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The Spiral of "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment": A Qualitative Analysis of an Immersive Psychological Education Model in Financial Institutions

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Abstract: Facing the "Financial Power" strategy's demand for talent with both "integrity and ability," the psychological education work in financial institutions urgently needs to shift from "problem counseling" to "personality cultivation." However, the "instrumental rationality" and "atomized competition" ecosystem prevalent among students poses a challenge to traditional "cognitive-preaching" education. This study aims to explore the internal operating mechanism of an immersive psychological education model that integrates "improvisational theatre" and "narrative therapy." Adopting a qualitative research paradigm, this study collected and analyzed the experiential materials of 14 finance major students who deeply participated in a three-month (eight-session) "improv-narrative" workshop, using methods of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and reflective text analysis. The study found that the model's effectiveness does not stem from a linear addition of "improv" and "narrative" techniques, but from a "spiraling" translational mechanism formed between "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment." This mechanism manifests in three progressive spiral levels: 1) From "Embodied Ice-breaking" to "Problem Externalization": Improvisational presence creates a "psychologically safe zone" through "non-utilitarian play," breaking down "rational armor" and providing embodied experience and emotional anchor points for the "problem externalization" of narrative empowerment. 2) From "Unique Outcomes" to "Embodied Rehearsal": Narrative empowerment uncovers "alternative stories" through "appreciative inquiry," while improvisational presence transforms this "possibility" into the "embodied rehearsal" of action capability through techniques like "Forum Theatre" and "Future Self-Portraits." 3) From "Collective Witnessing" to "Spontaneous Co-creation": The "collective witnessing" of narrative empowerment reframes individual transformation into a "group narrative," ultimately fostering the highest form of improvisational presence-participants "spontaneously" co-creating an empowering "new reality." This study reveals that the spiraling interaction of "improv" as "action" and "narrative" as "meaning" is an effective pedagogical path for achieving the "unity of knowing and doing" and "value re-authoring" for students in financial institutions, providing a localized model reference and mechanism analysis for "immersive" psychological education.

Keywords: Improvisational Presence, Narrative Empowerment, Immersive Psychological Education, Financial Institutions (Higher Education), Qualitative Research, Spiral Model.

1. Introduction: The "Immersive" Turn in Psychological Education at Financial Institutions

1.1. "Knowing-Doing Gap": The Practical Dilemma of Psychological Education in Financial Institutions

Against the grand backdrop of the "Financial Power" strategy, the cultivation objectives for financial talent are undergoing a profound shift-from singular "professional skill" elites to integrated talents who possess both "integrity and ability" and shoulder the social responsibility of "Finance for the People" [1]. This shift places new, higher demands on the psychological education work in financial institutions: the goal must move from the "therapy" of "psychological problems" to the "cultivation" of "financial personality."

However, the specific ecosystem of financial institutions-characterized by "GPA supremacy," "quantified internships," and "peer competition"-implicitly reinforces students' "instrumental rationality" and "refined egoism" [2]. This "rational armor" helps students win in competition on one hand, but on the other, it leads to a "knowing-doing gap" in education: students may "cognitively" (as taught in class) fully agree with values like "integrity" and "responsibility," but in "action" and "emotion" (as in real decisions), they may prioritize "individual profit maximization."

Traditional psychological education models, whether "cognitive lectures" or "group counseling," often feel powerless against this "rational armor." Students are adept at "analyzing" problems but reluctant to "invest" emotions; they "know" all the principles but are hard-pressed to "trigger" real change. Therefore, exploring an educational model that can "bypass" or "penetrate" this rational defense and achieve "unity of knowing and doing" through "action" and "experience" has become an urgent task for financial institutions.

1.2. "Immersive" Education: The Path Deficit from "Experience" to "Pedagogy"

"Immersive" or "Experiential" education, as a counter-movement to "cognitive preaching," has gained popularity. It emphasizes "Learning by Doing," creating situations that

"embody" participants [3]. However, "immersion" itself is not the end goal of "education." Many activities (like outdoor team-building, psychological games) can provide temporary "peak experiences," but without a mechanism for "meaning-making," this "experience" quickly fades and cannot be consolidated into stable "personality" or "value" changes [4A] (Mezirow's "transformative learning" requires "critical reflection").

