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Development of Students' Self-Learning Competence in Teaching Political Theory Subjects in the Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT: The development of digital technology and generative artificial intelligence has changed the conditions under which university students access, process, and use knowledge, while also reshaping the organization of self-learning activities. In Political Theory subjects, these changes are associated with the need to understand concepts accurately, identify relationships among theoretical propositions, select and verify learning materials, develop arguments, and apply theoretical knowledge. This paper adopts a theoretical approach, using methods of analysis, synthesis, systematization, and generalization of relevant literature. Students' self-learning competence is examined from three dimensions: self-direction and organization of learning; access to, selection, verification, and processing of learning materials; and application of knowledge, self-assessment, and adjustment. The paper analyzes changes in self-learning activities with the increasing use of generative artificial intelligence in learning and discusses orientations for teaching organization, assessment, and the conditions required to develop this competence. Digital technology and artificial intelligence are viewed as tools that support cognitive activities; identifying problems, verifying information, constructing arguments, and taking responsibility for learning products remain the responsibility of learners.

KEYWORDS: self-study competence, students, Political Theory, digital environment, artificial intelligence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-study is an integral component of university learning, reflected in learners' ability to independently set goals, select resources, organize learning activities, and evaluate their own outcomes. Knowles conceptualizes self-directed learning as a process in which learners take an active role in identifying their learning needs, establishing goals, selecting resources, and determining appropriate learning methods (Knowles, M. S., 1975) . From this perspective, self-study is not merely a set of tasks undertaken outside the classroom but a means of organizing cognitive activities through which students gradually assume responsibility for constructing and refining their own knowledge. In digital learning environments, the increasing availability of educational resources has transformed the conditions under which this process takes place. The primary challenge is no longer access to information but rather the ability to select, verify, and process information in accordance with learning objectives. Broadbent and Poon identify associations between certain self-regulated learning strategies and academic performance in online higher education settings (Broadbent, J. & Poon, W. L., 2015). In Political Theory courses, self-study entails certain distinctive requirements. The subject matter extends beyond individual concepts, categories, or theoretical propositions to encompass the relationships among theoretical ideas, the foundations underlying their formulation, and the ability to apply knowledge to identify and analyze issues. Consequently, memorizing course content alone does not adequately demonstrate students' capacity for self-study. Rather, students need to move beyond the passive acquisition of knowledge toward its active organization, verification, interpretation, and application.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence continues to transform the conditions under which self-directed learning takes place. AI tools can assist with searching, summarizing, explaining, suggesting, and generating content at high speed, while simultaneously placing greater demands on learners' ability to evaluate information and their sense of responsibility. UNESCO emphasizes a human-centered approach to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in education and research, whereby the design and use of AI tools should adhere to ethical, safety, and accountability requirements (Miao, F. & Holmes, W., 2023). In Vietnam, the issues of autonomous learning in digital environments and the development of thinking skills in the teaching of Political Theory courses have been examined from various perspectives. However, the theoretical understanding of students' self-study competence in Political Theory courses, particularly in contexts where generative artificial intelligence (AI) is directly integrated into the learning process, requires further clarification. This article aims to clarify the theoretical foundations and conceptual dimensions of self-study competence; analyze its characteristics in the teaching and learning of Political Theory courses in digital environments; and examine approaches to instructional organization, assessment and evaluation, as well as the conditions necessary to foster students' self-study competence when AI is used as a learning support tool.

