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 need to learn some practical skills and form an identity; therefore, verbally presenting the contents of mental health education may not be very appealing. Another way to help people manage their emotions is wordless art therapy. In light of the theory of interactive experiential learning and from the perspective of integrative logic, this paper explores the non-verbal forms, media adaptations and facilitation roles of group activities, derives three main Design elements, namely multimodal task sequences, symbolic embedding and structure of group dynamics, and finally builds a dynamic implementation framework that includes facilitation techniques, tension regulation and non-quantitative evaluation. The Process-Adaptive Teaching Design Path for Mental Health Courses in Vocational Colleges is Presented Here.*

Keywords: *Art Therapy, Vocational undergraduate education, Interactive experiential mental health course, Teaching design, Non-quantitative evaluation*

Introduction

Most of the mental health courses in vocational undergraduate colleges are based on the standard lesson plans of regular universities and do not take into account the special psychological needs of this group under training pressure, role changes and skill anxiety. Cognitive restructuring and verbal expression will be the main forms of organisation for this course, but vocational undergraduate students are more likely to feel alienated by abstract ideas and are often inhibited from speaking due to defence mechanisms. As it is non-verbal, art therapy can directly address the problem of inaccessibility and help people express their emotions and experience liminality in various forms of art, such as painting, music and dance. Most of the above studies have focused on art therapy as an independent type of intervention, and very few have systemically investigated the teaching design reasons for using it in interactive experiential courses. The purpose of this paper is to correct the problems mentioned above, build an integrated system of logic, primary design elements and implementation plans, and solve the three main problems: lack of connection between artistic activities and psychological goals, deficiency in experience and reflection, and a mismatch between evaluation methods and the nature of the course. The purpose of this paper is to improve the process adaptability of vocational college students' mental health courses and expand the application scope of art therapy in schools.

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

1.1 The Special Value of the Non-verbal Expression Mechanism of Art Therapy in Emotional Regulation

Art therapy can help people express emotions that are difficult to put into words and learn about themselves in a non-verbal way through art, music, movement, etc. Vocational undergraduate students often have emotional changes that are difficult to express precisely due to the pressure of skill training and study, and traditional words cannot be used easily because of defence mechanisms. Lines, colours and changes in rhythm during the creation of art can express subconscious tensions or conflicts, and this projection does not need to be logical; thus, it is free from psychological inhibition. Neurophysiology has found that regular participation in the arts can regulate the autonomic nervous system and increase heart rate variability and skin conductance responses. Therefore, art therapy can help regulate emotions by changing the structure of the brain through senses and by expressing

emotions[1].

Non-verbal art activities are more suitable for expressing vague emotions; that is, emotions that are in a grey area between consciousness and unconsciousness cannot be conveyed by words alone. Vocational college students are still discovering who they are, and the accidental results or lack of control over materials in art creation can be a safe place to express emotions. An overpainted area of colour or a regular tap that has not yet formed a tune is, in fact, more instructive and regulating than a whole piece. Based on the above analysis, the non-verbal mode of art therapy can help people regulate their emotions; therefore, it is very suitable to be introduced in the initial stage of interactive experience courses to provide a foundation for the subsequent cognitive-level psychological training.

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

Vocational undergraduate students need to handle the two psychological problems of adolescent self-identity exploration and preparation for vocational life. At this time, students may think that the teaching is too abstract, and they have a relatively high desire to learn through concrete operations, visual feedback and physical activities. After growing up, I have formed relationships with tools and materials through practice, and now I have created a kind of bodily memory that has made tactile art media, such as clay, collage and fabric crafts, more accessible than two-dimensional painting. At the same time, vocational college students are more focused on "usefulness", and artistic works that do not move people's hearts are often considered to have no purpose. Therefore, media screening should have a low threshold, be very tolerant of errors, and have good metaphorical capacity.

