

Research on Teaching Design of Integrating Art Therapy into Interactive Experiential Mental Health Courses for Vocational Undergraduate Education

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Abstract: Vocational undergraduate students face dual pressures from skill training and identity recognition, and verbally-dominated mental health courses often encounter obstacles to expression. Art therapy offers an alternative channel for emotional adjustment through non-verbal media. Based on interactive experiential learning theory and from the perspective of integrative logic, this study analyzes the non-verbal mechanisms, media adaptation, and facilitative functions; it extracts three core design elements, namely multimodal task sequences, symbolic embedding, and group dynamics structure; and it constructs a dynamic implementation framework encompassing facilitation techniques, tension regulation, and non-quantitative evaluation. This study provides a process-adaptive teaching design pathway for vocational undergraduate mental health courses.

Keywords: Art Therapy; Vocational Undergraduate Education; Interactive Experiential Mental Health Course; Teaching Design; Non-quantitative Evaluation.

Introduction

The mental health courses in vocational undergraduate colleges generally follow the standardized lesson plans of ordinary universities, ignoring the specific psychological needs of this group in terms of practical training pressure, role transition, and skill anxiety. Such courses primarily rely on cognitive restructuring and verbal expression as their main carriers, but vocational undergraduate students tend to feel alienated from abstract concepts, and their defense mechanisms often interfere with the exposure of genuine emotions. The non-verbal nature of art therapy can precisely bypass this obstacle, enabling the externalization of emotions and the concrete transformation of liminal feelings through media such as painting, music, and body movements. However, most existing studies treat art therapy as an independent intervention method, and few have systematically explored the teaching design logic of embedding it into interactive experiential courses. The significance of this study lies in filling this gap, forming a closed loop from integrative logic, core design elements, to dynamic implementation framework, and addressing three key issues: the disconnection between artistic activities and psychological objectives, the disconnection between experience and reflection, and the conflict between evaluation methods and the nature of the course. Conducting this research is necessary for enhancing the process adaptability of vocational undergraduate mental health courses and expanding the application boundaries of art therapy in educational settings.

1. Integrative Logic of Art Therapy and Vocational Undergraduate Mental Health Courses

1.1 The Unique Value of the Non-verbal Expression Mechanism of Art Therapy for Emotional Adjustment

Art therapy relies on non-verbal media such as painting, music, and body movements to provide individuals with a pathway that bypasses language centers and directly accesses inner feelings. Vocational undergraduate students often experience emotional fluctuations that are difficult to describe precisely when facing skill training and academic pressures, and traditional verbal communication is susceptible to interference from defense mechanisms. The lines, colors, and rhythmic changes in the artistic creation process can map subconscious tensions or conflicts, and this projective process does not rely on logical organization, thereby reducing psychological barriers. From a neurophysiological perspective, repetitive artistic operation behaviors help regulate the autonomic nervous system,

stabilizing heart rate variability and skin conductance responses. This mechanism indicates that art therapy is not simply catharsis, but rather reshapes the neural circuits of emotional regulation through sensory channels[1].

Compared with purely verbal expression, non-verbal artistic activities are more adept at handling liminal emotional states, namely those vague feelings that lie between consciousness and unconsciousness. Vocational undergraduate students are in a transition period of identity recognition, and the accidental effects or loss of control over materials in artistic creation can precisely serve as a safe simulation field for the externalization of emotions. An over-painted color patch or a rhythmic tapping that has not yet formed a melody, on the contrary, possesses greater diagnostic and regulatory value than complete works. Based on the above analysis, the non-verbal mechanism of art therapy is irreplaceable in emotional adjustment, and it is particularly suitable for embedding into the opening stage of interactive experiential courses, so as to lay the sensory foundation for subsequent cognitive-level psychological training.

1.2 Adaptive Screening of Psychological Development Characteristics of Vocational Undergraduate Students and Art Media

The vocational undergraduate student population bears the dual psychological tasks of adolescent self-identity exploration and vocational socialization preparation. Students at this stage tend to feel alienated from abstract didacticism, but they exhibit a relatively high degree of acceptance toward concrete operations, image feedback, and embodied actions. Having grown accustomed to establishing relationships with tools and materials through hand movements in practical training environments, this bodily memory makes tactile art media such as clay, collage, and fabric crafts more approachable than two-dimensional painting alone. Meanwhile, vocational undergraduate students are relatively sensitive to "usefulness," and artistic tasks that lack connections to real emotional scenarios are prone to being judged as meaningless activities. Therefore, media screening needs to take into account low thresholds, high error tolerance, and metaphorical carrying capacity.

