

Chu Hsi's Educational Thought of Autonomous Learning: A Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract. Chu Hsi was one of the representative scholars and educators in ancient China. Based on his own learning experience and teaching practice, he proposed a series of profound and influential educational theories and pedagogical concepts, which until now have been sparkling with ideas about autonomous learning. His in-depth thought of autonomous learning is specifically embodied in the educational principles that Chu Hsi put forward in his works, which include setting learning goals, thinking critically, conducting self-reflection, teacher-oriented and student-centered teaching, and teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. It can be safely concluded that though Chu Hsi did not explicitly put forward the concept of autonomous learning, his thought is obviously consistent with contemporary autonomous learning theory, and therefore, this academic thought still has great enlightening value to our educational practice.

Keywords: Chu Hsi; autonomous learning; educational thought.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of educational concepts such as “lifelong education” and “learner-centeredness”, autonomous learning has gradually become a research hotspot and practice trend in education both abroad and at home. The improvement of learner autonomy has become the goal of every learner and every teacher [1]. Autonomous learning generally refers to the learner's ability to control his or her own learning, including developing learning plans, selecting learning materials, monitoring the learning process, and conducting self-assessment [2]. Zimmerman defines autonomous learning as “a self-directed process in which learners turn their mental power into academic skills” [3]. Successful learners are more likely to be autonomous in their learning and are better at setting goals, seeking help when necessary, applying effective learning strategies, and managing time appropriately [4][5][6][7][8].

The development of Chinese educational thought went through a long process. It originally sprouted from the consciousness of survival and was gradually formed in the circle of correction and exploration through dynasties of Xia, Shang and Xi Zhou. After that, people began to recognize the importance and necessity of education. Then, “teacher” and “study” became two key words, and teachers' instruction and students' conscious learning formed two aspects of education. Consequently, autonomous learning became an important way for individuals to be taught and developed. The development of self-education thought in this period was based on summing up and criticizing the predecessors, drawing lessons, taking the essence, and abandoning its dross, which is characterized by its exploration and originality. The situation of the decline of official studies and the rise of private schools has left a rich historical material of thought for the autonomous learning of future generations, and has prepared for greater development of educational thoughts. In ancient China, the Confucian School advocated some principles and measures of education. Although there was no systematic elaboration and a clear definition of autonomous learning, it was reflected in many educational works in ancient times. Confucianism mainly proposed the principles with related connotations of self-education with the respect of morality. Other schools also elaborated on self-education from different angles. For example, Mencius mainly elaborated on the methods that focus on practice, creation and initiative and Taoism focused on establishing social inheritance from self-education.

During the Song Dynasty, Chu Hsi, a profound scholar and educator, advocated the idea of autonomous learning and promoted its further development. His thought of autonomous learning was well-embodied through autonomous learning perception to emphasize self-regulation in that way. In Chu Hsi's Reading Method, conducting self-reflection, a way of autonomous learning in daily

practice, is also an effective way recommended in Chu Hsi's class. He divided the educational process into two parts: primary education and university education. Determinedness, respect and inspection are the actions of individuals in the inner construction of self-education. He believed that the ultimate goal of understanding objective things is to inspire the mind. Reading Method is a step-by-step approach which consists of familiar reading, meditation, self-discipline, hard-work, and respectfulness. It is not only the way of self-experience, but also the way of self-education. First, it is the absorption and development of the ideas of the predecessors, and it has gradually formed a system naturally. For teachers and students, Chu Hsi emphasized that the learner's own affairs are the process where the students acquire knowledge by themselves, which means that the learning process should be both extensive and intensive. Teachers play a guiding role in mobilizing students' learning initiative and enthusiasm.

Though Chu Hsi did not explicitly propose the concept of autonomous learning in his works, his thought coincides with autonomous learning theory in modern times. Chu Hsi's educational thought on autonomous learning is vividly reflected by the following principles put forward by him, i.e. setting learning goals, thinking critically, conducting self-reflection, teacher-oriented and student-centered teaching, and teaching students in accordance with their aptitude.

