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Practical Exploration of the "PAD Class" in the Reform of New Liberal Arts Education: A Case Study of the Course *Management Psychology*

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Abstract: As the New Liberal Arts paradigm continues to evolve, liberal education must transcend traditional lecture-based approaches to cultivate higher-order thinking, interdisciplinary integration, and practical innovation among students. Management Psychology, a discipline bridging theoretical frameworks and practical applications, frequently encounters challenges under conventional teaching methods, including low student engagement, limited internalization of concepts, and a persistent gap between theory and practice. In response, this study implements a comprehensive course redesign using the PAD (Presentation-Assimilation-Discussion) model, structured to align with the New Liberal Arts principles of value orientation, cross-disciplinary integration, and practice-based learning. The PAD cycle actively engages students in self-directed learning, promotes the development of tacit knowledge, and integrates process-oriented assessments to continuously monitor understanding and skill acquisition. By systematically connecting theoretical knowledge with practical competence, this approach fosters not only cognitive understanding but also the application of psychological principles in real-world management scenarios. Classroom observations and evaluation data demonstrate that the PAD model effectively enhances student motivation, deepens comprehension, and encourages collaborative problem-solving, while providing measurable pathways for continuous improvement. The study concludes that this model offers a scalable and replicable framework for educational reform, serving as a viable blueprint for other disciplines seeking to bridge the theory-practice divide and advance the objectives of the New Liberal Arts.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Challenges in Chinese Higher Education

Chinese higher education has experienced rapid expansion, achieving near-universal enrollment, yet this quantitative growth has not been fully matched by improvements in academic quality. Traditional teaching methods remain dominant, particularly in theory-heavy courses, where instruction is largely unidirectional: instructors deliver content while students passively receive it. This approach prioritizes rote knowledge transmission over the cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills, limiting students' ability to engage deeply with complex concepts.

Even with the widespread availability of digital resources, including online libraries, multimedia content, and learning management systems, the pedagogical culture in many institutions continues to emphasize memorization and exam performance rather than meaningful engagement. Consequently, students often struggle to connect abstract theories with practical contexts, and instructors find it difficult to foster higher-order cognitive skills in large classrooms. These systemic limitations highlight the urgent need for educational reform that balances knowledge acquisition with skill development.

1.2. The New Liberal Arts Initiative

In response to these challenges, China's 2020 New Liberal Arts initiative advocates a holistic transformation of higher education, emphasizing interdisciplinary integration, the fusion of humanities and sciences, and the alignment of theoretical knowledge with practical applications [1]. The initiative aims to cultivate professionals who are not only competent in their fields but also possess patriotism, global awareness, innovation capability, and practical skills necessary for addressing complex societal challenges.

This vision demands comprehensive reform in pedagogy, curriculum design, and teaching methodology. Traditional lecture-based methods are insufficient for nurturing well-rounded competencies. Instead, approaches that promote active learning, self-direction, and cross-disciplinary thinking are prioritized. Institutions are encouraged to redesign courses to create more interactive, application-oriented learning environments, bridging the gap between abstract theory and real-world practice.

1.3. Limitations of Existing Reforms and the Role of Management Psychology

Recent pedagogical reforms—such as fragmented learning [2,3], flipped classrooms [4,5], micro-videos [6], and MOOCs [7]—have supported autonomous learning and greater flexibility in accessing content. However, these methods may inadvertently fragment students' attention and reduce the coherence of instruction. Deep, sustained engagement with concepts remains essential, and superficial exposure risks undermining meaningful learning. Discussion-based teaching [8] offers a potential solution but is difficult to implement at scale. It requires intensive preparation, can easily drift from curricular goals, and may restrict student autonomy if overly structured. Cultural norms emphasizing harmony and verbal restraint, combined with heavy course loads, further limit active participation in classroom dialogue.

Management Psychology, as an interdisciplinary field linking psychology with management, exemplifies these challenges. The course is essential for developing interpersonal, organizational, and decision-making competencies [9], yet its abstract concepts and the students' limited practical experience often reduce instruction to passive exposition. Students may memorize theories without understanding how to apply them in organizational settings, resulting in a persistent theory-practice gap.

To address these issues, this study introduces the PAD ("Presentation-Assimilation-Discussion") model for course redesign. By centering learning on students' engagement, fostering competency development, and implementing process-oriented assessment, the PAD framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to aligning Management Psychology instruction with the goals of the New Liberal Arts initiative.

