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# A Study on the Effectiveness of Experiential Teaching in Mental Health Education Courses in Higher Education

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**Abstract**. Experiential teaching, as an innovative instructional model, emphasizes the creation of authentic or simulated scenarios within the learning process, allowing students to gain insight and understanding of course content through direct experiences. This approach enables students to better comprehend and retain knowledge of mental health, enhancing their psychological resilience and self-regulation abilities. In this study, two freshman classes, with comparable pre-test results in psychological resilience, were selected as the subjects. The experimental group received a combination of experiential and lecture-based teaching, while the control group was taught solely through lectures. This research aims to explore the impact of experiential teaching in mental health courses on students' psychological resilience, ultimately contributing to improved quality and effectiveness of mental health education in higher education.

**Keywords**. Experiential Teaching, Mental Health Education, Psychological Resilience, Teaching Model

## Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of university students has become a growing concern worldwide. Factors such as academic pressure, social expectations, financial burdens, and transitional challenges can place significant stress on young adults during their college years, increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues (American College Health Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2021). To address this, universities have expanded mental health education programs with the aim of fostering psychological resilience, promoting self-regulation, and providing students with skills to manage stress effectively. Despite these efforts, traditional lecture-based teaching methods remain predominant in mental health education, limiting opportunities for students to engage actively in self-reflective and transformative learning experiences (Reis et al., 2023).

Experiential teaching has gained recognition as a powerful approach in educational psychology, emphasizing learning through direct experience, reflection, and active engagement (Kolb, 2014). This method has been particularly effective in fields such as medical and social work education, where it allows learners to develop practical skills in a controlled setting that simulates real-life experiences (Li & Chen, 2021). However, its application in mental health education within higher education remains underexplored. Although some studies suggest that

experiential teaching can enhance students' ability to internalize knowledge by engaging them emotionally and cognitively, there is limited empirical evidence supporting its impact on psychological resilience and self-regulation specifically in the context of mental health courses (Mahatmya et al., 2018; Hackey, 2023).

The primary research gap identified in this area is the lack of comprehensive studies that assess the effectiveness of experiential teaching in enhancing specific psychological outcomes, such as resilience, self-awareness, and adaptive coping skills, within mental health education courses. Traditional mental health education often focuses on imparting theoretical knowledge without fully addressing students' personal growth and self-reflective capacities, which are essential for mental resilience (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Therefore, a need exists to examine how experiential teaching methods can be applied to improve these outcomes and to explore whether a combined model of experiential and lecture-based teaching could provide more significant benefits than conventional methods alone.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the effectiveness of experiential teaching in mental health education courses aimed at fostering resilience and self-regulation among university students. The central research question is: To what extent does experiential teaching, when combined with traditional lecture methods, enhance students' psychological resilience in mental health education compared to lecture-based teaching alone? Additionally, this study will explore whether experiential teaching encourages greater self-reflection, improves stress management skills, and promotes a deeper understanding of mental health concepts.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform pedagogical practices and improve the quality of mental health education in higher education. By integrating experiential teaching methods into mental health courses, educators may foster an environment that not only promotes knowledge acquisition but also cultivates emotional resilience and adaptive skills in students, thereby preparing them to cope with personal and professional challenges (Armstrong, 2021). Furthermore, this study could provide valuable insights for curriculum developers seeking to design mental health programs that emphasize both theoretical and practical learning, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of enhancing mental well-being among young adults.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing field of educational psychology by investigating a teaching method that has the potential to redefine mental health education in higher education. By examining experiential teaching's impact on resilience and self-regulation, this research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a more holistic approach to student mental health education.

## Method

### Participants

Prior to the study, the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale was administered to the cohort of 2023 first-year students for group assessment. Cluster sampling was employed to select two classes with equivalent levels of resilience and comparable class sizes. One class was randomly assigned as the experimental group, consisting of 49 students (23 male, 26 female), while the other class served as the control group, comprising 51 students (27 male, 24 female).