2. Major Principles on Autonomous Learning Advocated by Chu Hsi

2.1 Principles of Setting Learning Goals

The "goal" emphasized by ancient Chinese scholars generally contains two aspects. One refers to the learning goal, just as mentioned by Mencius, "goal" of "concentration or commitment", while the other is the will, and with the "goal", "Those who are not strong-willed are not wise" in Mozi. Therefore, "What is the first step before learning?" Chu Hsi meaningfully said, "Just as mentioned before, the learner should set learning goals before learning" [9]. He stressed that the man who sets goals is to be determined, insatiable and simply gorge oneself on the superabundance with great eagerness, like the attitude of thirsty drinking and hungrily eating and much progress will be made.

However, what kind of "goal(s)" should be set for learning? The ancient scholars put forward three requirements: Firstly, the goal should be determined and Zhang Zai pointed out: "Those who are equipped with a narrow vision for a small goal are content to stand still with ease. No change and no improvement" [10]. In his view, it is easy to set and achieve a small goal in a narrow vision, and the more content, the less progress will be made. Wang Fuzhi, a Chinese ancient thinker and educator, happened to coincide with Zhang on that point, "The level of scholars depends on their goals and ambitions. He who keeps sight of his lofty aspirations spares his efforts to do things better" [11]. Secondly, goals setting is supposed to be determined and specialized. That is to say, one must concentrate on what they are learning. Zhang Zai stated, "Those who aspire for high and grand while planting their feet firmly on the ground are more likely to be successful." [10] And Wang Fuzhi agreed with Zhang's remarks, "Attention should be paid to when reading and the three presences of learning, presence of heart, presence of eye and presence of mouth, are coordinated." [9], which shows that there is a close relationship between learning and creation. That is to say, there is a clear direction for learning and thinking with goals set. Knowledge accumulation and learning experience improvement are developing over time, and learners' minds will become more and more intelligent. The third aspect is that the man is to be determined when setting goals. Zhang Zai said, just as the old saying goes, "Even an ordinary person has his unchangeable ambitions. The man he who tends to make his mind to learn is likely to set goals" [9]. And Chu Hsi pointed out that the learner should set goals before learning and also emphasized that it is time to move on from words to actions in the autonomous learning process. [9] In addition, in Chinese ancient time, scholars also have requirements in the respect of "goal". For Chu Hsi, "Learners are supposed to be in high aspiration and to challenge themselves beyond what they have done before instead of others" [9]. That is to say, the purpose of learning is not to surpass others, but to improve ourselves. Modern autonomous learning theorists advocate dividing students' learning goals into performative goals and cognitive goals. Performative goals are mainly to show learning ability to others, while cognitive goals are mainly to grasp the

learning contents and it is more important for autonomous learning [11], which coincides with Chu Hsi's point of view. From Chu Hsi perspective, learners are supposed to set goals before learning, a clear goal for learning, which is the best learning policy on one's way to achieve academic success.

Goals setting is of special significance for students today. A study reveals that when students set goals, they learn the importance of taking responsibility, of minimizing excuses and of helping others. John Ruskin's famous remark, "Living without an aim is sailing without a compass", which clearly illustrates the significance of goals setting. The learner who sets a clear goal in his plan will find that everything is easier than before. Helped to establish lofty aspirations, the learner will take delight in learning and gain more new knowledge. With the development of materialistic and acquisitive society, especially for the younger generations at present who have not suffered hardships are ought to review and assimilate the essence of these illuminating educational thoughts. As a matter of fact, a man who is ambitious or aspiring must have a clear goal and know what he lives for and strives for. Therefore, setting goals in the process of autonomous learning is of vital importance that just like a lamp, guiding the man in darkness and helping one overcome obstacle on one's way. Goals setting is a lifelong skill that first helps students succeed in autonomous learning and then later in their future life.