In response to the above characteristics, art media can be adapted from three dimensions: the first dimension is the perception awakening layer, which selects real-time feedback media such as watercolor blooming and sand tray placement, matching students' psychological tendency to seek quick results; the second dimension is the relationship mapping layer, which adopts semi-structured media such as group collage or collective graffiti, echoing their collaborative experience accumulated in team training; the third dimension is the meaning construction layer, which introduces preservable and replayable media such as digital painting or photographic sequences, fulfilling vocational undergraduate students' potential expectation of "output that can be reviewed." Different media correspond to task demands at different psychological development stages, and a single medium cannot cover all adjustment objectives. Through layered screening, artistic forms resonate with students' psychological rhythms, avoiding the one-size-fits-all abuse of media in curriculum design.

1.3 The Catalytic Function Positioning of Artistic Forms in Interactive Experiential Learning Theory

Interactive Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that learning occurs in the cycle of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. Artistic forms play a catalytic role in this cycle, rather than replacing the main agent of cognitive processing. In the Concrete Experience stage, artistic tasks quickly create perceptible situational anchors; for example, an impromptu percussion ensemble can generate authentic feelings of cooperative pressure and rhythmic conflict. In the Reflective Observation stage, artistic works, as solidified behavioral traces, provide neutral objects that can be repeatedly examined; students do not need to directly face the sources of emotions, but instead analyze changes in picture composition or material contrasts. This objectification process reduces psychological defenses and enables reflection to occur[2].

From the perspective of the dynamic evolution of the learning cycle, the catalytic function of artistic forms is manifested in three turning points. The first turning point is the transition from random scribbling to conscious symbol selection, marking the entry of unconscious material into working memory. The second turning point is the transition from individual creation to the co-exhibition of works, triggering social comparison and cognitive conflict, and promoting the emergence of the need for abstract conceptualization. The third turning point is the transition from work analysis to rule extraction, where students spontaneously summarize embodied principles such as "warm colors make

me feel relaxed," thus completing the preparation for active experimentation. In interactive experiential courses, artistic forms serve neither as decorative warm-up activities nor as therapeutic deep interventions, but rather as catalytic media precisely placed at the weak links of the learning cycle. This positioning determines that curriculum designers must deduce the timing of intervention and the mode of withdrawal for artistic tasks in reverse based on learning objectives.

2. Core Design Elements of the Interactive Experiential Mental Health Course for Vocational Undergraduate Education

2.1 The Relational Construction between Multimodal Art Task Sequences and Psychological Resilience Cultivation

A multimodal art task sequence refers to the alternation of artistic activities employing different sensory channels, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, within the same course unit. When vocational undergraduate students encounter practical training setbacks or employment anxiety, the core shortcomings of their psychological resilience are often manifested in slow emotional recovery rates and single coping strategies. A single art form such as painting can project stress but lacks regulation in the rhythmic dimension; music can influence arousal levels but struggles to carry concrete emotional labels. Linking color doodling, rhythm imitation, and body shaping into a closed task chain allows each task to exert influence on different components of psychological resilience. The doodling stage activates tolerance for ambiguous stimuli, rhythm imitation trains the flexible shifting of attention, and body shaping strengthens the sense of re-control over out-of-control postures. This sequence is not a simple superimposition, but rather interrupts the original rigid response patterns through channel switching.

From the perspective of cognitive load, multimodal switching itself constitutes a controllable micro-frustration situation. Students need to abandon the expressive logic they have just become familiar with when shifting from painting to rhythmic tapping, and this alternation precisely simulates the cognitive restructuring requirements in real adversity. Psychological resilience is not a static trait, but rather a state characteristic generated in the process of dynamic adaptation. Through repeatedly creating miniature practice opportunities for "adapting to new rules," the multimodal task sequence makes resilience a trainable procedural memory. The blank transition periods between different modalities also possess implicit evaluative value, during which students' duration of hesitation or spontaneous speech can serve as non-quantitative indicators of resilience level. This constructive relationship suggests that curriculum designers should focus on the transition design at task switching points, rather than on the intrinsic quality of individual tasks[3].

