

Original Paper

Research on Curriculum Teaching Reform of Fine Arts Major in Colleges and Universities: Guided by OBE Concept and Oriented by Thematic Painting Creation Competence

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Abstract

In recent years, against the backdrop of teacher professional certification, the education of fine arts majors in colleges and universities has undergone comprehensive reforms. Adopting Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) as the core philosophy of these reforms breaks through traditional educational models, pointing to a new direction for the educational reform of fine arts majors in higher education. Based on the OBE concept, this paper further explores the curriculum teaching reform of fine arts majors in colleges and universities, which is oriented toward thematic painting creation competence. It clarifies the concept of thematic painting creation and its value in the curriculum teaching reform of fine arts majors, and proposes a comprehensive implementation path.

Keywords

OBE concept, thematic painting creation, fine arts major, curriculum teaching reform

1. Introduction

Entering the 21st century, China's aesthetic education has achieved remarkable progress after more than a century of development. Currently, with the continuous influence of new technological revolutions and globalization, the level of higher art education has been steadily improved. New social demands, policy guidance, and the continuous development of educational concepts have raised higher requirements for aesthetic education. The introduction of the OBE concept in China began in the early 21st century and entered a period of rapid development after 2010. In 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the National Standards for Undergraduate Program Quality in Higher Education Institutions, explicitly requiring the design of talent cultivation plans to be "student-centered and outcome-oriented". In 2020, the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era

proposed “strengthening the combination of process evaluation and outcome evaluation,” providing policy support for the further integration of the OBE concept into higher education reform. Currently, institutions such as the China Engineering Education Accreditation Association (CEEAA) and the Teaching Guidance Committee for Fine Arts Programs in Higher Education Institutions under the Ministry of Education have adopted the OBE concept as a core standard for program accreditation. Based on this concept, the accreditation of fine arts programs requires universities to clearly define three core outcomes: “the artistic creation ability, theoretical research ability, and cultural inheritance ability of graduates” – and to demonstrate the achievement of these outcomes through diverse evaluations such as “work exhibitions, academic papers, and teaching practices”. This paper will follow the OBE concept, focusing on the important cultivation goal of graduates’ artistic creation ability and conduct research on the curriculum reform of fine arts programs in higher education institutions with thematic painting creation competence as the outcome-oriented focus, proposing specific implementation paths.

2. OBE Concept

2.1 The Concept of OBE Philosophy

Outcome-Based Education (OBE), a modern pedagogical framework proposed by Spady and his colleagues, originated in the United States during the 1980s. Now widely adopted in global educational reforms, it has been implemented in Chinese higher education institutions, particularly in teacher education programs, where it has significantly supported the reform of teacher certification standards. The core principle of OBE focuses on students’ specific competencies, knowledge, and literacy as ultimate learning outcomes, which guide the design of teaching objectives, content, methods, and evaluation systems. These outcomes must be measurable and achievable. By shifting from the traditional teacher-centered model, OBE represents a more effective educational approach that prioritizes students’ attainment of educational goals and outcomes.

2.2 Three Expected Results of Fine Arts Major in Universities under the Concept of OBE

Under the OBE concept framework, art students in higher education can be expected to achieve three primary learning outcomes. First, **knowledge outcomes**: mastering core concepts and principles of art studies, including theoretical knowledge of art history and pedagogical theories from education and psychology. Second, **competency outcomes**: developing practical skills to address real-world challenges in art practice, such as painting creation, classroom teaching, or art curation. Third, **literacy outcomes**: cultivating values and thinking patterns that align with both the discipline’s demands and societal needs, including awareness of cultural heritage preservation, innovative approaches to traditional folk art, and the integration of art with ideological and political education.

3. Value Analysis of the Teaching Reform of College Fine Arts Major Courses under the Concept of OBE with the Thematic Painting Creation Competence as the Outcome Orientation

3.1 Concept and Social Value of Thematic Painting Creation

Regarding the concept of thematic painting, Shang H stated in his article *Revisiting the Narrative Characteristics and Aesthetic Value of Thematic Painting*: those major events and important figures that have influenced the development process of a society or country during a certain historical period through painting. However, there are also other views that define this concept more broadly, namely, artworks with strong thematic purposes and complex content characteristics, whose intentions and themes can reflect core ideas, and meet the needs of social development and possess distinct characteristics of the era. This article adopts the latter. In terms of the techniques used in thematic painting creation, the realistic style is predominant; from the perspective of themes and social values, it mainly focuses on creating works reflecting the modernization of society, praising the motherland and the people, and other positive themes. These works can permeate the masses' hearts from multiple levels such as aesthetics, emotions, values, and cognition, leading social trends, conveying the spirit of China, and playing an important role in strengthening the love for the motherland and the people, as well as adhering to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

