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Implementing the Octalysis Framework for Engaging Mental Health Education: A Case Study in Mainland China

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study on implementing the Octalysis Framework in a high school mental health course in China. The study aims to engage and motivate students by incorporating gamification strategies. The paper provides an overview of the Octalysis Framework and discusses its selection for the course design. The implementation process, including specific gamification strategies and game mechanics, is described in detail. The student feedback indicates positive outcomes, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Octalysis Framework in engaging students in mental health education. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications of the study's findings and application of gamification in mental health education in China.

Keywords: Octalysis Framework; Gamification; Mental Health Education; Case Study.

1. Introduction

In the context of Chinese schools, a clear distinction is made between core subjects and secondary subjects. Core subjects, such as Chinese, mathematics, sciences, etc., are deemed essential, while subjects not directly linked to entrance examinations are categorized as secondary subjects, which mental health education falls within. However, concerning adolescents in China, data indicates a disheartening mental health knowledge attainment rate of only 23.1% in urban areas and an even lower 18.9% in rural areas (China National Children's Center, 2021). This concerning reality highlights the pressing need for high-quality mental health education. Given the current landscape of mental health education in China, it becomes imperative for mental health courses to transcend these challenges and instill genuine interest from within, aligning with the government policies promoting mental health education in schools. Implementing gamification strategies within this vulnerable context emerges as a practical and intelligent approach to heighten student engagement and captivate their interest in mental health classes. (Sailer & Homner, 2020)

Among the different gamification theories and models, the Octalysis Framework is a comprehensive and evidence-based one developed by Yu-kai Chou, which can be a good reference to develop Chinese mental health courses (Chou, 2019). The Octalysis Framework consists of eight core drives, which represent the underlying motivations that influence human behavior. In the context of mental health education, the Octalysis Framework can be utilized to address the challenges of student disengagement and low motivation. By applying game mechanics, dynamics, and feedback systems, educators can create interactive and immersive learning experiences that capture students' attention, foster their intrinsic motivation, and promote active participation in mental health education, making mental health learning an interesting and useful experience rather than a required but time-consuming subject.

This research aims to establish the inherent connection between the Octalysis Framework and mental health education and propose an approach for implementing this gamification model into course design through a case study in a Chinese school. The findings of this study will provide mental health teachers in China with an additional toolkit to attract students in class and help them improve their general well-being.

2. Why the Octalysis Framework is Suitable for Chinese Mental Health Course Design

The utilization of the Octalysis Framework in the design of mental health education courses offers several significant advantages. Firstly, it provides a structured approach that aligns with the intrinsic motivations and desires of students. By incorporating elements such as achievement, social influence, empowerment, and unpredictability, the Octalysis Framework taps into the innate psychological drivers that can enhance student engagement and motivation. Secondly, the framework promotes a sense of active participation and agency among students, empowering them to take ownership of their mental health and well-being. Through gamification strategies, such as progress tracking, rewards, and challenges, the Octalysis Framework fosters a sense of accomplishment and personal growth, encouraging students to actively pursue knowledge and skills related to mental health. Additionally, the Octalysis Framework offers opportunities for social interaction and collaboration, creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By integrating social elements and collaborative activities, students can engage in peer-to-peer learning, share experiences, and develop a sense of community. Ultimately, the Octalysis Framework provides educators with a comprehensive and effective toolset to design engaging and impactful mental health education experiences that promote student well-being and empower them to become active participants in their own mental health journey. (Chou, 2019)

Furthermore, the benefits mentioned above align with the

goals outlined in the Guideline for Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools by the National Ministry of Education in China. This document emphasizes the comprehensive impact of various approaches and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of mental health education. It suggests integrating games and interactive activities at the elementary school level to create a positive and cooperative atmosphere. In junior high schools, the focus is on experiential learning and character development, alongside comprehensive psychological education. Senior high schools primarily emphasize experiential learning and adjustment, promoting collaboration between classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, counseling services, and guidance to support students' overall well-being. The Octalysis Framework, as a gamification model, aligns with these strategies by providing a foundation for designing various interactive activities and experiential learning in mental health classes (National Ministry of Education, 2012).

