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The Meanings of Social Practice in Taiwanese Higher Education and Reflections on Its Implications for Curriculum Design

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

In recent years, social practice in Taiwanese higher education has moved beyond external service activities and stand-alone projects to become a significant issue tied to universities' public role, knowledge responsibility, and curriculum reform. Shaped by the intersecting policy agendas of University Social Responsibility (USR), local revitalization, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the public role of higher education, social practice has increasingly been institutionalized within university governance and formal curricula. This article adopts a literature-based analysis to examine the conceptual foundations of social practice, clarify its core meanings, and reflect on its implications for curriculum design. It argues that social practice should not be reduced to volunteer service, community engagement activities, or off-campus practicum work; rather, it should be understood as an educational practice that redefines the relationship between universities and society. Its significance lies in the reconfiguration of knowledge, publicness, and local engagement. The article further argues that social practice functions as a catalyst for curriculum transformation by shifting higher education away from knowledge transmission towards contextualized, problem-oriented, and reflective forms of learning. On this basis, it proposes that socially engaged curriculum design should integrate knowledge understanding, public participation, local context, reflective assessment, and structural flexibility. At the same time, such curricula remain vulnerable to instrumentalization under project-based governance, performance-oriented evaluation, and institutional time pressures. The article concludes that future development should move from outcome orientation to relationship orientation, from knowledge transfer to knowledge co-construction, and from policy compliance back to fundamental questions about the purposes of education.

Keywords: Taiwanese Higher Education, Social Practice, Curriculum Design, University Social Responsibility (USR), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. Introduction and Problem Awareness

In recent years, Taiwanese higher education has undergone a significant reorientation in institutional role and educational purpose under the intersecting policy agendas of University Social Responsibility (USR), regional revitalization, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the public role of higher

education. Since 2018, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has promoted the USR initiative, explicitly positioning universities not only as institutional sites for knowledge production and professional training, but also as public actors expected to respond to local needs, engage with social problem-solving, and generate public value. In its fourth phase, the initiative further requires universities to integrate social responsibility into their medium- and long-term development plans and to embed social practice within formal curricula, teaching innovation, and talent cultivation mechanisms (Ministry of Education, 2024, 2025). In this sense, the rise of social practice in Taiwanese higher education should not be seen simply as the addition of a new policy task. Rather, it signals a broader rethinking of how higher education institutions understand their public role, institutional responsibility, and educational purpose.

When situated within a wider international context, this shift is closely connected to broader debates on higher education policy and sustainable development. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* highlights that contemporary social, economic, and environmental challenges are deeply interconnected and cannot be addressed within isolated policy sectors. Education systems, higher education institutions, and other social actors are therefore assigned shared responsibility for participating in processes of sustainable transformation (United Nations, 2015). At the same time, UNESCO (2021) conceptualizes education as a new social contract, arguing that it should not merely serve individual competitiveness or market demand, but should function as a public mechanism for rebuilding relationships among people, society, and the future. From this perspective, social practice in higher education matters not simply because universities are encouraged to leave the campus and enter local communities, but because higher education is being asked to confront a more fundamental question: how should universities redefine their knowledge responsibility, public function, and educational legitimacy in the face of social inequality, local transformation, and public issues?

Despite the growing prominence of "social practice" as a key policy term in Taiwanese higher education, existing discussions remain concentrated largely on policy advocacy, implementation outcomes, and operational experiences. The educational, epistemic, and curricular implications of social practice have received much less systematic theoretical attention. Hsing and Huang (2023), in their review of the Taiwanese USR literature, show that most existing studies focus on how universities participate institutionally, how projects are operationalized, and how collaborative mechanisms are built. Considerably less attention has been given to questions of talent formation, university-community relationships, and the deeper epistemological and educational assumptions underpinning these practices. In other words, while Taiwanese USR research has accumulated substantial practical experience and case-based accounts, it still tends to privilege implementation analysis over conceptual clarification. This leaves a more fundamental question insufficiently addressed: when social practice becomes institutionalized as an important task in Taiwanese higher education, what does it actually mean? Is it simply a new form through which universities respond to policy demands and compete for resources, or does it amount to a substantive reconfiguration of universities' understanding of knowledge, publicness, and curriculum?

This question becomes more pressing when one considers the mode through which social practice has entered Taiwan's higher education system. Under current policy arrangements, social practice has not diffused spontaneously or evenly into university life. Rather, it has been incorporated primarily through project-based governance, competitive funding schemes, performance evaluation, and formal alignment with institutional development plans. The Ministry of Education's fourth-phase USR call explicitly requires universities to develop whole-institution planning, including the integration of social responsibility with university development strategies, institutional support mechanisms for USR, sustainable talent cultivation arrangements, institution-level

coordination platforms, teaching innovation mechanisms to support curricular development, faculty communities, and both short- and long-term evaluation frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2024). From the perspective of higher education governance, this suggests that social practice in Taiwan is not merely an educational ideal, but a policy field that is increasingly institutionalized, governable, and measurable. As Hsieh (2017) argues, higher education reform in Taiwan has long been shaped by an interplay of policy instruments combining regulatory steering and resource incentives. Within this context, social practice may indeed create opportunities for curricular transformation and educational innovation, but it may also become increasingly subject to instrumentalization and formalization under the influence of performance logic, output orientation, and resource competition.