3.2 Value Analysis

Currently, China's higher education institutions have begun integrating the OBE concept into their fine arts programs. While the direction of professional reforms and their achievements are evident, there remains significant room for improvement in practical implementation. For instance, regarding the competency outcome of 'painting creation ability,' incorporating education focused on enhancing thematic painting creation competence into teaching can yield tangible benefits, which are primarily reflected in three aspects.

First, cultivate a deeper patriotic spirit among art students in higher education. "Thematic painting," as a conventional term in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art, encompasses all painting creations since the 20th century that depict the historical and social realities of the nation-state. By studying the history of Chinese thematic painting and applying it to personal practice, students can develop an awareness of expressing their love for the country and people, showcasing national strength, and promoting the spirit of the times through artistic creation. They can also understand the profound value of art in serving the people and society, effectively addressing the spiritual deficiency in students' artistic creation and even their future lives and work.

Second, this approach revitalizes traditional art education by holistically developing students' professional competencies. While conventional art curricula in universities progress from foundational sketching and color theory to advanced oil painting and traditional Chinese painting – a progression that appears logical yet fails to stimulate student engagement due to its singular focus on technical mastery – the implementation of the OBE concept through thematic painting creation competence proves remarkably effective. This methodology not only ignites students' passion for learning but also

cultivates comprehensive professional skills. Artistic creation fundamentally serves to express ideas and emotions, requiring students to first master thematic conceptualization. A well-crafted theme serves as the cornerstone of successful artwork. Essential questions emerge during the creative process: What defines art's essence? How should it be expressed? This requires extensive collection of textual and visual materials, coupled with keen observation of life experiences to distill meaningful painting themes. Through deliberate planning of compositional structures, color schemes, and brushwork textures, students ultimately express their concepts. By establishing thematic painting as the overarching goal across all practical courses, this integrated approach enables students to synthesize knowledge from various disciplines, foster innovative thinking, and ultimately develop distinctive artistic styles.

Third, the cultivation of thematic painting creation competence inherently entails undertaking the historical mission of inheriting and promoting the national spirit, and fostering the next generation for the motherland. Through thematic painting creation, art students can holistically develop their professional skills. In the process of practice, they will be deeply immersed in the rich spiritual and emotional content conveyed by these works. In their future roles as educators, they will proactively shoulder the responsibility of passing down and advancing the national spirit, fostering patriotic sentiments among Chinese youth through aesthetic education.

4. Problems in the Teaching of Traditional Fine Arts

4.1 Issues in the Setting of Course Objectives

Traditional art education in Chinese universities still faces critical challenges in cultivating competency-based learning outcomes. Firstly, the curriculum is overloaded with diverse practical courses—ranging from traditional Chinese painting, oil painting, printmaking, digital art, folk art to three-brush calligraphy (a traditional Chinese writing style). This fragmentation leaves instructors isolated within their disciplinary silos, while students, constrained by narrow perspectives, struggle to synthesize skills and theories across disciplines. Secondly, the rigidly defined course objectives overemphasize basic training, with excessive time devoted to rote copying exercises that fail to stimulate students' initiative or creativity.

4.2 The Curriculum System Needs to Be further Improved

The teaching of fine arts courses in Chinese universities has long been influenced by Soviet art theory and practical methods, such as the Chistyakov's Sketch System. These played a crucial role in establishing a comprehensive fine arts curriculum system in China and dominated for a long time. However, with the beginning of reform and opening up, various European and American art ideas and fine arts education methods and concepts were rapidly introduced, and they began to dominate China's fine arts education. With the rapid development of China's fine arts education in recent decades, these educational concepts and methods have been largely digested and effectively applied. Some outstanding local art educators have also cultivated new educational concepts, teaching methods, and

curriculum systems that are becoming increasingly mature. Coupled with the vigorous promotion of the OBE concept, the fine arts curriculum system has had to usher in a new period of adjustment.