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2. CONTENT

2.1. Theoretical foundations and structure of self-study competence in digital learning environments

Self-directed learning primarily reflects a shift in the learner's position within the cognitive process. When learning is primarily organized around the reception of preselected and prestructured content, learners may complete assigned tasks without genuinely taking ownership of their learning process. Self-directed learning emphasizes learners' active engagement and responsibility for their own learning, encompassing the identification of learning needs, the establishment of learning objectives, and the selection of appropriate learning resources and methods (Knowles, M. S., 1975). Learners' responsibility, therefore, extends beyond completing assigned tasks to include the ability to organize and regulate their learning activities to achieve cognitive objectives. The concept of self-study should be understood in relation to self-regulated learning. Zimmerman conceptualizes self-regulated learning as a process in which learners analyze learning tasks, set goals, select strategies, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning outcomes (Zimmerman, B. J., 2002). A notable point here is that the learning activity does not conclude when a task is completed. The outcome of the task serves as a basis for the learner to reflect on the methods employed, identify limitations, and adjust subsequent actions. Thus, the capacity for self-directed learning encompasses both the ability to carry out a task and the ability to monitor the process of its execution. The models of self-regulated learning reviewed by Panadero indicate that, despite differences in their structures and conceptualizations, they consistently emphasize the importance of cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, motivational, and emotional components in the learning process (Panadero, E., 2017). This approach allows self-study competence to be understood as encompassing more than merely the ability to study independently. Students with the capacity for self-directed learning do not necessarily have to carry out every activity entirely on their own, without any support; the core issue is their ability to identify where they need assistance, select appropriate resources, determine how to utilize them, and evaluate the outcomes of using those resources.

In a digital environment, this perspective becomes increasingly essential. As learning materials expand in both quantity and variety of sources, learners gain more choices—but they also bear a greater responsibility for critical awareness. Learners must distinguish between mere information and actual knowledge, and between information that is ready for use and information that requires further verification. Consequently, the capacity for self-directed learning in a digital environment can be understood as the ability to proactively set goals and organize one's own learning activities; to select, utilize, verify, and process learning resources; to apply knowledge to complete tasks; and to self-evaluate and adjust both the outcomes and the methods of one's learning. The core of this competence lies in the learner's ability to take control of their own knowledge-construction process, rather than simply in the number of tools or resources they can access.

2.2. Requirements for developing self-study competence in digital and AI-enhanced learning environments

The nature of Political Theory courses requires self-study activities to focus on the formation and development of theoretical thinking. Knowledge in these courses consists not only of individual concepts and theoretical propositions but also of the relationships among concepts, the foundations underlying theoretical propositions, and the logic through which issues are explained. Information becomes an integral part of theoretical knowledge only when learners can identify the issue to which it relates, understand its connections with other concepts and ideas, and apply it to explain or address specific cognitive tasks. Recent research on developing students' dialectical thinking competence in the teaching of Marxist–Leninist Philosophy also approaches this issue by examining the relationships among the characteristics of the subject, the digital learning environment, teaching methods, assessment practices, and students' active role as agents in the learning process (Nguyen Ngoc Kha, 2026). This provides a theoretical basis for understanding self-study competence in Political Theory courses not merely in terms of the ability to acquire knowledge but also in terms of the ability to organize and manage cognitive activities. Accordingly, students' self-study competence in Political Theory courses can be examined through three closely interrelated dimensions: self-direction and organization of learning; retrieval, verification, and processing of learning resources; and application of knowledge, self-assessment, and adjustment of learning strategies. These three aspects are not separate capabilities. Self-direction determines the types of learning materials that students need to seek out and process; the quality of how these materials are utilized and handled influences the students' ability to construct arguments; and the outcomes of applying this knowledge provide a basis for students to evaluate and adjust their own learning approaches.

Self-directed learning and the organization of one's own studies are primarily demonstrated by the ability to translate the general requirements of a course into specific cognitive problems and objectives. Students must determine which content needs to be clarified, what resources should be utilized, how they intend to approach the task, and what criteria will be used to evaluate the outcomes. This serves as a foundation that prevents self-study efforts from becoming unfocused when faced with the vast amount of information present in a digital environment.

The exploitation, verification, and processing of learning materials are demonstrated through the ability to search for, select, cross-reference, analyze, and organize information. In a digital environment, this competence holds particular significance, as the same topic may appear across various types of materials with differing levels of reliability. Students must be able to identify sources appropriate for their learning objectives, compare different content, recognize inconsistencies, and use evidence to form judgments. This process transforms the act of searching for information into an activity of knowledge processing.

