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From Physical Presence to Inner Identification: How Practice Generates Identification in National-Conditions Ideological and Political Courses

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Abstract:

In response to the growing popularity of "mobile ideological and political theory courses" and the question of whether physical arrival amounts to meaningful engagement, this article develops a theoretical framework drawing on the Marxist view of practice, embodied cognition, interaction ritual chains, and the dialectical relation between internalization and externalization in ideological and political education. It also draws on policy documents and materials from field-based teaching. The article argues that deepening national-conditions identification depends on embodied presence, authentic relationships, and organized reflection. Classroom instruction and virtual experiences face structural limitations in providing these experiences. Current practice exhibits three forms of alienation—spectacularization, scripting, and textualization—that render presence ineffectual. These problems are rooted in artifact-centered evaluation and risk-averse approaches to safety. The movement from physical presence to inner identification requires the interaction of authentic tasks, authentic relationships, and genuine reflection, supported by evaluation reform and a redefinition of the university counselor's role.

Keywords:

national-conditions education; practice-based education; Big Ideological and Political Course; embodied cognition

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increasingly pronounced practice orientation in national-conditions education within university ideological and political education. In 2022, the Ministry of Education and nine other departments issued the Work Plan for Comprehensively Advancing the Development of the "Big Ideological and Political Course," calling for effective use of society as a large classroom and closer integration between classroom instruction and social practice [1]. In January 2025, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the Outline for Building a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035), which further called for integrating ideological and political education into social practice and developing the "Big Ideological

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and Political Course" brand [2]. Under these policies, revolutionary-heritage study tours, national-conditions research, rural services, and other practical formats have expanded rapidly, bringing social resources into the educational process.

Expansion in scale, however, does not necessarily deepen identification. The first author's experience of leading student fieldwork suggests that itineraries, interpretation, and the presentation of outcomes have become increasingly polished, yet student reports often remain at the level of what was seen and rarely explain how the experience changed their judgments. Months after an activity, students sometimes recall not the designated sites but unexpected experiences, such as an impromptu meal offered by a local household or an unplanned conversation. This selective recollection indicates that physical arrival cannot be equated with national-conditions identification; educational effects depend on the specific character of the experience of being present.

Existing research has not adequately explained this gap. Bibliometric analysis shows that research on practice-based education has grown continuously since 2012, with major topics including ideological and political education, higher education, and practice-based teaching [3]. Relevant studies have focused largely on the necessity and organization of practice, paying less attention to the intermediate mechanism through which presence is transformed into identification. Without mechanism-level analysis, practical instruction can easily substitute activity scale and documentary outputs for educational effectiveness.

Accordingly, this article addresses three questions in sequence: Why does deepening national-conditions identification require real-world settings? Under what conditions does physical presence become ineffectual? What conditions and organizational support are needed to move from physical presence to inner identification? The article's specific contribution is to shift the research focus from the organization of practice to the generation of identification. Drawing on materials from a student association that has returned to the same region over several years, it compares how experience is transformed under different conditions of presence.

2. Research Design and Materials

This is a theory-building study rather than an empirical test. It begins with experiential phenomena observed while leading student practice and draws on the Marxist view of practice, embodied cognition, interaction ritual chains, and the dialectical relation between internalization and externalization in ideological and political education to construct a mechanism-based explanation of why presence may become ineffectual. Policy documents and practical materials are then used to illustrate and refine the explanation. The three forms of alienation and three transformative conditions are therefore theoretical propositions awaiting empirical examination, not established causal conclusions.

The empirical material comes from the continuous activities of a student environmental association at a university. The association has conducted water-quality monitoring, biodiversity conservation, and rural environmental education in a lake basin in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The first author participated for several years as a faculty leader in its summer social practice and site-based service, accumulating fieldwork notes, travel logs, student reflections, and activity summaries. This case was selected for two reasons. First, the same students returned to the same region over several years, allowing relationships to

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develop. Second, tasks such as monitoring and environmental education had verifiable objects and outcomes, making it possible to compare different forms of presence.

