

Cultivating Critical Thinking through Learner Autonomy in Teaching Chinese Film History

Yongchun Fu, and Junwei Wang*

Zhejiang University Ningbo Institute of Technology, Ningbo, 315000, China

* The corresponding author

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Abstract: This article addresses how we employ the learner autonomy pedagogy to cultivate critical thinking into one of our courses, titled Chinese Film History. Our institution is a mid-size university (used to be an independent college) in a coast city in South-east China. The aim of teaching reform is to enhance the talent education quality and the independence is one key characteristic of such reform. This article examines how the learner autonomy pedagogy enhance such independence in our teaching practices.

1. Introduction

Crucial to the education quality in university is to cultivate critical thinking of the students and the key is to foster learner autonomy. It is particular true and necessary in the context of China's education system. This article employs a case study of our own experience in teaching a course titled Chinese Film History in a mid-size university. Our university is an education institution located in a coast city in South-east China, with a population of more than 10,000 students. The institution is used to be an independent university and is now owned by state and supported by public funding. The school we are serving is the School of Media and Design. The course, titled Chinese Film History, is designed for sophomore students who have basic understanding of film history after one year's systematic training. The text book used in this course is A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema, a seminar book in Chinese film historical studies written by Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen.

This article first examines the definition of learner autonomy and its study in English literature. It then delineates how we foster the learner autonomy in the course of Chinese film history by means of various methods. Thirdly, this article discusses the contribution of learner autonomy to cultivate critical thinking of our university students.

2. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is regarded as the core function for high education in world wide. According to Sage, critical thinking is defined as "evaluates the validity of propositions" [1]. That is to say, critical thinking is a term related to logic. Critical thinking is against with brainwashing and thinking unthinkable. The function of critical thinking, according to Sage, "is superior to unquestioning acceptance of popular precepts, common sense, gut instinct, religious faith, or folk wisdom" [1].

Critical thinking is particular significant in China's current education system. Chen Lei interviewed 46 Chinese college students for their concept of critical thinking. "Cognitive thinking skills, intellectual autonomy, and the omnipresence of positive and negative aspects are commonly mentioned in the students' definitions of critical thinking"[2]. Despite Chen Lei's positive attitude towards Chinese college students, the current education is suffered criticism on its policy towards the cultivation of critical thinking. In addition to ideological concern, China has a long history of obedience to orthodoxy in Confucianism writings. Instead of challenging the orthodoxy, Chinese students tend to follow and obey the assertion in classic writings.

Critical thinking is to educate independent thinkers and independent thinker is crucial to the healthy of a nation. Without independent thinkers, people become the crowd. As Le Bon describes the Latin people in his seminar book *The Crowd a study of the popular mind*: “They (the Latin people) have entirely destroyed that sentiment of the independence of the individual... Latin crowds are only concerned with the collective independence of the sect to which they belong, and the characteristic feature of their conception of independence is the need they experience of bringing those who are in disagreement with themselves into immediate and violent subjection to their beliefs” [3] Without critical thinking and independent thinkers, a person would be easily manipulated and a nation would be easily to lead to violence. That will be a disaster of a civilization.

Generally speaking, critical thinking was achieved through asking the following seven questions:

- 1) What does the statement assert? What is asserted by implication?
- 2) What constitutes evidence for or against the proposition?
- 3) What is the evidence for the proposition? What is the evidence against it?
- 4) What other explanations might there be for the evidence?
- 5) To which circumstances does the proposition apply?

6) Are the circumstances currently of interest like the circumstances to which the proposition applies?

- 7) What motives might the proponent of the proposition have besides validity?” [1]

These specific seven questions could be employed into our classroom to cultivate critical thinking by means of teaching Chinese film history.

3. Learner Autonomy

Fostering learner autonomy is a vehicle to cultivate critical thinking in high education. Learner autonomy is a term originated from language teaching and learning. In 1981, Henri Holec published the seminar account *Autonomy and foreign language learning* and introduced the learner autonomy to the scholarship. According to Holec, learner autonomy is defined as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, noting that this ability “is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way [4]. On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways:

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;*
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;*
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;*
- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;*
- for the right of the learners to determine the direction of their own learning.* [5]

However, as David Little points out, the definition of learner autonomy is problematic due to “its overlapped extension with self-instruction. In addition, scholarship has not reached an agreement on several key issues regarding the definition of learner autonomy” [6]. For example, “whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy” [6]. David Little therefore presents a working definition of learner autonomy as “the essence of learner autonomy is willing, proactive and reflective involvement in one’s own learning” [7]. “Learner autonomy is a social-inter-active as well as individual-cognitive phenomenon” [7]. Two methods matter in cultivating learners’ autonomy: “to realize the importance of their contribution” and “to take charge of their own learning” [8]

The role teachers played in cultivating learner autonomy is key to understand this learning strategy. Little claims that, “it is often argued that the pursuit of learner autonomy requires a shift in the role of the teacher from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning and manager of learning resources” [9]. According to Blidi, “teachers who manage to appraise learners’ values, develop in them self-concepts, and reshape their learning environment are likely to become better

tuned with the interests and needs of the learners and thus are more capable of developing learner autonomy in them” [10].

