

# Exploring the Construction of an Active Classroom in Higher Vocational Education

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Currently, negative learning behaviors such as students' addiction in their phones, lack of classroom interaction, and insufficient learning initiative are common in higher vocational education classrooms. Basing itself on the distinctive features of vocational education, this paper integrates five core educational theories, namely, self-determination theory, constructivist learning theory, situated learning theory, learning by doing, and project-based teaching. It aims to analyze the external manifestations and underlying causes of students' passive learning behaviors so as to propose a framework for building an active classroom through four dimensions, i.e., reconstructing classroom logic, implementing project-based teaching, creating workplace scenarios, and innovating diversified assessment systems, thereby supporting the holistic development of skilled talents.

*Keywords:* vocational education, phone-gazing behavior, active classroom, project-based teaching, learning by doing

## Introduction

Currently, negative phenomena such as students' looking down and remaining silent, low participation, and lack of motivation are commonly observed in higher vocational education classrooms. These issues are not primarily due to students' subjective disinterest in learning; rather, the root cause lies in traditional static lecture-based instruction, which contradicts the fundamental concept of vocational education—"learning by doing". The defining characteristic of vocational education is that learning must be grounded in action. Through hands-on practice, complete projects, and progressive tasks, students acquire skills, accumulate experience, and develop professional competencies. In other words, effective learning for higher vocational students cannot be achieved through the traditional model of passive listening and note-taking. Active engagement is a necessary prerequisite for meaningful classroom learning. Practical teaching experiences clearly demonstrate that when real-world tasks, job-related projects, and hands-on activities are integrated into classes, students' attention and participation significantly improve. However, once instruction reverts to purely theoretical lectures, students' passive behaviors quickly resurface. Basing itself on this, this paper systematically analyzes the internal and external causes of students' disengaged classroom behavior by integrating various theories of vocational learning. Centered on action-oriented and project-based teaching, it proposes constructing an active classroom model that aligns with the nature of vocational education and gears to the states of higher vocational students, offering practical guidance for classroom reform in higher vocational institutions.

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**Acknowledgments:** This research was supported by Shenzhen Polytechnic University Research Fund (2025, Grant No. 6025310018S) and Guangdong Philosophy and Social Science Foundation (2024, Grant No. GD24XXW13).

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## **Realistic Manifestations of Negative Learning Behaviors Among Students in Vocational Colleges**

### **Inadequate Sustained Attention and Normalization of Head-Down Learning Behavior**

In the standardized 45-minute classroom setting at vocational colleges, only a small proportion of students can consistently follow the teaching pace, actively engage in thinking, and maintain effective listening throughout the class. Most students exhibit a typical “physically present but mentally absent” pseudo-listening state, which can be categorized into two types. The first category is overt head-down behavior, where students continuously use mobile devices to watch short videos, browse social media, or play online games, thus passively filling class with fragmented digital entertainment; the second is covert head-down behavior, where students remain silently gazing downward, fidgeting with stationery, or flipping through irrelevant books, responding mechanically only when called upon by the teacher, without genuine knowledge absorption or cognitive engagement. Overall, fragmented attention and normalized head-down behavior have become widespread challenges in vocational college classrooms.

### **The Bidirectional Interaction Mechanism in the Classroom Fails, Which Results in Stagnation in Teacher-Student Communication**

Active classroom interaction is the core to energize the learning atmosphere and assess learning outcomes, yet a pervasive issue of interactive paralysis exists in current vocational education classrooms. When teachers pose questions, students commonly avoid eye contact by lowering their heads, sidestepping class participation and feedback. Even with pre-designed interactive elements like group discussions and collaborative inquiry, achieving full engagement remains elusive since most students remain silent observers or disengaged from group activities. Consequently, group work devolves into solo presentations by a few proactive students, resulting in an overall dull and oppressive classroom atmosphere which fails to foster a positive interactive learning ecosystem.

### **Lack of Intrinsic Learning Motivation Results in a Prevalent Passive Coping Mentality in Learning**

On the one hand, most vocational college students lack clear career planning before enrollment, have vague understanding of their major’s job matching direction and industry development prospects, and struggle to establish a connection between classroom learning and future employment. On the other hand, students generally find classroom theoretical knowledge obscure and difficult to apply directly to practical work, resulting in weak perception of its utilitarian value. Under this dual cognitive bias, students develop a passive learning mindset of “just passing credits, enduring class hours, and graduating smoothly”, where classroom learning merely fulfills attendance requirements without genuine engagement of thought or effort, ultimately leading to a habitual pattern of passive compliance and disengagement in learning.

## **Deep-Rooted Causes and Theoretical Support of Students’ Negative Learning Behaviors in Higher Vocational Classrooms**

### **Self-Determination Theory Reveals Lack of Basic Psychological Needs and Endogenous Learning Motivation**

The self-determination theory suggests that the generation and maintenance of individual autonomous learning behavior need to rely on the satisfaction of the three core psychological needs of autonomy, competence,

and sense of belonging. Psychologically, the theory can explain the internal mechanism of higher vocational students' bow and weariness in class.