This implies that an effective "immersive" educational model must possess two core engines: one responsible for "creating" vivid, embodied, "here and now" "action experiences"; the other responsible for "guiding" participants to reflect on, name, deconstruct, and reconstruct this "experience," integrating it into their "self-narrative" [4B] (the essence of White & Epston's Narrative Therapy).

1.3. The Theoretical Intersection of "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment"

The "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" model focused on in this study is an intentional fusion of these two engines.

"Improvisational Presence", originating from Improvisational Theatre, refers not to "performance" but to a "state of being": "living in the here and now," "non-judgmental acceptance" ("Yes, and..."), "embracing uncertainty," and "acting spontaneously" [5]. It is a powerful "action" tool, capable of quickly dismantling "over-planning" and "performance anxiety," serving as the "engine" for "embodied experience."

"Narrative Empowerment", originating from Narrative Therapy, is a "meaning" tool. Its core lies in "problem externalization," "deconstructing dominant narratives" (like "utilitarianism"), and "appreciative inquiry" to discover suppressed "unique outcomes," ultimately helping individuals to "re-author" their life stories and grant them "agency" [6].

Previous research has tended to focus on either "improv" [5] or "narrative" [6], with few studies exploring how the two "dynamically combine" in a pedagogical context. The core question of this study is: In the specific context of financial institutions, how do "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment" interact? How do they jointly form a "spiraling" immersive educational model to penetrate "rational armor" and achieve "value re-authoring"?

2. Theoretical Foundations: The Spiral of "Action" and "Meaning"

2.1. "Improvisational Presence": Psychological Education as "Action"

The core of "Improvisational Presence" is "Action." In psychological education, it plays at least three key roles:

1) Builder of the "Psychological Safety Zone": The golden rule of "Yes, and..." is the ultimate expression of "acceptance." It creates a "high fault-tolerance" space where participants are encouraged to "embrace failure," directly opposing the "no-fail" performance culture of financial institutions [7].

2) Dissolver of the "Rational Armor": Improvisational games are often "non-utilitarian," "silly," and "physical." When individuals are asked to "play" a "meaningless" game with their "bodies," their habitual "cognitive defenses" and "over-planning" are temporarily "short-circuited."

3) Creator of "Embodied Possibilities": "Improvisational Presence" demands "Spontaneity." It encourages individuals to "Think by Doing" rather than "Act after Thinking." This allows individuals to "try on" and "experience" "new behavioral patterns" that they might rationally deem "impossible" or "unsafe."

2.2. "Narrative Empowerment": Psychological Education as "Meaning"

The core of "Narrative Empowerment" is "Meaning." It does not "instill" meaning but "generates" it. In pedagogical practice, it plays three roles:

1) Deconstructor of "Problem-Discourse": "Externalizing" techniques (e.g., naming "involution" as the "GPA Monster") help participants shift from "I am the problem" to "I face the problem," thus "reclaiming" subjectivity from dominant, oppressive discourses like "utilitarianism" [4A].

2) Digger of "Agency": Narrative therapy firmly believes "the person is the expert in their own life." Through "appreciative inquiry," the facilitator works to uncover "unique outcomes" in participants' lives that do not fit the "dominant narrative" (of "utility") (e.g., "a moment of selfless help") and "thickens" them.

3) Reconstructor via "Collective Witnessing": In a group, when a "unique outcome" is "collectively witnessed," its power is amplified exponentially. The group becomes an "empowering audience," and an individual's "private narrative" is reconstructed as a "public narrative" [8].

2.3. "The Spiral": A Model Hypothesis of Improv and Narrative as "Mutually Generative"

The theoretical hypothesis of this study is that "Improvisational Presence" (Action) and "Narrative Empowerment" (Meaning) in an immersive workshop are not a simple "A+B" or "A then B," but a "spiraling," "mutually generative" relationship.

