

Original Research Article

The application of stage play project management in the cultivation of student backbones in higher education

Yubao Chu

Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China

Abstract: The production and rehearsal of stage plays are characterized by long cycles, complex tasks, and a high degree of teamwork, making them a natural testing ground for project-based student backbone development. Current cultivation of student backbones in higher education faces three significant practical dilemmas: "Lying-flat" (perfunctory) performance, "hollow" identification with organizational values, and "fragile" stress tolerance. This study takes the original stage play *Soul of the Dongjiang River* from Shenzhen Polytechnic University as a case study. It systematically analyzes the application mechanism of its full-chain educational model—Integrating "scriptwriting, creation, performance, learning, and action"—In cultivating student backbones. The findings indicate that stage play project management is notably effective in overcoming "lying-flat" attitudes, strengthening value identification, and enhancing stress resilience, thereby offering a replicable and innovative pathway for student backbone development in higher education.

Keywords: stage play; project management; student backbone cultivation; full-chain education

1. Introduction

The corps of student backbones is a crucial instrument for implementing the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education in higher education. In current university operations, the cultivation of these student backbones faces a series of practical challenges. Some student backbones exhibit a weak sense of role, performing their duties superficially. They lack deep identification with the organization's mission and show limited acceptance of mainstream values. When facing setbacks, they demonstrate insufficient psychological resilience, leading to increased mental health issues. If these challenges are not effectively addressed, they will directly impact the combat effectiveness and cohesion of the student backbone team.

Project management, as a goal-oriented, task-based organizational approach emphasizing clear division of labor, process control, and deliverable outcomes, has been gradually introduced into student backbone development practices in recent years. The production of stage plays, with its long cycles, complex tasks, strong collaborative demands, and deep emotional engagement, aligns well with project management requirements. The original stage play *Soul of the Dongjiang River* at Shenzhen Polytechnic University, developed over several years, has established a full-chain educational model integrating "scriptwriting, creation, performance, learning, and action." This model has accumulated rich experience in overcoming the difficulties of student backbone cultivation. Through in-depth interviews with 10 student backbones and 1 faculty advisor, as well as analysis of hundreds of post-performance audience questionnaires, this study systematically examines the application mechanism of stage play project management in cultivating student backbones, aiming to provide a replicable innovative path for higher education institutions.

2. The triple dilemma in cultivating student backbones in higher education

2.1. "Lying-flat" performance: The ambiguity of student backbone role definition

A primary challenge in cultivating student backbones is the "lying-flat" (perfunctory) performance resulting from ambiguous role definition. It is observable that some student backbones hold titles without substantive achievement, content merely with nominal membership and unwilling to invest in real work.

They habitually await instructions passively when assigned tasks, lacking proactive thinking or self-directed initiative. Their participation often remains at the level of "check-in" attendance, without genuine involvement or contribution. Interviews revealed that many student backbones admitted they were initially "not interested in collective activities" or "unwilling to participate much in organizational life." This "lying-flat" mentality is not uncommon among student backbones.

Self-Determination Theory posits that an individual's intrinsic motivation depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: Autonomy (acting out of one's own will), competence (feeling effective in completing tasks), and relatedness (forming meaningful connections with others). Chronic frustration of any of these needs leads to a persistent decline in intrinsic motivation. The "lying-flat" phenomenon among student backbones is primarily manifested as a lack of autonomy—A scarcity of space for independent choice in actual work. On the one hand, traditional incentive mechanisms in backbone cultivation are often tied to "identity labels" rather than "actual contributions," with many students expressing that "working hard or not makes no difference." On the other hand, the tasks assigned are predominantly repetitive and routine, lacking engaging formats that students find appealing. These factors contribute to the spread of "Buddhist-style" and "lying-flat" subcultural mentalities among youth, further eroding the ambition of student backbones and normalizing behaviors based on principles like "good enough is enough" or "avoid trouble whenever possible."

2.2. "Hollow" identification: Weak acceptance of mainstream values

The second dilemma is the "hollowing out" of value identification. This refers to a situation where student backbones, while nominally endorsing the organizational mission, lack genuine emotional connection and value resonance internally, and may even show limited acceptance of mainstream values. A student involved in scriptwriting once remarked that before deeply engaging with the project, history was "just cold text in books." This statement vividly captures the significant gap between "knowing" and "feeling."

According to Kelman's three-stage theory of attitude change, the process of accepting organizational values consists of three levels: Compliance, identification, and internalization. "Compliance" occurs when an individual superficially accepts organizational requirements to gain rewards or avoid punishment. While their attitudes and behaviors align with norms, there is no genuine internal conviction; it is a form of expedient, instrumental obedience. The "hollow" value identification observed in student backbones essentially stagnates at the "compliance" stage. Although they nominally accept the organization's mission and values, this acceptance is often motivated by instrumental considerations such as seeking academic recognition, enhancing their CV, or responding to external pressure, lacking heartfelt emotional connection and value resonance, resulting in a hollow state of identification with mainstream values.

