



Why Do Teachers in American Liberal Arts College Have a High Investment in Teaching?

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Abstract

American liberal arts colleges are renowned for their high-quality teaching. Due to the combined impact of field, capital, and habitus, the level of teaching commitment among teachers in American Liberal Arts Colleges is relatively high. Liberal arts colleges and the field of teaching, as external factors, collectively limit teachers' investment in teaching. The behavioral logic of teachers' teaching investment involves the accumulation and transformation of cultural capital associated with teachers' teaching. The formation, maintenance, and externalization of teachers' teaching habitus are internal factors that influence teachers' commitment to teaching. To address the issue of inadequate faculty members' commitment to teaching, colleges and universities should prioritize the teaching aspect. This can be achieved by emphasizing the professional development of teachers, enhancing their teaching skills, and updating the teacher evaluation system. Teachers should exercise their teaching autonomy fully and establish a sound teaching concept.

Keywords

Liberal Arts Colleges, Teaching investment, Field Theory, Capital, Habitus

1. Introduction

Teaching plays an important role in higher education, and it is the basic way to train talents and achieve educational goals (Xiao & Lin, 2024). Teachers' teaching investment is an important guarantee of teaching quality, and the level of teachers' teaching investment is a key variable affecting teachers' development and teaching quality (Guo, 2023). In the contemporary landscape marked by the swift evolution of information technology, the methods of knowledge acquisition and dissemination are undergoing a profound transformation. Navigating this dynamic terrain and effectively imparting cutting-edge knowledge poses a significant challenge to the teaching profession, necessitating a heightened level of investment from educators. Within this context, American Liberal Arts Colleges emerge as exemplars of undergraduate education excellence. In comparison to their counterparts, educators within these institutions demonstrate a remarkable level of dedication to teaching, investing comprehensively in terms of time, energy, and emotional commitment (Yang, 2020).

In today's academic landscape, a pervasive issue looms large: the chronic underinvestment in teaching within colleges and universities. Faculty members find themselves worn thin by the demands of research, leaving little energy or resources for their primary duty: teaching. This systemic neglect is particularly pronounced in institutions that prioritize research over pedagogy. However, amidst this backdrop of neglect, liberal arts colleges stand out as beacons of dedication to teaching excellence. Here, the ethos is clear: teaching is paramount. Unlike their counterparts, where research often takes precedence, liberal arts colleges place a premium on cultivating dynamic and engaging learning environments. Statistically speaking, the commitment to teaching is evident in the numbers. Teachers in the liberal arts college spend most of their time in teaching activities every week, accounting for 65.9% of all working hours. This emphasis on teaching not

only underscores the institution's commitment to student success but also fosters a culture where educators can thrive and students can flourish. Teachers' energy investment reflects the degree of teachers' concentration and hard work in teaching, which is manifested in teachers' timely and personalised feedback in liberal arts colleges, and promotes students' participation and integration in learning activities (Faculty at Williams, 2021). Emotional involvement is a measure of teachers' attitudes towards teaching and students. In *The Liberal Arts Colleges*, emotional investment in teaching can be expressed through teachers' behaviour. Teachers carefully arrange and correct homework after class, and also write comments on everyone's homework, encouraging students who have completed their homework carefully (Wang & Fang, 2020).

Field theory provides a reasonable explanatory framework for the phenomenon of teachers' high investment in teaching in liberal arts colleges. Based on the field theory, this paper analyses the reasons for teachers' high investment in teaching in American liberal arts colleges from the perspective of the internal function of the field, which can provide theoretical support for a deeper understanding of teachers' investment in teaching.

2. The Connotation of Teachers' Teaching investment: The Sum of Time, Energy and Emotion

The research on teaching investment tends to be rich (Pacaol, 2021). Initially, American scholars equated teachers' investment with their teaching workload. However, the American Teaching Research Council brought clarity to this notion in a 1994 report, emphasizing that teaching workload encompasses not only classroom activities but also the efforts teachers put into teaching beyond the confines of the classroom (Huang et al., 2022). Some studies have found that although the current teaching workload of teachers continues to increase, teachers are more likely to passively complete teaching tasks and lack investment in teaching work. Therefore, besides the workload, there are other measures of teaching investment (Marcos & Noy, 2023). Yourong Liu believes that the connotation of teaching investment is not the simple superposition of teachers' time, energy, and emotion, but the sum of time, energy, and emotion that teachers invest in the process of education, teaching, and professional growth (Liu, 2020). Based on Bourdieu's field theory, this study analyses the phenomenon of teachers' teaching investment in American liberal arts colleges that focus on teaching and considers teaching investment as the result of the joint efforts of time, energy, and emotion invested in teachers' education and teaching activities.

