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# Research on The Promotion Effect of "Psychology of Painting" Course on College Students' Mental Health

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## Abstract

With the expanding demand of college students for knowledge of mental health, mental health courses for college students are increasingly developing in the direction of diversification and pluralism. The “Psychology of Painting” is popular among students for its interesting, interactive, and practical features, and has achieved a certain effect in its teaching practice. The survey showed that the course enhanced students' self-awareness, improved interpersonal relationships, and promoted personal growth. In the future, this course could be widely promoted as a mental health class in colleges and universities.

## Keywords

Psychology of Painting; College Students; Mental Health

In recent years, various psychological problems have emerged among college students. The 2020 Mental Health Blue Book Report on National Mental Health Development in China (2019~2020) (hereinafter referred to as the Development Report) points out that 18.5% of college students tend towards depression, 4.2% tend high risk of depression; 8.4% tend towards anxiety. Sleep deprivation is more common among college students, with 43.8% of college students saying they were sleep deprived a few days in the recent week, 7.9% saying they were sleep deprived more than half of the time, and 4.4% saying they were sleep deprived almost every day. The results of the survey also indicate that 4% of college students have a low awareness of mental health and need to be improved, while 39% have a medium awareness of mental health and need to be improved. College students have a rich demand for mental health knowledge, and the degree of need satisfaction is significantly higher than the national average. It shows that it is urgent to enrich the content of college students' mental health education courses and strengthen the construction of college students' mental health education course system, so as to further enhance college students' mental health awareness and psychological growth ability.

In the past 30 years, the state has paid more and more attention to the mental health of college students, and the mental health course for college students has gone through a bottom-up and then top-down development path from non-existent to existing, from small to large, and from optional to compulsory. With the expanding demand for mental health education among college students, various forms and carriers of college mental health courses have been launched gradually in recent years, such as "Psychology of Love" by Zhang Xiaowen of Wuhan University of Technology. This course has just been launched, and the number of students who took the course exceeded 110,000 in one period. This has made her one of the most popular lecturers and an "internet celebrity" among mental health teachers. Since 2019, the author has experimentally introduced

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the course "Psychology of Painting" at Zhejiang Shurian University, which has been welcomed by current students. After four years of practice, the initial results have been achieved. Overall, this course is very effective in promoting self-awareness, interpersonal relationship building, and psychological growth among college students.

# 1 Introduction

The psychology of painting is the branch of psychology that uses painting as a medium for psychological analysis. The course "Psychology of Painting" is a university-wide elective course in mental health education. The main task of the course is to teach students to master the basic principles of psychoanalysis of painting, especially to learn the most common method – the HTP(House-Tree-Person). Acquire this practical psychoanalytic technique to better understand themselves and others and promote their personality towards healthy and harmonious development. Through learning and practice in the classroom, college students have gained personal growth.

## 1.1The situation of teaching objects

The course was offered in the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year and was offered for four semesters, with a total of 512 students taking the course (100 in the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year, 66 in the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, 60 in the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, 67 in the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year, 100 in the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, and 119 in the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year ).

Most of the students who took the course did so because of their interest in psychology and drawing. There were no significant psychological barriers for students who participated in the course.

## 1.2Instructional Design

The course consists of nine chapters, which are: Introduction to Psychoanalysis of Painting, Implementation of Painting Psychometric Tests, Overall Analysis of the Picture, Tree Painting Analysis, Character Portrait Analysis, House Painting Analysis, Attachment Analysis, Techniques of Integrated Psychological Analysis of Paintings, and The Application of Drawing Psychoanalysis in Personal Growth. The teaching schedule is two class periods per week for a total of 32 classes over 16 weeks. The first eight chapters focus on the training of the basic skills of psychoanalysis of painting, The first eight chapters focus on the basic skills of psychoanalysis, while the ninth chapter focuses on the application of psychoanalytic techniques in enhancing self-perception, regulating emotions, improving interpersonal relationships, coping with stress, and career planning.

## 1.3Assessment requirements

At the end of the course, each student takes an exam with the class. The general test questions consist of two parts, one is the gain and experience of the course study this semester, and the other is the analysis of two

paintings of HTP (The first painting was drawn by the student in the first session, and the second painting was drawn in the last session).

# 2 Evaluation of the effect

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of this course, the author conducted an anonymous survey in the form of a questionnaire to students in four classes. The details are as follows:

A total of 259 students participated in this questionnaire, including 59 male students (22.78%) and 200 female students (77.22%). Significantly more female students than male students were surveyed. The proportion of course selection shows that more female students than male students participated in the course, which is in line with the actual situation. From the perspective of grade level, 88 students (33.98%%) in the class of 2018, 42 (16.22%) in the class of 2019, 47 (18.15%) in the class of 2020, 48 (18.53%) in the class of 2021, and 31 (11.97%) in the class of 2022.

## 2.1 Students are highly satisfied with the course

As seen in Table 1, students' overall satisfaction with the course is high. There are 100 people with a perfect score of 10, accounting for 38.61% of the survey, more than one-third; 51 people with a score of 9, accounting for 19.69%, and more than half with a score of 9 or more; 61 people with a score of 8, accounting for 23.55%, and only 11 people with a score of 6 or less.

