

# *Insights into How to Improve Chinese Undergraduate Students' Autonomous Learning Ability*

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**Abstract:** This paper firstly explores the learning characteristics of undergraduates at different stages of learning in China's universities and the self-learning abilities they are supposed to possess, as well as the reasons that affect their active learning. Finally, the paper proposes recommendations on how to improve the autonomous learning ability of students at different grades.

## **1. Introduction**

Common features: The learning characteristics of university students are different from those of high schools, especially in the context of the rapid development of information technology, and the differences mainly fall into 4 aspects: first, university students have initially developed a professional orientation and have a relatively clear positioning for future career development; second, they begin to consciously choose their own learning contents, and become subjective in the choice of learning time, courses and teachers; third, their learning approaches also assume diversified characteristics, such as classroom learning, practical learning, extracurricular learning, etc.; they begin to develop certain aspirations for exploration and research on learning and on the characteristics of knowledge or skill they have acquired. In response to these characteristics, undergraduates at different grades show different characteristics.

The characteristics of freshmen: due to the sudden changes in the learning environment, they don't know much about their majors; they are not so accustomed to the learning methods and school management mode different from what they had in middle school; they still have a strong dependence on teachers and parents. Consequently, they find it challenging to adapt to the new learning style, feel unclear about learning objectives, and their motivation for study become diversified. Therefore, students at this stage should prioritize how to better adapt to the new learning environment.

The characteristics of sophomores: they have begun to adapt to the environment and understand the learning model of university. Besides, they have developed friendships and their own interest and hobbies; furthermore, they have gained a preliminary understanding of characteristics of their majors. Therefore, their main characteristics are as follows: showing curiosity and exploration of the environment, gradual forming of self-study habits, a weakened dependence on parents, increased dependence on university teachers, and polarized performance in self-discipline and self-learning. Thus, sophomores should prioritize how to develop their comprehensive quality.

The characteristics of juniors: they have fully adapted to the environment and started to learn a

large number of professional courses; they have made career plan with through the arrangement and assistance of their universities. The main characteristics of their learning are as follows: the time spent on learning has increased compared with time spent on other activities; their learning methods and habits have been finalized, and they have proposed requirement on their self-learning; they have begun to interact and discuss for professional content learning, and to explore the development of social adaptability. Therefore, juniors should prioritize their learning of professional content.

The characteristics of seniors: these students, who are about to leave the university campus, display the following learning characteristics: they have attained clear understanding of professional requirements, and insights into how to improve social adaptability; they have enhanced their self-learning ability, and showed an increased desire for knowledge exploration; still, they have built a self-motivation mechanism, and show a differentiated dependence on parents and teachers. For the last year of study, seniors should prioritize their ability to adapt to society and preparation for stepping into society.

In accordance with the afore-mentioned characteristics, autonomous learning ability of undergraduates of different grades are correspondingly different.

## **2. Internal and External Factors Affecting University Students' Autonomous Learning**

Professor Pintridge at the University of Michigan in the United proposes in 2000 that autonomous learning is a kind of autonomous constructive learning. According to the process of self-directed formation, autonomous learning is mainly divided into six steps: the formation of learning atmosphere, the diagnosis of learning requirements, the setting of learning goals, the grasp of learning resources, the selection of learning strategies and the evaluation of learning results. There are internal and external factors that affect the realization of these processes and the final formation of desirable self-learning habits.

### **2.1 The Internal Factors Mainly Include:**

**Intellectual factor.** It mainly includes memory, imagination, thinking, understanding, etc. It is also an ability to adapt to the environment. The level of intelligence affects students' analytical and judgment ability, and plays a basic role in their judgment of whether they need to strengthen self-learning.

**Self-efficacy.** American scholar Bandura believes that self-efficacy is the manifestation of individual ability and self-confidence in certain activities, that is, the belief that one has the ability to accomplish something. The determination of task goals and the way in which university students complete the goals determine the effectiveness of autonomous learning.