1) Spiral Start (Level 1): The "embodied play" of "Improvisational Presence" creates a "non-rational," "vivid experience" (Action); "Narrative Empowerment" immediately follows, "naming" and "externalizing" this "experience" (Meaning).

2) Spiral Progression (Level 2): "Narrative Empowerment" discovers "unique outcomes" through "interviewing" (Meaning); "Improvisational Presence" immediately follows, "anchoring" and "rehearsing" this "outcome" (a value) in "action" through "embodied rehearsal" (like "Forum Theatre") (Action).

3) Spiral Culmination (Level 3): The "collective witnessing" of "Narrative" (Meaning) and the "spontaneous co-creation" of "Improv" (Action) merge, as the group ultimately "co-generates" a "new way of being."

This spiral path constitutes the "immersive psychological education model" this study seeks to verify.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study employs an "Exploratory Case Study" paradigm within qualitative research [9]. The "case" in this study is the "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" model itself. The study aims for a "Thick Description" of this model's operational process and to deeply analyze the "spiral mechanism" of interaction between "improvisational presence" and

"narrative empowerment."

3.2. Research Participants

The researcher recruited participants for an eight-session (3 hours each) "Improvisational Narrative Theatre" workshop at a financial institution via posters and online announcements. The recruitment emphasized "exploring self-growth and interpersonal interaction through drama and stories." 22 students applied; after screening (for professional relevance, motivation, and full commitment), 14 students (9 female, 5 male; ranging from sophomores to first-year master's students; majors covering finance, accounting, economics) became research participants and signed informed consent.

3.3. Workshop Implementation: The Pedagogical Model as "Field"

The "field" of this research was the complete process of the eight workshops. The workshop design intentionally wove together elements of "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment."

Module 1 (Sessions 1-2): Ice-breaking & Externalization. *Improv Elements*: Non-competitive games like "Pass the Energy," "Mirror," to build a "Yes, and..." atmosphere of acceptance. *Narrative Elements*: Guiding participants to "externalize" their "present" "tension" or "stiffness" (e.g., "Performance Anxiety Armor") and discuss its source (e.g., "performance culture").

Module 2 (Sessions 3-4): Deconstruction & Discovery. *Narrative Elements*: In-depth "narrative interviews" focusing on "How did you maintain your 'original intention' in a 'utilitarian' environment?" to discover "unique outcomes." *Improv Elements*: A prototype of "Playback Theatre," where the group instantly "performs" these "unique outcomes."

Module 3 (Sessions 5-6): Conflict & Rehearsal. *Narrative Elements*: Introducing and "deconstructing" a "financial ethical dilemma" script (e.g., "integrity vs. profit"). *Improv* Elements: "Forum Theatre," inviting participants to "replace" the protagonist and "bodily" rehearse "possible resistance" or "new choices."

Module 4 (Sessions 7-8): Integration & Generation. *Improv Elements*: "Future Self-Portrait," playing one's "ideal" self. *Narrative Elements*: "Collectively witnessing" these "self-portraits" and, through a "re-authoring" ritual, "integrating" the workshop experience into the individual's "self-narrative."

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

(1) Data Collection: 1) **Participatory Observation Notes**: The researcher (as a co-facilitator) recorded detailed notes on field dynamics, key "turning points," and participants' "embodied" changes. 2) **Participant Reflective Journals**: 112 anonymous reflective texts submitted by 14 participants after each session. 3) **In-depth Narrative Interviews**: Post-workshop, semi-structured interviews (70-100 minutes each) with all 14 participants, focusing on the "connection" and "translation" process of their "improv" and "narrative" experiences.

(2) Data Analysis: A hybrid approach of "theory-driven" and "data-driven" Thematic Analysis [10]. The analysis focused on tracing the "process" and "path" of how the two core constructs-"improvisational presence" and "narrative empowerment"-"interacted" in the participants' experiences, ultimately extracting the "spiral mechanism" model.

4. Research Findings: The Spiral Mechanism of "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment"

Through a "process-mechanism" analysis of the 14 participants' experiential data, this study found that the fusion of "Improvisational Presence" (Action) and "Narrative Empowerment" (Meaning) is not a simple "1+1," but forms a dynamic spiral of "experience-reflection-action-integration." This spiral mechanism can be distilled into three progressive levels.

