



Expansive Teaching Approach in Mental Health Education: A Theoretical Study in Chinese Vocational Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Mental health education plays a vital role in fostering the holistic development of students in higher vocational colleges, where learners often face academic pressure, career uncertainty, and social adaptation challenges. However, traditional lecture-based psychological courses tend to emphasize theoretical knowledge while neglecting students' engagement and practical psychological skills. To address this gap, this paper explores the theoretical application of the Expansive Teaching Approach in mental health education for vocational students in China. Drawing on Vygotsky's developmental theory, Activity Theory, and constructivist pedagogy, the Expansive Teaching Approach emphasizes learner-centered participation, open exploration, and the integration of real-life contexts into the curriculum. This paper develops a conceptual framework that situates expansive teaching within three interrelated dimensions—cognitive expansion, emotional expansion, and behavioral expansion—and analyzes how these dimensions can be embedded into course objectives, instructional design, and classroom strategies. The study argues that this approach can enhance students' self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence, while also cultivating resilience and adaptability. At the same time, potential challenges are discussed, including limited teaching resources, teacher preparedness, and institutional constraints. By providing a theoretical model and pedagogical implications, this paper contributes to the innovation of mental health education in vocational colleges and offers directions for future empirical studies and curriculum reforms.

Keywords: Expansive Teaching Approach; Mental Health Education; Vocational Colleges; Theoretical Framework; Student Development

INTRODUCTION

In the global education system, mental health education has become a key indicator for evaluating educational quality and the holistic development of students. For students in Chinese higher vocational colleges, psychological challenges are particularly prominent. Compared with undergraduates, vocational students often face more complex sources of psychological stress, including academic adaptation, career anxiety, interpersonal conflict, and social identity issues. In recent years, the Ministry of Education of China has incorporated mental health education into the quality evaluation framework of vocational education and emphasized a learner-centered, development-oriented philosophy that places psychological well-being at the foundation of personal growth. However, in practice, mental health courses in vocational colleges often remain “theory-heavy but experience-light,” characterized by monotonous teaching methods, fragmented content, and limited student engagement.

Traditional psychological courses are primarily lecture-based, where teachers dominate the classroom and students passively receive information. Although this model facilitates systematic knowledge transmission, it has notable limitations: students struggle to transform theoretical knowledge



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October 30, 2025

into practical self-awareness and emotional regulation skills; classroom interaction and experiential learning are minimal, resulting in weak motivation and participation. Consequently, such instruction often remains at the cognitive level, failing to promote genuine psychological competence. Therefore, it is urgent to introduce pedagogical innovations that emphasize interactivity, development, and openness in mental health education for vocational students.

The Expansive Teaching Approach provides a new theoretical perspective for addressing this issue. Originating from Vygotsky's developmental theory and Engeström's activity theory, this approach highlights the social, interactive, and developmental nature of learning. Its central idea is to promote the co-development of cognition, emotion, and behavior through dynamic interaction among learners, environments, and tasks. It encourages students to engage in active exploration within authentic contexts, to participate in open discussions, share experiences, and reflect critically—thereby integrating knowledge construction with personal psychological growth. This philosophy aligns closely with the objectives of mental health education, which aim to help students understand themselves, regulate emotions, and develop empathy, resilience, and social adaptability.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Expansive Teaching Approach is not merely a teaching method but an educational philosophy centered on learner development. It transcends the traditional boundaries of classroom space and teacher–student roles, viewing learning as a continuous process of expansion and transformation. For higher vocational colleges, this approach can effectively stimulate students' learning motivation and sense of professional identity, while fostering the integration of psychological and professional courses. At the same time, it redefines the teacher's role—from being a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator, co-learner, and mentor who supports students' developmental processes.

Although the Expansive Teaching Approach has been widely discussed in fields such as pedagogy, management, and innovation education, its application in mental health education remains relatively unexplored. Existing literature focuses mainly on mental health education in universities or primary and secondary schools, while theoretical studies specific to vocational students—a group with distinct psychological characteristics—are scarce. Furthermore, most research emphasizes classroom strategies but neglects the deeper interconnections between teaching philosophy, curriculum design, and learning mechanisms.

Therefore, this study adopts a theoretical perspective to explore the applicability of the Expansive Teaching Approach in mental health education for vocational college students. It aims to construct a three-dimensional framework encompassing cognitive expansion, emotional expansion, and behavioral expansion, illustrating how these dimensions can be systematically integrated into the objectives, content, and strategies of mental health education.

