course content solely as material for exams and believe that they can understand it by reading books after class, thus overlooking the importance of classroom lectures. Some students also feel that the events of the past have little relevance to their future studies in economics, which leads to a lack of motivation to learn.

### 2.2. There Is Too Much Teaching Content to Be Effectively Covered in a Short Time

The current teaching syllabus covers 26 chapters. If each chapter is taught in two class hours, it is difficult to cover all in the 48 hours allotted in the teaching plan. Additionally, teachers need to help students understand the connections between historical events, the continuity and development of history, and the general outline of macro history. The abundance of teaching content and numerous knowledge points make it hard for students to grasp the material quickly, and rote memorization demotivates them from actively engaging with the course. The main approach to teaching "Economic History" is to explain the development trajectory of the world economy, focusing on notable economic histories and phenomena. However, many economic issues and phenomena are not covered in textbooks and cannot be explored further due to time constraints and course duration, necessitating a solution to this problem.

### 2.3. It Is Difficult to Cultivate Students' Dialectical Thinking in Traditional Teaching

The pattern of thinking required for economics needs to be continually developed through learning. Traditional teaching methods often overlook the cultivation of students' thinking skills. Dialectical thinking is beneficial for economics students as it helps them explore future economic and social issues. It is important to emphasize that fostering students' dialectical thinking skills does not mean that every student should think the same way; rather, thinking skills vary among individuals and are used in various ways, such as identifying biases, which helps eliminate them from debates and allows viewing issues from different perspectives. Thus, the benefits of cultivating students' dialectical thinking skills are not only reflected in their studies but also in their lives.

### 2.4. Teaching Resources Are Outdated and Need Updating and Expansion

The current global economic situation is constantly changing, and new economic stories and issues require students to learn and explore. New teaching methods should be employed, and "Economic History" teaching resources should be expanded to enrich students' learning perspectives. Some teachers limit their explanations to the textbook content, satisfied with explaining and supplementing some concepts and data. Although some teaching resources have been developed and utilized, their use is superficial, making it difficult for students to apply their learning to analyze real economic issues. Currently, textbooks from the Ma Engineering series are used, but the focus is on explaining and interpreting historical developments, lacking how China's gradual economic progress from a backward state has been integrated into course content. How to bring Chinese economic stories into the classroom requires exploration and extrapolation by the course teachers, and in line with Xinjiang's talent training needs, it should fit the frontier needs to inject Chinese culture into students' minds, strengthening their pride in their ethnicity and their identification with the motherland.

## 3. Course Resource Development Strategy

### 3.1. Reform Content

#### 3.1.1. Reform of Teaching Methods

On the basis of changing teaching philosophies and selecting textbooks, the basic approach to optimizing the teaching content of "Economic History" includes maintaining essential teaching content while adding extracurricular cases according to chapter content. During instruction, the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) method is employed [4]. This classroom teaching approach is a beneficial supplement and improvement to traditional methods in "Economic History." It is also an effective attempt and innovation for enhancing students' self-learning capabilities and their ability to handle real-world problems, as well as an effective means to enhance students' team awareness and communication skills. Moreover, this teaching model effectively alleviates the contradiction between the insufficient allocation of classroom hours and the richness of the course content.

### *3.1.2. Incorporation of Ideological and Political Education in the Course Content*

Cover the entire teaching process with "Ideological and Political Education." Include course ideological and political content, which can be integrated into the teachers' lectures or embodied through the PBL method. This approach helps students establish a tripartite framework of knowledge, skills, and literacy, clarifying the basic knowledge students should master, the basic abilities they should attain, and the fundamental literacy they should achieve. For example, in explaining "The Mystery of Chinese Economy and Friedrich List," incorporate narratives such as the story of Wang Zhaojun going beyond the frontier, the biography of Marco Polo, and comments by the international economic community on China's economic development to integrate the spirit and stories of China into the course content.

### *3.1.3. Reform of the Teaching Process*

In the 2020 "Economic History" course, I assigned 20 topics related to Chinese economic development and world economic development, requiring students to study after class and prepare for in-class presentations. The teacher provides comments, summaries, and clarifications on the content reported by the group members, the problems solved, and the approaches and methods used. Corrections and guidance are given for the issues identified in the reports, and detailed explanations and supplements are provided for the difficult and doubtful points in the answers, leading students to integrate and comprehend the teaching content and knowledge of the class. Special emphasis is placed on using theoretical knowledge to infer analogous cases, further exploring and delving into subsequent related knowledge and content.