4.1. Spiral Level 1: From "Embodied Ice-breaking" to "Problem Externalization" (Action → Meaning)

"Improvisational Presence" as "ice-breaking" action provides the "safe field" and "embodied material" for the "problem externalization**" of "Narrative Empowerment."**

The "rational armor" of financial institution students ("straight-A students") is extremely thick. In the early stages of the workshop, a direct "narrative interview" ("Tell me about your anxiety") would often be met with "standard answer" style "cognitive defense."

The starting point of this model is the "non-utilitarian play" of "Improvisational Presence." In activities like "Mirror" (one person moves, one person mimics) or "Pass the Sound" (group passes a meaningless sound with eyes closed), participants are required to "stop thinking" and "just use the body."

"(Playing 'Mirror') At first, my mind was full of 'What move should I make so I don't look awkward,' I was completely 'stuck.' The facilitator said, 'Stop thinking, feel your partner.' When I really 'gave up,' my body suddenly felt 'free.' That feeling of being 'silly' but 'relaxed,' I haven't felt that at school in a long time." (Participant S, 3rd Year Undergrad)

This "embodied relaxation" and "non-utilitarian" "play" [7] quickly established a "Yes, and..." atmosphere of acceptance ("Here, 'silly' is welcome"). **"Improvisational Presence" at this moment plays the role of "emptying"**; it empties "performance" and "judgment," creating a "psychological safety zone."

The key turning point happens at the "joint" of the spiral: the facilitator immediately connects this "embodied feeling" with "narrative externalization."

"(Reflecting after the game) The facilitator asked us: 'That thing that made you 'stuck,' that 'over-thinking,' what is it?' After discussion, we called it the 'Performance Burden' or the 'GPA Ghost.' ...I realized, the 'stuck' 'me' I just 'played' was 'it' (the ghost) controlling me. By 'playing' it like that, I feel like I can 'grab' it." (Participant L, 1st Year Master's)

"We played an 'Energy Ball' game, pretending to push something very heavy. The facilitator asked us: 'This is heavy, what is it like in your life?' I blurted out: 'It's like the 'Others' Expectations' I carry.' ...At that moment, I wasn't 'talking about' expectations, I 'felt' its weight, and then I 'threw' it (the energy ball) away. That 'throwing' motion was so important." (Participant M, 2nd Year Undergrad)

In the first spiral, the "action" of "Improvisational Presence" (like "stuck," "throwing") **provides vivid, irrefutable "embodied experience" for the "externalization" of "Narrative Empowerment"** (like "GPA Ghost," "Others' Expectations"). It first makes

participants "feel," and then guides them to "think." This "Action → Meaning" path successfully penetrates the "rational armor."

4.2. Spiral Level 2: From "Unique Outcomes" to "Embodied Rehearsal" (Meaning → Action)

"Narrative Empowerment" as the discovery of "meaning," provides the "new script" and "action goal" for the "embodied rehearsal" of "Improvisational Presence."

After the "problem" is externalized, the workshop enters the "construction" phase. Now, "Narrative Empowerment" becomes dominant, as the facilitator uses "appreciative inquiry" to discover "unique outcomes" in the participants' ("straight-A students") narratives that are obscured by the "utilitarian" dominant story.

"The facilitator asked us, 'In your finance studies, was there a moment when you weren't doing it for 'GPA,' but purely felt 'joy' or 'altruism'?' I shared about how I helped a classmate (for no reward) with a difficult options problem, and I felt so happy when he understood. ...I used to think this 'didn't count' (was 'useless'), but sharing it in the group, the way everyone looked at me was so 'bright'." (Participant P, 3rd Year Undergrad)

If it stopped at "sharing" (Meaning), this "empowerment" might be fleeting. **The spiral progression occurs here**: the workshop immediately takes this "unique outcome" ("Altruistic P") as "material" and throws it into the "action" furnace of "Improvisational Presence."