4.3 The Use of New Technological Methods is Limited

The education sector is witnessing rapid technological advancements. In 2020, online instruction sparked widespread adoption of blended learning models. Platforms like MOOCs and “Rain Classroom” have evolved to streamline theoretical courses that traditionally emphasized single-objective assessments, significantly reducing teaching workload while boosting student engagement and learning outcomes. As AI technology reaches its full potential by 2025, it will propel education into an era of intelligent transformation. In art education, these innovations are not only embraced by veteran instructors but also adopted by new faculty members with remarkable speed. However, their value remains underutilized, often serving as supplementary tools rather than core educational components. Further research and practical implementation are crucial to maximize how these technologies can enhance art education.

4.4 Problems of Teachers and Students in the Teaching of Fine Arts

From a student’s perspective, contemporary fine arts education for China’s College Entrance Examination has become increasingly formulaic. Most art students are trained under exam-oriented systems, revealing the following issues: superficial and impulsive observation of subjects; highly formulaic approaches to modeling and chiaroscuro; monotonous painting techniques lacking individual exploration; singular cognitive objectives that reduce artistic practice to mere photographic replication; and generally low theoretical proficiency coupled with inadequate humanistic literacy.

At present, there are many problems in the professional capabilities of some college teachers.

(1) Young teachers, though lacking experience and requiring time to develop their skills, actively embrace new concepts and methods, leading to rapid professional growth. In contrast, older teachers, often slow to adapt to new approaches, persist in using traditional teaching philosophies and techniques. For instance, they frequently have students copy classic works, but due to students’ insufficient foundational skills and rigid cognitive patterns from the college entrance exam, such imitation naturally yields poor results.

(2) A concerning trend exists in university art practice classes. Unlike the lecture-heavy theoretical sessions, practice classes are often perceived as less demanding. Instructors typically assign tasks, allow ample time for students to conduct hands-on exercises, and then provide feedback. This inherent difference in course nature leads many teachers with strong theoretical skills but limited practical expertise to focus solely on practice classes, resulting in slow development of students’ professional practical abilities.

5. Implementation Path of the Teaching Reform of the College Fine Arts Major Course under the Concept of OBE with the Thematic Painting Creation Competence as the Achievement-oriented

5.1 Strengthening the Training Objectives of Thematic Painting Creation Competence in the Talent Training Program

As the Ministry of Education advances the continuous expansion and deepening of teacher education program accreditation, universities that have passed the secondary accreditation of teacher education programs can now develop undergraduate talent cultivation plans and course materials based on the OBE concept. These plans achieve organic integration and high consistency in both form and content. However, if the competency outcome objectives in art education programs are poorly designed, practical courses may still revert to traditional approaches. Many practical courses, such as sketching and color theory, in programs that have undergone accreditation still focus on single-skill training, resulting in minimal improvement in students' professional practice abilities. This phenomenon warrants serious reflection.

It is a sound strategy to prioritize the cultivation of thematic painting creation as the outcome-oriented talent training goal.

In the integration process, this study first analyzes policies from the Ministry of Education, provincial education authorities, and schools, while collecting feedback from employers, graduates, and frontline teachers. This information is then incorporated into the overarching goals of the training program through thematic painting creation competencies. Subsequently, specific graduation requirement indicators emphasizing "enhancing thematic painting creation competence" are developed and aligned with the Fine Arts major's graduation criteria. For newly added indicators, they are systematically integrated into course objectives through organic reverse engineering within syllabi, ensuring effective implementation. Finally, comprehensive course documentation including assessment frameworks, achievement reports, evaluation matrices, and assignment samples is organized. By embedding thematic painting competencies as core objectives of the OBE concept and refining these course materials, this approach significantly enhances the effectiveness of practical teaching in Fine Arts programs.

5.2 Constructing a Curriculum System Centered on thematic painting creation competence in Fine Arts Major

When implementing the OBE concept and establishing the talent development goal of "enhancing thematic painting creation competence," we can then reverse-engineer the final learning outcomes, that students must achieve upon graduation: "to independently create paintings reflecting contemporary aesthetic trends, and to comprehensively and accurately interpret their works from the perspectives of emotion, values, and painting forms."