**Attribution.** It refers to how people explain the causes of their own behaviors and others' behaviors. It is a cognitive process by which people make conclusions about factors that affect or explain their behavior (McCabe & Dutton, 1993). Continuous improvement of the effectiveness of autonomous learning, and positive attitudes can improve learning motivation, while negative attitudes will stagnate or even hinder learning activities.

**Motivation.** Motivation is the motive and desire that drive self-directed learners to learn. Purpose-oriented instrumental motivation, and integrative motivation oriented on strong personal interests have different effects on self-learning. Integrative motivation, which includes learning enthusiasm, learning continuity, and learning self-control can better improve autonomous learning ability.

**Learning method.** It mainly includes setting learning goals in time and realizing them in accordance with universities' requirements, forming good learning habits and adapting to the cooperative learning model.

## **2.2 External Factors Mainly Include:**

learning environment. A university learning environment includes teachers, dormitories, library resources, and experiments room and professional space settings, informal learning space design, school location, etc., as well as teaching mode, students status management, academic atmosphere, campus cultural atmosphere, etc.

Teacher guidance. Teachers' teaching methods, teaching effects and teachers' requirements for students all belong to the part of teacher guidance.

Contract establishment. It falls into two kinds: the contract of self-determining learning goals, and the contract of a teacher-assisted determination of learning goals.

Good internal and external factors can fully stimulate the enthusiasm of university students to learn independently and tap their learning potential; besides, they have a positive function of promotion, adjustment and strengthening for improving students' ability of autonomous learning.

## **3. Methods to Improve University students' Autonomous Learning**

There are four main ways of autonomous learning: inductive, cooperative, spontaneous, and exploratory. According to the features of students' autonomous learning ability in different grades, the following methods are suggested to improve their autonomous learning:

### **3.1 Freshmen:**

Inductive self-learning should be prioritized, involvement of external forces can be introduced, so as to let students understand the necessity of learning. For example, university should establish a good learning environment and academic atmosphere, pose strict requirements on students, make learning contracts, offer clear and scientific learning guidance; besides, teachers should adopt more open and effective teaching models.

Collaborative self-learning can be adopted as a supplementary. Through teamwork and collaborative learning, students develop interest in learning is generated, and turn passive learning into active learning. In the course setting, multi-faceted freshman entrance education courses, time management courses, psychological guidance courses, should be arranged.

### **3.2 Sophomores:**

At this stage, students' autonomous learning is based on the inductive type, with cooperative type as the main method. Universities should provide more professional teaching spaces, such as laboratories, studios, etc., and help students develop a variety of learning methods such as interaction, participation, and independent discussion through offering different teaching methods and teaching modes. Students should consolidate their professional thinking, cultivate professional interest, and achieve the purpose of forming independent learning habits and improving learning ability.

### **3.3 Juniors:**

The spontaneous type of autonomous learning should be developed at this stage. In a good learning environment, students determine their own learning goals, strengthen the cultivation of professional interests, and are guided to pay attention to their internal motivations.

### **3.4 Seniors:**

The autonomous learning type featuring inquiry learning should be the focus. Students should be guided to explore their own academic discipline creatively and skillfully, learn how to know himself, how to make himself learn in a better manner. Meanwhile, the career planning courses should be linked with professional courses to guide students to continue self-learning after they enter the society.

#### 4. Conclusion

Students of Chinese undergraduate colleges and universities display different characteristics and similarities at different grades. And autonomous learning is not a learning type entirely directed by students themselves, nor is it a purely personal behavior. The cultivation of autonomous learning relies on individual self-consciousness and external guidance. We should strengthen the cultivation of their professional interests, help increase their self-responsibility, and enhance time management ability according to their characteristics, so as to guide our students to continuously explore and acquire the habit of self-learning, thus gradually establishing the ability of autonomous learning

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