The facilitator used the "Forum Theatre" [4B] (Boal, A.) format. P (playing themself) would have an "internal dialogue" with another member (playing "the Utilitarian Self"); or a "new dilemma" was set: *"P, you now have a competition opportunity to 'crush' that classmate. Will you still help him?"*

"(In Forum Theatre) I 'played' that 'new dilemma.' My 'Utilitarian Me' (played by another student) was at my side saying: 'Don't help him, he's your rival!' I 'froze' (again). ...But the facilitator (as the 'Joker') asked me: 'Do you remember the 'happy' you when you helped him? Where is that 'happy' you?' ...Then I (as the character) took a deep breath, said to the 'Utilitarian Me': 'Shut up.' And then I 'acted out' 'I'll help him anyway'." (Participant P, interview summary)

In the second spiral, the "meaning" from "Narrative Empowerment" (the discovered "altruistic" value) **provided the "anchor" and "motivation" for the "action" of "Improvisational Presence."** And the "embodied rehearsal" of "Improvisational Presence" (acting out "I'll help him anyway") **in turn "solidified" this "meaning" as a "body memory" and an "action capability."**

"'Knowing' I should be altruistic, and 'acting out' my 'choice' to be altruistic, are completely different. Once I've 'acted' it, I know I 'can' do it. My body 'remembers' that feeling of 'refusal' (to the utilitarian self)." (Participant P)

This "Meaning → Action" path responds to the "knowing-doing gap" dilemma. Through "rehearsal," it transforms an "ought-to-be" "value" into an "is" "capability."

4.3. Spiral Level 3: From "Collective Witnessing" to "Spontaneous Co-creation" (Meaning ⇋ Action = Being)

The "collective witnessing" of "Narrative Empowerment" and the "spontaneous action" of "Improvisational Presence" merge, co-generating a "new way of group being."

In the first two spirals, the facilitator's "guidance" and "design" are explicit. But in the latter half of the workshop, once group safety and "improv/narrative" skills are established, the spiral enters the "sublimation" phase.

At this point, the core function of "Narrative Empowerment" is "Collective Witnessing." When P "acted out" "I'll help him anyway," the other 13 members as "witnesses," their "applause" and "feedback" ("You were so cool when you 'refused' him," "I was moved by your 'choice'") **reframed P's "individual transformation" into a "group value."** [8]

"When P finished his scene, we all cried. I (as an audience member) felt the birth of a 'We-ness.' We were no longer 14 'atomized,' competing finance students. We were an 'alliance' that 'could' talk about 'altruism' and 'passion'." (Participant S, 3rd Year Undergrad)

"Improvisational Presence" at this moment also evolves into its highest form—"Spontaneous Co-creation." In the final "Future Self-Portrait" activity, the facilitator only gave the instruction "Play yourself in five years," and the "content" was "spontaneously" created by the participants.

"I played a (future) fund manager who 'refused 996' (the 9am-9pm, 6-day work culture). I expected others to 'play' my boss and 'oppress' me. Instead, a classmate (M) 'spontaneously' walked over, played my colleague, and said to me: 'Yes, and... I support you, let's go hiking together.' Then another classmate (L) came over and said: 'Yes, and... the 'client' I'm playing doesn't need you to 996, I value your 'integrity' more.'..." (Participant J, 1st Year Master's)

"(From J's interview summary) At that moment, we (the participants) didn't need the facilitator anymore. We 'spontaneously' used 'Yes, and...' (Improv Presence) to 'support' J's new story (Narrative Empowerment). We 'co-created' a 'healthier' vision of the future for the finance industry. ...We 'were' (Being) that 'new story,' not just 'acting' it." (Participant J)

In the third spiral, the boundary between "Improvisational Presence" (Action) and "Narrative Empowerment" (Meaning) is blurred. **"Action" is the expression of "Meaning," and "Meaning" is the guide for "Action."** Participants are no longer "practicing" techniques but "living" in the "empowering narrative" of "improvisational presence." This fusion of "Meaning ⇋ Action = Being" is the pinnacle of "personality cultivation" sought by "immersive" psychological education.

5. Discussion: The Pedagogical Mechanism of "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment"

This study, by analyzing the "three spiral levels," reveals the internal mechanism of the immersive educational model that combines "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment."