The study pursues three primary objectives:

To trace the theoretical origins and evolution of the Expansive Teaching Approach and clarify its core concepts; To analyze the alignment between this approach and the goals of mental health education, proposing a teaching framework suitable for vocational college contexts; and to discuss the potential pedagogical innovations and implementation challenges associated with this approach, thereby offering insights for future empirical research and curriculum reform.

Through this theoretical inquiry, the author seeks to provide an academic foundation for pedagogical innovation in mental health education and to promote deeper integration between psychological education and vocational development within the learner-centered framework of modern vocational education.



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October 30, 2025

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Origins of the Expansive Teaching Approach

The Expansive Teaching Approach originates from Lev Vygotsky's Developmental Theory and Yrjö Engeström's Activity Theory. Vygotsky emphasized that learning is not merely an individual cognitive process but a social and cultural process that leads to psychological development. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains that individual growth occurs through collaboration and scaffolding within social interactions. From this perspective, the goal of teaching is not simply to transmit knowledge but to promote students' development through mediated learning and guided participation.

Building upon Vygotsky's ideas, Engeström introduced the notion of Expansive Learning, suggesting that learning involves breaking through existing conceptual boundaries and reconstructing activity systems. Learners expand their understanding through reflection, inquiry, and practical engagement with real-life problems. The process of learning thus becomes an ongoing transformation in which cognition, emotion, and behavior co-evolve. The Expansive Teaching Approach, grounded in this perspective, emphasizes that teaching should address the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of development simultaneously.

Additionally, Constructivist Learning Theory provides complementary support for this approach. Constructivism posits that knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed by learners through authentic experiences and reflection. The process of "experience–reflection–reconstruction" represents the essence of meaningful learning. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but facilitators and co-learners who create contexts that stimulate learners' inquiry and growth. This philosophy aligns with the Expansive Teaching Approach, which advocates learner-centered, inquiry-based, and development-oriented education.

Core Concepts and Features of the Expansive Teaching Approach

Drawing from these theoretical roots, the Expansive Teaching Approach can be defined through three essential principles:

- a. Development-Oriented: The ultimate aim of teaching is to promote the learner's potential development rather than simply deliver content knowledge.
- b. Interaction-Based: Knowledge is constructed through continuous social interaction between teachers and students, as well as among peers.
- c. Reflection-Driven: Meaningful learning occurs through reflective engagement with experience, enabling the reconstruction of understanding and the simultaneous growth of cognition and emotion.

In practical teaching, the Expansive Teaching Approach demonstrates several key characteristics:

- a. Openness: Learning extends beyond textbooks and classrooms, encouraging students to connect knowledge with real-life experiences.
- b. Contextualization: Teaching design incorporates authentic scenarios and emotional experiences to enhance engagement and psychological resonance.
- c. Collaboration: Learning occurs within a community of practice that values cooperation, dialogue, and mutual support.
- d. Reflection: Students are encouraged to observe, evaluate, and reflect upon their mental states and learning processes, thereby deepening self-awareness.

These features make the Expansive Teaching Approach particularly compatible with the goals of mental



October 30, 2025

International Conference on Fundamental and Applied Research, Dhyana Pura University

I-CFAR 2025

health education, which emphasizes self-understanding, emotional regulation, and social adaptation.

The Logic of Mental Health Education and Its Compatibility with Expansive Teaching

The fundamental goal of mental health education is to guide students toward self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personality development. This educational process is both systematic and developmental, moving from cognitive understanding to emotional experience and ultimately to behavioral adjustment. Traditional teaching models are effective in conveying theoretical knowledge but tend to be weak in facilitating emotional engagement and behavioral transformation.

The Expansive Teaching Approach provides a new pedagogical logic that integrates these three dimensions. In this model:

- a. Cognitive Expansion enables students to deepen their understanding of psychological phenomena through exploration, discussion, and reflection, building a framework for self-awareness.
- b. Emotional Expansion fosters emotional expression and regulation through authentic interaction, empathy, and situational experience.
- c. Behavioral Expansion transforms psychological growth into action through practical participation, teamwork, and social engagement.

These three dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing: cognitive expansion provides theoretical foundation, emotional expansion provides motivational support, and behavioral expansion provides practical pathways for change. Together, they transform mental health education from a one-way process of knowledge transmission into a bidirectional process of experiential learning and self-development.

Theoretical Framework Model of Expansive Teaching in Mental Health Education

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes a Three-Dimensional Theoretical Framework of Expansive Teaching in Mental Health Education. The model consists of three interrelated dimensions:

Cognitive Expansion: Knowledge construction and reflective understanding;

Emotional Expansion: Emotional experience, empathy, and self-regulation;

Behavioral Expansion: Action, application, and social adaptation.