2.2 Principles of Thinking Critically

In the process of autonomous learning, it is inevitable that learners come into difficult problems that they cannot solve on their own, which requires students to think critically. For Zhang Zai, "Those who are suspicious about learning without asking, they will fail to learn" [10]. From his perspective, in the learning process, one should be equipped with questions and ask for help if necessary. On the other hand, he believes that too many questions in learning are not good. The high frequency of questioning will affect the cultivation of critical thinking ability that results in learner laziness and teacher malpractice instead. Autonomous learning relies to a large extent on the individual basic ability and quality to complete the accumulation of their own knowledge, so they will encounter various difficulties, which requires the learners to constantly ask questions and keep finding solutions. For Chu Hsi, thinking critically means that the real reading lies in the circle from asking questions to solving problems. Generally speaking, thinking critically refers to putting forward and solving problems in the process of learning. Chu Hsi viewed that one would be engaged in doubts when learning. Just as Chu Hsi said, "It is unlikely that reading begins with no doubts. Then the doubt rises gradually during the progress of thinking, and sometimes lots of doubts occur to the reader. After the process of doubts solving, a comprehensive autonomous learning is complete with no doubts at all, and the beginning is learning" [10]. Chu Hsi stressed meanwhile, "The autonomous learning process should be accompanied with doubts." Thus, thinking critically is an indispensable component of the learning process. In the process of teaching, teachers should actively encourage students to ask with doubts and guide them through careful observation, multi-facet comparison, dig up doubts with bold hypothesis, brainstorming and exploring from time to time. What's more, doubt raising can effectively stimulate students' learning interest and enthusiasm in exploring knowledge.

Those who have the courage to ask are supposed to possess the capability of critical thinking. For example, in the process of learning, some students have a series of questions but they are ashamed to ask while others are just reticent about questioning. Faced with above mentioned situation, on the one hand, teachers should strive hard to create problem-solving situations in the class and vigorously encourage students to ask questions. On the other hand, students themselves should also be guided to skillfully ask questions. When the questions students ask deviate from their original purpose, teachers do not need to correct them immediately. Instead, the teachers should patiently inspire and guide students to clear their minds and then clearly express themselves to enhance self-confidence and develop good learning habits in the process of autonomous learning. In Chu Hsi's Reading Method, he believes that it is necessary to pay attention to dealing with doubts for cultivating students' questioning skills and improving the overall quality of the students.

Chu Hsi encouraged students to make doubts. When faced with a problem, students often linger on its surface but not delve into deeper thinking. However, teachers should give full play to the role of "leaders" and inspire students to think more. And contemporary society attaches great importance

to the spirit of innovation, imagining what spiritual source comes from. If one develops the habit of constantly exploring new knowledge, then he will find more and gain more, which are the premise of creation. In the process of training students' initiative, it is indeed to be thought-provoking of the Chinese education system in some aspects.

2.3 Principles of Conducting Self-reflection

Principle of self-reflection conduction is one of the internal motivations of self-exploration, self-awareness, self-affirmation and self-development of autonomous learning. In its essence, self-reflection is a psychological related activity of self-reformation, self-education, and self-analysis. Through a gradual self-introspection of the inner world and self-supervision of the learner's own behavior, it spits new ideas to cultivate moral affections and moral behaviors. One of the great western philosophers, Plato referred to it as the struggle between rational will and desire in the soul, Fichte regarded it as a struggle between self and non-self and Freud called it a struggle between self and super nature. However, for Chu Hsi, he considered it as a struggle between the principle of nature and human desire, i.e. the principle of nature and human desire are incompatible with each other. Chu Hsi pointed out that the requirements of self-reflection are what the learners think "when it will be reflected" and "after which has been reflected." Therefore, self-reflection is to strengthen self-awareness, improve moral self-awareness and mark the maturity of autonomous learning ability individually as well. Self-reflection learning is inseparable from the participation of the metacognitive process. "Ke Ji (in Chinese)" means self-control and "Xing Cha (in Chinese)" refers to self-inspection and requires consciously reflection for what one can or cannot do, and thus consciously carry out moral cultivation. That is to say, in the process of autonomous learning, learners should be able to monitor and evaluate their own learning progress and make assessment preparing for later learning. Ancient Chinese scholars also paid attention to this point. For example, Mencius pointed out that those who have some deficiencies on learning ability are often treated unjustifiably of the learning mode.[10] During the ancient time, the well-timed of reflection for Chinese people was requested in a different way. In the book of "Mandarin, Lu language", it reads that the learners are supposed to learn in the morning, listen to the teacher during the daytime, review in the evening, and reflect at night to rethink the shortage and outlook the later learning [10]. Chu Hsi emphasized that the learners individually should always inspect themselves in the process of autonomous learning. However, it is easy to cloud one's vision and dull one's sense, just like a mirror covered with dust, and the process of self-reflection can be the antidote to strike at the root of these problems. His remark lied in two types of self-reflection, one is to take reflection before action and another is after: reflection before action is to be precautious beforehand and predict something wrong one would come into; reflection after is to pat the mistakes right to make improvements in future study. In his view, self-reflection for teachers and students both makes sense and has positive significance on the formation of their good moral cultivation and the correction of wrong ideas.