2.3. "Fragile" stress tolerance: The vulnerability of student backbones' psychological resilience

The third inescapable dilemma is the "fragilization" of psychological resilience. In practice, it is common to see student backbones emotionally collapse under work pressure, easily quit when faced with criticism or setbacks, react to disagreements in teamwork with conflict or avoidance, and shift blame when responsibilities arise.

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy defines it as an individual's subjective belief in their capacity to successfully execute a given task. This belief directly influences their level of effort, persistence, and emotional responses when facing difficulties. When self-efficacy is low, an individual's self-assessment is negative. They are prone to anxiety and helplessness under work pressure, tend to give up rather than persist when criticized or encountering setbacks, choose avoidance when faced with disagreement and conflict, and exhibit blame-shifting when shouldering responsibility. These behaviors are essentially defensive reactions to the anticipation of "not being able to do it well." In other words, the "fragile" stress tolerance of student backbones is not necessarily a lack of ability, but rather psychological vulnerability stemming from weak self-efficacy. The core manifestations are: Fear of confronting challenges, reluctance to persevere, and a tendency to retreat easily.

3. The educational pathway of project management in Soul of the Dongjiang River

To address the triple dilemmas outlined above, the Soul of the Dongjiang River stage play project has

developed a systematic project management approach through its "scriptwriting, creation, performance, learning, and action" full-chain educational model. This model transforms the entire process of stage play production into a practical arena for cultivating student backbones, enabling a triple shift: From "passive reception" to "active construction," from "task execution" to "immersive experience," and from "stage performance" to "cultural dissemination."

3.1. The "scriptwriting & creation" phase: Overcoming "lying-flat" mentality through self-driven agency

In the scriptwriting and creation phase, the Soul of the Dongjiang River project positions students at the core of research and creation, flipping their role from "passive executors" to "active creators." The project breaks from the traditional practice of having faculty or external experts solely write the script, instead forming a student-led writing team. Students are responsible for independently completing tasks such as historical research, character development, plot construction, and dialogue writing, with faculty and experts providing only directional guidance and historical verification. This design transforms the student experience from "listening to a story" to "telling and creating a story," fundamentally changing their identity.

The educational outcomes of this mechanism are significant. First, a sense of agency is fully stimulated. Students, who previously participated passively in school-organized activities, become owners of the stage play. One student noted in an interview: "I used to think 'lying flat' was fine, but now this is my own work; I have to do it well." This sense of "ownership" is the most powerful antidote to the "lying-flat" mentality. Second, a sense of responsibility is effectively awakened. When students realize their script will be performed before thousands, a feeling of "not letting the team down" naturally arises. One student playwright mentioned: "The sense of achievement is immense when the script you wrote is staged." Finally, proactive decision-making skills are systematically cultivated. During scriptwriting, students must repeatedly weigh complex issues like "how to balance historical accuracy and artistic interpretation" or "how to resonate with the post-2000s audience." Each decision serves as a valuable training exercise.

3.2. The "performance & learning" phase: Strengthening value identification through immersive experience

In the performance and learning phase, the Soul of the Dongjiang River project utilizes role-playing and immersive experiences to construct a mechanism for strengthening value identification, effectively countering the "hollow identification" dilemma. Stage performance is inherently a high-intensity form of experiential learning. To embody their characters, student actors must repeatedly delve into the character's psychology and historical context, sweating in rehearsal halls and fully committing on stage. This "living-the-role" immersion fosters a "spiritual dialogue" across time and space between the students and the revolutionary forebears. A student playing the lead role, Huang You, shared: "Every time I rehearsed the 'Farewell to Mother' scene, I could truly feel the maternal love and weight of responsibility. This gave me a profound, unforgettable understanding of 'dedication' and made me want to be a selfless person myself." Through this immersive experience, student backbones transform from passively accepting work assignments to developing a high degree of identification with their own roles and contributions.

This identification is not only emotional and cognitive but also internalizes into proactive actions in their daily student work. Another student commented: "I used to feel history was distant, but after truly participating in Soul of the Dongjiang River, I realized those historical figures were flesh and blood like us. Their choices made me think about what I can do for this era." This transition from "observation" to "empathy" and then to "internalization" is the core value of immersive experience in strengthening value identification. Another student backbone, after participating, exclaimed: "I never knew working with a group of people towards a common goal with such intensity could be so exhilarating. The feeling of teamwork is incredible." Mainstream values are no longer abstract slogans but become tangible, relatable spiritual forces through vivid stories and authentic experiences.

3.3. The "action" phase: Enhancing stress tolerance through social dissemination

In the action phase, the Soul of the Dongjiang River project organizes students to go beyond campus for social tours, constructing a mechanism for improving stress tolerance, directly addressing the "fragile" stress response. The project does not confine itself to campus theaters. Instead, it establishes a "Youth

Vanguard Propaganda Troupe," leading students to perform in enterprises, communities, schools, and rural areas. To date, they have completed over 80 performances, reaching more than 10,000 audience members. When students perform for construction workers on-site or tell moving stories to villagers in rural areas as "cultural disseminators," their identity subtly yet profoundly shifts—From "performers on stage" to "bearers, disseminators, and practitioners of red culture."