### *3.1.4. Reform of Teaching Evaluation*

The evaluation of students' learning not only examines their mastery of knowledge points but also assesses their understanding of today's mainstream ideologies, ultimately evaluating whether students have established correct views on life, values, and worldview. Reforming the course evaluation mechanism is also crucial. The "Economic History" course should change the traditional evaluation mechanism and design a new set of assessment standards and evaluation systems that not only test students' mastery of professional knowledge but also further assess their satisfaction with the professional "course ideological and political education" and their improvement in moral standards. In addition to the final exam, "Economic History" must appropriately increase classroom questioning, quizzes, speeches, and paper writing as part of the formative evaluation processes to achieve "full coverage of course ideological and political education." The evaluation of "Economic History" is divided into formative assessment and summative assessment.

## **3.2. Course Segment Reform**

### *3.2.1. Pre-class Preparation*

The target of the teaching reform is the 70 students from our school's 2019 economics major. Given that history stems from the study of events and observes each event in sequence, starting from case study analysis over specific periods, economic history seeks to understand historical events by appealing to our understanding of economic processes, while economics studies patterns. Economists look for similarities between different events and ask whether they support specific economic theories or models. The studies of history and economics were once closely related, with figures such as the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, the British economist and demographer Thomas Malthus, and the German economist and philosopher Karl Marx, all of whom incorporated historical data into their analyses of political economy. To help students better integrate economics with history, teachers assign pre-study tasks in the teaching group before class. These tasks involve 15 different economic history cases closely related to each chapter's content and are an extension of extracurricular knowledge, touching upon current world and Chinese economic developments. Students are required to form teams, report and analyze cases in different weeks, and peers are expected to ask deeper questions about the economic history issues discussed. Finally, the teacher further explains and answers based on the group's defense content. This learning method allows students to analyze and study the topics raised by the teacher after class through team formation, effectively cultivating their dialectical thinking skills and enhancing their learning enthusiasm, encouraging active participation in the course and making the demonstration of history more vivid.

### *3.2.2. Teaching Process*

We divide the teaching structure into two parts. The first part mainly uses the PBL teaching method, where the teacher poses questions and students answer them. The second part involves the teacher evaluating and further analyzing the students' case studies, integrating textbook chapter knowledge into the lecture. In this teaching study, the course no longer follows the order of chapters but shifts to case analysis, making it easier for students to understand and remember.

### 3.2.3. Assessment Methods

The assessment method for "Economic History" at our school consists of 40% ongoing assessments and 60% final exams. The ongoing assessments are mainly based on the students' group case analyses. The final assessment is conducted as a closed-book exam, including questions from the textbook and class cases, and features a historical material analysis question. With diverse question types, the course evaluation becomes more diversified.

### 3.3. Teaching Reform Effectiveness

In the final course effect assessment, 3 groups of students combined course knowledge with assigned topics to publish 3 articles, and 1 group of students combined the topic with economic research methods to participate in the National College Students' Statistical Modeling Contest, winning a national third prize. Based on the course implementation in 2020, students transformed from being unable to apply economic knowledge to using economic knowledge to solve problems. Therefore, this teaching method will continue in future course reforms, continually stimulating students' creativity.

## 4. Conclusion

China University of Petroleum (Beijing), located in the Karamay Campus in Xinjiang, plays a significant role in the development and establishment of the frontier economy of our country. It is crucial for achieving long-term stability in the Xinjiang region, a frontier area of the motherland, and in strengthening the national and cultural identity of university students. This teaching reform spans from preparation to the final assessment phases. Both teachers and students have gained considerably; teachers have made their classroom lectures more engaging, and students have learned to apply the knowledge of economic history to study economic issues. This course reform adheres to the "student-centered" talent cultivation philosophy, implementing requirements of higher order thinking, innovation, and challenge. Its goal is to help students master the worldview and methodology of Marxism, form a correct understanding of the laws governing world economic development, and from both historical and practical dimensions, help students deeply understand the thoughts of Xi Jinping on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era and the concept of a community with a shared future for humanity. It aims to enhance students' literacy in economic history, guide students to deeply understand the core values of socialism, and actively promote the excellent traditional, revolutionary, and socialist advanced cultures. Furthermore, students are encouraged to understand and recognize the trends and basic logic behind world economic developments.

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