These tensions are especially visible at the curricular level. Yang and Wang (2023) point out that under the USR policy framework, interdisciplinary curricula have gradually become an important means of preparing students to respond to real social problems and enact civic responsibility. The range of curricular forms that universities have developed—including credit programmes, micro-credit courses, self-directed learning courses, and interdisciplinary bachelor's programmes—suggests that social practice has increasingly entered formal curriculum structures and pedagogical organization. However, these curricular forms continue to face multiple challenges, including course development and design, institutional culture, teacher preparedness and attitudes, students' interdisciplinary learning capacity, and evaluation mechanisms. This indicates that social practice in Taiwanese higher education is no longer simply an extension of university outreach, but is becoming an important entry point for rethinking curricular aims, content, and method. Yet there remains a lack of sufficiently developed theoretical discussion on how such curricular transformation should be understood from a broader educational perspective, and on what reflective principles should guide curriculum design under these conditions.

Against this background, this article argues that the central issue is not simply whether Taiwanese higher education has engaged in social practice, but what social practice means within Taiwan's higher education system and how it reshapes universities' understandings of knowledge, publicness, local engagement, and curriculum design. Put differently, the concern here is not the success or failure of particular projects, nor the accumulation of practical outcomes, but whether a deeper educational shift is taking place as social practice becomes embedded in policy discourse, institutional arrangements, and curricular design. This also explains the two key terms in the title of this article. "Meanings" refers to the need to clarify the internal significance of social practice as an idea of higher education, a mode of knowledge practice, and a form of public responsibility. "Reflections" refers to the need to examine the tensions, limits, and risks that emerge as social practice is institutionalized and translated into curriculum. In this sense, the article speaks directly to a major gap in current Taiwanese USR scholarship: while practical outcomes and operational experiences have gradually accumulated, the deeper educational discourse and curricular theoretical foundations of social practice remain insufficiently developed.

This article makes three contributions. First, it reconceptualizes social practice in Taiwanese higher education as a policy-mediated educational formation rather than a set of outreach activities. Second, it identifies how project-based governance, performance evaluation, and institutional alignment reshape the curricular meaning of social practice. Third, it proposes a policy-relevant framework for socially engaged curriculum design that may inform wider debates on higher education publicness, civic engagement, and curriculum reform.

Methodologically, this article develops a critical policy analysis of social practice in Taiwanese higher education, drawing on policy documents, Taiwanese USR scholarship, and international literature on higher education publicness, community engagement, and curriculum transformation. It seeks to open a dialogue between policy analysis and curricular

reflection. First, it examines the institutional turn in Taiwanese higher education under the intersecting frameworks of USR, SDGs, and the public role of higher education in order to clarify the conceptual foundations and core meanings of social practice. Second, it explores why social practice has become a catalyst for curriculum transformation and analyses its educational significance for knowledge formation, public orientation, local engagement, and student subject formation. Third, it examines the tensions and constraints that socially engaged curricula face under conditions of policy implementation and institutional operation, and reflects on how curriculum design might develop a more dialogic, reflexive, and publicly oriented logic in negotiating among institutional demands, educational ideals, and local needs. Through this analysis, the article aims to move social practice beyond the level of policy advocacy and project outcomes and to advance it as an analytical framework linking higher education policy research, curriculum theory, and educational practice, thereby offering implications for both higher education policy and curriculum development in Taiwan.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Core Meanings of Social Practice in Taiwanese Higher Education

2.1 Policy Institutionalization of Social Practice in Taiwan: Instruments, Incentives, and Governance Effects

Social practice in Taiwanese higher education has not emerged simply as a spontaneous pedagogical innovation or as an extension of voluntary university outreach. Rather, it has been actively produced and institutionalized through specific policy instruments, funding arrangements, and governance mechanisms. In this sense, social practice should be understood not only as an educational orientation, but also as a policy-mediated formation shaped by the intersecting agendas of USR, regional revitalization, the SDGs, and the broader public role of higher education. Its growing prominence in Taiwan is therefore inseparable from the ways in which state policy has defined, incentivized, and regulated the relationship between universities and society.

A key mechanism in this process has been the use of competitive project funding as a mode of higher education policy steering. Since the Ministry of Education launched the USR initiative in 2018, social engagement has increasingly been promoted not merely as an ethical aspiration, but as an institutional priority tied to grant eligibility, strategic planning, and visible performance. In particular, the fourth phase of the USR initiative requires universities to integrate social responsibility into their medium- and long-term development plans, establish institution-level support mechanisms, strengthen teaching innovation and talent cultivation, and construct both short- and long-term evaluation frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2024, 2025). Through these requirements, social practice has moved beyond the status of optional or peripheral activity and has become embedded within the formal planning logic of higher education institutions. In this way, social practice has gradually been transformed into a governable and evaluable domain of institutional action.