The ultimate goal can be broken down into specific phased sub-goals: "Mastering sketching fundamentals, painting composition, color coordination, material application techniques; understanding contemporary art movements and learning from them; and independently completing a relatively

complete thematic painting creation.” The curriculum and teaching activities are designed based on these sub-goals. For example, foundational courses like Plane Form, Color Composition, and Mixed Media are offered to help students scientifically analyze classic paintings from three perspectives: form, color, and texture, revealing the essence of painting and mastering its principles. Additionally, students need to comprehensively enhance their sketching skills beyond the conventional understanding of college entrance exam sketching. Introducing the sketching teaching system by Professor Wang HX from the Central Academy of Fine Arts is an effective approach: First, students learn to “imitate nature” by mastering the ability to reproduce subtle forms and light-dark variations. Then, they “study masters” by advancing to advanced sketching courses, where they analyze how masters handle modeling, shading, outlines, and use special materials to express emotions and concepts. Furthermore, foundational theoretical and practical courses such as Chinese and Western art history, art theory, perspective, and anatomy are essential. These three categories of foundational courses cover professional practice, theory, and creation. Mastering them enables students to better engage with traditional subjects like Chinese painting and oil painting, and produce works with creative vision. Students with extra capacity can further challenge themselves with thematic painting creation. In this way, creative knowledge is accumulated in daily study, basic painting skills are trained in daily creation, and finally these abilities are directed to the thematic graduation creation.

The corresponding curriculum system is shown in Figure 1 below:

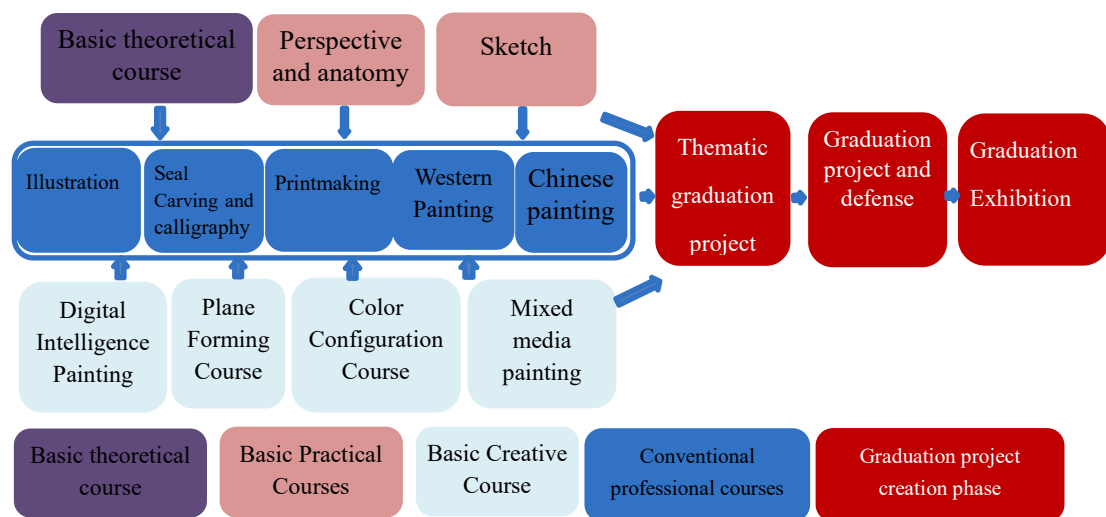


Figure 1. The Curriculum System of Fine Arts Major in Universities Based on the thematic painting creation competence under the Concept of OBE

5.3 Flexible Use of New Teaching Methods

Under the OBE concept, the following aspects can be improved in teaching methods.

First, **the development of blended online-offline teaching models**. Currently, schools have adopted various new educational platforms such as MOOCs and Rain Classroom. Guided by the OBE concept, teachers can leverage students' enthusiasm for digital devices by creating online courses and

implementing blended learning: Before class, learning materials are pre-distributed on the platform for mobile preview; during sessions, interactive activities like pre-class quizzes, roll call, quick responses, and in-class tests are conducted through the platform; after class, extended learning modules, peer evaluations, and teacher-student assessments are facilitated. By integrating online and offline teaching methods, key course concepts are systematically embedded into various activities, effectively boosting engagement, expanding learning channels, enhancing interest, improving teaching quality, and achieving data-driven monitoring throughout the instructional process to support educational evaluation.