To protect the participants, the materials have been anonymized. No information that could identify individuals or specific institutions is presented, and examples retain only the structural details relevant to the argument. These materials do not serve as causal evidence. They are used to identify the problem and illustrate the proposed mechanisms: they show how the gap emerges in practice and how experience differs when a given condition is present or absent. The limits of their representativeness are addressed in the conclusion.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1. Conceptual Definitions: National-Conditions Education, Ideological and Political Theory Courses, and Forms of Practice

National-conditions education refers here to educational activities that address the country's history, geography, institutions, stage of development, and people's lives, with the aim of strengthening students' understanding of and identification with the national community. Ideological and political theory courses are the key courses for fulfilling the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, and practice-based teaching is an important mode of delivery. The "Big Ideological and Political Course" emphasizes linking classroom instruction with society as a large classroom [1], while the "mobile ideological and political theory course" brings students into social settings. This article uses "national-conditions ideological and political course" as a working concept within practice-based education. It denotes practical activities centered on knowledge and experience of national conditions and oriented toward value identification. It includes both practical instruction formally incorporated into ideological and political theory courses and themed social practice aligned with their educational objectives; the latter is not necessarily a formal course. Political identification refers to an individual's acceptance of and sense of belonging to the national community, its institutions, culture, and people. "National-conditions identification" denotes a context-specific expression of such identification in national-conditions education, emphasizing the understanding, emotion, and responsibility that arise from learning about national conditions; the two concepts are not treated as equivalent.

3.2. Three Strands of Existing Research

Three strands of research are relevant to this article. The first concerns practice-based teaching in ideological and political theory courses. Studies have examined its meaning, value, and implementation, identified problems of formalism and superficiality, and proposed improvements [4]. Their problem awareness, however, lies largely on the supply side—course design, base construction, and resource integration—with insufficient attention to changes in students' experience. The second strand concerns the development of the "Big Ideological and Political Course." It focuses on resource development and coordination within society as a large classroom, thereby expanding the space of practice. Yet measuring success by the number of bases or routes risks reducing this policy concept to an aggregation of resources. The third strand addresses political identification and the sense of gain, directly examining how identification is generated. Taking the integration of the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress into university ideological and political education as its

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focus, Duan proposes an "institutional embedding–identification generation" framework [5]. Such discussions, however, rarely analyze social practice as a specific setting for the generation of identification.

The English-language service-learning literature is adjacent to these strands. Drawing on experiential learning theory [6], this tradition has used large-sample longitudinal surveys to examine how service participation affects undergraduates' civic responsibility, academic development, and life skills [7], and has asked where in the service process learning occurs [8]. Its emphasis on reflection is consistent with the argument developed here. Its research objects, however, are mostly curricular service projects; less attention is paid to sustained engagement with the same heterogeneous setting or to bodily presence itself as a variable requiring explanation.

These strands leave a research gap: practice-based research gives insufficient attention to mechanisms of identification, research on identification pays limited attention to practical settings, and service-learning research focuses primarily on curricular effectiveness. The transformation of bodily presence into national-conditions identification lies at their intersection. If this transformation is presumed to follow naturally from participation, the gap observed in the fieldwork described above cannot be explained. This presumption is the point of departure for the present analysis.

3.3. The Theoretical Framework and Rationale for Its Selection

The theoretical framework has four components. The Marxist view of practice supplies the axiological premise. "All social life is essentially practical" [9]. As a form of cognition and evaluation of social existence, national-conditions identification cannot develop independently of practical experience. This component explains why practice is an indispensable part of national-conditions education.

Embodied cognition explains how presence supplies experiential content. The body's physical properties shape cognition, and bodily experience supplies cognitive content [10]; the absence of the body can lead to the alienation of learning [11]. Classroom instruction and virtual experiences can transmit information, but they cannot equivalently provide the experience formed through bodily immersion in concrete situations.