The institutionalization of social practice has also been driven by a set of incentives that shape how universities organize internal resources and priorities. Under the USR framework, institutions are encouraged to align social engagement with cross-unit coordination, faculty participation, curriculum innovation, and local partnership-building. As Hsieh (2017) argues, higher education reform in Taiwan has long been shaped by a combination of regulatory steering and resource incentives. The case of social practice reflects this broader pattern. Universities are not merely invited to respond to social issues; they are encouraged to translate social engagement into strategic plans, measurable objectives, and sustainable institutional structures. As a result, social practice becomes tied not only to educational ideals, but also to institutional adaptation within a competitive higher education environment.

These policy arrangements generate important governance effects. Although the discourse of USR emphasizes public

responsibility, local engagement, and talent cultivation, its implementation is also mediated through mechanisms of planning, reporting, assessment, and institutional comparison. Social practice is therefore increasingly rendered visible in forms that can be administered, measured, and reviewed. This process does not simply expand the university's public role; it also formalizes social engagement within contemporary governance regimes. From this perspective, social practice in Taiwan is not merely a value-laden educational ideal, but a policy field that is increasingly institutionalized, governable, and measurable.

These governance effects are especially significant at the curricular level. As Yang and Wang (2023) note, the USR policy framework has gradually encouraged the development of interdisciplinary curricula designed to prepare students to respond to real social problems and enact civic responsibility. The range of curricular forms that universities have developed—including credit programmes, micro-credit courses, self-directed learning courses, and interdisciplinary bachelor's programmes—suggests that social practice has increasingly entered formal curriculum structures and pedagogical organization. Yet this incorporation is not politically neutral. Once social practice is tied to institutional planning and policy evaluation, curriculum becomes one of the principal sites through which policy expectations are translated into educational form. Courses are expected not only to facilitate student learning and local engagement, but also to demonstrate institutional innovation, public responsiveness, and measurable outcomes. |

At the same time, policy institutionalization should not be understood only in negative terms. The USR framework has created important opportunities for universities to rethink their public role, develop new forms of local partnership, and create curricular spaces through which students may engage real-world social issues. Without such policy support, many forms of socially engaged teaching and community collaboration might remain marginal, temporary, or under-resourced. Policy institutionalization has therefore enabled social practice to gain legitimacy, visibility, and organizational support within Taiwanese higher education. However, it has also reshaped the meaning of social practice by placing it within a field of incentives and constraints. The issue, then, is not simply whether policy has promoted social practice, but how the institutional forms through which it is promoted also influence what social practice can become.

To understand the meanings of social practice in Taiwanese higher education more fully, it is therefore necessary to move from this policy-institutional level to the conceptual level. Only by recognizing that social practice is shaped by specific policy instruments, incentives, and governance effects can one more precisely clarify its deeper significance as a mode of knowledge practice, public engagement, and educational responsibility.

2.2 Conceptual Foundations and Core Meanings of Social Practice

Against the backdrop of this policy institutionalization, the meanings of social practice in Taiwanese higher education can be clarified more precisely at the conceptual level. Social practice should not be reduced to volunteer service, community activities, off-campus practicums, or short-term field visits. Although such forms may constitute visible expressions of engagement, they do not in themselves capture the full meaning of social practice if they are detached from reflection on universities' knowledge role, educational purpose, and social responsibility. At the conceptual level, social practice in Taiwanese higher education is more appropriately understood as an educational orientation that redefines the relationship between the university and society. Its significance lies not simply in whether universities "enter" local communities, but in whether teaching, research, and social responsibility are re-situated within a framework of interaction, responsiveness, and publicness. In this sense, social practice is not a peripheral activity appended to higher education, but part of a broader re-positioning of institutional identity and purpose.

The conceptual foundation of this reorientation is closely connected to renewed

emphasis on publicness and the common good in contemporary educational thought. UNESCO (2021), in *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, argues that education should be oriented towards the public and common good rather than narrowly serving market competition and instrumental rationality. In higher education, this implies that universities should be understood not merely as institutions granting degrees and credentials, but also as public institutions capable of opening spaces for public deliberation, responding to social problems, fostering democratic participation, and assuming social responsibility. In the Taiwanese policy context, recent understandings of USR broadly follow this direction by emphasizing that universities should combine humanistic concern with technical resources, begin from local needs, and cultivate students' capacities to understand social realities, respond to public issues, and take practical action (Tsai, 2024; Tsai & Yeh, 2025). Social practice in Taiwanese higher education, therefore, should be seen not as an extension of activities or projects, but as part of a redefinition of the university's public role.