Second, **the application of smart large screens and smart small screens.** High-color-accuracy, high-definition smart large screens serve as essential teaching tools, playing an increasingly vital role in enhancing the quality of courses like Plane Form and Color Composition. In such classes, students are encouraged to appreciate a wealth of high-quality works by masters and renowned artists, while student assignments are displayed extensively on the large screens for peer reviews and teacher feedback. Additionally, the curriculum requires students to fully utilize tablets and styluses for assignment completion. This achieves comprehensive modernization of teaching tools, methods, and assignment delivery.

5.4 Practical Driving Forces: Exhibitions at Various Levels and Teacher Projects

Participating in painting exhibitions at various levels or teacher-led projects as teaching objectives is an important component of this reform. Currently, China's painting art is experiencing its best development period in history, with a constant stream of national-level thematic painting creation projects, national-level painting exhibitions organized by the China Artists Association, provincial and municipal painting exhibitions, as well as exhibitions for college students. In these exhibitions, students from various universities are frequently selected, and it is not uncommon for them to be chosen for the highly challenging national exhibitions. Facts have proven that exhibitions at all levels are excellent opportunities for students to stand out and provide ample training platforms for broader future career development. The establishment of the "Narrative Painting Experimental Class" at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts is precisely based on this purpose: it Promotes the integration of theoretical and practical courses through research, teaching, major projects, and exhibition activities, bridging the teaching linkage between inside and outside the school, and enhancing the multidimensional effect of the curriculum.

The core benefit of art exhibitions at all levels and teacher-driven projects in higher education lies in breaking down the barriers between classroom theory and practical creation. This approach redefines the content and direction of teaching and creative training, making professional development more aligned with industry demands. Ultimately, it facilitates a comprehensive upgrade from merely being able to paint to creating and effectively communicating artistic works.

First, these two approaches provide students with "real-world creative scenarios" beyond the classroom, compelling them to apply their skills in practice. To prepare for exhibitions, students must actively

engage multiple competencies throughout the creative process: conceptualizing themes, gathering materials, composing visual elements, designing black-and-white sketches and color drafts, finalizing works, and mounting them. This effectively addresses the traditional classroom model where teachers assign tasks and students passively complete them. Beyond these benefits, participating in teacher-led vertical or horizontal projects allows students to experience authentic creative demands, learn to determine styles based on project themes, collaborate on large-scale works, and adapt to professional creative workflows in advance. Second, teacher-led projects and exhibitions facilitate content renewal, making instruction more timely and targeted. By incorporating real-world project cases into classroom teaching, educators expose students to the latest industry concepts, materials, and techniques, avoiding outdated textbook content. Through exhibition feedback and peer evaluations, teachers can clearly identify common challenges in thematic expression, stylistic recognition, and foundational skills, enabling targeted adjustments to teaching priorities.

5.5 Embracing Digital and AI Technologies in Creative Practice

AI and digital technologies have evolved from “auxiliary tools” into pivotal technical means supporting artistic creation in fine arts education. Through the dual dimensions of “intelligent collaboration” and “tool innovation,” they have fundamentally redefined the creative logic, technical boundaries, and value expression of painting. Their application transcends mere replacement of traditional methods; instead, by deeply integrating with the professional competencies of fine arts (including modeling skills, aesthetic cognition, and conceptual expression), they lower the technical barriers. This enables creators to focus more on core artistic pursuits such as “emotional expression, conceptual construction, and cultural inheritance.”

5.5.1 Digital Technology

Digital technology is the core carrier of the painting skills of fine arts students from the physical level to the digital level. Its value is concentrated in reducing the technical threshold, optimizing the creative process, expanding the expression form, and providing the digital extension of the traditional painting language.

The “iterative optimization” throughout the creative process: At the initial stage, digital tools like Photoshop and TianSheng Painting Software enable artists to simulate brush textures—such as traditional Chinese brushes, oil brushes, and pencils—using digital mice and styluses, overcoming traditional painting’s reliance on physical materials and high revision costs. The software’s “layering function” separates composition, line drawing, and coloring into independent layers, allowing modifications to individual stages without affecting the whole. Features like “color card import” precisely match color schemes, significantly reducing trial-and-error time. Upon completion, works saved in PSD format preserve modification trails, facilitating creative retrospection and providing visual case studies for art education. Moreover, digital technology breaks the “two-dimensional plane” limitation of traditional painting, achieving cross-media integration of “painting + technology” that expands artistic boundaries. Static paintings can be transformed into interactive short films, enabling

audience engagement. Finally, digital technology redefines art dissemination by transcending geographical and physical constraints. Works can be directly displayed on major online portals' virtual galleries, published on art sales platforms like ARTAND, or even live-streamed through digital broadcasting software.