At the core of the model lies Student Development, representing the ultimate goal of teaching. The interaction among the three dimensions forms a dynamic cycle of Learning Activity – Psychological Experience – Social Practice. Teachers act as facilitators and mentors, guiding students through exploration, reflection, and transformation, while students actively engage in meaning-making and self-growth.

This model highlights the alignment between Expansive Teaching and the fundamental values of mental health education. Both emphasize the learner's active role, the continuity of personal development, and the importance of social interaction as a catalyst for psychological growth. The framework thus provides a theoretical foundation for curriculum design and offers a structured lens for future empirical validation.

Theoretical Positioning of This Study

In summary, the Expansive Teaching Approach holds significant theoretical value for mental health education. It integrates the developmental view of learning from psychology with the constructivist and sociocultural perspectives of education. This study conceptualizes the Expansive Teaching Approach as a systematic pedagogical model that promotes vocational students' psychological development through interactive and reflective learning.



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October 30, 2025

I-CFAR 2025

By establishing a theoretical linkage between teaching philosophy, curriculum objectives, and student development mechanisms, this framework aims to enrich the theoretical foundation of mental health education in vocational colleges. It provides not only conceptual guidance for teaching innovation but also new perspectives for future research and practice in promoting students' holistic growth.

METHODS

Research Type and Design

This study is a conceptual and theoretical research, employing exploratory analysis and model construction to examine how the Expansive Teaching Approach can be applied in mental health education within Chinese higher vocational colleges. Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the research integrates findings from educational psychology, activity theory, and constructivist pedagogy to construct a theoretical model that reveals the internal logic and educational significance of this teaching approach.

The study follows a systematic design process of problem identification → theoretical review → logical reasoning → framework construction. Specifically, the research procedure involves: Clarifying the research problem: addressing the pedagogical challenges and reform needs in mental health education for vocational students; Reviewing theoretical foundations: analyzing Vygotsky's developmental theory, Engeström's activity theory, and constructivist learning perspectives; Extracting key concepts: identifying the essential elements of the Expansive Teaching Approach and its compatibility with mental health education; Constructing the analytical framework: formulating a three-dimensional teaching model of Cognitive Expansion – Emotional Expansion – Behavioral Expansion; Theoretical justification: explaining how this model aligns with course objectives, instructional strategies, and student development mechanisms. This design ensures that the study remains theoretically grounded, logically coherent, and applicable to the educational reform context of Chinese vocational colleges.

Data and Information Sources

Since this research is theoretical in nature, its "data sources" consist of secondary materials rather than primary empirical data. The study draws upon three major categories of sources: Academic literature: key works on expansive learning, activity theory, mental health education, and vocational pedagogy from both international and Chinese scholars; Policy and curriculum documents: official publications from the Chinese Ministry of Education and UNESCO concerning mental health education and vocational education reform, providing macro-level policy alignment; Representative practice reports: selected research papers and project reports from higher vocational institutions, which serve as contextual references for model validation. By synthesizing these sources, the study achieves horizontal integration across disciplines and vertical coherence between pedagogical theory and mental health education.

Theoretical Tools and Analytical Methods

Three major theoretical systems serve as the analytical instruments for this research: Vygotsky's Developmental Theory – providing the philosophical foundation of learning as development; Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987) – explaining the interactive relationships among subjects, objects, tools, and social contexts in educational settings; Constructivist Learning Theory – emphasizing the learner's active role in constructing knowledge and meaning through experience and reflection. In terms of analytical methods, the study applies two complementary approaches: Thematic Analysis: identifying



key themes of the Expansive Teaching Approach in the context of mental health education, such as interactivity, reflection, and developmental orientation; Conceptual Synthesis: integrating these themes into a systematic theoretical model that captures the interconnections between teaching philosophy, curriculum structure, and learning outcomes. These approaches ensure a balanced combination of theoretical depth and conceptual clarity in constructing the analytical framework.

Research Procedure

The research procedure was implemented in four sequential stages:

Literature Review: systematically retrieving and analyzing relevant studies published over the past decade to identify theoretical gaps and research trends;

Comparative Analysis: comparing diverse perspectives on expansive learning and mental health education to identify commonalities and distinctions;

Model Construction: developing the three-dimensional framework of Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Expansion based on theoretical integration;

Logical Argumentation: evaluating the internal coherence and pedagogical implications of the model by linking it to course objectives, learning mechanisms, and teacher roles.

This structured procedure ensures both theoretical rigor and conceptual validity, enabling the proposed model to serve as a foundation for subsequent empirical validation.