### Research tools

The study employed two primary instruments: the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) and the Learning Gains Questionnaire. The CD-RISC, adapted and validated for

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use in China by Xiao Nan and Zhang Jianxin, assesses resilience through 25 items covering three dimensions: tenacity, self-reliance, and optimism. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with the scale demonstrating high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$), indicating good validity for measuring resilience in this context. Additionally, the Learning Gains Questionnaire, developed by Fu Baisong to align with the objectives of the mental health course, includes 8 items measuring course-related learning outcomes. This questionnaire also exhibits high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.954$), confirming its reliability and validity for assessing the targeted educational outcomes.

**Design**

A quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-test assessments was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of experiential teaching on psychological resilience. Undergraduate freshmen enrolled in 2023 were initially screened using a psychological resilience assessment. Two classes with comparable class sizes and showing no significant differences in baseline psychological resilience scores were selected as research subjects. The experimental group received a combined teaching approach incorporating both experiential and traditional lecture-based methods, while the control group was taught exclusively through conventional lectures. To control for potential instructor-related variables, both groups were taught by the same instructor.

**Procedure**

The mental health course for university students was conducted during the first semester of the freshman year, with a total of nine sessions held on an alternating weekly schedule. Each session lasted for 90 minutes. The experimental group integrated both didactic and experiential teaching methods, ensuring that at least 60 minutes of each session were dedicated to experiential learning. In contrast, the control group received instruction solely through didactic teaching methods. The establishment of psychological growth groups was intended to foster a supportive network among students, facilitating their journey of self-exploration with psychological backing. Through communication and sharing, these groups provided a channel for students to express their emotions, deepen their inner experiences, and seek resonance. This structure helped students gain clarity on their psychological states. At the commencement of the course, the instructor divided the experimental group into eight subgroups using a game-based approach, seven of which consisted of six members each, and one subgroup had seven members. The control group did not undergo any subgrouping. Experiential teaching was designed in five steps: (1) Creating instructional scenarios to evoke a sense of presence and stimulate student engagement; (2) Triggering psychological experiences to address diverse emotional responses through various educational techniques; (3) Facilitating intra-group communication and sharing to enhance interaction among peers and between instructors and students; (4) Internalizing personal experiences through group discussions to clarify and deepen psychological insights; (5) Emphasizing practical application by guiding students to transfer knowledge and skills to similar life scenarios, thereby linking classroom learning with real-life experiences and enhancing psychological resilience levels.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Psychological resilience was assessed at two time points: pre-intervention, prior to the commencement of the course, and post-intervention, upon course completion. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25.0, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The

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choice of statistical methods was determined based on the data distribution and the specific objectives of the study.

**Results**

(1) Comparison of Pre- and Post-Intervention Results Between Experimental and Control Groups

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare psychological resilience scores between the experimental and control groups before the intervention. Results indicated no significant differences between the two groups in overall psychological resilience and its sub-dimensions ($p > 0.05$). Post-intervention, an independent samples t-test revealed significant differences in the total psychological resilience scores and in the "tenacity" and "self-reliance" dimensions between the two groups ($p < 0.05$), with the experimental group scoring higher than the control group. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in the "optimism" dimension ($p > 0.05$) (see Table 1).

(2) Pre- and Post-Intervention Results Within Experimental and Control Groups

A paired samples t-test was performed to assess changes within each group. In the experimental group, significant differences were observed in the total psychological resilience score and in the "tenacity" and "self-reliance" dimensions between pre- and post-intervention ($p < 0.05$), with post-intervention scores higher than pre-intervention scores. No significant difference was found in the "optimism" dimension ($p > 0.05$). In the control group, no significant differences were found in the total resilience score or any of the three dimensions between pre- and post-intervention ($p > 0.05$) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Comparison of Psychological Resilience Scores Between Experimental and Control Groups

| Dimension | Experimental Group (n=49) | | | | Control Group (n=51) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre-test M±SD | Post-test M±SD | t | p | Pre-test M±SD | Post-test M±SD |
| Tenacity | 45.49±7.34 | 49.49±6.55*△△ | -4.47 | 0.00 | 45.53±6.79 | 45.76±7.56 |
| Optimism | 13.82±2.51 | 14.29±2.37 | -1.53 | 0.13 | 45.53±6.79 | 45.76±7.56 |
| Self-reliance | 30.04±3.37 | 31.45±3.87*△△ | -0.35 | 0.00 | 13.96±2.35 | 13.90±2.33 |
| Resilience | 89.35±11.62 | 95.22±11.20*△ | -4.52 | 0.00 | 89.84±11.36 | 89.96±13.25 |