Based on the above attributes, the three dimensions of art media can be divided as follows. First, there should be interest; in real-time feedback media, students can immediately see the results of their work, such as watercolor blooming or sand tray placement. Second, we need to create links among the works; group collage and collective graffiti are typical semi-structured media that can build on the collaborative experience students have gained in team training. Finally, there is a need for the creation of meaning, and preservable and replayable media, such as digital painting and photographic sequences, can meet the vocational undergraduate students' desire for an "output that can be reviewed". Different media are suitable for the various needs of tasks at different times in people's psychological development, and no single medium can meet all these demands. Different kinds of art have different emotional effects on students and can be used for teaching.

1.3 Position of the Catalytic Function of Artistic Forms in Interactive Experiential Learning Theory

According to the theory of interactive experiential learning, people learn through the cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Artistic forms can promote this cycle, but they should not be taken as the main way of thinking. Artistic tasks in the period of concrete experience can quickly create a typical situation; for example, an improvised percussion group can express the actual emotions of cooperative pressure and rhythmic conflict. At the stage of reflective observation, as fixed behavioural traces, works of art are neutral objects that can be observed repeatedly; one does not need to face the sources of emotion directly but can study changes in picture composition or material contrast. Objectification is a way to avoid emotion and gain distance from life[2].

The three times that the catalytic effect of art forms has been observed in the development of the learning cycle are as follows. The first is that the random scribbling has become a conscious selection of symbols, and unconscious material has thus entered working memory. The second is that the works are no longer created alone but co-exhibited; thus, there has been social comparison and cognitive conflict, and a need for abstract conceptualisation has arisen. The third stage is to go from work analysis to rule extraction; at this time, students will spontaneously summarize the embodied principles, such as "warm colours make me feel relaxed", and thus have completed the preparatory work for active experimentation. Artistic forms in interactive experiential courses are not only for the pleasure of aesthetics and emotions but also aim to inspire and promote all links in the learning process. Therefore, the curriculum designer needs to decide when to intervene and how to withdraw during the teaching of art according to the learning goals.

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

2.1 Relational Construction of Multimodal Art Task Sequences and Cultivation of Psychological Resilience

A sequence of multimodal art activities is a collection of all kinds of senses that are combined in a single lesson, such as sight, sound, movement, etc. Most vocational college students, when they encounter problems during their internships or are anxious about getting a job, find that their main weaknesses in psychological resilience are a slow speed of emotional recovery and a single way of coping. Painting is a single type of art that can cause stress but does not have rhythm regulation; music can change people's arousal levels, but it is not generally associated with particular emotions. Colour doodling, rhythm imitation and body shaping can be connected in a closed task chain to affect various areas of psychological resilience in different ways. Doodling can help reduce anxiety, and rhythmic exercise can improve the concentration and self-regulation abilities of the brain; thus, people are less likely to develop bad posture habits. It is not to be added directly, but rather channel switching is employed to break the original fixed-response pattern.

Cognitive load is a person's mental capacity, so changing modes may be stressful. Students need to move away from the expressive logic they have just become accustomed to in painting and start to feel what cognitive restructuring is required when facing difficulties in real life. Psychological resilience is not an innate trait of personality but rather a condition that can be achieved through life experience. After a few short training rounds of "adjustment to the new rules", the multimodal task sequence has shown some robustness and is now a type of trainable procedural memory. There is no empty transition period between the different modes, and the length of students' hesitation or spontaneous speech at this time can be taken as a non-quantifiable index of resilience. As shown in the construction above, curriculum designers need to give more attention to the design of transitions at the time of task switching rather than to the intrinsic quality of individual tasks[3].

2.2 Reorganisation of Curriculum Content Based on Symbolic Embedding and Emotional Externalisation Procedures

Symbolic embedding is the use of metaphors in images, colours and other materials that have cross-individual consistency in artistic works to provide a way for private emotions to be expressed publicly. Vocational undergraduate students have a very uneven distribution of knowledge in emotional vocabulary; some students can express their emotions in words accurately, such as "anxiety", while others can only say they are "uncomfortable". In the middle are symbols; a messy line is entanglement, a dark block is suppression, and a sharp zigzag is anger. To add these symbols to the curriculum, the original knowledge points in mental health need to be revised. The old unit of emotion recognition will be replaced by a "symbol-to-emotion mapping exercise", and the unit on stress management will be changed to a "material selection task for stress shapes"; thus, the course content will no longer be organized according to conceptual definitions but based on the process of symbol generation and interpretation.