2. The Compatibility of the "Divided Classroom" Teaching Model with New Liberal Arts

2.1. Overview of the Divided Classroom and PAD Cycle

The "Divided Classroom" model, developed at Fudan University, integrates concise lectures with interactive discussions through the PAD cycle—Presentation, Assimilation, and Discussion [10]. In this framework, a brief lecture introduces core concepts, followed by student-centered internalization activities, such as note-taking, reflection, or problem-solving exercises. The process culminates in collaborative discussions, either within small

groups or guided by the instructor, to consolidate understanding and apply knowledge in practical contexts.

This structure addresses the limitations of conventional lecture-based teaching by balancing the transmission of knowledge with active learning. Presentation ensures foundational concepts are clearly communicated, Assimilation allows students to process and internalize information independently, and Discussion encourages dialogue, peer learning, and critical examination. By structuring learning in cycles, the Divided Classroom model reduces passive learning, strengthens cognitive engagement, and fosters a deeper understanding of complex, abstract material.

2.2. Alignment with New Liberal Arts Principles

The PAD model aligns closely with the New Liberal Arts vision, which emphasizes student agency, cross-disciplinary integration, and the fusion of knowledge with practical skills. First, the cycle centers on student autonomy by requiring active participation in internalization and discussion phases, cultivating a sense of ownership over the learning process. Second, it promotes the development of tacit knowledge and higher-order thinking. Reflective exercises encourage students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, rather than merely memorizing content, thereby deepening conceptual understanding and critical reasoning skills.

Third, the discussion component fosters collaborative learning, allowing students to engage in structured "learning-through-practice" experiences. By negotiating perspectives, debating solutions, and co-constructing knowledge, students develop interpersonal and problem-solving competencies essential for professional and social contexts. Moreover, this approach encourages interdisciplinary thinking; discussions can incorporate themes from digital governance, AI ethics, behavioral economics, or management strategy, demonstrating the applicability of theoretical knowledge across multiple domains.

2.3. Practical Implications and Scalability

Beyond theoretical alignment, the PAD model offers tangible benefits for course design and educational reform. Its cyclical approach provides a replicable and scalable framework that can be adapted to diverse disciplines and class sizes, enabling instructors to maintain interactive pedagogy even in large or resource-constrained settings. By integrating formative assessments throughout the cycle, educators can monitor learning progress continuously, identify areas for improvement, and provide targeted feedback, thereby enhancing both teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

Importantly, the model bridges the long-standing gap between theory and practice, particularly in interdisciplinary courses like Management Psychology. Students are encouraged to apply abstract concepts to real-world scenarios, reflecting on the implications of psychological theories in organizational decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics. In doing so, PAD not only advances New Liberal Arts objectives but also cultivates graduates equipped with both cognitive mastery and practical competence, demonstrating the model's relevance and applicability in contemporary higher education.

3. Implementation of PAD in Management Psychology

3.1. Structure and Pedagogical Rationale

The PAD (Presentation-Assimilation-Discussion) model is designed to integrate lecture-based instruction with active, student-centered learning. A key feature is the deliberate assimilation phase, where students independently process and internalize the content delivered in a concise lecture [10]. This phase allows learners to reflect, organize knowledge, and construct personal understanding before engaging in collaborative discussion, effectively bridging the gap between theory and application.

The presentation phase introduces core concepts in a structured and focused manner, ensuring that foundational knowledge is clearly communicated. The assimilation phase provides time for individual reflection, note-taking, or problem-solving, encouraging cognitive processing and higher-order thinking. Finally, the discussion phase allows students to articulate insights, debate interpretations, and collaboratively solve problems, promoting deeper understanding and knowledge transfer.

This structured cycle addresses common challenges in traditional classrooms, where passive listening often leads to shallow learning. By alternating between presentation, individual assimilation, and discussion, PAD encourages sustained engagement, reflection, and application of concepts in Management Psychology, enhancing both comprehension and practical skill development.

3.2. Cross-Class PAD Implementation

In the "cross-class PAD" approach, each instructional unit spans two class sessions, forming an integrated learning cycle. The first session begins with a discussion that reviews prior material, followed by a presentation introducing new content. Students then complete after-class assimilation tasks, such as reflective exercises or assignments, which prepare them for the next discussion. The second session opens with an in-depth discussion of the current unit and ends with a lecture on the subsequent unit, linking past, current, and future content in a continuous cycle.

This iterative format ensures that each unit builds logically on the previous one, reinforcing retention and understanding. By explicitly connecting after-class preparation with in-class discussion, students experience a coherent learning process that supports active participation and promotes higher-order thinking. Optional extensions, such as case studies or applied exercises, can further strengthen comprehension and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary integration.