Its core meanings can be clarified through three interrelated dimensions. The first is the knowledge dimension. Social practice is significant because it challenges the long-standing tendency in higher education to treat academic knowledge as the primary legitimate form of knowledge and to allow it to circulate within relatively closed institutional boundaries. Boyer (1996) argued that if universities are to respond meaningfully to the complexities of contemporary society, knowledge must enter the conditions of the real world. Mtawa et al. (2016) likewise contend that university-community relations should not be confined to professional support or knowledge transfer, but should involve more interactive and reflexive forms of knowledge production. Hall et al. (2014), from the perspective of community-university research partnerships, further suggest that the key to co-constructing knowledge lies not simply in bringing different knowledges into the same space, but in creating conditions under which diverse forms of knowledge can recognize one another, learn from one another, and jointly generate public value. In the Taiwanese context, this means that university knowledge should not be fully defined within the campus and then taken to local communities for "application". Rather, academic knowledge should enter social contexts, engage in dialogue with local knowledge, lived experience, and practical wisdom, and in doing so revise its own problem framings and interpretive horizons. Social practice thus expands not only the sites in which knowledge is used, but also the conditions under which knowledge is formed.

The second is the publicness dimension. If social practice merely brings students into communities to complete tasks, without engaging broader questions of public issues, the shared world, and civic responsibility, it remains difficult to regard it as educationally substantive. Biesta (2012) argues that if education is to serve the common good, it cannot ask only whether it is effective; it must also ask whether it enables people to attend to the shared world and to learn how to exist with others. Marginson (2011) similarly maintains that the public value of higher education lies not only in individualized human capital formation, but also in its contribution to public knowledge, social cooperation, and the conditions of collective life. From this perspective, the publicness of social practice in Taiwanese higher education does not lie in universities unilaterally "helping" local communities, but in whether universities can, through curriculum and field-based interaction, enable students to engage questions of social inequality, local development, cultural sustainability, and environmental issues, and to form a sense of responsibility and judgement oriented towards shared life. Social practice, in this sense, may be seen as a reactivation of the public educational function of higher education rather than merely an expansion of external service.

The third is the local engagement dimension, which is especially significant in the Taiwanese context. Social practice in Taiwanese higher education is closely tied to USR precisely because policy has explicitly placed "local engagement" and "talent cultivation" side by side as twin priorities. The Ministry of Education

(2025) states that universities should work with local governments, industry, and non-profit organizations to promote industrial upgrading, cultural innovation, educational transformation, and environmental sustainability, thereby revitalizing local development and supporting regional transformation. The fourth phase of the USR initiative further emphasizes the need for sustainable flagship projects to deepen local engagement and talent cultivation, develop local studies as teaching and research priorities, and construct local knowledge as part of institutional academic identity (Ministry of Education, 2024). These policy directions suggest that localities should not be understood simply as sites into which universities move, but as increasingly important partners in knowledge construction, curriculum transformation, and educational practice. As Hsing and Huang (2023) note, most Taiwanese USR research still narrates social practice primarily from the perspective of universities, while paying less attention to the viewpoints of communities and service sites. From this perspective, the real meaning of local engagement lies not only in universities entering local settings, but in whether they are willing to recognize localities as subjects of knowledge, education, and action, and to establish more interactive partnerships through co-learning, co-working, and co-deliberation.

Taken together, these three dimensions suggest that the core spirit of social practice in Taiwanese higher education may be understood as an educational orientation centered on the mutual validation and complementarity of knowledge. This notion does not simply call for different forms of knowledge to coexist side by side. Rather, it argues that academic knowledge, local knowledge, and practical knowledge should not be treated as competing sources of legitimacy, but as forms of understanding that can validate, revise, and supplement one another through dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration. This resonates with Hall et al.'s (2014) emphasis on knowledge co-construction: if encounters among different knowledges are to generate public significance, they must be grounded in mutual recognition, jointly defined problems, and collaboratively produced understanding. For Taiwanese higher education, this means that social practice should not take the form of one-way university intervention into local settings, nor should local communities be reduced to sites for curricular operation and outcome display. Instead, social practice should become a form of knowledge practice with educational depth and public significance, through which universities relearn how to understand knowledge, enact publicness, and cultivate more ethical educational relationships in their engagement with local communities. This conceptual framing also provides the analytical point of departure for the subsequent discussion of curriculum transformation, curriculum design, and institutional reflection.

3. The Educational Significance of Social Practice as a Catalyst for Curriculum Transformation in Taiwanese Higher Education

From an educational perspective, social practice in Taiwanese higher education should not be understood merely as an addition to existing course content, nor simply as a pedagogical arrangement does that take students out of the classroom and into communities. More fundamentally, it is reshaping how higher education understands what counts as curriculum, what constitutes learning, and what kinds of subjects universities seek to cultivate. Traditionally, higher education curricula have centered on the systematic transmission of disciplinary knowledge, emphasizing mastery of content, comprehension of theoretical frameworks, and the accumulation of professional competencies. However, once social practice enters the curriculum, the curriculum is no longer organized solely around the delivery of disciplinary content. Instead, it increasingly shifts towards contextualized, relational, and problem-oriented forms of learning. This shift means that curriculum no longer serves merely the reproduction of knowledge; it becomes a site in which students learn to interpret problems, form judgements, and respond to real-world situations. Dewey (1938) long ago argued that the core of education lies not in the accumulation of knowledge, but in how experience is organized into learning

marked by continuity and growth. Kolb (1984) further conceptualized learning as a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and practice. In the context of social practice in Taiwanese higher education, this emphasis on experience and reflection helps explain why social practice should be understood as a catalyst for curriculum transformation rather than an activity appended to the curriculum.