Analytical Path and Logical Framework

The analytical path of this study unfolds across three interrelated layers:

Layer 1 – Theoretical Foundation: the philosophical principle of “learning as development,” integrating developmental psychology and sociocultural learning theory; Layer 2 – Pedagogical Structure: the interactive mechanism among cognition, emotion, and behavior in the learning process; Layer 3 – Application Logic: the alignment between course objectives, teaching strategies, and student developmental outcomes.

Through this three-layer analytical structure, the study demonstrates how the Expansive Teaching Approach facilitates the transformation of learning in mental health education—from knowledge acquisition to personal growth, and from passive reception to active development.

Summary of Methodological Value

By adopting this methodological framework, the study establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding and innovating mental health education in vocational settings. The framework provides a coherent process for analyzing how expansive teaching can cultivate students’ psychological literacy and holistic competence. It not only bridges the gap between educational theory and mental health practice but also lays the groundwork for future empirical studies and curriculum reform initiatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Core Findings and Theoretical Contributions of the Expansive Teaching Approach

a. Construction of the Three-Dimensional Teaching Model

Based on the preceding theoretical framework, this study developed a three-dimensional teaching model comprising Cognitive Expansion, Emotional Expansion, and Behavioral Expansion. This model offers a new pedagogical logic for mental health education. Cognitive Expansion represents the process through which students deepen their understanding of psychological concepts via inquiry and reflection. It serves as the rational foundation of mental health education.

Emotional Expansion focuses on emotional resonance and self-regulation developed through



interaction and experiential learning. It functions as the affective driving force behind psychological growth. Behavioral Expansion emphasizes the translation of psychological knowledge into practical strategies for social adaptation, serving as the behavioral manifestation of mental health education.

The significance of this model lies in transcending the traditional “knowledge–emotion–behavior” fragmentation often found in psychological courses. It establishes a dynamic, integrative structure in which students engage in a developmental cycle—from understanding psychological concepts, to experiencing emotional processes, and ultimately to applying self-improvement strategies. These findings echo Vygotsky’s notion that “learning should lead development” and validate Engeström’s assumption that a learning activity system possesses the capacity for self-expansion and reconstruction.

b. Interaction Mechanism within the Teaching System

Through the reinterpretation of Activity Theory, the study found that the effectiveness of mental health education largely depends on the quality of interaction among elements in the teaching system.

Teacher–Student Interaction: Teachers shift from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning, scaffolding student engagement and guiding reflective inquiry.

Peer Interaction: Group sharing and situational dialogue enhance emotional expression and empathy, forming a key pathway for emotional expansion.

Student–Context Interaction: Problem-based learning, case analysis, and real-life projects allow students to test and reflect upon psychological strategies in authentic contexts.

This multi-layered interaction structure transforms the classroom from a one-way information space into a social learning community. Compared with traditional lecture-based instruction, the Expansive Teaching Approach emphasizes psychological experience and social support within the learning process, thereby fostering resilience, empathy, and self-regulation.

c. Educational Contributions of the Expansive Teaching Model

The theoretical framework proposed in this study contributes to the field in three key dimensions: **Theoretical Contribution:** It integrates developmental psychology and constructivist pedagogy, forming a developmental teaching model for mental health education. **Curricular Contribution:** It provides a structural logic for redesigning mental health education curricula in vocational colleges. **Human Development Contribution:** It reinforces the connection between psychological growth, career development, and social adaptation, offering a psychological foundation for the holistic development objectives of vocational education.

d. Comparison with Existing Research and Scholarly Discussion

Beyond Traditional Models of Mental Health Education.

- 1) Existing studies identify three main limitations of traditional mental health education: an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge while neglecting students’ emotional engagement;
- 2) limited diversity of teaching methods and contextual learning; an evaluation system focused mainly on cognitive outcomes rather than developmental processes.
- 3) The model proposed in this study addresses these limitations effectively:
Through Cognitive Expansion, it redefines the depth of knowledge learning by linking psychological theory to lived experience;
Through Emotional Expansion, it enriches classroom learning with contextualized and experiential engagement, enabling emotional regulation through empathy and reflection;
Through Behavioral Expansion, it extends learning outcomes into everyday practice, bridging classroom learning with real-world mental health application.



This integrated model broadens the scope of mental health education and shifts its paradigm from knowledge-based to experience-based and development-oriented teaching.

Alignment with and Innovation Beyond International Research

From an international perspective, reform trends in mental health education in Europe and Asia share the same orientation—emphasizing learner autonomy and social participation. Engeström's (1987) theory of Expansive Learning and Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle both underscore reflection and practice as the essence of learning.