First, this study responds to the "experience" vs. "transformation" gap in "immersive" education. Pure "improv" (action) can decay into "gamification," bringing a temporary "high" but no "consolidation"; pure "narrative" (meaning) can decay into a "cognitive game," failing against the "rational armor." **The value of the "Improv-Narrative**

Spiral" model is: "Improv" is responsible for "breaching defenses" and "creating experience," while "Narrative" is responsible for "distilling" and "assigning meaning." Conversely, "Narrative" is responsible for "discovering goals," and "Improv" is responsible for "rehearsing" and "solidifying" those goals. This "reciprocating oscillation, spiraling upward" of "action" and "meaning" constitutes the complete feedback loop of "immersive" education [4A].

Second, this study provides an "embodied" solution to the "knowing-doing gap" in financial institutions. The "knowing-doing gap" of finance students is, in essence, a "separation" of "cognition" from "body/emotion." The core mechanism of "Improvisational Presence" is "Embodied Cognition" [5], forcing participants to "think with their bodies"; the core mechanism of "Narrative Empowerment" is "meaning-making" [6]. **The "Improvisational Narrative Spiral" model, precisely by using "embodied action" to "shake up" old cognitions, and then using "narrative reconstruction" to "integrate" new experiences**, achieves the "unity of knowing and doing" at the "body-emotion-cognition" levels simultaneously.

Finally, the "spontaneous co-creation" (Spiral Level 3) revealed by this study has significant pedagogical implications. The ultimate goal of education is not to have students "master" a technique, but to "become" a "more integrated person." In the later stages of the workshop, the fusion of "collective witnessing" (narrative) and "spontaneous creation" (improv) **transforms the group from a "community of learning" into a "community of healing" and a "community of generation."** This process, of "atomized" individuals transforming into an "empowering alliance," is the most profound "antidote" to the "involution" and "refined egoism" culture of financial institutions.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Implications

6.1. Conclusion

This study, through qualitative analysis, has deconstructed an immersive psychological education model that fuses "Improvisational Presence" and "Narrative Empowerment." The study found that the model's internal mechanism is a "spiral" where "action" and "meaning" mutually generate and progressively deepen: **"Improvisational *Presence*" breaks the "Rational *Field*," providing "E*motion*" for "Narrative *E*mpowerment"; "Narrative *Empowerment*" discovers "New *Potential*," anchoring the "Action *Field*" for "Improvisational *Presence*."** This "spiral" path provides an operable, localized "pedagogical paradigm" for cultivating integrated talents with "unity of knowing and doing," "ethical self-awareness," and "social concern" in financial institutions.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

As an exploratory case study, this study's conclusions prioritize "depth" over "breadth." Its limitations include: 1) The small sample size (14) limits "generalizability"; 2) The researcher's dual role as facilitator, while providing deep "insider perspective," requires caution regarding "researcher bias"; 3) The long-term "effects" of the workshop (e.g., after participants graduate) were not tracked. Future research could use "mixed-methods" to "longitudinally track" the long-term effects of this model; or conduct comparative studies of "model migration" in different "high-stakes" professions (e.g., medicine, law).

6.3. Practical Implications

The "Improvisational Narrative Spiral" mechanism distilled by this study offers three implications for current psychological education work in universities:

1) From "Single-Channel" to "Multi-Channel": Educational work should move beyond the single channel of "cognition" and introduce "action" channels such as "improv," "drama," and "the body," to achieve "multi-channel," "whole-person" interventions.

2) From "Technical Addition" to "Mechanism Fusion": Educators should consider how to organically "weave" "action" (like team-building, games) with "meaning" (like reflection, narrative) to build a "spiral" translation mechanism, rather than just an "activity platter."

3) From "Individual Intervention" to "Ecosystem Reconstruction": The ultimate goal of an educational model (like a workshop) should be to "empower" participants to "spontaneously generate" a "supportive" "peer new-ecosystem" (like the "alliance" in this study), to use this "new ecosystem" to counter the "old ecosystem" (like the "involution" ecosystem).

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