3. Case Study: Implementing the Octalysis Framework in a Mental Health Course in China

3.1. Introduction to the Mental Health Course

The mental health course under analysis was specifically designed for grade 11 students in a Chinese boarding school, focusing on the topic of "The Courage to Be Disliked." The selection of this topic stems from the observed experiences of students who frequently encounter unpleasant situations with their dormmates, leading to heightened sensitivity and negative emotions. The primary objective of this course is to empower these students by incorporating theories from Adler's individual psychology. The aim is to facilitate a fun and interactive learning environment, enabling students to develop the courage to address and navigate the challenges they face in their interpersonal relationships. By equipping students with essential psychological tools, this course strives to enhance their emotional well-being and resilience in a boarding school setting.

3.2. Rationale for Selecting the Octalysis Framework

The Octalysis Framework was chosen as the foundation for designing the mental health course due to several compelling reasons. Firstly, its comprehensive and systematic approach to gamification allowed for a well-rounded and engaging learning experience. By incorporating elements of game design, the Octalysis Framework provided a unique opportunity to create an interactive and immersive environment that resonated with students. Additionally, the framework's emphasis on motivation and intrinsic drives aligned perfectly with the goals of the mental health course, as it aimed to empower students, enhance their well-being, and encourage them to confront and overcome interpersonal challenges. By leveraging the Octalysis Framework, the course design aimed to foster a positive and transformative learning experience for the students. (Chou, 2019)

The implementation of the Octalysis Framework in the mental health course incorporated various core drives to optimize student engagement and motivation. The drive for achievement was utilized through the game-based activities of "Who's Undercover" and "Guess Who Is This Singer," stimulating students' curiosity and providing a sense of accomplishment when deciphering the theme and identifying the singer. The element of social influence and relatedness was integrated through activities such as the "Big Detective Who Can Comfort," where students were encouraged to empathize with the singer, Zhou Shen, and support him using concepts from Adler's individual psychology. The element of unpredictability added excitement and challenge to the learning experience, keeping students intrigued and motivated throughout the course. By incorporating these core drives, the Octalysis Framework created an environment conducive to meaningful student engagement and active participation.

The selected elements from the Octalysis Framework were carefully aligned with the goals of the mental health course. The emphasis on achievement and curiosity aligned with the objective of empowering students to confront and overcome challenges related to interpersonal relationships within their boarding school environment. By engaging in the game-based activities, students not only had fun but also developed resilience and problem-solving skills. The focus on social influence and relatedness resonated with the course's aim of creating a supportive and collaborative learning community, where students could connect, empathize, and support one another. Additionally, the element of unpredictability ensured that students remained engaged and motivated to explore different aspects of mental health. By aligning the selected elements with the course goals, the Octalysis Framework facilitated a transformative learning experience that empowered students to develop essential skills, improve their well-being, and apply the principles of Adler's individual psychology to their own lives.

Students actively engaged with the theme of the course, "The Courage to Be Disliked," through an immersive and upgraded version of the game "Who's Undercover." They delved deeper into the concept by participating in the engaging activity called "Guess Who Is This Singer." Utilizing clues from comments about the singer's journey and a video performance with masks, students unveiled the identity of the admired but previously disliked singer, Zhou Shen. The game "Big Detective Who Can Comfort," inspired by empty chair technology used in counseling, further facilitated the exploration of core ideas from the book "The Courage to Be Disliked." In this activity, each student received a strip containing guided information about a specific role, including Zhou Shen's fans, parents, teachers, and passers-by. Drawing inspiration from Adler's theories, students used the received information to creatively express their support and comfort for Zhou Shen. As Zhou Shen is currently a highly popular Chinese singer, the activity not only motivated students but also provided them with a hidden therapeutic effect. By offering comfort to Zhou Shen, students inadvertently found comfort within themselves and from their classmates. Building on this interactive experience, students were then prompted to apply Adler's viewpoint to answer a question related to relationships and the challenges of not being liked. This encouraged students to integrate the concept of "courage" and the strategies they had learned from the class into real-life situations. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, students were empowered to navigate their own interpersonal relationships with greater confidence and resilience.

3.3. Implementation Process

The implementation of the Octalysis Framework in the

mental health course involved a systematic and iterative process. First, a thorough analysis of the course objectives and target audience was conducted to identify the most suitable game-based approach. The steps included designing the game scenarios, developing the necessary materials, and preparing the classroom environment to create an engaging and immersive experience for the students.