2.2 Curriculum Content Reorganization through Symbolic Embedding and Emotional Externalization Procedures

Symbolic embedding refers to the introduction of metaphors in images, colors, or materials that possess cross-individual consistency within artistic tasks, thereby enabling originally private emotions to acquire a shareable expressive vehicle. Vocational undergraduate students vary considerably in their recognition of emotional vocabulary; some students can accurately describe their states with terms such as "anxiety," while others can only say "uncomfortable." Symbols provide an intermediate pathway: a tangled line represents entanglement, a dark color block represents suppression, and a sharp zigzag represents anger. Integrating these symbols into the curriculum content necessitates the reorganization of the original mental health knowledge points. The traditional unit on emotion recognition can be replaced with a "symbol-to-emotion mapping exercise," and the unit on stress management can be replaced with a "material selection task for stress shapes." Course content is no longer organized around conceptual definitions, but rather around the processes of symbol generation and interpretation.

The emotional externalization stage further transfers symbolic symbols from individual working memory to observable physical space. Specific operations include creating an emotion card wall, building a temporary sand tray landscape, or shooting a stop-motion animation sequence. The key function of externalization lies in breaking the direct equivalence between emotions and the self. The psychological distance between a student saying "I am very anxious" and saying "this blue square represents my anxiety" is vastly different. This sense of distance provides operational space for subsequent cognitive restructuring. When reorganizing the curriculum content, symbolic embedding should be placed before the externalization stage, and the externalization stage should be immediately

followed by activities for adjusting symbol relationships. For example, when students find that changing the sharp zigzag representing anxiety into a rounded curve leads to a decrease in subjective discomfort, this proves more effective than verbal persuasion. Through such reorganization, the content of the mental health course is transformed from knowledge transmission into the learning of a symbolic operating system.

2.3 Structured Organizational Principles for Art Co-creation Activities from the Perspective of Group Dynamics

The core difference between art co-creation activities and individual art creation lies in the sharing of the same artistic task space by multiple participants, such as relay painting, collective clay sculpting, or sound ensembles. Vocational undergraduate classes are relatively large in size, and group interactions tend to engender two extreme behavioral patterns, namely conformity and withdrawal. From the perspective of group dynamics, the structured organizational principles comprise three dimensions: role allocation structure, rule boundary structure, and feedback loop structure. The role allocation structure requires each co-creation activity to have predetermined yet non-fixed divisions of labor, such as "material manager," "action initiator," and "silent observer." Roles are rotated regularly to prevent the solidification of power. The rule boundary structure refers to the imposition of minimal constraints on artistic behavior, for example, "each person can only add one stroke at a time" or "one must not cover others' works." These rules are not intended to limit creativity, but rather to create a predictable order of interaction and reduce group anxiety[4].

The feedback loop structure is the most easily overlooked link in structured organization. After the co-creation activity ends, the work itself carries the traces of the entire group interaction process. The organizational principle requires the setup of a "trace reading" session, in which students only describe the creative traces left by others that they have observed, without making emotional attributions. For example, "I saw red lines extending from the lower right corner to the upper left corner," rather than "he was venting his anger." This de-psychologized description maintains a safe group distance, while at the same time enabling each individual to see how their own actions have been transformed or amplified by the group field. Vocational undergraduate students value efficiency and output, and the structured organizational principles precisely align with this characteristic: clear roles and rules reduce wasteful consumption caused by ambiguity, and the trace reading session transforms the co-created output into analyzable data materials. Group dynamics are no longer an uncontrollable variable, but rather a designable and observable curriculum resource.

3. Dynamic Implementation Framework for Integrating Art Therapy into the Teaching Process

3.1 Key Facilitation Techniques for the Perception Awakening and Material Probing Stages

The goal of the perception awakening stage is to help vocational undergraduate students switch from their daily cognitive mode to the sensory mode required for artistic expression. The facilitation techniques mainly revolve around the regulation of sensory thresholds, for example, asking students to close their eyes and touch paper surfaces of different roughness, or to adjust their breathing rhythm following low-frequency drumbeats. The material probing stage immediately follows perception awakening, allowing students to aimlessly handle materials such as clay, pastel powders, and collage fragments. The key facilitation points for the facilitator at this stage include: providing a limited set of options rather than a completely open material library, because too many choices can induce the habitual efficiency anxiety of vocational undergraduate students; and demonstrating "incorrect uses" of materials to reduce perfectionism, for instance, using fingers instead of brushes to apply paint. These two stages do not require the production of any recognizable imagery, but only record students' initial response patterns to the materials.