*Table 1: Students' satisfaction with the course*

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 13 | 23 | 61 | 51 | 100 |
| (0%) | (0%) | (0%) | (0.77%) | (3.47%) | (5.02%) | (8.88%) | (23.55%) | (19.69%) | (38.61%) |

## 2.2 Students gain more from this course

In the survey, 109 people (42.08%) considered it “very rewarding”, 126 people (48.65%) considered it “gain a lot”, and 24 people (9.27%) considered a “somewhat rewarding”. No students in the survey thought they were "not very productive" or "not productive", as shown in Table 2. In other words, all students who participated in the course reported that they had gained something, and the percentage of students who had gained a lot was over 90%.

*Table 2: What students have learned in this course*

| Options | Sub-total | Scale |
|---|---|---|
| Very Rewarding | 109 | 42.08% |
| Gain a Lot | 126 | 48.65% |
| Somewhat | 24 | 9.27% |
| Not Many | 0 | 0% |
| No | 0 | 0% |
| Number of valid persons | 259 | 42.08% |

Likewise, the end-of-course feedback reflects that most of the students said they “benefited” from the course and “gained a lot”. Some students said that at first, they thought that this kind of school elective was

a “watered-down class” and that they only took the class to get credit for it. She didn’t expect to find that the course was comparable to a professional course, and in the end, she “overturned the silly idea that it was a watered-down class”. Some students even claim to have taken more notes than in their major classes and have no time to play with their phones. Some students also expressed it this way: “Overall, through this period of study, I have gone from a non-basic person to a person who can analyze a simple HTP on his own. Thanks to my previous curiosity, I didn’t miss this class. Even though I had to attend five classes every Thursday, it was hard but fulfilling, and the fulfillment made it enjoyable.” Some students also said, “Taking this course has given me great rewards that are different from my usual subjects. It not only gave me a foundation of theoretical knowledge about the psychology of painting but also gave me the ability to practice. When analyzing each painting you need to combine theoretical knowledge with practicality to know what the painter has experienced. It is really a special kind of amazing journey.”

## 2.3 The most obvious reward for students is improved self-awareness

*Table 3: What is the most rewarding aspect*

| Options | Sub-total | Scale |
|---|---|---|
| Further understand one’s personality traits | 229 | 88.42% |
| Easier to understand the inner world of others | 169 | 65.25% |
| Build better relationships with others | 137 | 52.9% |
| Better self-growth | 141 | 54.44% |
| Others | 31 | 11.97% |
| Number of valid persons | 259 | |

According to Table 3, the most rewarding aspect for students is “better understanding of their personality traits”, which is the top priority, accounting for 88.42%, followed by “easier understanding of others’ inner world “, accounting for 65.25%. The third is achieving self-growth and improving interpersonal relationships.

2.3.1 The course enhances students’ self-awareness

As the survey shows, the improvement of self-perception is the biggest gain for students taking this course, which is closely related to the fact that the HTP itself is a personality test. After learning the HTP, students can understand their personality characteristics, such as their personality's introversion and extroversion, attitude, self-confidence, etc. The author was most impressed by the way one student commented on his gains: "It is no exaggeration to say that this semester I have learned more about myself than even the previous dozen years. The most amazing thing is that the deficiencies and shortcomings exposed in that painting before the semester were greatly improved at the end of the semester. I can say that the psychology of painting has not only made me understand myself better but also become better and more confident." Some students also said, "I gradually began to re-understand myself, discovering the part of myself that I had not shown before, and facing up to many flaws that I had always avoided before, or that had not surfaced in my subconscious. Through analyzing and profiling myself again and again, I became more and more aware of my strengths and weaknesses. Thanks to this course and Mrs. Chen, I can be face to face with myself as I really am." There are many similar experiences, so I won’t list them all here.

2.3.2 The course promotes students' understanding of others

Psychoanalysis of paintings also plays a very important role in understanding others. The HTP serves as

a tool to recognize not only themselves but also others. One student said, “Now I am able to analyze the inner world of the painter, his truest emotions and thoughts, and even understand the painter’s past and his imagined future from a simple painting. This is something I would never have been able to do before taking this course.” Many students apply it to their friends and family after studying it. For example, a student described it this way: “During the Dragon Boat Festival, I met my good friend and asked her to draw the analysis of the HTP. Both of us did not expect that the final analysis results were similar to her personality and experience. At that time I was immensely proud, I felt I had become a counselor, relying on what I had learned to analyze it.” One student had this to say, “After taking this course, I can analyze the people around me and be able to know in time what problems they have and what points I should learn.” Another student also used the HTP to analyze her brother’s drawings to understand his current state, and said, “I was happy to see me in his drawings and to see that he is a positive and cheerful child! Thanks to the psychology of painting, I have another way to communicate with my family.” Through a painting, her understanding of her loved ones has been enhanced. The painting has enhanced her relationship with her family.