3. The High Investment of Teachers in American Liberal Arts Colleges: The Result of the Combined Action of Field, Capital, and Habitus

Field refers to the network or configuration of objective relations between different positions (He & Ma, 2023). Modern society consists of relatively autonomous fields, including educational, economic, and cultural fields. The resonance of different fields determines the behaviour of actors. Capital is the power and the tool for the actors to practice in the field. The accumulation of primitive capital determines the position of actors in the field, and the transformation between capitals provides competitive space for groups in the field. Habitus is the generating mechanism of the actors' practice in the field. It synthesises all past experiences and reflects the persistent temperamental tendency of actors in the form of perceptual, thinking, and behavioural schemata (Chen & Zhang, 2023). Habitus generation and the whole practice that leads it to develop in a structured direction is a structure that promotes structure (Ouyang et al., 2023). Habitus is historical and past experiences will influence the behaviour patterns of actors. Habitus is realistic, they come from history and are externalised in current practice. Habitus is persistent and difficult to change once it is formed.

The cultivation of teaching prowess is profoundly shaped by the operational dynamics of the academic domain in which educators operate, the interplay and conversion of diverse forms of capital within that domain, and their individual habitus. In the context of American liberal arts colleges, a paramount emphasis is placed on pedagogy, thereby furnishing a trajectory for instructors' growth and fostering their commitment to teaching. The initial endowment of cultural capital significantly influences educators' nascent instructional aptitude and lays the groundwork for their investment in teaching endeavors. As instructors vie for prominence, the accrual of cultural capital metamorphoses into various forms of capital manifested through their dedication to teaching, thereby delineating the contours of their professional advancement within liberal arts academia. Aligned with the scholarly ethos of teaching, educators within liberal arts institutions espouse academic values, thereby galvanizing their fervor for pedagogy and translating it into tangible classroom practices.

3.1 The external constraints of high investment in teaching: liberal arts college and teaching field resonance

The university field is a relatively independent social space. Teachers, students, and other administrators are the main actors in the university field, and different actors will construct their behaviour according to the logic of the university's

operation (Li, 2021). The liberal arts colleges are one of the fields of American colleges and universities that emphasizes the development of teachers' teaching, take free education as the school management concept, and emphasizes that education is student-centred. This field puts forward the requirements for teachers' teaching investment from the aspects of teacher selection, teacher welfare, and teacher evaluation to ensure the quality of teaching. The teaching field is the space for teachers to exercise their relative autonomy and carry out educational activities for students in the classroom (Tao, 2024). Effective teaching forms in the teaching field help teachers to have the energy to care for each student and gain a sense of teaching success, which is the prerequisite for teachers to carry out autonomous teaching and increase teaching investment.

The American Liberal Arts College is an undergraduate college with strong teaching characteristics. Scientific research projects do not dominate, and teachers invest more in teaching. In terms of teacher recruitment, universities such as Swarthmore College emphasise the importance of quality teaching in the application guide, and teacher applicants need to submit sample syllabi and teaching awards. In terms of the mechanism for rewarding teachers' teaching, salary and funding is the external motivation for teachers to invest in teaching. In order to attract and retain talented teachers, liberal arts colleges adjust the salary range and salary structure according to the position type, market value, and job evaluation results (Zhao, 2022). In terms of teaching evaluation, a teacher evaluation system is formed with teaching as the main indicator, and scientific research is the ultimate goal to serve teaching. In terms of the teaching atmosphere, the college has established a teaching development centre for teachers to provide teachers with teaching development opportunities, promote teachers' communication, and realize the sharing of teaching resources. The teaching area supports teachers' teaching and encourages students to participate in teaching. The American Liberal Arts College adopts a small class teaching system, advocates discussion-heuristic teaching in class, and encourages students to actively interact with teachers, which makes teachers feel a sense of teaching achievement and thus promotes teachers' investment in teaching. The resonance between the Liberal Arts College and the classroom teaching field restricts teachers' behaviour and is an external factor that affects teachers' investment in teaching.

3.2 The behavioral logic of high investment in teaching: the accumulation and transformation of cultural capital related to teaching literacy

For teachers, cultural capital exists in the form of bodily states (Cui, 2022). Teachers should be familiar with the knowledge of disciplines and teaching methods and carry out teaching activities to help students succeed (Csíkos & Sztányi, 2020). The primitive accumulation of cultural capital determines the willingness and ability of novice teachers to invest in teaching. Cultural capital can transform the social and economic capital that teachers really need. The amount of each capital is related to teachers' career planning and development and determines teachers' position in the field. Teaching investment is a legitimate way for teachers' cultural capital to be transformed into other capital.