3.3. Benefits and Practical Considerations

The PAD model is flexible and scalable, adaptable to class size, course content, and teaching objectives (see Table 1). Small-group discussions foster collaboration and peer learning, while whole-class dialogues allow instructors to provide guidance and address conceptual misunderstandings. Assimilation activities can be customized to include applied exercises, critical reflections, or interdisciplinary connections, linking psychological theory to management practice.

Table 1. Basic Procedure of "Cross-class PAD".

Instructional Phase	In-class Activities (D/P)	After-class Activity (A)	Linked Instructional Unit	Core Function
First cycle	D (discussion) + P (presentation) - recap of previous unit + introductory lecture on new unit	A (assimilation) - students digest content independently, complete assignments, prepare for discussion	Bridge from previous → current unit	Review prior knowledge; introduce new content; after-class assimilation smooths the transition
Second cycle	D (discussion) + P (presentation) - in-depth discussion of current unit + lecture on next unit	A (assimilation) - consolidate current unit and preview the following one	Current unit	Deepen understanding; foster higher-order thinking

Third cycle	D (discussion) + P (presentation) - discussion of next unit + preview/lecture on subsequent unit	- (optional extension or entry into next cycle)	Next unit	Sustain learning chain; form continuous feedback loop
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Classroom observations indicate that students benefit from the structured learning chain, showing improved engagement, motivation, and ability to apply theoretical concepts. Instructors gain insight into learning progress and can provide timely feedback, making the teaching process more responsive and evidence-based. Overall, the PAD implementation in Management Psychology exemplifies how structured, student-centered pedagogy can operationalize New Liberal Arts principles, bridging theory and practice while cultivating reflective, autonomous, and collaborative learners.

4. Implementation Path of the PAD Class in Management Psychology

This study implemented the "cross-class PAD" model in an 18-session Management Psychology course (2×45 min per session) for E-Commerce majors (2020-2021 cohorts) at a private university in Guangdong (see Table 2). The course was carefully structured to integrate theoretical knowledge, independent reflection, and collaborative discussion, embodying the New Liberal Arts emphasis on linking theory with practice.

Table 2. Detailed Implementation Plan of the PAD Class in the Course "Management Psychology".

Session	Phase	Classroom Arrangement	Activities & Content
1	Presentation (P)	First half	① Explain PAD rules & course requirements
		Second half	② Outline Chapter 1 framework, key terms, emphases & difficulties; ③ students listen & take notes
	Assimilation (A)	After class	④ Self-study Chapter 1; ⑤ submit homework by 22:00 the night before Session 2; ⑥ instructor marks before class
2	Discussion (D)	First half (25 min)	⑦ Small-group discussion: solve low-level questions, refine high-level questions
		First half (20 min)	⑧ Whole-class Q&A: instructor tackles high-level questions
	Presentation (P)	Second half	① Lecture on Chapter 2 framework, key terms, emphases & difficulties; ② students listen & take notes
3	Assimilation (A)	After class	① Self-study Chapter 2; ② submit homework by 22:00 the night before Session 3; ③ instructor marks before class
	Discussion (D)	First half (25 min)	⑥ Small-group discussion: solve low-level questions, refine high-level questions
		First half (20 min)	⑦ Whole-class Q&A: instructor tackles high-level questions
	Presentation (P)	Second half	① Lecture on Chapter 3 framework, key terms, emphases & difficulties; ② students listen & take notes

Assimilation (A)	After class	③ Self-study Chapter 3; ④ submit homework by 22:00 the night before Session 4; ⑤ instructor marks before class
...	...	...
Same pattern continues for subsequent sessions		

Session 1 introduced the course objectives, PAD principles, and Chapter 1 content. Students were guided on how to engage with the PAD cycle, including effective note-taking, reflection, and preparation for discussion. Reading notes were submitted via the "Chaoxing Learning" platform by 10 PM the following day, allowing instructors to review and provide timely feedback before the next session. This initial session established clear expectations for student participation and set the foundation for a structured "input-process-output" learning cycle.

Session 2 marked the formal start of the recurring PAD cycle. The first half began with a 25-minute small-group discussion (4 students per group), where students solved low-level questions and collaboratively refined higher-order queries. This was followed by a 20-minute whole-class Q&A, enabling the instructor to address complex questions and guide students' analytical thinking. The second half of the session introduced Chapter 2 through a focused presentation, with students actively listening and taking structured notes. After-class assimilation tasks reinforced learning, requiring students to engage independently with the material, complete assignments, and submit them before the next session.

