

University Mental Health Education Reconsidered: A Satir Model Perspective

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This study addresses the issue of suboptimal outcomes in university mental health education by adopting Satir's model of growth philosophy and systems perspective as its theoretical foundation. It deeply integrates structured experiential teaching methods, such as craft activities, expressive painting, and psychological sculpting. Empirical research conducted over six consecutive semesters reveals that the curriculum significantly enhances students' self-esteem, with consistently high and stable overall teaching evaluations. Following the introduction of group counseling, the effectiveness of combined-class teaching underwent structural optimization, with average evaluations surpassing those of small-group classes and exhibiting high consistency. Qualitative analysis indicates that experiential activities serve as the key mechanism facilitating students' self-awareness and behavioral transformation. This study confirms that integrating systemic content and experiential methods through the Satir Model effectively adapts to the realities of combined-class teaching in higher education, providing an empirical solution for advancing mental health education toward competency-based transformation.

Keywords: Satir model, mental health education in higher education institutions, experiential learning, curriculum reconstruction, empirical research

Introduction

Currently, mental health issues among college students are becoming increasingly prominent and complex. Research indicates that “mental health courses help increase positive emotions among college students and improve their attitudes toward seeking psychological help” (Liang et al., 2017). However, the problem persists that “mental health education courses are mostly university-wide electives, often taught in large lecture formats. Combined with limited class hours, this results in less than ideal teaching outcomes” (Ma, 2013). Although policies such as the Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Higher Education Institutions explicitly advocate for “innovating mental health education methods and effectively improving teaching approaches” (2018), the practical challenge remains: how to construct a feasible curriculum system that can both penetrate students’ inner worlds and engage their ecosystems.

The Satir Model, developed by Virginia Satir, offers a suitable theoretical framework and rich intervention tools for this challenge. It emphasizes self-exploration through the “inner iceberg,” consistent interpersonal communication, and an ecological perspective on systemic interactions. It is not merely a therapeutic technique

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but an educational philosophy centered on growth and transformation. However, its systematic application within the required curriculum of higher education institutions requires further validation.

Therefore, the core objective of this study is to design and implement a structured experiential curriculum system with the Satir Model as its theoretical foundation. By tracking six consecutive semesters of teaching practice, we empirically evaluate the effectiveness of this curriculum paradigm in enhancing students' core psychological competencies, as well as its stability and scalability. This aims to provide empirical evidence and a theoretical reference for the scientific and systematic reform of mental health education in higher education institutions.

Integrative Design of the Satir Model and the Mental Health Education Curriculum

Core Principles: Experience-Based and Systemic Growth

The guiding philosophy of this course paradigm is Satir's growth-oriented view of humanity and systems theory. Virginia Satir's theory is not merely a set of therapeutic techniques; it is grounded in a profound, optimistic, and empowering philosophy about people, relationships, and change. Satir's fundamental belief in humanity is that individuals inherently possess the inner resources and vitality to continuously grow, transform, and achieve wholeness. Psychological distress or problematic behaviors are not inherent flaws but rather optimal strategies developed during an individual's growth to adapt to their environment and ensure survival (Satir, 2007). Based on this, the goal of mental health education is not to eliminate problems or patch defects, but to activate an individual's inner resources and learn to use them in a more consistent and vital way. Satir's systems perspective holds that individuals are products of systems; personal feelings, beliefs, behavioral patterns, and even symptoms are closely intertwined with the rules, communication patterns, secrets, and intergenerational transmissions of their primary systems of belonging. Problems manifest within relationships, and change must occur within relationships. Therefore, interventions cannot target individuals alone; they must also examine and adjust the relational context in which they exist. This guides students to depersonalize their struggles, recognize underlying systemic factors like family and group dynamics, thereby reducing self-blame, broadening their perspective on issues, increasing the potential for change, and fostering more constructive solutions.

Therefore, course design abandons one-way instruction and strives to create experiential opportunities for students, achieving integration through reflection and sharing. The teacher's role shifts from lecturer to facilitator and creator of a safe space, with the core task being to establish an inclusive, trusting environment where students can safely explore themselves through experiential activities.