The facilitation techniques also need to address a common phenomenon: some students will actively ask "what should I do" or "is this correct." The appropriate response is not to provide directional instructions, but rather to transform the question into a description of perceptual states, for example, by asking in return "what temperature does the paper you are holding feel like" or "what does the feeling of pressing down this clay remind you of." The key technical points also include setting a fixed duration for the material probing stage, generally controlled within five to eight minutes, to prevent the probing stage from being indefinitely prolonged or from prematurely transitioning into image generation. The clarity of the time boundary itself serves a safety function: when students know

when the probing will end, they become more willing to engage in it[5].

3.2 Process Tension Regulation in the Image Generation and Narrative Reconstruction Stages

The image generation stage occurs after material probing, during which students begin to consciously discover recognizable forms from accidental traces. The core of process tension regulation is to maintain a state "between controllability and loss of control." Too low a level of tension causes the work to remain at the level of rigid symbols, for example, repeatedly drawing the same smiley face or geometric shapes; too high a level of tension triggers frustration and even refusal to continue. The regulatory measures include adjusting the degree of openness of the artistic task: for students who have difficulty starting, providing semi-structured prompts such as "turn that color block into an animal"; for overly controlling students, requiring drawing with the non-dominant hand or eyes-closed doodling to interrupt automatic expression. The tension level during the image generation stage can be read from non-verbal cues such as creation speed, frequency of revisions, and breathing rhythm.

The narrative reconstruction stage utilizes the generated images to reorganize emotional narratives. Students, when facing their own created imagery, are easily bound by existing interpretive frameworks. Process tension regulation at this stage is manifested in the facilitator's use of reframing questions to alter the narrative attributes of the images, for example, "if this squeezed shape is not anger, but rather suppressed strength, how would it change." This approach does not directly negate the original narrative, but rather expands the space of possibilities for alternative narratives. The technical points also include shifting the narrative from static description to dynamic evolution, requiring students to tell the "before, now, and after" of the image through three consecutive frames. This operation transforms fixed emotional experiences into editable storylines, and the process tension shifts from conflict to generation, avoiding the premature smoothness of the integration stage.

3.3 Non-quantitative Evaluation References for the Integration, Reflection, and Transfer Application Stages

The task of the integration and reflection stage is to help students extract transferable psychological operating rules from the artistic experience. Non-quantitative evaluation references refer to the use of three types of reference systems instead of quantitative indicators such as scores, grades, or scale values: behavioral trace reference, self-comparison reference, and context-matching reference. The behavioral trace reference requires students to compare the differences between the traces they left in the same artistic task at two different time points, for example, changes in pressure and color distribution between the first doodle and the third doodle. The self-comparison reference focuses on whether students can recognize "how this time's way of handling emotions differs from the last time." The context-matching reference assesses whether students can map strategies used in artistic tasks to specific life scenarios, for example, "which practical training session could the method of adjusting rhythm just now be applied to"[6].

The transfer application stage examines whether students can apply the regulatory strategies generated in the classroom to preset simulated scenarios. Non-quantitative evaluation references adopt descriptive levels rather than numerical scores, for example, three categories of labels: "independently transferable," "transferable with prompts," and "not yet transferable." The evaluation information originates from students' quality descriptions of their completion of the transfer tasks, rather than from the instructor's subjective scoring. A specific operation involves setting up "transfer cards," on which students write down one effective strategy they discovered in the artistic activity, and then write down two campus life scenarios to which this strategy might be applicable. The evaluation reference does not judge right or wrong, but rather records whether the matching logic between the strategy and the scenario holds. The two stages of integration reflection and transfer application share the same evaluation logic: focusing on the usability and applicability range of the strategies, without attending to the correctness or superiority-inferiority of the strategies.

Conclusion

This study has theoretically clarified the integrative logic of incorporating art therapy into vocational undergraduate interactive experiential mental health courses, proposed three core design elements, namely multimodal task sequences, symbolic embedding, and structured organization of group dynamics, and constructed a dynamic implementation framework encompassing facilitation

techniques, tension regulation, and non-quantitative evaluation. This framework distinguishes itself from traditional quantitative-oriented instructional design, emphasizing the precise deployment of artistic forms as catalytic media and the shift of evaluation references from scores to behavioral traces and self-comparison. Future research directions include: the differential effects of various art media types (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) on specific psychological resilience components of vocational undergraduate students; strategies for maintaining the reliability of non-quantitative evaluation references across different class sizes; and the construction of a facilitator competency model to support the large-scale promotion of this instructional design. Longitudinal follow-up studies may also examine the delayed effects of such courses on students' vocational adaptation periods.

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