Chu Hsi believed that self-reflection is not only applicable to social life but also to school life in the process of learning and it should be adhered to in a long term. It is important for learners to be self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses through self-examination and self-assessment. The first monograph dedicated to education in the world, *Subject of Education (Rite)* clearly pointed out the necessity of the principle of self-reflection in autonomous learning. Chu Hsi, despite his thought of Support for the Principle of the Nature and Denial of the Human Desire, viewed that self-reflection is likely to link with a negative facet of humanity that uncovered the active exploration of one's own value and the positive pursuit of one's own personality highlighting the rational consciousness and subjective value of human beings in the process of moral cultivation.

2.4 Principles of Teacher-Oriented and Student-Centered Teaching

Self-reflection is not incompatible with seclusion. Students always encounter some difficulties in the process of autonomous learning. One way is to answer difficult questions with the help of others, but the most effective method is to follow teachers' instruction. Therefore, the role of teachers is indispensable in the autonomous learning process that cannot be denied.

In ancient China, teachers tended to dominate the whole process of teaching. Such passive knowledge impartment often resulted in unsatisfactory learning efficiency and learning outcome for students. Nevertheless, how teachers make students take the initiative from passive learning to active learning and consciously participate in autonomous learning? The answer to the question happened to the poem of *Sense of Reading* where Chu Hsi once remarked that the source of living water metaphorically represents that knowledge is constantly updating and developing for knowledge accumulation. And only by continuous learning and exploration can we energetically keep ourselves moving forward. Chu Hsi also explained in the *Analects of Confucius* that the knowledge impartment only rushed to instill was unable to live up to learner's expectation. In Chu Hsi's view, there are two roles for the teacher, one is as a guide to sketch out the method of learning and its plan before learning; the other is as a commentator to make a final analysis at the end of learning. He also advocated, "Less time but more practice is the best policy. Everything is to understand, to observe and to cultivate by yourself. Someone like me is just a leader, respondent or discussant at the most instead"[9], from which he uttered three functions of the teacher: (1) to lead the way, that is, to indicate the student's learning goals at the beginning of learning; (2) to prove that at the end of the study, to assess the correctness of result, and to provide students with learning feedback; (3) to solve the problem, that is, when encountering obstacles in learning, to discuss with the students to solve their problems. It not only reflects the leading role of teachers in student learning, but also highlights the subjective status and autonomous principle of student learning. From Chu Hsi's perspective of autonomous teaching, defining teacher's role as leading while student central in education, an integrative form that focuses on the initiative of students, the transformation of teachers' teaching methods, the emphasis on the subjective position of students in the teaching process and the leading role of teachers, which can inspire students to explore their innovative thinking mode and, in the long time, develop their thinking habit. "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." That is, the transfer of knowledge is used only for once, and the ability and method of acquisition for students is used for lifetime. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should abandon the traditional boring and cramming method by the construction of the guided teaching mode, an appropriate method to guide students to learn knowledge, which is to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching. The role of the teacher is to guide, prove, and discuss, which gives important instruction for educators.

Chu Hsi believes that learning is mainly based on the students' own subjective efforts, mastering knowledge or seeking truth with a positive attitude or an open mind, while the teacher just plays a role as a "leader." It can be seen that Chu Hsi attached great importance to the cultivation of personal abilities. In the *Bailudong Academy*, Chu Hsi required students to ask more questions and inspired students to dare to question, which is good for the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. Foreigners have such a comment on Chinese students, "Many students in China have strong problem-solving skills, but they can only be the assistant of others." What does this mean? Under the current education system, students are only passively learning who rarely take the initiative to learn. Chu Hsi emphasized that the role of teachers is only to be regarded as a guide but not a controller. Under today's education system, teachers are at a dominant position in class who keep talking from time to time but leave less space and time for students to brainstorm who rarely ask questions. On the one hand, the task for students is time-limited, and teachers are afraid of wasting time; on the other hand, Chu Hsi's emphasis is on elementary moral education. If the student does not develop the habit of active learning in the primary education stage, then it is difficult to raise it later. The cultivation of students' initiative relies on the students themselves, and meanwhile, depends on teachers to inspire them.