The application of knowledge, self-assessment, and adjustment are reflected in learners' ability to apply what they have learned to new tasks, evaluate the quality of their work, and identify aspects of their approaches that require modification. In Political Theory courses, knowledge application may involve explaining an issue, analyzing a statement, comparing different interpretations, or applying a theoretical principle to explain a specific case. The value of such activities lies in requiring learners to examine the depth of their understanding and their ability to apply knowledge.

The three aspects outlined above can be further specified into six activities: identifying learning problems and objectives; accessing and utilizing learning resources; verifying and processing information; engaging in discussion and receiving feedback; applying knowledge; and conducting self-assessment and making adjustments. These six activities constitute a flexible guiding framework for organizing self-study rather than a mandatory linear sequence. A learning task may begin with a problem posed by the lecturer or emerge from a question identified by students while reading academic materials. Verification may occur repeatedly as learners encounter new sources or identify inconsistencies in information.

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Feedback may also contribute to the development and refinement of approaches to problem-solving. This approach is consistent with the self-regulatory nature of learning, in which learners continuously monitor, evaluate, and adjust their learning processes (Zimmerman, B. J., 2002).

2.3. Approaches to organizing teaching and learning to develop self-study competence in digital learning environments

The digital environment primarily alters the conditions under which self-directed learning takes place. Students can access electronic textbooks, databases, scholarly publications, and various other learning resources within a short period of time. While this increased accessibility reduces the scarcity of information, it does not diminish the need for cognitive competence. On the contrary, as the number of available resources increases, identifying appropriate sources, evaluating their reliability, and organizing information become integral components of the learning process. Empirical research in Vietnam also suggests that this issue should be examined in relation to both students' competencies and the support conditions available to them. A survey of 468 first-year students at several universities in Hanoi revealed variations across the components of autonomous learning competence in digital environments, with self-assessment, self-regulation, and time management exhibiting higher levels than certain other components, such as learning motivation and technology-use skills (Bui Phuong Thuy et al., 2026). Although these findings do not directly establish the structure of self-study competence among students enrolled in Political Theory courses, they provide additional empirical evidence suggesting that digital learning environments and support conditions should be taken into account when organizing self-study activities.

Generative AI continues to transform the way certain self-directed learning activities are carried out. AI tools can assist with keyword research, explaining concepts, summarizing documents, suggesting questions, or proposing approaches to a problem. The study by Wang and Li examines the relationship between AI use and university students' tendencies toward autonomous learning, thereby opening up a further avenue of research into the role of AI in learning activities (Wang, L. & Li, W., 2024). However, the ability to generate a quick response does not equate to the learner having developed an actual understanding. The gap between providing an answer and truly understanding it, which involves verifying the answer and being able to explain the reasoning behind it must be placed at the core when organizing self-directed learning in an AI-enhanced environment.

This changes how learning tasks are designed. If a task merely requires the production of a complete written text, AI can perform a substantial proportion of the content-generation process, making it difficult to determine the extent of students' cognitive engagement. By contrast, tasks that require students to identify problems, select sources, verify claims, compare different interpretations, identify inconsistencies, and defend their arguments compel them to engage in cognitive processes that cannot simply be replaced by automated text generation. In this context, AI serves as a source of suggestions for critical examination or as a supporting tool, rather than assuming full responsibility for completing the task. UNESCO advocates a human-centered approach to the use of generative AI in education, emphasizing ethical considerations, safety, accountability, and pedagogical design (Miao, F. & Holmes, W., 2023). For students, these principles can be translated into specific requirements, including checking sources, verifying information, identifying the limitations of responses created by AI, and taking responsibility for their final work. UNESCO's AI Competency Framework for Students also identifies competencies across four dimensions: a human-centered mindset, ethics of AI, AI techniques and applications, and AI system design, structured around three progression levels: Understand, Apply, and Create (Miao, F., Shiohira, K. & Lao, N., 2024). Within the scope of this article, these requirements provide a basis for conceptualizing AI-use competence as an integral component of self-study competence rather than as a separate technological skill.