At this time, emotions are expressed by moving symbols from working memory out into the world. Some activities are to create an emotion card wall, build a temporary sand tray landscape, film stop-motion animations, etc. The first reason for externalisation is that emotions are not qualities of the self. The psychological distance of a student saying "I am very anxious" and saying "this blue square is my anxiety" is relatively large. Therefore, there is a sense of alienation in the next stage of consciousness. When revising the content of the curriculum, symbolic embedding should be carried out before the externalisation stage, and immediately after the externalisation stage, activities to adjust symbol relationships need to be organised. For example, if the students can learn from their own experience that changing the sharp zigzag used to show anxiety into a round curve reduces their own sense of unease, it will be more effective than just being told verbally. Therefore, the content of the mental health course will change from teaching knowledge to teaching how to use the symbolic operating system.

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

The main difference between art co-creation activities and individual art creation is that in

co-creation activities, several people work together in the same area of artistic creation, such as relay painting, group clay sculpting or sound ensembles. Vocational undergraduate classes are usually large in size, and group interaction tends to result in the two extreme behaviors of conformity and withdrawal. The three types of organisations in terms of group dynamics are the structure of role allocation, the structure of rule boundaries and the feedback loop. Divide the roles of co-creation activities and keep them fixed but not too rigid; for example, there are "material managers", "action initiators" and "silent observers", and these roles should be regularly rotated to prevent the formation of power. The Structure of the rule boundary is to set a low threshold for artistic behaviour, such as "each person can add only one stroke at a time" or "do not cover others' works". The purpose of the rules is to promote the free expression of creativity and reduce the stress that may lead to anxiety in students[4].

The Structure of the feedback loop is often omitted from the organisation of formal organisations. At the end of the co-creation activity, the work will bear the marks of all the groups' cooperation. The organisation of the "trace reading" session is that students only need to describe the creative traces others have left in their work and do not need to add any emotions. For example, instead of saying that he was angry, one could write that he saw red lines extending from the lower right corner to the upper left corner; although these are impersonal descriptions, they can still make people feel how their own behaviour has been changed or improved by the group situation. Vocational college students are more concerned about efficiency and results; therefore, the organisation of the structure should have a clear division of labour and rules to avoid time loss due to ambiguity, and trace reading sessions can be used to collect data on the joint creation of works. Group dynamics are no longer random fluctuations but can be organised intentionally in the curriculum and observed.

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

3.1 Primary Facilitation Methods for the Perception Awakening and Material Probing Stages

The Goal of the Perception Awakening stage is to help vocational college students change from their old way of thinking to a sense-oriented approach to art. The first type of help is to change the sensory threshold; for example, have the students close their eyes and feel all sorts of rough textures of paper, or moderate their breathing according to the speed of a slow-tempo drum. The Material Probing Stage is directly after the Perception Awakening Stage, and students can freely try all kinds of materials, such as clay, pastel powder and collage. At this time, the first way to help the facilitator is to offer a small number of choices instead of a whole open-material library; otherwise, there will be efficiency anxiety among vocational undergraduate students, and demonstrating "incorrect use" of materials will reduce perfectionism, such as using fingers instead of brushes to apply paint. The two stages do not need to produce any pictures; they only need to record the students' first reactions to the materials.

Another problem with the leading method is that some students are too eager to ask what to do or whether it is right. In such cases, do not answer immediately; instead, turn the question back and ask how one feels, such as, "What is the temperature of the paper you are holding?" or "What do you think about the sensation of pressing down on this clay?". The other technical requirement is to set a reasonable time limit for the material probing stage, which is usually five to eight minutes; otherwise, it will run indefinitely or be too early in the image creation process. The first reason for setting a time limit is to ensure the safety of the students; they will be more willing to answer in class if they know when the questions will be over[5].