5.5.2 AI Technology

Digital technology serves as the digital tool for painting, while AI technology acts as an intelligent companion for art education. By integrating data and expanding possibilities, it helps art students achieve "conceptual realization" and "creative breakthroughs", supporting their deeper needs such as "thematic creation" and "style exploration." Art creators in the new era should proactively understand the principles of AI painting, master its technical skills, and embrace its expressive methods. This will provide them with more creative inspiration and implementation pathways, ultimately realizing a new artistic landscape of harmonious human-machine collaboration.

The specific functions of AI are as follows:

First, AI technology empowers artistic creation by transcending the foundational stages of material accumulation and experiential learning. Through "massive data training," it achieves "precise material matching" and "expansion of creative possibilities". For instance, art students working on historical-themed graduation projects can input keywords like "Northern Song Dynasty urban life + freehand Chinese painting style" into tools such as Doubao Software, which instantly generates dozens of reference images. This helps artists authentically recreate historical scenes and provides abundant inspiration.

Second, AI technology enables rapid style blending experiments. For instance, users can upload their sketches into the software and input a text command like 'Convert the image into Van Gogh's Starry Night brushstrokes' to instantly generate a work in that style, serving as a new training ground for visual experience and a testing ground for style experimentation.

Furthermore, AI technology can address the "technical bottlenecks" commonly encountered by art students. Through "image recognition and data mining," it provides "quantitative support" for academic research, which in turn enriches creative practice. The system also enables trend prediction and analysis, summarizing popular styles. For instance, current visual trends like flat design and national exhibition styles offer crucial references for creators' future stylistic choices.

5.6 *Emphasizing the Improvement and Implementation of the Evaluation System*

In the construction of an OBE-based curriculum for fine arts education, the teaching evaluation system plays a pivotal role in summarizing and guiding instructional activities, forming a closed-loop process. Comprehensive assessments of artistic creation capabilities can be conducted through the integrated approach of "exhibition + creative report + defense." Specific evaluation criteria for each course include daily attendance, formative assessments, final exam scores, student self-evaluations, peer reviews, and instructor feedback. Unlike traditional teaching methods that rely on "one exam determining a final grade", OBE-based evaluations emphasize process-oriented assessment. Course

objectives can be broken down into multiple formative assessments. For example, the Plane Form course has two core goals: cultivating students' awareness and perspective in artistic composition, and mastering compositional techniques. To achieve this, the course can be divided into two major themes: "Classic Analysis" and "From Here to There". The former explores patterns in classical works from ancient and modern times across cultures to develop plane awareness, while the latter encourages students to select materials and create their own compositions based on understanding these works' structural principles, ultimately developing skills in organizing and developing two-dimensional graphics. The "Classic Analysis" theme can further be subdivided into "Plane Form Analysis" and "Black-White-Gray Analysis". All these thematic components contribute to the overarching goal of thematic creative ability cultivation and should be evaluated through formative assessments. In addition, students' responses and interactions in class, as well as their final assignments, should also be recorded and evaluated as part of the process-based assessment.

Through the inclusion of these process achievements and the further data-driven calculation of the course objective achievement table, the subjective and objective evaluations by teachers, combined with students' self-assessment and peer assessment, complete the self-evaluation of teaching objective achievement, and ultimately produce the corresponding course achievement report.

Only by establishing a relatively sound evaluation mechanism can the achievement evaluation be more reasonable, and the teaching can be accurately fed back, and the teaching can be further optimized, and even achieve a good teaching effect, and lay a solid foundation for the achievement of the ultimate training goal.

6. Discussion

Guided by the OBE concept, this study constructs a curriculum teaching reform system for fine arts major with thematic painting creation competence as the core. The teaching practice shows that the reform effectively solves the problem of disconnection between theory and practice in traditional curriculum, and significantly improves students' comprehensive competence in thematic creation. In the context of the demand for high-quality fine arts talents in the new era, this study provides a feasible path for the curriculum reform of fine arts major in colleges and universities, and its core ideas can also be used for reference in the training of thematic art creation talents in related fields.

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