Interaction ritual chain theory explains how authentic relationships evoke emotion. Bodily co-presence, mutual focus of attention, and a shared mood can generate emotional energy and transform it into identification with group symbols [12]. The theory primarily explains group solidarity and attachment to symbols in micro-level interaction. It is used here only as a reference for understanding the affective mechanism of national-conditions identification; general group identification is not directly equated with national political identification.

The dialectical relation between internalization and externalization in ideological and political education describes how identification becomes consolidated. The formation of an individual's internal moral character and its external behavioral expression are interconnected: cognition is internalized as conviction, which is then consolidated through externalization in action [13]. This component explains the process through which identification emerges and becomes stable.

The four components respectively answer why practice is necessary, how presence supplies content, how presence evokes emotion, and how identification becomes consolidated. Rather than asking whether prac-

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tice-based teaching is effective in general, this article asks under what conditions identification is generated. Answering that question requires cognition, emotion, and moral formation to be examined within a single analytical chain.

4. Mechanism Analysis: The Irreplaceable Role of Real-World Settings in Generating National-Conditions Identification

If national-conditions education were aimed solely at knowledge transmission, classroom lectures, documentaries, and virtual simulations could all perform this task efficiently. National-conditions education, however, cannot stop at "knowing"; it must also cultivate "believing," enabling students to develop emotional belonging and a sense of responsibility on the basis of their understanding. The significance of real-world settings lies in their provision of distinctive experiential conditions for this transformation.

This argument does not deny the role of classroom instruction in value guidance. Ideological and political theory courses can transmit information about national conditions, explain values, and evoke emotion. They do not necessarily include bodily entry into heterogeneous settings, the assumption of consequences within authentic relationships, or the confirmation of conviction through sustained action. Identifying these limitations in experiential conditions does not oppose classroom instruction to practice; it distinguishes their respective functions in generating identification.

4.1. The Embodied Nature of National Conditions: National Conditions as Both Knowledge and Embodied Experience

In textbooks, national conditions appear as data and concepts; in reality, they are manifested in concrete environments, living conditions, and labor processes. Embodied cognition suggests that bodily experience supplies cognitive content [10]. Without such experience, students acquire primarily information about national conditions, not necessarily direct experience of them. A student may accurately recite statistics on regional disparities. After entering a setting in which those disparities are concrete, the figures may become connected to perceptible living conditions and thereby influence judgment and emotion. Information can be transmitted independently of the body; embodied experience cannot be formed independently of it.

Virtual-simulation ideological and political courses expand the space of practical instruction and are valuable for presenting knowledge, but their boundaries must be recognized. Virtual environments can simulate scenes, yet they cannot fully reproduce bodily situations. Students who "enter" a village in a virtual exhibition generally need not endure cold, dampness, sunlight, or the practical difficulties of communicating across dialects, nor need they encounter others whose responses have real-world consequences. Virtual experience can supplement cognition and imagination, but it cannot fully replace practical experience constituted by bodily situations and authentic interaction.

4.2. The Affective Dimension of Identification: Authentic Relationships as a Condition for Deep Emotional Attachment

Identification comprises cognitive judgment, affective belonging, and behavioral dispositions. This article

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focuses on how understanding is transformed into relatively stable affective belonging. Interaction ritual chain theory holds that emotional energy arises from bodily co-presence, mutual focus on a common object, and shared emotion, and can be consolidated as attachment to group symbols [12]. Classroom and virtual communication can also evoke emotion. The difference lies primarily in the density of interaction, the richness of bodily signals, and the reality of action's consequences. In practice-based education, service recipients' immediate responses and the friction and reconciliation involved in collaboration provide richer conditions for sustained emotional attachment.

Such relationships are connected to the consequences of action: promises must be kept, mistakes require a response, and a breach of trust must be addressed with concrete people. Some classroom exchanges and virtual interactions do not carry continuing responsibility of this kind and therefore are less likely to produce relational experiences of comparable intensity. In fieldwork, students and local residents often begin with polite but distant interactions and become familiar only after working together. This process cannot readily be replaced by explanation or compressed indefinitely; emotional attachment requires time and shared experience.

