

Exploring the Implementation Path of the Modern Apprenticeship System in University Art Programs

Jian Li

School of Fine Arts, Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, 130032, China

ABSTRACT

With the continuous advancement of higher education in the arts and the Ministry of Education's active promotion of the "modern apprenticeship system" reform, art-related majors in universities—particularly those focused on experimental art—are ushering in a new opportunity for educational transformation. As a cutting-edge art form that emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, media innovation, and interaction with social practice, experimental art poses significant challenges to traditional educational content and objectives. The triadic educational mechanism of the modern apprenticeship system—combining academic study with professional practice, fostering university-industry collaboration, and adopting task-oriented instruction—provides crucial policy support for the practical teaching of experimental art. Centered on the application of the modern apprenticeship system in university art programs, this paper elaborates on the theoretical foundation of this mechanism and its adaptability to art education. Drawing on the characteristics of experimental art, the study analyzes the system's advantages and feasibility in terms of teaching models, talent cultivation, and integration of social resources, while also identifying potential issues in current implementation and proposing strategies for optimization. The research concludes that the modern apprenticeship system has broad applicability and educational value in higher art education, and plays a positive role in constructing a practical education system for the arts and promoting the integration of educational resources with societal and cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS

Modern apprenticeship system; Higher education; Industry-education integration; Practical teaching

1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of deepening reforms in China's higher education system and the optimization of the vocational education framework, the modern apprenticeship system—an educational model that emphasizes "university-industry cooperation and the integration of work and study"—is gradually extending into a broader range of academic disciplines. The Ministry of Education has also issued a series of policy documents explicitly advocating a work-oriented educational mechanism for undergraduate students,^[1] thereby providing support and policy guidance for the adoption of the modern apprenticeship model in higher education. In art education, the training objectives of fine arts programs are shifting from traditional "technical training-oriented" models toward more "innovative and practice-based" and "applied interdisciplinary" approaches. This trend is especially prominent in experimental art programs within university fine arts departments. As a comprehensive discipline integrating various media—such as painting, installation, video, performance, and material experimentation—experimental art fundamentally relies on the "learning by doing" concept at the core of the modern apprenticeship system. Since its inception, the Experimental Art Program at the School of Fine Arts, Changchun Normal University, has been committed to exploring the integration of creative practice with pedagogical mechanisms. It has developed a curriculum system and creative platform centered around "studio-based teaching." Over the course of its development, the program has accumulated relatively mature teaching resources and instructional experience. This paper combines the principles of the modern apprenticeship system with the teaching mechanisms of experimental art to conduct a theoretical analysis and practical reflection, exploring the system's application value and implementation path in the context of transforming talent cultivation models in higher education.

2 Advantage analysis

The modern apprenticeship system originates from Germany's dual-track education model. Its core concept lies in the deep integration of school education with actual enterprise work, through joint training under a "dual-instructor system" involving both academic and industry mentors. By incorporating real-world projects into classroom teaching and aligning

students' learning processes with their professional development, this model enhances students' practical skills and adaptability to the workplace. For experimental art education, which emphasizes the progression from "perception to expression to transformation," the introduction of the modern apprenticeship system represents both a methodological innovation and a deepening of educational philosophy.^[2] The modern apprenticeship system stresses "task-based learning," in which real work environments and practical creative assignments drive students to acquire knowledge and develop skills. Experimental art programs are characterized by their "non-standardized, non-formulaic, problem-oriented" pedagogy. Students engage in a creative process marked by uncertainty, where they choose media and conceptualize works based on evolving artistic themes. In this context, the apprenticeship model is not limited to training for technical positions; it can be transformed into a central pedagogical strategy for art programs. After instructing students in foundational creative techniques, teachers guide them in participating in real-world projects, social art initiatives, and exhibition planning. This reinforces a "learning by doing" approach, expanding art education beyond the classroom and freeing students from rigid, repetitive painting routines, instead immersing them in authentic artistic production tied to cultural project themes. The development of work competence is the core training objective of the apprenticeship model, while the transmission of knowledge is only one component. This offers valuable insight for the current trend of "decentralizing disciplines" in art education. Cultivating talent in experimental art requires training across multiple dimensions, which is difficult to achieve through traditional classroom structures alone. The apprenticeship mechanism bridges the gap between on-campus coursework and off-campus projects, enabling students to apply and validate their knowledge in real social contexts. This not only prepares them for a smoother transition into professional life after graduation, but also lays a solid foundation for building comprehensive abilities in creative process management, teamwork, and communication.