Integration of Course Content With Satir Experiential Activities

The course content is divided into three major modules comprising eight chapters. Satir's core concepts serve as the theoretical foundation throughout, while incorporating specific Satir implementation activities and techniques alongside other experiential activities. The specific arrangement is as follows:

Course Modules	Chapter Topics	Satir Theory Anchors	Typical Experiential Learning Activities
Module One: Self-Exploration and Cognition	Chapter 1: Foundational Knowledge	Systems Perspective	Mental Health Center Visit Experience, Blindfolded Walk
	Chapter 2: Self-Awareness Chapter 3: Personality Development	Self-Value Systems Perspective (Family Influence)	20 “Who Am I?” Questions, Self-Portrait Drawing, OH Cards Self-Exploration, Family Tree
Module II: Life Psychological Literacy	Chapter 4: Learning Psychology	Coping Postures	Mindfulness Meditation Practice, Time Pie Chart Drawing
	Chapter 5: Emotion Management	Iceberg Theory (Feeling Layer)	Drawing “Stress System Circle,” Drawing “My Iceberg Map,” Handmade Emotion Clay Painting
	Chapter 6: Interpersonal Communication	Communication Stances, Consistency in Communication	Communication Stance Sculpting, Role-Playing Scenarios, Consistency Expression Practice
	Chapter 7: Love and Sexuality	Systems Perspective (Family Influence), Self-Worth	Role-Playing Scenarios
Module III: Integration and Transcendence	Chapter 8: Life Education	Self (Spiritual Dimension)	Life Line Drawing, Values Auction

The above activities were implemented consistently throughout the entire six-semester research process. Specific content and formats were adjusted based on time constraints and class size. For instance, while the “blindfolded walk” activity might involve all students in smaller classes, participation might be partial in combined classes. Field trips, drawing, and craft activities, however, were always conducted with full participation. Additionally, to meet research requirements, two 2-period group counseling sessions were scheduled during the 2024-2025-2 and 2025-2026-1 semesters, respectively, within the interpersonal communication unit.

Practical Validation of Course Implementation Outcomes

This study adopted an action research paradigm, conducting a systematic evaluation and continuous optimization of course outcomes through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data over six consecutive semesters in real teaching contexts.

Research Participants and Methods

The study participants comprised first-year students enrolled in this course across six consecutive semesters from 2022-2023-2 to 2025-2026-1. The sample encompassed a total of 24 teaching classes (including 6 small classes and 18 combined classes), involving 42 administrative classes, with an effective sample size of $N = 1,132$. Among these, the 2023-2024-1 semester employed a pre- and post-test control group design; comprehensive end-of-term feedback data were collected for all six semesters.

Quantitative tools included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for pre- and post-assessment, along with a self-developed Course Teaching Effectiveness Evaluation Questionnaire to collect end-of-term feedback. The latter covers items such as “Course Objective Achievement,” “Teaching Method Evaluation,” “Practical Component Satisfaction,” and “Class Participation” using a five-point Likert scale. Qualitative data were derived from open-ended questions within the same questionnaire: “What aspect of this course left the deepest impression on you?” and “What areas would you most like to see improved?”

Data analysis was conducted using Excel, including: (1) Paired-sample t -tests for pre- and post-tests; (2) Descriptive statistics for core indicators across multiple semesters and independent-sample t -tests between class types; (3) Qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended text responses.

Quantitative Research Findings and Analysis

This study employs a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to evaluate course effectiveness. Quantitatively, by comparing student teaching evaluation data across four consecutive semesters, we examine the effectiveness, stability, and adaptability of the Satir Model-reconstructed curriculum to teaching scenarios from both horizontal (differences in class types) and vertical (teaching iteration effects) dimensions.

Course effectiveness validation: significant enhancement in students' sense of self-worth. To evaluate the immediate impact of the course, pre- and post-assessments using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were administered to students in the 2023-2024-1 semester. Due to the anonymous collection of data, individual matching could not be fully performed. Therefore, conservative paired analysis (using the minimum sample size of $n = 280$ pairs for pre- and post-tests) was employed to ensure the robustness of the results.

Analysis revealed that students in combined classes demonstrated a significant improvement in their overall psychological self-identity scores ($t = 2.21, p = 0.028$, Cohen's $d = 0.14$). This change was primarily manifested in a significant reduction in the self-denial dimension ($t = 2.73, p = 0.007, d = 0.18$). In contrast, students in small classes did not exhibit statistically significant changes between pre- and post-tests. These findings indicate that the curriculum demonstrably promotes reduced self-negativity among students in combined-class settings. Although the effect size was small ($d < 0.2$), it was statistically significant and directionally consistent, revealing the program's positive impact on fostering self-worth.

Stability and iterative enhancement of teaching quality: analysis based on longitudinal evaluation data. To assess the sustained quality and iterative optimization of the course, this study tracked the average scores from the end-of-semester "Comprehensive Teaching Evaluation" across four consecutive semesters (this average score integrates four dimensions: teaching objectives, methods, content, and classroom participation). As shown in Table 1, the overall course rating consistently remained within the excellent range ($M = 4.73\text{--}4.84$), demonstrating high stability.