4.3. The Action-Oriented Nature of Conviction: Belief Consolidated through Action

Affective arousal does not amount to stable identification; the latter must also be confirmed through action. The dialectical relation between internalization and externalization indicates that the internalization of cognition as conviction and the externalization of conviction in action constitute a complete cycle in the formation of moral character [13]. Following sustained practice, students may use problems encountered in the field as points of reference for academic study, thesis topics, or career choices. Once confirmed through action, identification may develop from a transient emotion into a relatively stable orientation.

During his visit to Renmin University of China, Xi Jinping called on young people to "measure the motherland with their feet, discover the Chinese spirit through their eyes, listen to the people with their ears and feel the pulse of the times with their hearts" [14]. This statement links bodily action, situated perception, and inner understanding, providing fundamental guidance for the practice orientation of national-conditions education. Classroom instruction and virtual experiences can support knowledge preparation, problem introduction, and the representation of experience, while real-world settings further provide bodily situations, authentic relationships, and responsible action. The two perform complementary functions in generating identification.

5. Three Forms of Alienation: "Presence without Meaningful Engagement"

Recognizing that real-world settings are irreplaceable does not imply that practice is automatically effective. Bodily presence is an important condition for generating identification, but it is not sufficient. In this article, "alienation" means a departure from an activity's intrinsic purpose, whereby means displace ends. It is not used in the original sense of Marx's concept of alienated labor; rather, it denotes conditions in which practice-based education departs from its own purpose. Three forms of alienation—spectacularization, scripting, and textualization—can be identified in the fieldwork materials, each rendering presence ineffectual.

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5.1. Spectacularization: Reducing Field Sites to Backdrops for Photo-Taking

Spectacularization occurs when practical itineraries are designed for display: sites are selected for visual impact, schedules for convenient photography, and outcomes for conversion into display boards and short videos. Students consequently become spectators rather than participants, and no meaningful exchange occurs between them and the setting. The problem lies not in photography itself but in the position it assigns students in relation to national conditions: the country becomes an object to be viewed rather than a form of life to be entered. Observation and labor produce different kinds of experience.

The logic of communication can reinforce this tendency. If practical outcomes are evaluated primarily by their communicative effects, images may displace process, and the laboring body may give way to the performing body. When producing visually appealing content becomes a tacit objective, students' position in the field shifts from participant to presenter.

5.2. Scripting: Excluding Contingency and Depriving the Field of Authenticity

Scripting occurs when procedures are excessively prearranged: interviewees, questions, and even the order of speakers are determined in advance. Reasonable organization is indispensable, but a script that excludes all contingency deprives the setting of authenticity. In Dewey's account of experiential education, "learning by doing" matters not only because of the activity itself but also because learners experience the activity and its consequences [15]. Students need to make judgments and bear their consequences. A fully prearranged setting can train compliance, but it is unlikely to deepen understanding of social complexity.

Scripting entails a paradox: when organizers discharge responsibility through comprehensive control, more meticulous planning can make the setting less authentic. Safety plans and itinerary management are necessary minimum safeguards. When this logic expands into total control, however, students encounter a rehearsal staged against a social backdrop. The impromptu meals and unplanned conversations mentioned earlier are remembered precisely because they involve authentic responses beyond the script.

5.3. Textualization: Compressing Meaning into Submittable Artifacts

Textualization occurs in evaluation. The value of practice is ultimately confirmed through reports, photographs, reflective essays, and certificates; the more polished the artifacts, the greater the evaluative advantage. Yet such artifacts can be produced independently of experience. Substantive practice entails financial, safety, and organizational costs, whereas formalistic practice is cheaper and more controllable. When assessment also demands documentary traces, a perverse incentive may arise: teachers who carefully organize students' entry into society may have no advantage in competitions based on documentary materials. Documentation proliferates while experience remains insufficient.