The instructional requirements of experimental art programs are inherently highly open-ended. Course content often transcends the boundaries of traditional curricular frameworks, encompassing new media and materials, novel conceptual approaches, and interdisciplinary content exploration. This necessitates a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in the teaching structure. The modern apprenticeship system offers a modular, project-based, and segmented model of instructional organization.^[3] It structures learning around specific tasks, integrates curricula through project completion as the central thread, and relies on mentors to guide the educational process. This format effectively breaks the constraints of conventional class periods and aligns more closely with the creative logic of experimental art. Another key advantage of this system is its emphasis on social engagement and participatory learning. Artistic works must establish meaningful connections with social spaces (such as galleries and exhibition venues), environments, and audiences. Allowing students to engage in real collaborations with art institutions during their academic training greatly expands their social experience and professional perspective. Through the adoption of the apprenticeship system, schools function as foundational platforms, while enterprises or art institutions serve as practice bases. Students are no longer passive recipients of instruction; they become active executors and collaborators in projects. This not only enhances their professional adaptability as future art practitioners, but also enables institutions to accumulate valuable resources for transforming social service outcomes into tangible educational achievements.

3 Feasibility analysis

The apprenticeship system was initially applied mainly in vocational education and skill-based positions. However, with the deepening of higher education reform, collaborative models such as university-industry cooperation and dual-instructor training are increasingly being introduced into disciplines that value both theoretical knowledge and practical application. The unique characteristics of the Experimental Art Program at the School of Fine Arts, Changchun Normal University—along with its educational resources, geographical location, and surrounding cultural ecosystem—provide a strong practical foundation for the implementation of the modern apprenticeship system. In recent years, the School of Fine Arts has consistently increased its investment in experimental art teaching infrastructure, gradually establishing a comprehensive platform for creation and exhibition. This includes the Institute of Experimental Art, a Material Art Workshop, personalized student studios, and a Digital Art Workstation—practical creative spaces that offer essential support for curriculum activities based on "thematic creative assignments." The school also hosts annual exhibitions of student work and graduation projects, with some exhibitions extending beyond the campus to external galleries and cultural art venues. These efforts have created effective channels for integrating student creation with real-world artistic practice. The introduction of the modern apprenticeship model into the training process can further transform these spaces into "simulated work environments," using project-based instruction to encourage students to independently

manage studios and take on project responsibilities, thereby simulating a professional work setting within the educational context. As an emerging field that spans multiple media and disciplines, experimental art imposes higher requirements on instructors' academic and practical qualifications. The School of Fine Arts currently employs a cohort of young faculty members actively engaged in contemporary art, mixed-media practices, and video art, all possessing strong backgrounds in artistic practice and project mentoring. These conditions provide a solid foundation for establishing a dual-mentorship system in which "on-campus mentors + off-campus mentors" jointly guide student learning. In recent years, the school has also actively invited cutting-edge artists and scholars with international exhibition experience to deliver lectures, thereby enhancing the discipline's academic profile, project-based teaching capacity, and global perspective. Under the modern apprenticeship framework, in-house instructors can oversee curriculum planning and process management, while external mentors—such as artists, curators, and creative industry leaders—can lead project guidance and provide feedback on student work, forming a "bidirectional feedback mechanism" within the professional teaching system.^[4]

As the capital city of Jilin Province, Changchun possesses a vibrant artistic and cultural atmosphere, along with a considerable number of art-related resource platforms. The city hosts major cultural landmarks such as Changchun Sculpture Park, the Former Site Museum of Changchun Film Studio, and Jilin Academy of Arts, all of which serve as hubs for artistic activity. In addition, local emerging industries—such as cultural and creative enterprises, digital art companies, urban renewal projects, and cultural promotion initiatives—provide diverse opportunities for social practice. These resources offer rich off-campus practice environments for students in experimental art. Art students naturally exhibit a strong interest in innovative and exploratory forms of learning. Building upon a solid foundation in creative techniques, they are eager to express their personal artistic ideas through hands-on practice, experimentation with materials and media, and spatial interventions, demonstrating a high level of engagement. Compared with traditional didactic teaching methods, the modern apprenticeship model emphasizes a "process-oriented" approach, which aligns well with the learning preferences of experimental art students. Some students have already participated in national or provincial thematic art exhibitions during their time at school and have achieved outstanding results, indicating a strong enthusiasm for real-world projects. The integration of the modern apprenticeship system into instruction can further stimulate students' sense of responsibility and ownership in real tasks, thereby enhancing the completeness, conceptual depth, and expressive intensity of their works. Moreover, the apprenticeship model emphasizes phased outcome evaluations, which facilitate systematic training in time management, process coordination, and teamwork. This supports the transition from student to quasi-professional roles, playing a crucial role in post-graduation employment and career positioning.

4 Challenges and countermeasures

While the philosophy of the apprenticeship system aligns closely with the temporal and developmental nature of experimental art programs, its implementation in higher education remains fraught with practical challenges. These include issues related to educational management systems, faculty allocation, curriculum structure, student adaptability, and external collaboration mechanisms. Without comprehensive planning and strategic support, the modern apprenticeship model may risk becoming a prematurely applied concept in higher art education. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the root causes of these challenges and offer practical solutions.