4. Implication

To cultivate students’ critical thinking, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* is deliberately chosen as textbook. The seminar account written by Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen is regarded as the standard official book in the scholarship of Chinese film history. The book is proposed and promoted by Chinese government. Despite its strong ideological preference, this book is widely accepted due to its empirical evidences. However, along with unearthing and digitalising new materials, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* faced serious challenges and a movement titled *Rewriting Film History* is emerged since the 1980s. Our course is design to echo the movement by training undergraduate in research methods and arming film history knowledge. Therefore, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* become a good departure point for undergraduate students. Due to time limitation, we choose the first half of this two-volumes book as the textbook in our course.

We encourage students to challenge the notions presented in *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* by means of the seven questions we mentioned in the section of critical thinking. For instance, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* identifies foreign practitioners as imperialist and argues their film activities as invasion. We, therefore, encourage students not to take the notion for granted and suggest to analyse such notion with those seven questions, such as *What constitutes evidence for or against the proposition? What is the evidence against it?* We endorse students to find evidence to support such notion from the book. How does the notion support by the authors? In addition, we ask our students whether there are other identifications for these foreign practitioners. We encourage our students to find evidence to against such notion. In this sense, we could cultivate students to think differently. A number of students could have a better understanding about the multi roles that foreigners played in Chinese film history.

Not all projects are designed to challenge the existing notions. Due to various reasons, a number of practitioners are neglected in *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*. Therefore, by virtues of databases and other accessible materials, we encourage our students to find these practitioners and dig the stories behind these missing people and therefore enrich the film literature. In addition, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* and other convention accounts is production-centered, while the new cinema history tend to move away from production-centered direction and shed light on distribution and exhibition areas. In this sense, students are encouraged to explore new thinking on distribution and exhibition industries, instead of the conventional text and director analysis.

Learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher stands in the corner of the classroom and let the students discuss by themselves. As Little puts, “In formal educational contexts, learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning--teachers must help them to do so” [9]. Therefore, teachers or instructors should provide students with “appropriate tools and with opportunities to practice using them” [9]. In this sense, at the beginning of each semester, we introduce students the database and search methods through the help of librarians. Some basic databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO, JSTOR are introduced to students. With regard to Chinese databases, Duxiu, National Index on Historical Newspaper Database, CNKI, and Wanfang are instructed to students. In addition, our institution has purchased *Selection of Film Journals and Magazines in the Republic of China* for students’ reference. With these instruments and bibliography, students could extend their own interests and develop their own study. Therefore, they could challenge the orthodoxic statement in *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*.

The role of teacher in cultivating learner autonomy also include “decide...whether and to what extent it is possible for the learners to determine their own learning objectives, select their own learning materials and contribute to the assessment of their learning progress” [9]. That is to say, teachers should design the task for each learner based on the learner’s background and expertise. In teaching Chinese film history, when the students submit their research interest, we will help them to

tailor their objectives to avoid “impossible missions”. Due to the lack of knowledge about the existing literature, many students would choose hot and hard topics like left-wing cinema, looking at the female representation in the left-wing cinema. Intriguing is the topic though, one could present a satisfied output with a systematic understanding about modern China, feminism, and cultural studies. Therefore, we usually persuade students to tailor their research interesting into some more specific topic, such as focusing on the representation of one particular kind of female in films, such as prostitution.

Lessons and challenges exist as well. Major frustration of learner autonomy is “the endless amounts of energy in the students and getting very little in response” [8]. Such situation is attributed to the students’ “over-reliance on the teacher” [8]. A research study could not complete entirely in the class room and students should spend considerable efforts outside classroom. However, as students at the tertiary level show “limited interest and incentive to learn outside classrooms and tend to stick to teachers’ instructions and what is taught in the course mainly as they are almost, and by faulty, mark-driven” [10]. This is true to our students as well. Without considerable energy spent, it is not hard to imagine the quality of essay.

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