Once artifacts become the primary basis of evaluation, the purpose of practice may shift to artifact production. Topics are selected for their potential to produce materials, itineraries for their visual yield, and students focus on what an experience can be written into rather than how it has changed them. The means of evaluation thus displace the educational purpose.

The three forms of alienation are related both to teachers' implementation and to systems of evaluation and

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organization. Artifact-centered evaluation encourages textualization, while risk-averse management encourages scripting. Correcting these problems therefore cannot rely solely on teachers' self-discipline; transformative conditions must be considered together with organizational and institutional reform.

6. Mechanisms of Transformation: Three Conditions from Physical Presence to Inner Identification

The movement from physical presence to inner identification requires the interaction of authentic tasks, authentic relationships, and genuine reflection, which respectively address spectacularization, scripting, and textualization. Authentic tasks turn students from spectators into bearers of responsibility; authentic relationships restore the field as a space of real interaction; and genuine reflection returns meaning from artifacts to experience. The three conditions have different primary temporal locations. Authentic tasks are established before fieldwork and enacted during it; authentic relationships develop through shared experience; and genuine reflection, although it can run throughout the process, plays an irreplaceable deepening role afterward. They should not be understood as a strictly linear, irreversible sequence. Tasks provide shared goals for relationships, relationships provide affective content for reflection, and reflection can in turn reshape subsequent tasks and relationships.

Table 1. A Conditional Model for the Transformation from Presence to Identification

Primary period	Condition	Problem addressed	Empirical indicators
Before and during fieldwork	Authentic tasks	Spectacularization	Tasks address genuine needs, can fail, and are evaluated by service recipients
During and after fieldwork	Authentic relationships	Scripting	Students interact continuously with service recipients and can describe specific changes in these relationships
After fieldwork and over longer periods	Genuine reflection	Textualization	Students can identify a specific judgment that was revised through the experience

6.1. Authentic Tasks: Assigning Responsibilities with Real-World Consequences

Authentic tasks require students to assume responsibilities with real consequences: they serve actual recipients, promises must be honored, and mistakes affect someone. If a science lesson for rural children is poorly prepared, the children may stop attending; inaccurate data in an industry survey may mislead subsequent decisions. Responsibility changes students' relation to national conditions. The country and society are no longer merely concepts in an examination but concrete others whom students' actions can actually affect.

In the first author's fieldwork, students with authentic tasks began saying "our village" sooner, whereas those assigned only observational tasks were more likely to continue saying "they." Such shifts in pronouns can indicate a change in relational position, but they are not sufficient evidence of identification. Authentic tasks have three criteria: they address genuine needs rather than needs invented temporarily for a student team; they can fail, with real costs; and their outcomes are evaluated by the service recipients. Projects limited to visits or displays may provide experience without sustained responsibility. The problem with spectacularization is precisely that, when a setting is required only to look appealing, tasks degenerate into observa-

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tion.

6.2. Authentic Relationships: Evoking Emotion through Engagement with Others across Difference

Authentic relationships require students to form genuine connections with people whose backgrounds differ from their own. Fishermen, rural children, and grassroots officials are not abstract figures in a lecture but concrete people who can respond, question, and refuse. Working together, sharing a meal, or listening to a village history that differs from a textbook account can all become channels for emotional engagement. Such connections often involve distance or friction; difference and how it is handled therefore provide important clues to the deepening of emotional attachment.

In addition to explaining knowledge, teachers and university counselors should facilitate relationships by leaving room for direct interaction between students and service recipients. Excessive explanation and comprehensive assistance can reduce such opportunities. Authentic relationships also require time. One-day visits rarely accumulate shared experience, whereas site-based and continuing arrangements are more conducive to relational development. When students serve the same village or school over several years, unfamiliarity may gradually give way to familiarity, and "they" may become "we." Compressing the time spent together also compresses the space in which emotional attachment can form.