4.1 Difficulty in establishing a dual-mentorship model between campus and industry

A core requirement of the modern apprenticeship system is the creation of a stable "dual mentorship" structure, typically involving collaboration between on-campus instructors and industry-based mentors to guide student projects. However, in practice, sourcing suitable mentors from the arts industry is often difficult due to the diversity and high turnover of professionals in the field. Unlike vocational schools where skill-based mentors may commit to long-term involvement, freelance artists and creative professionals—despite their artistic capabilities—often lack teaching experience or a strong sense of pedagogical responsibility. This can result in a project-driven rather than education-driven dynamic, where students are simply assistants rather than learners. To address this, universities should establish clear criteria for mentor selection and sign cooperative agreements to ensure that external mentors not only have project experience but also demonstrate a sense of educational commitment. A tiered mentoring system can be adopted—distinguishing between hired mentors, part-time mentors, and project-based mentors—each with defined scopes of

responsibility. In addition, a collaborative working system should be developed between campus and external mentors, clearly outlining teaching responsibilities, assessment standards, and student management protocols to avoid fragmented cooperation. Furthermore, universities could allocate dedicated funding to subsidize and incentivize long-term mentor participation, enhancing sustained engagement in student development.

4.2 Lack of institutional support for sustained university-industry collaboration

In current practices of integrating production and education within art-related majors, most collaborations are limited to short-term projects or ad-hoc partnerships, lacking a normalized, institutionalized operational model. The irregular and non-cyclical nature of artistic projects often discourages companies or institutions from committing to long-term apprenticeship programs with universities. Additionally, some partner organizations prioritize project outcomes over the student learning process and personal development, resulting in superficial partnerships that fail to achieve deep educational integration. To address this, universities should proactively establish long-term, stable partnerships with local cultural authorities, creative enterprises, and social art institutions. Institutionalized platforms such as "Joint Talent Development Practice Bases" and "Collaborative Art Innovation Centers" can facilitate long-term alignment of project resources and instructional objectives. Cooperation agreements should include detailed provisions on student roles, mentor responsibilities, ownership of outcomes, and intellectual property rights, thereby protecting student interests and ensuring educational goals are met. Furthermore, leveraging support from government-backed projects can increase the appeal of such collaborations, promoting the institutionalization and regularization of project-based partnerships.

4.3 Mismatch between teaching schedules and project timelines

Art projects generally have long and complex creation cycles, with outcomes that are often unpredictable, making it difficult to align them with the standard weekly class schedules typical in universities. Courses in art programs tend to be highly specialized and time-concentrated, which can lead to conflicts when real-world projects start or end outside the planned academic calendar. Additionally, summer and winter breaks pose challenges for in-depth project advancement and outcome conversion, negatively affecting both the student experience and the quality of their work. It is recommended that universities establish "flexible semesters" or "project windows" to accommodate the needs of project-based instruction. For example, independent practice weeks can be scheduled at the end of semesters or during school breaks to allocate dedicated time for project courses. Multiple course contents could also be integrated into a single project for collaborative teaching, fulfilling academic requirements while enhancing project efficiency. Moreover, course evaluations could incorporate project outcomes or interim reports as credit-bearing components, encouraging the development of cross-curricular assessment systems.

4.4 Students' adaptation to high-intensity practice

Participation in real-world projects requires students to take on actual responsibilities and be accountable for tangible results, continuously refining and improving their work through practice. This demands higher levels of time management, communication skills, and stress resilience. However, some art students are accustomed to teacher-centered classroom models, lacking autonomous learning habits and practical execution awareness. When faced with real tasks, they may struggle with procrastination or imbalance in managing expectations. To address this issue, it is recommended that foundational courses related to project-based training be introduced early in the curriculum, helping students develop a sense of responsibility and self-management from the outset. For lower-level students, simulated projects can be used as a transitional phase before advancing to real projects. Senior students should gradually take on leadership roles, managing the overall project and presenting outcomes. Instructors should also employ phased feedback mechanisms to encourage self-reflection and collaboration, thereby reinforcing students' sense of ownership and initiative in task execution.^[5]

5 Conclusion

Through the comprehensive analysis of the theoretical foundations and practical feasibility of implementing a modern apprenticeship system in higher art education, it becomes clear that this model holds substantial value for application in art-related disciplines. As an educational approach integrating "school-based learning" with "professional practice," the

modern apprenticeship system is increasingly being adopted and explored by higher education institutions. In the context of art education—characterized by creativity, social relevance, and cross-media integration—the modern apprenticeship model not only enhances students' practical skills and professional competencies but also facilitates a shift in art education from a relatively "closed" model to one that is more "open and integrated," transitioning from teaching-focused to doing-focused instruction. Looking ahead, with the continuous evolution of educational philosophies in universities, art programs are likely to embrace more diverse and holistic talent cultivation models under the framework of the modern apprenticeship. This shift will not only contribute to the intrinsic development of art education but also provide valuable experiential insights for integrating the arts into broader societal and interdisciplinary contexts under the "New Liberal Arts" paradigm. Ultimately, only by continuously optimizing systems and harnessing collective effort can art education truly fulfill its mission: nurturing individuals through art, and empowering creation as a path to personal and societal development.

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