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

Second, there is image generation by material probing, and at this time, students begin to recognise familiar shapes in the random marks subconsciously. The Goal of regulating process tension is to keep it at an acceptable level and, at the same time, allow some freedom for people. If the tension is too low, the work will be boring and uninteresting; if it is too high, one will feel frustrated and lose the will to continue. Regulatory Measures: Reduce the degree of openness in the students' artistic tasks; for students who have difficulty starting, give semi-structured prompts such as "turn that colour block into an animal"; if they are too controlled, have them draw with their non-dominant hand or doodle with their eyes closed. Tension at the time of image creation can be deduced from non-verbal cues, such as the speed of creation, frequency of revision and changes in breathing.

Narrative Reconstruction is based on the images obtained in the previous step. When the students create their own pictures, they will not be limited by the interpretation frameworks of others. At this

time, to control the tension in the process, I have used reframing questions from the facilitator to change the narrative attributes of the pictures, such as, "If this squeezed shape is not anger, but rather suppressed strength, how would it be different?" I have not directly refuted the original story but have created new spaces for alternative narratives. The technical goal is to go from a fixed description to dynamic development in the story and show how something changes by displaying three consecutive pictures. Therefore, the fixed emotional experience becomes an editable story, and the tension in this process is no longer conflict but generation; thus, it does not have the early smoothness of the integration stage.

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

The aim of the integration and reflection stage is to have students develop general rules for psychological regulation based on their own experiences in art. References that are not quantitative fall into the three types of reference systems and are not quantitative indicators such as scores, grades or scale values: behavioural trace references, self-comparison references and context-matching references. Behavioural trace reference asks students to compare the differences in the traces they left during the same artistic activity at two different times, such as how pressure and colour distribution have changed between the first doodle and the third doodle. The first is a self-comparison reference; whether students can feel that their way of handling emotions at this time is different from last time is the subject. Second, based on the context of life, it should be determined whether students can apply the strategies they have learned in artistic activities to actual situations in daily life, such as choosing which practical training session to use the method of adjusting rhythm at present[6].

The application stage is when students use the regulation strategies they have learned in class to solve the simulated problem. The reference for the non-quantitative assessment is at the descriptive level, and there are three categories of labels: "independently transferable", "transferable with prompts", and "not yet transferable". The evaluation data are based on the students' quality descriptions of how they completed the transfer tasks, and there are no subjective scores from teachers. Students can also make "transfer cards", record one good way they have learned in the art class activity on these cards, and then write down two situations in their school life where they can use this method. The evaluation norm is not about right and wrong; it is only to determine whether the matching logic of the strategy and the scenario is correct. Both the two stages of integration reflection and transfer application will be judged by the same criteria; only the usability and scope of application for the strategies will be considered, not whether the strategies are correct or superior to others.

Conclusion

First, there is a theoretical study on how to integrate art therapy in vocational undergraduate interactive experiential mental health courses; next, there are the design elements of three multimodal task sequences, symbolic embedding and structured organisation of group dynamics; finally, a dynamic implementation framework of facilitation techniques, tension regulation and non-quantitative evaluation has also been established. The framework above is different from the traditional quantitative approach to instructional design in that it uses all kinds of art forms as catalysts and changes the basis of assessment from scores to behavioural traces and self-comparison. In the future, more research will be conducted to study the effects of all kinds of art media (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) on all aspects of psychological resilience for vocational undergraduate students; methods to ensure the reliability of non-quantitative evaluation references in all classes need to be developed; and a competency model for facilitators should be established to support the broad application of this teaching model. Longitudinal follow-up studies will be carried out to observe whether there are any delayed effects of the above courses on students' vocational adaptation.

Fund Projects

The 2026 Annual General Research Project of Higher Education Teaching Reform in Hainan Province: “Innovation in the Curriculum System and Teaching Model of Vocational Undergraduate Mental Health Courses — A Study on the Integrated Practice Based on Interactive Experiential Teaching” (Project No.: Hnjg2026-179).

This paper is a research achievement of the 2025 Annual Key Funded Project of Higher Education Teaching Reform in Hainan Province, “Research on Curriculum Construction Standards and Evaluation

Methods for Vocational Undergraduate Institutions" (Project No.: Hnjg2025ZD-74).

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