2.5 Principles of Teaching Students in Accordance with their Aptitude

Since ancient times, many educators have proposed ideas and methods to promote education values. The principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude that emphasizes teachers are supposed to know individual differences of learners, starting from their actual situation and carrying out targeted educational activities, which was first proposed by Confucius and made

application in teaching practice. Confucius observed the students and found out their differences in personality, knowledge level, hobbies, etc., and regarded “a man is known by his surroundings” as his teaching guidance, and implement different education methods according to the different characteristics of students. Later, Chu Hsi, in the book of *Four Books Annotation*, summarized teaching students according to their aptitude. On the basis of inheritance and development of Confucius’ educational thoughts, Chu Hsi proposed a unique method of autonomous learning. Chu Hsi’s *Reading Method*, to some degree, really plays a leading role in Chu Hsi’s educational thought and educational methods.

Chu Hsi advocated the teaching method of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. In practice, in terms of the discussion of filiality, Zi You viewed that filiality is the young generation supporting the need for their parents or elders, while Zi Xia thought that is not enough and respect for the elders is a necessity, which shows individual differences of the learners’ aptitude. And in *Mencius Annotation*, Chu Hsi made a close analogy, “the timely rain to the growth of greenery is teaching method of teaching students to their aptitude”. He pointed out that the schedule of education is based on different materials, and different teaching methods are applied to different students.

Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude is not only a teaching principle, but also a principle embodied in the whole process of educational practice. The principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude is, in essence, a concrete manifestation of the principle of educational justice. At first, it expresses the legitimacy of the relationship between the teachers and the students, and secondly it represents that its fundamental purpose is to achieve what education means. The prerequisite for teaching students in accordance with their aptitude is to respect and realize the individual differences. The fundamental purpose of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude is to ensure that every learner becomes a superior person on one’s own and becomes a true person with human qualities, so that each student not only gains survival ability through education, but also gains the ability of living a happy life. Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude is the meaning of educational justice [12].

Chu Hsi’s discourse on the teaching of Confucianism in the pre-Qin period showed support for the principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude in teaching practice. As emphasized by Chu Hsi, the principle is of great significance for teachers to adhere to that different types of materials should be utilized and different teaching methods should be employed for students at different proficiency levels.

3. Conclusion and Implications

As a representative educational practitioner and thinker after Confucius and Mencius, Chu Hsi extracted the ideological essence of ancient educators and established profound and influential educational theories in his *Reading Method*. Although he did not explicitly propose the concept of autonomous learning, Chu Hsi put forward five principles that are applicable to various educational contexts, i.e. setting learning goals, thinking critically, conducting self-reflection, teacher-oriented and student-centered teaching, and teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. He advocated that in the process of autonomous learning, setting goals is the first and foremost, and in the teaching practice, teacher’s role is to orient students to learning while students should be placed as the center. At the same time, teachers should pay attention to the initiative of students, guide students to actively participate and think critically. Moreover, teachers need to take into consideration students’ individual differences especially their different intelligence and proficiency levels, and bring all the students’ potential into full play.

It is obvious that Chu Hsi’ educational thought is consistent with contemporary autonomous learning theory. Autonomous learning can promote the development of students’ intellects and thinking mode, especially the formation of students’ good thinking quality. Teachers should give students the appropriate space for personality development, and create opportunities for students to discover, express themselves and adjust themselves in different situations. Autonomous learning can activate and induce students’ enthusiasm for learning, and promote students’ good learning attitude

and formation of learning mentality. Especially in the background of today's special emphasis on cultivating students' autonomous learning ability, understanding Chu Hsi's thought on autonomous learning has important guiding reference for educators and learners.

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