The role of the instructor, therefore, requires adjustment. As information sources and AI tools become more abundant, instructors do not lose their significance. On the contrary, their role in designing cognitive tasks, curating learning materials, establishing criteria for verification, and providing feedback becomes even more important. Students remain the primary agents of the cognitive process, while technology serves as a resource that is carefully selected and controlled. This relationship helps avoid two extremes: excluding AI from the learning process entirely, or delegating the bulk of cognitive activity to AI tools.

2.4. Innovations in assessment and evaluation and the conditions necessary for implementation

The development of self-study competence should be incorporated into the design of learning tasks from the outset. In Political Theory courses, learning tasks should require students to explain concepts, analyze relationships among theoretical propositions, verify claims, compare sources, and apply knowledge to specific issues. Problem-based tasks, in which students must select supporting evidence and explain how they arrive at their conclusions, provide greater opportunities to demonstrate self-study competence than tasks primarily focused on reproducing learned content.

Learning resources should be organized according to their cognitive functions. Textbooks and foundational materials provide a systematic body of essential knowledge; scholarly publications help broaden perspectives, facilitate comparisons, and deepen understanding of specific issues; and other sources may be used to illustrate concepts or create situations that stimulate critical thinking. The lecturer's role should extend beyond providing reading lists to guiding students in establishing criteria for selecting resources, verifying sources, and incorporating information into their arguments. Research on supporting autonomous learning in the context of digital transformation indicates that learning support should be examined in relation to multiple factors, including the role of academic advisors and organizational and technological conditions (Bui Phuong Thuy, Nguyen Vu Bich Hien, 2026).

Feedback is an essential component that should be integrated into the self-study process. Its value lies not merely in indicating whether an answer is correct or incorrect but also in helping students identify specific areas of difficulty, such as an insufficiently defined problem, inappropriate selection of sources, arguments lacking adequate evidence, or applications of knowledge that fail to meet task requirements. When students receive evidence-based feedback, they are better equipped to regulate their learning activities rather than simply revise a particular piece of work.

Assessment and evaluation should also shift their focus from the final product to include the process through which that product is developed. In AI-enhanced learning environments, a completed written text alone is insufficient to reflect the extent of students' individual contributions. Assessment may require learners to explain the problems they have selected, the sources they have consulted, the evidence used for verification, the revisions made in response to feedback, and the extent of AI use, where permitted by the task. This approach enables a clearer understanding of students' cognitive processes and reduces reliance on the formal characteristics of the final product as the sole basis for evaluation.

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The development of self-study competence also requires appropriate conditions within the educational environment. Digital learning resources must be of high quality and organized in accordance with learning objectives. Lecturers need the competence to design learning tasks and guide students in accessing, evaluating, and using information sources. Students, in turn, need to develop information literacy, self-regulation skills, and an awareness of academic integrity. Higher education institutions and academic departments should establish clear guidelines regarding the permissible scope of AI use, responsibility for learning outcomes and submitted work, and assessment practices for tasks involving AI tools. When these conditions are established and coordinated effectively, technology can serve as a resource for expanding learning opportunities without diminishing students' agency in the learning process.

3. CONCLUSION

Digital learning environments and generative artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming the conditions under which students engage in self-study. In Political Theory courses, these changes highlight the importance of identifying problems, selecting and verifying learning resources, constructing arguments, applying knowledge, and regulating learning activities, in addition to acquiring course content. Students' self-study competence in Political Theory courses can be examined through three dimensions: self-direction and organization of learning; retrieval, verification, and processing of learning resources; and application of knowledge, self-assessment, and adjustment of learning strategies. Six activities, including identifying problems and learning objectives, accessing and utilizing learning resources, verifying and processing information, engaging in discussion and feedback, applying knowledge, and conducting self-assessment and making adjustments constitute a flexible guiding framework for organizing self-study activities, which can be adapted to specific course content and learning tasks. As generative AI becomes increasingly integrated into learning processes, the development of self-study competence needs to be closely linked to task design, the organization of learning resources, feedback, assessment, and evaluation. Although AI can support various learning activities, it cannot replace students' core cognitive processes. The abilities to identify problems, verify information, construct arguments, apply knowledge, and take responsibility for their work must remain central components of self-study competence.

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