First, in terms of changing conceptions of learning, social practice shifts higher education from classroom-based knowledge transmission towards problem understanding and reflective practice in the field. Eyler and Giles (1999) argue in their work on service-learning that educationally meaningful learning is not determined by how much service students complete, but by whether reflection enables them to deepen their understanding of knowledge, society, and self through action. Molee et al. (2010) further suggest that when courses incorporate structured forms of critical reflection, students are more likely to develop deeper critical thinking and stronger capacities for learning transfer. These insights are highly relevant to socially engaged curricula in Taiwan. The value of such curricula lies not in enabling students simply to "see the community" or "complete tasks", but in whether they can learn to observe, ask questions, identify problem structures, and move back and forth between theory and field experience in ways that revise their initial understandings. Yang and Wang (2023) similarly argue that, within the Taiwanese USR policy framework, interdisciplinary curricula have become important precisely because they enable students to confront the complexity of rural and social issues, move beyond single-disciplinary logic, and develop more integrative ways of understanding and responding to problems. From this perspective, social practice brings about a shift in learning from knowledge accumulation to problem orientation, and from one-way reception to situated meaning-making.

Second, social practice transforms the role of students. It unsettles their conventional position as passive recipients of knowledge and repositions them as participants capable of judgement, responsibility, and action. In his critique of the "banking model" of education, Freire (1970) argues that when education treats students merely as containers for received knowledge, it suppresses both subjectivity and critical consciousness. By contrast, emancipatory education enables learners, through dialogue, reflection, and practice, to become aware of their own position in the world and of their capacity to act within it. Biesta (2012) similarly contends that the significance of education lies not only in qualification and socialization, but also in subjectification: whether learners can become persons who respond responsibly to others and to the public world. Read in the context of Taiwanese higher education, the educational value of social practice lies not simply in adding field experience to students' learning, but in enabling them, through encounters with local communities, social groups, and public issues, to develop sensitivity to difference, attentiveness to others, the ability to judge complex problems, and a sense of responsibility for collective action. In this sense, student development in socially engaged curricula should not be measured only through participation or outputs, but more fundamentally through the emergence of civic agency and ethical subjectivity.

Third, social practice also transforms the role of teachers. Teachers in higher education are no longer positioned simply as transmitters of knowledge, but increasingly as mediators of knowledge, curriculum facilitators, and collaborators in field-based learning (Tsai, 2025). Bringle and Hatcher (2002) note that when university courses form genuine partnerships with community settings, the work of teachers extends well beyond content delivery and assessment. It also involves coordinating relations between universities and communities, building reciprocal conditions for collaboration, and designing reflective mechanisms through which students can convert experience into learning. Jacoby (2015) likewise argues that the key to service-learning and community-engaged curricula is not simply taking students "out" into communities, but integrating experience with academic purposes so that field experience becomes a process of deepened learning rather

than a collection of disconnected impressions. This point is particularly significant in the Taiwanese context. As curricula increasingly emphasize field participation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and problem orientation, teachers must move away from the position of knowledge authority and towards more facilitative, coordinating, and reflexive roles (Tsai, 2025). Their expertise, therefore, lies not simply in transmitting established knowledge, but in helping students build meaningful, dialogic, and actionable connections among knowledge, experience, and public problems.

At a deeper level, social practice constitutes a crucial catalyst for curriculum transformation because it compels higher education to revisit a more fundamental question: what kind of person should education cultivate? Nussbaum (2010) warns that when higher education is overly shaped by market competition and economic utility, it risks weakening the critical thinking, empathetic understanding, and public judgement that democratic societies require. Marginson (2011) likewise argues that the public value of higher education should not be reduced to an investment in human capital, but must also include its contribution to public knowledge, social cooperation, and the conditions of shared life. In a similar vein, UNESCO's (2021) new social contract for education, together with Delors et al.'s (1996) influential emphasis on learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be, reminds us that education cannot respond to the complexity of contemporary society if it remains confined to skills and knowledge alone; it must also address ethics, publicness, and subject formation. From this perspective, the significance of social practice in Taiwanese higher education lies not in adding service experiences or project outputs, but in prompting universities to reconsider their educational aims. The central issue becomes whether higher education seeks to cultivate technically competent professionals alone, or public subjects capable of understanding the shared world, collaborating with others, and acting responsibly within it.

Seen in this way, the educational significance of social practice as a catalyst for curriculum transformation in Taiwanese higher education can be summarized in at least four respects. First, it shifts curriculum from knowledge transmission towards contextualized, reflective, and problem-oriented learning processes. Second, it repositions students from passive recipients of knowledge to subjects capable of dialogue, judgement, and action. Third, it transforms teachers from one-way lecturers into mediators of knowledge, curriculum designers, and field collaborators. Fourth, it prompts higher education to reconsider the nature of talent cultivation itself, moving beyond narrow professional training towards an educational orientation that places greater emphasis on public participation, ethical reflection, and civic agency. This suggests that the impact of social practice on higher education extends far beyond changes in course content. Rather, it entails a broader re-evaluation of curricular assumptions, conceptions of learning, educational relationships, and the purposes of higher education. Extending the argument of the previous section, the value of social practice lies precisely in enabling higher education to move beyond one-way knowledge transmission and towards forms of learning through which students engage in dialogue with others, understand difference, assume responsibility, and develop capacities for public action in real-world contexts. This, in turn, provides an important theoretical basis for the subsequent discussion of curriculum design and institutional reflection.