2.3.3 The course helps students to build good interpersonal relationships

In terms of interpersonal communication, taking this course can help students build better interpersonal relationships. After learning about the content of self-portraits, one girl described it this way: "I always thought I was a good listener, but when I started my portraits without ears, I had doubts about what I had known for 18 years. And later on, when I got along with my roommates, I found that sometimes I really wasn't as good at listening as I thought, and I would even misunderstand them. But when I started to look at myself, I started to change. I started to listen carefully, and that made me get along better with them. I also told them what I had learned in the psychology of drawing, they were very interested in it as well, and the atmosphere at that time was really nice"

2.3.4 The course helps students to grow themselves

The course also has a positive effect on students in terms of self-growth. For example, one boy wrote: “What surprised me was its ability to deduce my character and personal problem from just a few paintings. I also deduced some of my problems through self-analysis based on what my teacher taught me, such as being quiet, not very good at socializing, and choosing to run away when faced with difficulties. I try to change myself, such as trying to communicate with strangers when I go out, and not avoiding problem when it becomes difficult. After a period of experience, my personality has also improved. I became lively and cheerful, willing to take the initiative to communicate with people so that I gained more friends. In terms of problem-solving, I am now more confident and relaxed than I was before.” This student saw the problems in his personality through the painting and took positive action to make progress and grow. There is also a girl who confessed her heart like this: “At first, I closed myself up because of emotional problems, but in the process of learning the psychology of painting, I slowly opened myself. After analyzing and understanding myself a little bit, I started to come out of my own world. I also learned how to quickly understand the psychological state of others and analyze their feelings and personalities. I feel that I have bridged life again, and I have become comfortable in dealing with others because I can feel their emotions through paintings. I have become cheerful and I think I have come out of the shadow of my freshman year. “

## 2.4 Highly recommended by students

Course recommendation is an important indicator of a course's popularity with students. Table 4 shows that 67.18% of the students would recommend this course to others, and the number of those who would not recommend it is only 2. This also shows the recognition of this course.

At the end of the term, many students expressed their willingness to continue taking these courses or to recommend them to others. For example, one student mentioned, "I think the Psychology of Painting class is getting more and more interesting, but the semester is coming to the end so quickly. I suddenly feel a little bit reluctant to leave this class, and I hope to have the opportunity to take Psychology of Drawing next semester."

*Table 4: Students' recommendation of the course*

| Options | Sub-total | Scale |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 174 | 67.18% |
| Probably | 83 | 32.05% |
| No | 2 | 0.77% |
| Number of valid persons | 259 | |

## 3 Outlook on The Psychology of Painting Course

The development of college student mental health programs needs to be more diverse. As suggested in the Development Report, more targeted programs could be offered in the future to address college students' focus on interpersonal interaction, self-regulation, and career guidance. The Psychology of Painting is just such a course. Painting psychoanalysis has proven to be a very practical technique that can help students understand themselves and improve their social skills and self-development. After the systematic study, college students are also able to handle it.

As a course, the Psychology of Painting is a late starter and needs more people to participate in it to promote its continuous improvement and development. In future teaching and practice, the author believes that attention must be paid to the following areas.

Firstly, it is the issue of teacher training. It is understood that there are no relevant specialties in China to cultivate specialized talents. only a few universities have been involved in postgraduate education, which makes it difficult to cultivate professional talents in painting psychology. Although there are currently some pieces of training on psychological painting skills, the quality of teaching cannot be guaranteed and the identity of the teachers is doubtful. There is a lack of a group on leading figures and standardized training standards. In this regard, the author has conducted useful exploration and practice and has been committed to the teaching and promotion of this course for a long time. In the past four years, in addition to the regular school elective courses in colleges and universities, the author has given lectures in more than ten colleges and institutions, including Zhejiang University, through large-scale public welfare activities on mental health education to spread the basic concepts of drawing psychology. In March 2020, the author was invited by the Zhejiang Provincial Psychological Counseling Committee to give a web lecture on the psychology of painting, and more than 100 teachers listened online; In October 2022, a workshop on psychological of painting was conducted by the author in Hangzhou, and more than thirty university teachers participated.

Secondly, it is the problem of the teaching team. Building a good course needs to be supported by a strong team. One person can go fast, but a group of people can go far. The construction of the course "Psychology of Painting" relies on a team of teachers who not only understand psychology but also have studied and practiced the techniques of psychoanalysis of painting. Currently, the author's school has a learning practice group that conducts regular exchanges and discussions, laying the foundation for a sustainable course offering. In addition, the author has extended to other universities to help psychology teachers with related courses. For example, Zhejiang University City College has set up "Psychology of Painting" as a school-level elective course in 2020.

Thirdly, there is the issue of the course materials. Quality courses require quality materials. At present, books on the psychology of painting are mainly self-study in science, while those suitable for course teaching are rarely seen. In 2020, Psychological Drawing for College Students was launched, edited by Mr. Yan Hu, with the participation of the author and psychology teachers from other universities. However, the book covers a wide range of topics and is more suitable for self-study by college students. Therefore, a set of materials suitable for teaching the "Psychology of Painting" is still to be developed. To this end, the author is also working actively on a related textbook, which is expected to be published at the end of 2023.

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