The educational benefits of this mechanism are multi-layered. First, self-efficacy is significantly enhanced. Positive feedback from society fosters a powerful sense of "I can do this" and "I am useful." One student backbone recalled: "After our performance in Shuguang Community, an elderly lady emotionally told us, 'My father was a soldier. Thank you for bringing their stories to the stage for more people to know.' At that moment, I felt everything we did was incredibly worthwhile. It strengthened my convictions and choices far more effectively than any lecture could." This recognition from the real world is far more persuasive than praise within the classroom. Second, social responsibility becomes substantively solidified. Students no longer see "dedication" and "responsibility" as abstract concepts, but genuinely experience the meaning and value of serving society through their actions. Finally, psychological resilience is tempered through authentic pressure situations. Going on tour presents numerous uncertainties—Equipment malfunctions, weather changes, logistical issues—Each testing the students' adaptability and stress tolerance. Overcoming these challenges results in substantial growth in their psychological resilience.

4. The educational mechanisms of stage play project management

4.1. Role-flipping mechanism: From "passive execution" to "active creation"

The scriptwriting and creation phase of the Soul of the Dongjiang River project enacts a role flip, moving students from "passive executors" to "active creators." This seemingly simple shift fundamentally transforms the educational logic. In traditional student backbone development, students are often relegated to a "passive execution" position—Tasks assigned by teachers, plans determined by superiors, with students merely following instructions. In this model, students lack autonomy, and according to Self-Determination Theory, the chronic frustration of the autonomy need inevitably leads to a decline in intrinsic motivation, breeding the "lying-flat" attitude.

The role-flipping mechanism redefines the relationship between students and their tasks. When students are entrusted with genuine creative responsibilities—Such as independently conducting research, developing characters, crafting plots, and writing dialogue—The task is no longer "something others want me to do," but rather "something I want to do myself." This sense of "ownership" activates intrinsic responsibility: The awareness that their script will be seen by thousands creates a natural sense of mission. Crucially, this creates a virtuous cycle of responsibility and achievement: Greater investment leads to higher quality work, which yields stronger feelings of accomplishment, reinforcing the willingness to proactively engage. The essence of the role-flipping mechanism, therefore, is to rebuild the sense of agency obscured by the "lying-flat" mentality by altering the power dynamics between student and task, guiding students from "being told to do" to "choosing to do."

4.2. Immersive experience mechanism: From "cognitive compliance" to "emotional internalization"

The essence of the immersive experience mechanism is to transform values education from "external indoctrination" to "internal construction," moving from "being told what is right" to "genuinely recognizing what is right." Through role-playing and emotional engagement during the performance and learning phase, the Soul of the Dongjiang River project establishes a progressive pathway from "cognitive compliance" to "emotional internalization." It bypasses purely rational "lecturing" and directly uses emotional participation to bridge the psychological gap between "knowing" and "feeling." As students repeatedly explore character psychology and fully commit on stage, values cease to be abstract slogans. They become tangible and relatable through concrete character fates and emotional experiences. This immersive role adoption allows students to establish an emotional and spiritual connection with revolutionary forebears across time, facilitating the active internalization of values through empathy.

4.3. Social dissemination mechanism: From "stage performance" to "cultural dissemination"

In the action phase, the Soul of the Dongjiang River project organizes student backbones to go on social tours, upgrading their identity from "performers on stage" to "cultural disseminators." This shift

creates a positive feedback loop: "Effort → feedback → affirmation → reinforcement." When student backbones, acting as cultural disseminators, perform for real audiences in communities, enterprises, and rural areas, the feedback they receive is authentic, diverse, and emotionally charged—An elderly woman's heartfelt thanks, a child's admiring gaze, the warm applause of workers. This positive feedback from the real social environment carries more weight than any praise received in school. Each successful tour is an accumulation of "I did it" experiences, and the repetition of such success experiences is a key pathway to building robust self-efficacy from a state of fragility. Moreover, the social dissemination process itself is full of uncertainties—Equipment problems, weather changes, venue adjustments—Demanding that students adapt quickly under real pressure. This practical, high-stakes environment is far more effective at strengthening psychological resilience than simulated classroom training. Thus, the essence of the social dissemination mechanism is to use a practical loop of "real tasks, real scenarios, and real feedback" to help students rebuild a belief in their own capabilities through genuine effort and authentic rewards, thereby fundamentally addressing the root cause of "fragile" stress tolerance.

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About the author

Yubao Chu (1991-), male, Han ethnicity, native of Shenqiu, Henan Province, Lecturer at the School of Construction Engineering, Shenzhen Polytechnic University.

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