4. Core Principles and Practical Logic of Socially Engaged Curriculum Design in Taiwanese Higher Education

If social practice is understood not merely as an outreach activity in higher education, but as a development that reconfigures universities' understandings of knowledge, publicness, and local engagement, then the next critical question is how such an orientation can be translated into curriculum design. This article argues that the core of socially engaged curriculum design in Taiwanese higher education lies not in whether students are taken out of the classroom, but in whether curriculum establishes a pedagogical

structure through which students can meaningfully understand local contexts, collaborate with others, reflect on their own position in relation to knowledge, and develop the capacity for action and judgement. In this sense, socially engaged curricula should not be treated simply as arrangements of field-based activities. Rather, they should be understood as a design logic that entails a comprehensive rethinking of curricular aims, content, teaching methods, assessment, and temporal organization. This perspective is consistent with Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) principle of backward design: curriculum should not be built through the accumulation of activities, but through the alignment of content, pedagogy, and assessment with the forms of understanding, capability, and transformation that the course intends to cultivate. For socially engaged curricula, what matters is therefore not the number of activities undertaken, but whether those activities serve deeper forms of knowledge understanding, public participation, and reflective practice.

First, in terms of curricular aims, socially engaged courses should not be driven primarily by activity completion, output display, or service hours. Rather, they should integrate knowledge understanding, public participation, problem analysis, and reflective practice. Eyler and Giles (1999) argue that the effectiveness of service-learning lies not in service itself, but in whether course design enables students to connect experience with academic learning, social understanding, and self-reflection. Biesta (2012) similarly reminds us that the central question of education is never simply how much has been done, but what kinds of subjects education seeks to form and what kinds of public worlds it seeks to sustain. In the Taiwanese context, this means that the aims of socially engaged curricula cannot remain at the level of "exposing students to communities" or "completing local projects." They must instead be framed in terms of enabling students to understand local issues, analyze social problems, strengthen their sense of public responsibility and collaborative capacity, and develop reflective judgement through action. Put differently, the aims of such curricula should move from output orientation towards an integrated framework of understanding, participation, reflection, and action.

Second, in terms of curricular content, socially engaged curricula should combine theoretical inquiry, local context, field-based issues, and practical situations so that students can build meaningful connections between knowledge and reality. If course content is limited to field experience or activity scheduling without providing conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks, students' understanding of local communities is likely to remain impressionistic and descriptive. By contrast, if content remains exclusively theoretical and detached from real settings, students are unlikely to develop the forms of situated judgement required for social practice. Thomas (2000) and Hmelo-Silver (2004) both suggest that problem-based and project-based learning gain their educational value by placing knowledge within complex situations, enabling students to reorganize knowledge, practice collaboration, and develop higher-order understanding through problem-solving. In the context of Taiwanese higher education, this implies that course content should include at least four interrelated elements: first, theoretical foundations for issue understanding; second, local historical, cultural, industrial, and institutional contexts; third, the identification and analysis of actual field-based problems; and fourth, the dialogic, collaborative, and ethical reflections required in working with local communities. In this way, curriculum content can avoid reducing localities to mere cases or teaching materials and instead enable students to move repeatedly between theory and field experience in the development of deeper understanding.

Third, in terms of pedagogical methods, socially engaged curricula require forms of teaching that are explicitly participatory, inquiry-based, and reflective, so that students can generate understanding through practice. International scholarship suggests that service-learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, fieldwork, interviewing, collaborative proposal-making, and reflective writing are all important methods for linking experience with understanding (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Jacoby, 2015). Yet, for Taiwanese socially engaged

curricula, the key issue is not simply which techniques are used, but whether the pedagogical process enables students to move from being observers to participants, from executors to interpreters, and from recipients to agents. Freire (1970) argues that education can avoid becoming an act of knowledge deposition only when it is grounded in dialogue and collective inquiry. Schön (2017) similarly identifies reflection-in-action as a core capacity in professional practice under conditions of uncertainty. Accordingly, the methods used in socially engaged curricula should not be evaluated merely in terms of the richness of activity design. What matters more is whether students are given opportunities to observe, question, interview, organize data, negotiate with stakeholders, formulate initial proposals, and use reflective writing and classroom discussion to convert fragmented experience into more structured understanding.