Building upon these foundations, this study introduces several innovations:

Theoretical Integration: It systematically applies the philosophy of expansive learning to the context of vocational mental health education—an area that has received limited attention. **Structural Innovation:** It establishes a three-dimensional interactive framework (Cognitive–Emotional–Behavioral), enriching the structural understanding of mental health education. **Cultural Adaptation:** By incorporating the specific learning characteristics and sociocultural contexts of Chinese vocational students, it proposes a more contextually adaptable pedagogical logic. Thus, this study not only extends the theoretical boundary of expansive teaching but also provides a culturally grounded interpretation for non-Western approaches to mental health education.

e. Significance and Educational Implications

1) Implications for Mental Health Education

The findings indicate that mental health education should transcend the traditional “therapeutic” or “intervention-based” orientation and move toward developmental, preventive, and empowering approaches. By constructing an interactive learning ecology that promotes active participation, the Expansive Teaching Approach empowers students to experience psychological growth throughout the learning process. This model is particularly relevant for vocational college students, who are in a critical phase of professional identity formation and social adaptation.

2) Implications for Teacher Professional Development

The implementation of expansive teaching requires teachers to develop cross-disciplinary integration and contextual facilitation skills. Teachers must not only master psychological theory but also create open, safe, and interactive classroom environments where students can explore and grow. Therefore, teacher training should strengthen both psychological literacy and reflective teaching competence, preparing educators to guide students through developmental learning processes.

3) Implications for Future Research

The theoretical model constructed in this study offers a foundation for further empirical validation. Future research may explore:

Quantitative validation of the three-dimensional model's effectiveness in different mental health courses; Case studies examining its application across institutions, disciplines, and cultural contexts; Digital integration, investigating how online learning platforms can support sustainable expansive teaching practices in mental health education.

f. Summary of Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the Expansive Teaching Approach provides both theoretical depth and practical relevance for mental health education in vocational contexts. It redefines the role of psychological courses as not merely transmitting knowledge but facilitating student development through integrated cognitive, emotional, and behavioral learning. This approach enriches the theoretical discourse on holistic education and contributes to the ongoing transformation of



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October 30, 2025

International Conference on Fundamental and Applied Research, Dhyana Pura University

I-CFAR 2025

vocational pedagogy toward a more human-centered, development-oriented paradigm.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the application of the Expansive Teaching Approach in mental health education within the context of Chinese higher vocational colleges. Centered on the core question of how expansive teaching can promote students' psychological development, the research constructed a systematic theoretical framework and pedagogical model. Drawing on Vygotsky's Developmental Theory, Engeström's Activity Theory, and constructivist learning principles, the study demonstrated the intrinsic consistency between learning and psychological development, and proposed a three-dimensional teaching model comprising Cognitive Expansion, Emotional Expansion, and Behavioral Expansion. This framework provides both theoretical support and pedagogical logic for innovation in mental health education.

The findings indicate that the Expansive Teaching Approach effectively addresses the limitations of traditional psychological courses—namely, excessive lecturing, limited experience, and weak participation. It promotes a transformation from knowledge transmission to ability construction, and from passive reception to active development. Through multi-level interactions among teachers, students, and learning contexts, students achieved deeper cognitive understanding, richer emotional experiences, and more sustained behavioral transformation, thereby enhancing their overall psychological literacy. This approach represents not only an instructional innovation but also a conceptual shift from intervention-oriented to development-oriented mental health education.

At the theoretical level, the primary contribution of this study lies in systematically introducing the concept of Expansive Learning into the field of mental health education, thereby constructing a pedagogical framework that aligns with the psychological characteristics of vocational students and enriching the theoretical foundation of developmental pedagogy.

At the practical level, the proposed model offers an operational reference for curriculum reform in vocational mental health education. It enables teachers to balance knowledge acquisition with emotional experience and to link affective engagement with behavioral change in classroom design. At the policy level, the study provides a feasible integration pathway between psychological education and the "whole-person development" goal of vocational education, aligning with China's national strategy to strengthen students' mental health education systems.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. As a theoretical investigation, it lacks empirical validation. The actual applicability and effectiveness of the proposed model require further empirical research. Moreover, the framework focuses primarily on higher vocational education; thus, its generalization to other educational contexts—such as secondary vocational schools or academic universities—may require contextual adaptation based on learner characteristics.

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October 30, 2025

I-CFAR 2025

International Conference on Fundamental and Applied Research, Dhyana Pura University

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