Table 1

Comprehensive Teaching Evaluation Data for Four Semesters

Semester (Group Counseling Status)	Class Type	Sample Size (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
2023-2024-2 (Before)	Single-grade	26	4.86	0.30
	Combined-grade	144	4.72	0.33
2024-2025-1 (Before)	Single-grade	24	4.73	0.32
	Combined-grade	208	4.80	0.33
2024-2025-2 (After)	Single-grade	19	4.74	0.37
	Combined-grade	129	4.87	0.26
2025-2026-1 (After)	Single-grade	33	4.71	0.37
	Combined-grade	158	4.88	0.21

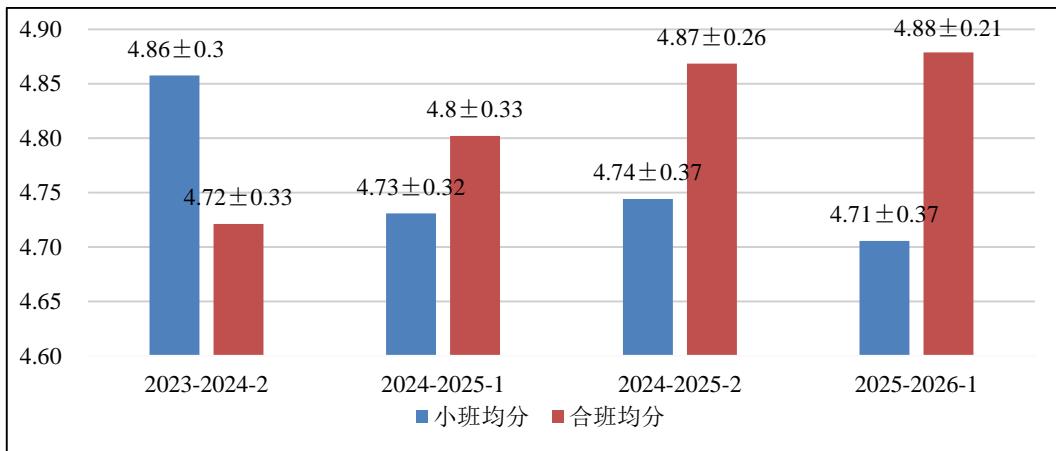


Figure 1. Comprehensive teaching evaluation data for four semesters.

Comparing data before and after the group counseling implementation reveals that prior to its introduction (2023-2024-2 semester), teaching effectiveness exhibited the traditional “small-class advantage,” with small classes scoring higher (4.86) than combined classes (4.72), a difference of 0.14. Following the implementation of group counseling (2024-2025-2 and 2025-2026-1 semesters), the effectiveness pattern underwent a structural reversal. Combined class ratings (4.87 and 4.88, respectively) systematically surpassed small class ratings (4.74 and 4.71, respectively), with the lead expanding to 0.17 by the final semester.

The data changes indicate that after introducing group counseling as a core iteration, the course outcomes not only reversed in horizontal comparisons but also demonstrated profound shifts in data distribution. First, effect activation occurred: as the experiential embodiment of the Satir model, group counseling effectively activated the potential of the combined-grade classroom, propelling its average score from near parity to a stable lead. Second, feedback convergence emerged, with the most critical evidence being the significant change in standard deviation. The evaluation dispersion (SD) for combined-class teaching converged significantly from approximately 0.33 pre-implementation to 0.26 post-implementation, further decreasing to 0.21. This indicates that group coaching created a highly consistent and positive collective learning experience within the combined class, substantially enhancing the homogeneity of student feedback. In contrast, the standard deviation for small-group teaching remained stable ($SD \approx 0.32-0.37$), reflecting the inherent individual variations in feedback.

This combined effect of increased mean scores and reduced standard deviation provides compelling evidence that group counseling does not merely add activities to large-class settings. Instead, through its structured interactions and experiential design, it efficiently constructs the psychological field emphasized by the Satir Model—one characterized by safety, connection, and high engagement—within large class sizes. This approach achieves a qualitative leap in teaching effectiveness.

Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms Underlying Experiential Teaching

To delve deeper into course effectiveness, this study conducted thematic analysis on 1,132 open-ended responses collected over six consecutive semesters, focusing on “most memorable aspects” and “suggestions for improvement.”

“Most memorable aspects”: resonance between experience, teachers, and knowledge. Student feedback centered on three dimensions: experiential activities, teacher qualities, and knowledge content.