Fourth, in terms of assessment, socially engaged curricula need to move beyond counting outputs, activity completion, or superficial participation, and instead place greater weight on processual engagement, problem understanding, relationship-building, and the quality of reflection. Molee et al. (2010) show that when courses incorporate embedded structures of reflection, students' experiences can be assessed more effectively in terms of the depth of their critical thinking and the quality of their learning. This has direct implications for curriculum design in Taiwanese higher education. If socially engaged courses continue to rely primarily on end-of-term exhibitions, presentation counts, activity numbers, or satisfaction indicators as measures of achievement, then their assessment logic risks aligning too closely with institutional performance regimes, thereby weakening the educational value of the curriculum itself. More meaningful assessment, by contrast, should ask whether students can clearly define problems, understand local contexts, recognise their own knowledge position through reflection, establish respectful and sustained interaction with field sites, and demonstrate increasingly mature judgement on public issues. In other words, assessment in socially engaged curricula should move from visible outputs to more comprehensive criteria centered on quality of understanding and relational ethics.

Fifth, in terms of curricular rhythm and structural organization, socially engaged curricula must retain sufficient flexibility to respond to the uncertainty of field settings and the temporal rhythms of local communities. This point can be clarified through Aoki's (2004) distinction between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience. Aoki reminds us that while planning is indispensable, the curriculum that actually unfolds is always shaped by concrete, fluid, and partly unpredictable situations encountered by teachers and students. In the context of Taiwanese socially engaged higher education, this suggests that educationally meaningful social practice cannot proceed simply through the linear execution of a predesigned plan. It must preserve room for responding to the field, adjusting pacing, and continually revising the course in light of unfolding realities. The formation of local partnerships, the availability of community members, the actual pace of issue development, and even unforeseen events may all require the original syllabus and activity structure to be adapted. Without such flexibility, what students learn is often merely how to "complete a project," rather than how to understand a field situation. The practical logic of socially engaged curriculum design should therefore not be one of rigid implementation, but of sustained adjustment between planning and practice, and of continuous movement between theory and field.

Taken together, the core principles of socially engaged curriculum design in Taiwanese higher education may be summarized in at least five respects. First, curricular aims should integrate knowledge understanding, public participation, problem analysis, and reflective practice. Second, curricular content should combine theoretical inquiry, local context, field-based issues, and practical situations. Third, pedagogy should emphasize participation, problem orientation, field inquiry, dialogue, collaboration, and reflective writing. Fourth, assessment should focus on processual engagement, depth of understanding, relationship-building, and the quality of

reflection. Fifth, curricular structures should retain sufficient flexibility to respond to the dynamics of field settings and local temporalities. From the standpoint of practical logic, such curriculum design does not seek to repackage "social practice" as a new label for university courses. Rather, it aims to make curriculum a genuinely educational space in which students can understand local realities, collaborate in action, reflect on their relation to knowledge, and develop public judgement. The real challenge of socially engaged curriculum design, therefore, lies not in whether there are enough activities, but in whether the curriculum can preserve its character as a form of deep learning and public practice amid the pressures of institutional requirements and policy expectations.

5. Social Practice as Policy-Mediated Curriculum Reform in Taiwanese Higher Education: Meanings, Tensions, and Implications

If social practice can serve as an important catalyst for curriculum transformation in higher education, then a further question arises: how are such curricular practices shaped within the institutional context of Taiwanese higher education, and what constraints do they face? This article argues that the most critical issue in socially engaged curricula in Taiwan lies in the fact that they are simultaneously invested with educational expectations to respond to local needs, advance publicness, and cultivate capable subjects of action, while also being regulated by institutional forces such as USR, competitive funding, performance evaluation, and project-based governance. Hsieh's (2017) analysis of higher education governance in Taiwan suggests that, although reforms have employed a range of policy instruments, they have remained predominantly shaped by authoritative steering mechanisms, indicating the strong formative power of governance arrangements over both the direction and operation of reform. Applied to socially engaged curricula, this means that when courses are placed within institutional frameworks of grant applications, funding allocation, performance monitoring, and reporting requirements, they can gradually be translated from practices oriented towards publicness, dialogue, and educational depth into visible, comparable, and measurable performance items. Socially engaged curricula, then, do not develop naturally towards educational ideals; rather, they are continually negotiated between institutional requirements and educational purposes.

The most visible tension stems from project-based governance and the logic of performativity. The Ministry of Education's fourth-phase USR call requires universities to provide explanations of institutional planning, resource investment, support mechanisms, incubation and advisory systems, faculty communities, evaluation methods, and stakeholder surveys for later adjustment and impact assessment. Such requirements may strengthen institutional support and strategic coordination, but they also make socially engaged curricula more susceptible to output-oriented and performance-driven governance. Ball's (2003) concept of performativity is especially useful here: in education, increasing numbers of practices are compelled to justify themselves through indicators, outputs, and performance measures, leading teachers and institutions to reconstruct their activities in ways that are visible and auditable. Power's (1997) notion of the audit society pushes this critique further by showing how, once verification and review become core institutional principles, organizations increasingly organize their internal activities in forms that are auditable rather than necessarily faithful to their original purposes. In the context of socially engaged curricula in Taiwan, this helps explain why courses that must constantly demonstrate the number of activities, cases, participants, local responses, and the visibility of outcomes may find their educational meaning compressed into whether they have "produced" something, rather than whether students have genuinely developed understanding and judgement. Under such conditions, socially engaged curricula are at risk of becoming instrumentalized, performative, and even theatrical.