Sessions 3-14 followed this iterative pattern, covering all 14 textbook chapters. Each session maintained the integrated sequence of discussion, presentation, and after-class assimilation, promoting continuous reflection, knowledge consolidation, and practical application. This structured cycle enabled students to internalize theoretical concepts progressively, while instructors could monitor comprehension and adjust teaching strategies as needed.

Sessions 15-17 shifted focus to literature review and real-world case analysis, including topics such as e-commerce trends and Gen-Z workplace behavior. These sessions emphasized the New Liberal Arts goal of integrating theory with practice, encouraging students to apply psychological principles to practical contexts and interdisciplinary scenarios.

Session 18 concluded the course with a synthesis-focused review and reflective Q&A, allowing students to consolidate learning across all units and articulate insights gained throughout the PAD cycle. Throughout the course, the instructor's role evolved from "knowledge transmitter" to "learning architect" and "thinking facilitator," while students progressed from passive recipients to active constructors of knowledge, engaging in a continuous and coherent "input-process-output" cycle that reinforced both comprehension and application.

5. Teaching-Reform Outcomes and Reflection

The PAD-based redesign of the Management Psychology course effectively transformed students from passive recipients of information into active, inquiry-driven learners. The integration of structured presentations, independent assimilation, and collaborative discussion strengthened self-directed learning, deep cognitive engagement, and durable mastery of course content. The outcomes can be summarized in five key areas.

5.1. Learner Autonomy and Deep Understanding

Concise presentations provide students with a skeletal framework of core concepts, which they actively build upon through preparation, note-taking, and consultation of supplementary resources. By arriving at class with pre-prepared notes or reflective memos, students engage in an enhanced, continuous learning loop. This approach replaces last-minute cramming with sustained preparation, discussion, and iterative

reflection, effectively doubling the time devoted to self-directed study and promoting deeper conceptual understanding.

5.2. Tacit-Knowledge Development

The assimilation and discussion phases enable students to integrate new knowledge with personal experience, fostering the formation of tacit knowledge. Through classroom dialogue and peer collaboration, students develop actionable insights, such as understanding group dynamics, adapting leadership strategies, or applying psychological principles to workplace scenarios. These experiences cultivate transferable competencies that extend beyond the classroom, supporting internships, career preparation, and lifelong learning.

5.3. Process-Oriented Assessment

Assessment shifted from reliance on a single final examination to a more holistic, process-oriented framework: 40% weekly assignments, 30% class engagement, and 30% exams. This structure encourages consistent effort, mitigates the impact of weaker final performance, and reinforces the New Liberal Arts principle of cultivating competence rather than merely measuring memorization. Students demonstrate sustained progress over time, reflecting improved self-regulation and reflective practice.

5.4. Instructor Role Transformation

Teachers transitioned from the traditional role of knowledge transmitter to that of learning architect and thinking facilitator. Instructors focus on high-impact explanations of core difficulties, eliminating redundancy, and strategically guiding discussions without dominating them. This transformation enhances teaching efficiency, elevates student satisfaction, and positively impacts course evaluations, while allowing students to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

5.5. Cross-Disciplinary Integration

Despite limited prior managerial experience among students, PAD facilitated the application of interdisciplinary knowledge to real-world cases, including topics in e-commerce, remote leadership, and Gen-Z psychology. Students were able to analyze these cases collaboratively, integrating insights from psychology, management, and digital technology. This early exposure to integrative thinking provides a foundation for broader New Liberal Arts objectives, promoting cross-disciplinary problem-solving and practical competence.

6. Conclusion

The PAD class represents not merely an instructional improvement but a philosophical shift in teaching, aligning with the New Liberal Arts' vision of cross-disciplinary integration, technology-enabled learning, and value-oriented education. By providing a clear, structured, and operationally feasible framework, PAD moves students from knowledge-centered learning to competence-centered development. Its implementation in Management Psychology has revitalized student engagement, enhanced practical application, and created a replicable reform model for similar courses.

Future directions include expanding interdisciplinary case studies, integrating digital tools to support personalized learning, and exploring hybrid approaches such as "PAD + PBL" (Project-Based Learning). These enhancements aim to deepen the humanistic and practical impact of the New Liberal Arts, cultivating graduates who are reflective, competent, and capable of addressing complex societal challenges.

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Li: investigation, funding acquisition.; Xingya Yu: data collection and literature review; Xiao Zheng: student coordination and class management.; Chi Chen: software, formal analysis; Keke Shi (corresponding author): writing-review & editing, funding acquisition.

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