Various gamification strategies were employed to enhance student engagement and motivation throughout the course. One strategy was the incorporation of game-based activities, such as "Who's Undercover" and "Guess Who Is This Singer," which provided a sense of challenge and excitement for the students. Another strategy involved utilizing role-playing and empty chair technology, as seen in the "Big Detective Who Can Comfort" game, where students had the opportunity to apply Adler's individual psychology concepts in a practical setting. These gamification strategies aimed to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that fostered active participation and critical thinking.

The course design included various game mechanics and dynamics to enhance the learning experience. These included elements such as rewards, and achievements to incentivize student progress and provide a sense of accomplishment. The use of rewards, both intrinsic and extrinsic, motivated students to actively participate and strive for personal growth. Feedback mechanisms, such as immediate feedback during game activities and constructive feedback during discussions, contributed to ongoing learning and improvement.

To illustrate how the Octalysis Framework was integrated into the course, specific examples and scenarios were employed. For instance, in the game "Guess Who Is This Singer," students deciphered clues and engaged in critical thinking to identify the popular singer Zhou Shen. Through the "Big Detective Who Can Comfort" game, students were given role-playing opportunities to apply Adler's concepts and provide comfort and support to Zhou Shen. These examples demonstrated how the Octalysis Framework was utilized to create meaningful learning experiences, where students not only gained knowledge but also developed essential skills, such as empathy, problem-solving, and resilience.

4. Student Feedback and Outcomes

The feedback from students regarding the Octalysis-based mental health course was overwhelmingly positive. Students demonstrated high levels of engagement and focus throughout the duration of the class. Despite the challenging nature of the topic, "the courage to be disliked," the integration of the Octalysis Framework made the course highly interactive and student-centered. A survey conducted at the end of the school year revealed that more than half of the students considered this course to be the most memorable and helpful mental health class they had taken. This feedback indicates the success of implementing gamification strategies in mental health education, emphasizing the potential impact of the Octalysis Framework in enhancing students' learning experiences.

The Octalysis-based mental health course yielded several positive outcomes and benefits for the students. First and foremost, the interactive nature of the course fostered a heightened level of student involvement. Students actively participated in the game-based activities and discussions, which created a dynamic and stimulating learning environment. This active engagement enabled students to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of the courage to be disliked and its application in real-life situations. Moreover, the integration of gamification strategies facilitated the cultivation of essential skills, including empathy, problem-solving, and resilience. Students reported feeling more confident in navigating and managing challenging relationships, and the course provided them with a framework to approach these situations with courage and self-assurance.

While the student feedback was predominantly positive, some challenges and areas for improvement were identified. One area that emerged was the need for further reinforcement and application of the learned concepts beyond the classroom setting. Students expressed a desire for more opportunities to practice the skills they acquired during the course in real-life scenarios. Additionally, a few students noted the need for more individualized support and guidance to address their specific concerns and challenges related to the courage to be disliked. These insights provide valuable feedback for refining and enhancing future iterations of the Octalysis-based mental health course, ensuring its continued effectiveness and impact. (Moore-Russo, Wiss & Grabowski, 2018)

5. Conclusion

The positive outcomes observed in this case study indicate the broader implications of incorporating gamification in mental health education in China. By adopting a gamified approach, educators have the opportunity to increase student engagement, improve knowledge retention, and cultivate essential life skills such as empathy, problem-solving, and emotional resilience. Moreover, the success of this case study highlights the potential for gamified mental health education to address the existing challenges faced by students in managing relationships and emotional well-being.

Based on the findings of this case study, several recommendations can be made for further refinement and expansion of the gamification model in mental health education. First, continuous evaluation and assessment of the implemented gamification strategies should be conducted to identify areas for improvement and optimize the learning experience for students. Additionally, future research should explore the integration of technology to enhance the immersive and interactive nature of gamified mental health courses.

In conclusion, the implementation of the Octalysis Framework in the mental health course showcased the effectiveness of gamification in engaging and motivating students in China. By harnessing the power of game design principles and intrinsic motivators, educators can create impactful and immersive learning experiences. This study not only contributes to the field of gamified mental health education but also provides valuable insights for designing effective mental health courses in China.

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