From the perspective of autonomy, the teaching progress, teaching content, classroom tasks, and assessment methods of many higher vocational classes are unilaterally formulated by teachers, and students have no learning space of independent exploration, choice, and planning. In terms of competence, the lack of competence is the core psychological root of higher vocational students' weariness of learning. Higher vocational students' theoretical learning and abstract understanding are inadequate. At this stage, the classroom lacks gradient hierarchical teaching design, so students may feel too confused, encounter frustration, and gradually lose confidence in learning. Besides, they sometimes feel that the basic material is too easy to obtain a sense of learning achievement. From the perspective of sense of belonging, some teachers only focus on the completion of teaching tasks, ignoring the changes of students' classroom emotions and learning difficulties. The relationship between teachers and students only stays at the level of knowledge transmission, lacking emotional communication and humanistic care. Consequently, students cannot get a sense of identity and collective belonging in the classroom, and finally actively drift away from classroom teaching.

### **Constructivism Learning Theory Suggests That Passive Listening Mode Hinders the Independent Construction of Knowledge**

Constructivism learning theory clearly states that learning is not a mechanical process of teachers' one-way indoctrination and students' passive memory, but a dynamic process of learners' completing the internalization of knowledge and the construction of personalized knowledge system through independent thinking, cooperative exploration, questioning and discrimination based on their original cognitive experience. Learners' subjective initiative is the core premise of knowledge construction.

The traditional lecture class completely violates the learning law of constructivism. The class takes ppt, reading, theoretical focus planning, recitation as the core teaching link, and lacks the teaching design of heuristic questions, exploratory tasks, speculative discussions, etc. Students do not need to think and question actively in the whole process; instead, they only need to receive theoretical information passively, thus staying in a passive learning state for a long time.

### **Situational Learning Theory: The Classroom Is Separated From the Professional Scene, and the Perception of Learning Practical Value Is Weak**

Situational learning theory emphasizes the fact that effective learning is inseparable from real scene support and practical interaction. Fragmented theoretical learning, separated from specific application scenarios, is difficult to stimulate learning motivation and realize the transformation from knowledge to post ability. The core learning demand of higher vocational students is to master the post practical skills and achieve high-quality employment, while there is an obvious dislocation between the supply of classroom teaching and students' learning demand. Most theoretical courses are limited to a single teaching scene in an ordinary classroom, lacking the integration of real work cases of enterprises, practical tasks of posts, and industry-leading trends. The theoretical knowledge in the classroom is seriously disconnected from the actual work process and post ability requirements of enterprises. Combined with the cognitive characteristics of higher vocational students' concrete thinking, the pure theory teaching mode completely violates its cognitive law. The simpler the teaching scene and the more abstract the content, the lower the students' learning initiative, and the more prominent the negative behaviors such as bowing and wandering, and classroom dissociation.

### **Learning by Doing Theory: Classroom Without Action Carrier Violates the Learning Law of Vocational Education**

Dewey's learning by doing theory is the core teaching theory in vocational education. Its core point is that learning is generated by action, static listening without practice is not effective learning, and the improvement of knowledge, skills, and professional thinking must be completed by practical attempts, problem solving, project practice, and other specific actions. Many higher vocational classes emphasize teaching while despising action. The classroom only completes the theoretical knowledge explanation, and does not match the corresponding practical tasks. Students only listen instead of doing, and reciting instead of using with no practical carrier, task goal, and learning output. This mode violates the cognitive habits of higher vocational students and the growth law of skilled talents. The lack of action in the classroom will make students' attention continue to be lax, and classroom learning will change from active learning to passive learning, resulting in ineffective classroom inevitably.

### **Project-Based Teaching Theory: Lack of Learning Objectives Result From No Project Chain Support**

The project-based teaching theory points out that the vocational education classroom needs to take the complete post project and work task as the basic teaching unit, integrate the fragmented knowledge into the real work process, and allow students to complete learning, skill training, and vegetarian training simultaneously in the process of promoting the project.

At the present stage, there are some problems in the conventional classroom of higher vocational colleges, such as the fragmentation of knowledge, the fragmentation of teaching links, and the hollowing out of learning objectives. The classroom is lack of complete, coherent, and productive teaching projects. Students are unable to clarify the learning objectives and learning outcomes of a single class, and are not clear about what tasks need to be completed and what ability objectives need to be achieved in classroom learning. Lacking continuous task traction, students cannot form a coherent learning focus, and classroom participation is lack of purpose, finally leading to a passive learning state.

## **Multidimensional Construction Path of Active Classroom From the Perspective of Vocational Education**

Building a dynamic and active classroom with Dewey's learning by doing and project-based teaching theory as the core theme, matching psychological incentives, scenario creation, evaluation and optimization at the same time, thoroughly solving the problem of students' learning weariness from the root, and building a dynamic and active classroom can realize "students' extensive and in-depth classroom participation, free and full personality expansion, and clear and positive significance pursuit" (Cui & Chen, 2020, p. 3).