6.3. Genuine Reflection: Consolidating Fragmentary Experience into a Structure of Identification

Field experience is fragmentary; emotional arousal fades and details become blurred. Structured retrospection is needed to consolidate experience into relatively stable identification. In terms of the dialectical relation between internalization and externalization, reflection constitutes an "externalization–reinternalization" loop: students speak and write about their experiences and discuss them with peers, thereby reinterpreting those experiences through narration [13, 15]. In current practice, the end of an activity often means the archiving of materials, and summary meetings may amount to little more than statements of resolve. Extended conversations on the return journey, a reunion one week later, and renewed questioning after a semester are inexpensive formats. The key is to establish reflection as a continuing and formal component of instruction.

Productive reflection has two features. First, it asks about concrete experience rather than general feelings. Instead of "What are your thoughts?", it asks "Which moment was unexpected?" and "Which of your previous judgments was revised?", thereby reducing formulaic responses. Second, it makes peers an audience. Personal narratives are subject to verification by others who shared the experience, making exaggeration more difficult. Reflection thus involves both individual consolidation and collective calibration. Reflection and textualization both take the external form of writing, but the former seeks to understand experience, whereas the latter may seek to demonstrate achievement for evaluation. Their different purposes determine the educational significance of the texts they produce.

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7. Conclusions and Discussion

7.1. Main Conclusions

The central argument of this article is that classroom instruction and virtual experiences cannot fully provide the embodied experience, authentic relationships, and responsible action required for national-conditions identification; real-world settings therefore play an irreplaceable role. Bodily presence, however, does not automatically produce identification. The movement from physical presence to inner identification requires authentic tasks, authentic relationships, and genuine reflection to work together. The current priority in developing "mobile ideological and political theory courses" is not to continue expanding bases and routes but to deepen the mechanisms through which presence is transformed. The effectiveness of a national-conditions ideological and political course should be judged by whether students assume authentic responsibilities, form authentic relationships, and engage in genuine reflection, not merely by whether they were physically present.

For the development of the "Big Ideological and Political Course," this argument implies a shift from "taking courses into society" to "allowing society to enter students' understanding." The former primarily concerns space and resources, whereas the latter concerns the transformation of experience. University counselors and teachers of ideological and political theory courses therefore need to develop capacities to design authentic tasks, facilitate relationships in unfamiliar settings, and organize in-depth reflection. These capacities must be developed through sustained field leadership and professional reflection. Institutional improvement and workforce development should proceed together: the former determines which forms of practice are encouraged, and the latter determines whether they can be implemented effectively.

7.2. Three Questions for Evaluating Practice

These arguments can be translated into three questions for project evaluation: Do students' tasks have authentic evaluators? Does the project provide enough time together for relationships to form? Is organized reflection conducted after the activity? These questions provide basic diagnostic clues. If any component is clearly absent, a project may carry the risk of "presence without meaningful engagement," even when it is large in scale and impressive in presentation.

Shifting evaluative attention from scale indicators to these three questions constitutes an institutional correction to spectacularization, scripting, and textualization. Asking about evaluators tests the authenticity of tasks; asking about time together tests the conditions for relationship formation; and asking about reflection tests whether the transformation of experience has been implemented. Evaluation thus changes the constraints on organizers' behavior and acts more directly on the conditions producing alienation than one-off mobilization does.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The three forms of alienation and three conditions were constructed from fieldwork observations and the literature and have not been systematically measured empirically. The materials come from a single student association, limiting the range of settings and their representativeness. Future research could follow national-conditions education projects in different regions and of different types,

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conduct longitudinal qualitative research with participating students, test the explanatory power of the three conditions, and examine differences associated with disciplinary background and life experience. Whether the framework can be generalized to other forms of practice-based education, such as labor education and professional internships, also requires separate examination, because their educational objectives, meanings of presence, and conditions of transformation may differ.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: J.X.; Methodology: J.X.; Formal analysis: J.X.; Investigation: J.X.; Resources: J.X.; Data curation: J.X.; Writing—original draft preparation: J.X.; Writing—review and editing: J.X., Y.Z. and Y.H.; Visualization: J.X.; Project administration: J.X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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