Experiential activities formed the core of cognitive and emotional engagement. Crafts (“clay painting,”

“mosaic coasters”), painting (“self-portraits,” “life line drawings”), and scenario-based interactions (“role-playing,” “mini-theater”) were frequently mentioned. Students described these as “healing” and “relaxing,” validating Satir’s approach where artistic expression promotes emotional integration. Extracurricular practices like “visiting the counseling center” and “group counseling sessions at the South Campus activity center” were also repeatedly mentioned for their novelty and authentic interactive experiences.

High recognition of teachers highlights a safe learning environment. Over one-third of feedback directly praised educators, using terms like “gentle,” “humorous,” and “responsible.” Students particularly emphasized traits such as “teachers energizing classroom atmosphere,” “never dismissing classmates’ answers,” and “providing warm homework feedback.” This strong endorsement of teachers’ personalities and teaching styles vividly demonstrates the successful application of Satir Model principles: “the therapist (teacher) as the tool” and “creating a safe, trusting space.” This indicates that teachers have successfully assumed the roles of guides and facilitators, providing the crucial psychological safety essential for students’ experiential learning.

Practical knowledge resonates deeply. “Sex education” emerged as the most frequently mentioned topic, described as ‘straightforward’ and “highly beneficial,” addressing students’ real-world needs. Following closely were subjects like “self-awareness,” “emotional management,” and “life education”—themes that align profoundly with the Satir Model’s focus on self-worth, inner feelings, and life’s meaning.

Overall feedback was highly positive, filled with words like “like” and “look forward to,” indicating that the course successfully sparked students’ intrinsic motivation and emotional connection.

“Suggestions for improvement”: expectations for deepening experiential learning. Student suggestions primarily revolve around increasing and optimizing experiential opportunities.

There is a strong call for more hands-on experiences and practical activities. The most concentrated recommendations are “increase practical activities” and “organize more group counseling sessions,” which indirectly underscores the immense appeal and effectiveness of experiential teaching.

We aim to optimize interactions to enhance engagement. Some suggestions focus on interaction formats, such as “inviting more classmates to share” and “accommodating less socially inclined classmates,” reflecting expectations for a more balanced and inclusive classroom participation model.

A few specific teaching refinements, such as “supplementing instruction with more examples and stories” and “removing or improving the ‘Daily Quick Quiz’ (pre-class assessment),” provide direction for technological optimization.

The suggested statements are predominantly phrased constructively, often appearing in the form of “We hope... but the teachers are already doing a great job,” reflecting positive suggestions grounded in high satisfaction.

Qualitative analysis reveals that the course effectively fosters students’ internal awareness of theory of mind, emotional integration, and behavioral transformation. This is achieved through the secure relationships established by instructors and structured experiential activities centered on artistic expression. Students’ deep identification with these activities and their eagerness for further practice collectively validate the feasibility and effectiveness of Satir’s “process-oriented change” approach within the university classroom setting.

Discussion on the Mechanisms and Value of Paradigm Reconstruction

The data findings of this study reveal the following conclusion: The mental health curriculum reconstructed based on the Satir Model not only significantly enhances students’ sense of self-worth but also maintains

consistently high teaching quality over multiple consecutive semesters. This demonstrates the maturity and reliability of the reconstructed teaching paradigm.

The most significant finding of this study lies in the fact that the experiential course redesign—theoretically grounded in the Satir Model and practically implemented through activities and “group counseling”—has achieved profound optimization and empowerment of the common large-class teaching scenario in higher education. It not only reverses the traditional advantage of small-class settings but also demonstrates the full feasibility of delivering in-depth mental health education within real-world constraints by creating highly cohesive, high-engagement collective experiences. By introducing “group counseling” as a core component, it successfully resolves a widespread dilemma in university mental health education—the tension between large class sizes and facilitating deep student engagement. Research data indicates that the restructured curriculum not only remains effective for small-group settings but also demonstrates unique adaptability and exceptional empowering effects within combined-class scenarios.

The underlying mechanism may lie in the fact that in traditional combined-grade teaching, students easily fall into a passive, anonymous state of listening. In contrast, Satir Model group counseling transforms large classrooms into a series of experiential small groups centered on the “here and now” through systematic activity design. This shifts students from being “spectators” to becoming “participants” and “co-creators.” This shift in the teaching relationship is precisely the fundamental reason for the improvement in assessment scores and the convergence of opinions (low standard deviation). It validates the feasibility of the core principles of the Satir Model—“process over content” and “transformation through experience”—in the educational setting.

The limitations of this study include the primary reliance on self-reported data for outcome assessment; the sample size was limited, and the generalizability and long-term effectiveness require further tracking. Future research may incorporate peer-rated assessments or objective behavioral indicators, and further explore the differential intervention mechanisms of various experiential activities on specific psychological constructs.

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