### **Reconstruction of Classroom Teaching Logic**

Basing ourselves on learning by doing, we can realize the transformation of classroom teaching from "teaching-oriented" to "learning-oriented". We are expected to completely break the traditional classroom structure of teachers' one-way indoctrination, following the principle of giving priority to action, promoting learning by doing, and combining learning with doing. Besides, we must reconstruct the classroom teaching process, reduce the length of ineffective theory teaching, and return the main body of the classroom to students. The length of conventional classroom theory teaching should be within 20%, and the remaining classroom time should be used for students' practice, exploration, communication and achievement display, so as to completely

change the classroom form of sitting in class, and return the classroom to the essence of action. It enables students to internalize knowledge in continuous practice, and reverse the learning habit of passive listening.

On the one hand, we are expected to rely on the progressive problem chain to drive classroom thinking. And hierarchical problems are designed around professional core competencies and post core pain points, which guide students' independent thinking, group discrimination, and classroom speech, forcing students to actively follow the pace of the classroom and improve their thinking participation. On the other hand, we have designed lightweight and normalized classroom hands-on tasks, replacing mechanical notes with tasks such as mind mapping, case analysis report writing, practical steps sorting, and group results reporting, so that students could maintain the state of hand brain interaction throughout the course.

### **Innovation of Classroom Teaching Carrier**

We are expected to implement project-based teaching in the whole area and build a closed-loop learning chain. With the real work project of the post as the core teaching carrier, the fragmented classroom of traditional knowledge points is transformed into a task driven project classroom, which breaks the inherent teaching logic of textbook chapters, disassembles and reconstructs the knowledge points of the course, and integrates them into the real project of the post, so that students can learn around the complete project. In the process of promoting the project, students can intuitively perceive the relevance between knowledge and post work, continue to harvest practical results and sense of learning achievement, effectively break the cognitive misunderstanding of useless attendance, and actively participate in classroom learning and practical training.

There are three types of project-based teaching modes: One is the post simulation project, which reproduces the standard work process of the enterprise and carries out authentic post skill training. For example, the cross-border e-commerce specialty sets up the full process projects of cross-border e-commerce platform store decoration, short video editing, and live data replay; the second is a case study project, which relies on typical problems in the industry to cultivate students' ability to analyze and solve problems; the third is the group cooperation project, which divides the comprehensive project tasks and cultivates the students' ability of team cooperation and division of labor.

### **Creating Professional Teaching Scenes**

The teaching situation is an event or scene directly related to the teaching content, which can wake up the students' daily life experience through the teaching situation, so as to promote the positive transfer of the learned knowledge and skills (Wang, 2025). With situational teaching, we must break the limitations of single teaching in ordinary classrooms, build diversified workplace simulation teaching scenarios, eliminate the abstraction of theoretical knowledge, reduce the difficulty of students' knowledge understanding, and activate the endogenous learning motivation in the classroom. Students establish the direct connection between classroom learning and employment development through professional teaching scenes, clarify the practical value of learning, and use immersive classroom practice to replace the fragmented pleasure brought by mobile entertainment, so as to wake up classroom concentration.

Specifically, it is divided into three types of scenario creation methods: The first one is the real workplace scenario, which introduces real work orders, work projects, and industry-leading cases of enterprises to restore the real workplace working atmosphere; the second one is the role-playing situation, which relies on the post identity simulation and workflow deduction and allows students to immerse themselves in the post work content; the third one is the integration of theory and practice training situation. The majority of professional courses will

be transferred to the school training room and training workshop so as to achieve the seamless connection between theory and practice in the guidance of speaking theory, doing practice and error correction.

### **Optimizing the Classroom Evaluation System**

We must build a process of multiple evaluation and establish a long-term incentive and restraint mechanism. Abandoning the traditional result-oriented evaluation mode with a final paper to fit the project-based classroom teaching mode, we must build a diversified evaluation system with process assessment as the core, taking into account ability and literacy, so as to play the role of guidance, incentive and constraint of evaluation. Besides, we are expected to reconstruct the weight of curriculum assessment by reducing the proportion of final examination paper to 40%, and increase the weight of the five process indicators of classroom project completion quality to 60%, i.e., practical task results, group cooperation performance, classroom interaction participation, and classroom attendance. The evaluation mechanism forces students to change their learning behavior from passive avoidance of classroom learning to active participation in practice, thereby forming a benign classroom learning closed loop of “active participation, harvesting results, positive incentive, and continuous participation”, and consolidating the achievements of active classroom construction.

### **Conclusion**

The core of active classroom is to realize the transformation of the classroom from static listening to dynamic practice, so that students can do tasks and projects actively. By reconstructing the classroom logic with action as the core, implementing project-based task teaching in the whole area, building workplace teaching situations, and improving the process of multiple evaluation, we can fully meet the three psychological needs of students’ sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging, so as to truly build a high-quality positive classroom and realize the cultivation of high-quality technical and skilled talents.

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