Note: *p<0.05 compared with control group; △p<0.05, △△p<0.01 compared with pre-test within experimental group

(3) Comparison of Learning Outcomes Between Groups

An independent samples t-test was conducted to evaluate differences in learning outcomes between the experimental and control groups after the intervention. Analysis revealed a significant difference in learning outcome scores between the groups ($t=-2.18$, $p<0.05$), with the experimental group ($M=31.98$, $SD=4.36$) demonstrating significantly higher scores compared to the control group ($M=29.98$, $SD=4.79$) (See Table 2). These results suggest that

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the experiential teaching approach was associated with enhanced learning outcomes compared to traditional lecture-based instruction.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Learning Outcomes Between Experimental and Control Groups

| Variable | Experimental Group (n=49) | Control Group (n=51) | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Learning Outcomes | 31.98±4.36* | 29.98±4.79 | -2.18 | 0.03 |

Note: *p<0.05 compared with control group

**Discussion**

The findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of experiential teaching in enhancing psychological resilience among university students, specifically in the dimensions of tenacity and self-reliance, when integrated into mental health education. Consistent with prior research, these results highlight the potential of experiential learning to engage students actively in their psychological growth and emotional regulation (Jonathan & Laik, 2019). Compared to the control group, which experienced only lecture-based instruction, the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in overall resilience scores, supporting the notion that a combined experiential and lecture-based approach provides substantial benefits in mental health education (Armstrong & Schmidt, 2021).

Experiential learning's unique capacity to create immersive environments where students can confront real-life challenges and reflect on personal experiences may explain its effectiveness. By simulating authentic situations, experiential teaching allows students to internalize coping mechanisms and apply resilience strategies directly to personal scenarios, fostering a higher degree of self-awareness and psychological adaptability (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). This aligns with educational psychology theories that posit experiential learning as a powerful tool for enhancing emotional and cognitive engagement in students (Dewey, 1938).

In examining specific resilience dimensions, the tenacity and self-reliance improvements observed in the experimental group could be attributed to structured activities that promote self-discovery and encourage autonomous problem-solving, both essential components of experiential learning (Hackney, 2023). However, the lack of significant change in the optimism dimension in both groups indicates that optimism may require longer-term intervention or additional supportive structures outside the classroom setting (Kunzler et al., 2020).

This study's implications extend to mental health curriculum developers in higher education. Incorporating experiential learning strategies can effectively bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, thus preparing students not only to understand mental health concepts but also to implement resilience skills in everyday life (Reis et al., 2023). As previous research has shown, mental health programs that integrate experiential methods yield higher satisfaction rates and more meaningful learning outcomes than purely lecture-based approaches, especially in courses centered on self-reflective and transformative learning (Walsh et al., 2020).

Given these findings, further research could explore optimal durations and instructional balances for experiential versus traditional teaching methods to support specific psychological outcomes, including optimism and long-term resilience development. Additionally, future studies should examine how demographic factors, such as cultural background or socioeconomic status, may influence the effectiveness of experiential teaching in mental health education .

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www.techniumscience.com

**Summary**

Integrating experiential teaching with traditional lecture-based methods in university mental health courses significantly enhances students' psychological resilience, especially in tenacity and self-reliance. Experiential learning fosters deep engagement by creating immersive environments that promote self-awareness and emotional adaptability, aligning with theories in educational psychology advocating active, reflective learning. Although resilience and self-reliance showed marked improvements, the optimism dimension remained unchanged, suggesting that fostering optimism may require further or longer interventions. Overall, these findings highlight the value of combining experiential and lecture-based teaching methods to strengthen mental health education, providing insights for future curriculum development and research into optimized teaching strategies.

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