3.2.1 The primitive accumulation of cultural capital

The level of primitive cultural capital is the entry ticket for teachers. The proportion of teachers with a doctorate or the highest degree or certificate in their subject is over 80%. They are able to explain complex concepts to students in an enlightening and guiding way and are skilled in a variety of teaching methods and skills (Bi, 2021). Primitive cultural capital is the key factor for teachers to gain a competitive advantage. The primitive accumulation of cultural capital helps teachers to improve their teaching ability and realise a high investment in teaching. Most students in American liberal arts colleges are satisfied with the teaching effect of their teachers. They generally think that teachers can help them solve problems in their studies and in life. The quality of teaching is inseparable from teachers' investment in teaching. Cultural capital maintains the stability of teaching field structure, which is the key capital for teachers to gain competitive advantage and the main factor influencing teachers' high investment in teaching.

3.2.2 The transformation of cultural capital

Social capital refers to the actual or potential resources formed by the institutionalised network of relationships (Wu et al., 2021). American liberal arts colleges place significant emphasis on teachers' teaching ability and effectiveness when evaluating and promoting faculty positions. For instance, Williams College outlines specific criteria for tenured faculty selection, emphasizing an enthusiasm for teaching, the capacity for continuous improvement, and a nuanced comprehension of the interplay between teaching and scholarly research. Within these institutions, social capital plays a pivotal role in educators' professional growth. When teachers align their developmental trajectory with their instructional responsibilities, they naturally immerse themselves in teaching endeavors. Consequently, cultural capital seamlessly transitions into social capital through the level of commitment invested in pedagogy.

Economic capital is the general term for all types of physical capital that maintain the survival and operation of

institutions (Luke et al., 2023). The acquisition of economic capital helps teachers to maintain the stability of their family field structure. The liberal arts colleges provide economic capital for teachers, prepare development funds, distribute salaries according to teachers' teaching effects, academic activities, and achievements, and also provide subsidies for teachers' children and families. High investment in teaching promotes the transformation of cultural capital into economic capital and ensures the survival of teachers.

4. The Internal Influence of High Investment in Teaching: The Formation, Maintenance and Externalization of Teachers' Habitus of Focusing on Teaching

Habitus refers to an individual's attitude and disposition towards work. Teachers in American liberal arts colleges are good at grasping the balance between teaching and scholarly research, promoting the interaction between teaching and scholarly research, thus forming a tendency to focus on teaching. Teachers in liberal arts colleges often cooperate with students in research and apply the research results to teaching activities. Teachers pay more attention to their own teaching development and think that academic research should promote teaching, and teaching practice provides experience for academic research. Habitus is maintained and externalised in the field, which has a significant impact on teachers' investment in teaching.

Teachers in liberal arts colleges are a community that agrees with the academic concept of teaching, with teaching as the primary responsibility. This habitus of focusing on teaching was formed early on, and the teachers' investment in teaching was decided after they entered the field. The persistence of this habitus is reflected in the long-term commitment of teachers to teaching. It has been found that professors in liberal arts colleges tend to publish journal articles with strong application or practicality, while other teachers pay more attention to teaching and have fewer scholarly research outputs. The habitual practices of teachers are outwardly manifested in their spontaneous engagement with teaching methods aligned with their individual tendencies. Within liberal arts colleges, this dynamic is evident in the constant exchange of teaching experiences among faculty members. Teachers diligently craft lesson plans for classroom instruction and actively partake in training sessions aimed at enhancing their teaching practices. Even during winter and summer breaks, educators meticulously refine their teaching methodologies based on feedback received. The entrenched habitus formed early on, its enduring influence on teachers' professional endeavors, and its capacity for transformation contribute to the remarkable level of dedication teachers exhibit towards their craft within American liberal arts colleges.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on field theory, this study delves into the present landscape and underlying motivations behind the heightened commitment of educators within American liberal arts colleges. It reveals a synergistic interplay between field dynamics, capital accumulation, and habitus formation, culminating in elevated faculty dedication to teaching. At the core of the issue of inadequate teaching investment lies the stark heterogeneity distinguishing liberal arts colleges from other institutions, the skewed balance between teaching and research in the faculty's pursuit of academic capital, and a prevalent misunderstanding of the intrinsic value of teaching roles, leading to habitus misalignment. Consequently, the pedagogical conduct of educators can be reconfigured through a lens centered on the intrinsic functions of the academic field. Faculty members ought to leverage the inherent functions of the academic realm, capital, and habitus within colleges and universities. In parallel, institutions should revisit the foundational essence of teaching, facilitating the enhancement of educators' pedagogical prowess and fostering a nuanced understanding of teaching paradigms.

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