A second major dilemma concerns the mismatch between institutional rhythms and the

lifeworlds of local communities. Even when a socially engaged course is strongly committed in principle to local connection and collaborative practice, its operation is still constrained by institutional arrangements such as semester structures, weekly timetables, credit requirements, budget reimbursement regulations, and project timelines. Yet the rhythms of relationship-building, trust formation, issue development, and collaboration in local settings rarely conform to the schedules pre-set by universities. Aoki (2004) argues that there is always an irreducible gap between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience. This is particularly evident in socially engaged curricula: local communities may not be available at fixed weekly times, community partners' expectations and schedules may diverge from institutional rhythms, and issues that require long-term accompaniment are unlikely to be adequately addressed within a single semester or project cycle. When course design becomes overly subordinated to institutional temporality, local communities risk being treated as sites that must adapt to the course, rather than as collaborative subjects whose own rhythms and conditions deserve recognition. This tension often leaves socially engaged curricula caught between what is institutionally manageable and what is genuinely needed in local practice.

A third major issue concerns knowledge power and relational ethics. Earlier sections argued that the core of social practice should not lie in one-way knowledge transfer from universities to local communities, but in the mutual validation and complementarity of knowledge. In practice, however, universities may still draw on their professional authority, institutional resources, and discursive advantage to redefine local needs, frame problems, and marginalize local voices in the name of "expert support" or "curriculum design". Research on university–community partnerships has long warned that reciprocity does not emerge automatically; rather, it must be sustained through attentiveness to power, long-term negotiation, and relationship-building. Hall et al. (2014) point out that one of the central difficulties of knowledge co-construction lies in the tendency of higher education systems to presume the superior legitimacy of academic knowledge, with the result that local knowledge may be incorporated into courses or research only to be used, rather than genuinely treated as equal. This is particularly important in the Taiwanese context. When successive groups of students enter communities to conduct interviews, observations, proposals, and public presentations, local communities may be burdened by repeated interruptions, data extraction, and pressure to accommodate university schedules. If universities fail to develop adequate relational ethics and exit ethics, socially engaged curricula may not only exhaust local communities but also reduce them to teaching materials and performance stages. The central challenge, therefore, is not simply whether enough has been done, but whether it is being done in ways that are ethically defensible and relationally sustainable.

A fourth concern is the risk of losing educational and public purpose. Biesta (2009) argues that one of the major problems in contemporary educational discourse is its excessive preoccupation with measurable outcomes and comparisons, at the expense of the more fundamental question of what education is for. Applied to socially engaged curricula, this suggests that the key issue is not whether courses contain sufficient off-campus activities, but whether they still place students' transformation of understanding, ethical reflection, and public judgement at the center. When social practice becomes too closely equated with policy responsiveness, output display, and visible effectiveness, its original educational and public significance may be weakened. This is why social practice in Taiwanese higher education, if reduced to policy slogans, counts of activities, and displays of outcomes, risks losing its educational depth. Universities may appear to be closer to society, while in fact moving further away from educational purpose. The issue here is not opposition to institutional support as such, but a reminder that institutional mechanisms cannot replace educational purpose, outputs cannot replace understanding, and display cannot replace relationships.

In light of these tensions and dilemmas, this article argues that the future development of socially engaged curricula in Taiwanese higher education should move in at least four reflective directions. First, it should shift from outcome orientation to relationship orientation. What matters is not simply whether activities are completed and outcomes presented, but whether universities and local communities can build sustained, reciprocal, and trusting relationships. Second, it should shift from knowledge transfer to knowledge co-construction. Local communities should not be treated merely as sites for curricular implementation, but as participants in problem definition, knowledge generation, and learning reflection. Third, it should shift from institutional compliance to questions of educational purpose. Socially engaged curricula should ask not only how project requirements can be met, but also what students are actually learning, whether the educational process is ethically defensible, and what kinds of public subjects it seeks to cultivate. Fourth, it should shift from short-term projects to long-term accompaniment and reflexive design. Educationally meaningful social practice cannot be accomplished through a single semester, a single course, or a single event alone; it requires longer-term local understanding, relationship-building, and curricular revision. These directions do not reject current efforts in Taiwanese higher education. Rather, they suggest that if social practice is to become a genuine educational catalyst for higher education transformation, it cannot be treated merely as a new tool of university governance. It must instead be sustained by critical awareness of institutions, knowledge, and relationships.

In sum, this section represents the most explicitly critical part of the article because "reflection" here is not a supplementary commentary on existing practice, but a reconsideration of the institutional position occupied by socially engaged curricula in Taiwanese higher education. The key issue is not simply whether universities have engaged in social practice, but how they can maintain reflexivity, dialogue, and ethical sensitivity amid the competing demands of institutional requirements, local needs, and educational ideals. Only under such conditions can social practice become something more than a new indicator or resource-allocation strategy within higher education governance. It may instead become an important opportunity for rethinking curriculum, knowledge, publicness, and the purposes of education.

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