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An Analysis of the Path for Cultivating College Students' Self-Leadership in the Digital Learning Field

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Abstract: Digital technology is comprehensively reshaping university learning spaces, with online courses, project-based online training, and blended classrooms together forming a new digital learning environment. Self-leadership relies on three core strategies: behavioral focus, natural rewards, and constructive thinking, which are key internal qualities for college students to achieve independent planning, proactive pursuit of knowledge, and adjust their learning mindset. Currently, the digital learning environment faces real pain points such as complex and fragmented resources, weak student self-control, frequent delays in online learning, and limited platform educational functions. Traditional classroom cultivation models struggle to adapt to the characteristics of digital scenario learning. Based on existing research findings in foreign languages, this paper analyzes the opportunities and practical obstacles that digital environments pose to college students' self-leadership development from the perspectives of digital environments and the internal logic of self-leadership. It systematically establishes cultivation paths from five dimensions: curriculum design, digital platform optimization, tiered education guidance, campus supporting cultivation, and student autonomy internalization. It explores measures such as blended project-based teaching, mindfulness digital training, and process-based online assessments to implement self-leadership cultivation. It provides theoretical references for universities in the new era to improve their independent talent cultivation systems by leveraging digital resources.

Keywords: Digital Learning, College Students, Self-leadership, Blended Teaching.

1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of digital infrastructure has driven higher education into a normalized digital learning stage. MOOCs, smart classrooms, online project collaboration platforms, and short video learning resources have broken the boundaries of time and space in the classroom, transforming digital learning from emergency online teaching to normalized educational scenarios. Compared to traditional fixed offline teaching models, digital learning gives students the high degree of autonomy to choose courses, freely adjust study times, and independently filter learning resources. However, while this freedom increases, it also exposes many learning management challenges: massive fragmented information disrupts learning rhythms, some students slack off online, procrastinate tasks, have unclear goals, and easily give up when facing learning setbacks. Essentially, this stems from insufficient self-leadership qualities, lack of self-goal setting, process supervision, internal motivation, and negative cognitive correction. Self-leadership theory was first proposed by Manz and others. After decades of refinement, it has developed into three major dimensions: behavioral focus, natural rewards, and constructive thinking. It emphasizes individuals relying on self-control to achieve behavior-driven and intrinsic growth. It has been widely practiced in university teaching and employee training in Europe and America, with extensive empirical research confirming that systematic cultivation can significantly enhance individual academic engagement, stress resistance, and innovation literacy.

Based on existing research, Sampl et al. (2017), Lee & Jung (2022) conducted course experiments on mindfulness combined with self-leadership for university students, confirming that online training can effectively improve students' self-leadership skills; Durnali (2022) pointed out that self-leadership in digital e-learning environments is a key element for optimizing learning styles and breaking down critical thinking barriers; Müller & Niessen (2019) conducted research on remote home learning groups and found that remote autonomous environments test individuals' self-leadership abilities even more. In contrast, in the practice of digital education in domestic universities, most institutions focus their digital construction on hardware equipment and course resource building, emphasizing course launch and resource expansion, neglecting the supporting cultivation of students' self-quality in digital scenarios, with self-leadership cultivation often scattered into class meetings or general education courses, lacking systematic implementation paths that adapt to digital learning laws.

Based on the above gaps in reality and theory, this paper adopts a pure discourse research approach combining literature review and theoretical reflection, clarifies the intrinsic alignment between the digital field and self-leadership, analyzes existing challenges in cultivation, constructs targeted full-chain cultivation implementation paths, enriches research on digital teaching reform and localized self-leadership education, and helps universities shift digital construction from "resource building" to "literacy + knowledge" two-way cultivation.

2. Relevant Concept Definitions and Theoretical Alignment Logic

2.1. Core Concept Definition

First, the digital learning field. Unlike single online class attendance, the digital learning space uses smart teaching platforms, online collaboration software, open learning resource libraries, and online Q&A communities as carriers. It integrates blended teaching during classes, independent study outside of class, cross-group remote project

collaboration, and online assessment and review, forming a composite learning space characterized by openness, fragmentation, temporal flexibility, and diversified resources. Students transform from passive listeners into selectors of learning resources and leaders of learning rhythm.

Second, self-leadership. According to the classic definition by Neck & Houghton (2006), self-leadership includes three main strategies: first, the action-focused strategy, which includes self-goal setting, breakdown of phased tasks, self-review and supervision, and behavior correction; The second is the natural reward strategy, relying on interest and a sense of learning achievement to achieve intrinsic motivation, breaking free from outwardly limited incentives; Third, constructive thinking strategies guide individuals to abandon attributing failures, correct negative cognition, and view learning setbacks rationally. Together, these three form a complete logical system for individual self-control and serve as the core theoretical basis for resolving the chaos in autonomous learning.

2.2. The Intrinsic Alignment between Digital Fields and Self-Leadership Cultivation

From the perspective of educational goals, digital learning advocates autonomous and inquiry-based learning, requiring students to plan their own study plans and aligning closely with the cultivation goal of self-leadership and individual growth. From the perspective of scenario adaptation, the flexible learning model in the digital environment provides a platform for setting self-goals, weekly online reviews, and personalized achievement creation. Students can rely on platform ledgers to record tasks and complete group self-checks with the help of communities, naturally adapting to the implementation of three major strategies. From the perspective of complementary shortcomings, the digital environment is overly resourceful and tempting, easily causing students' learning attention to be scattered, while self-directed behavior control and cognitive optimization strategies perfectly compensate for these environmental shortcomings; Conversely, the diverse forms of digital outcomes and the fun design of online tasks can implement natural rewards, leveraging interest to strengthen intrinsic learning motivation and empower both environment and literacy.

2.3. The Theoretical Foundation for Cultivating Self-leadership in Digital Domains

This study mainly relies on self-determination theory and social cognition theory. Self-determination theory emphasizes that three types of psychological needs-autonomy, competence, and association-are sources of intrinsic motivation. Bakker et al. (2021) confirmed based on this theory that autonomous work/study scenarios can activate individuals' internal motivation, and digital environments grant students autonomy to choose, aligning with the logic of cultivating needs; Social cognition theory emphasizes the interaction among environment, individuals, and behaviors. Abid et al. (2021) and Kang et al. (2022) based on this theory have confirmed that environmental characteristics influence individual self-development. As a new type of external environment, the digital environment can guide students to develop self-leadership habits through platform design and curriculum reform.

3. Existing Practical Challenges in Cultivating College Students' Self-Leadership in the Digital Learning Arena

3.1. University Digital Construction Focuses on Resources Over Literacy Cultivation

At present, most universities focus their digital construction on building smart classrooms and purchasing massive online course resources, equating digitalization with course digitalization. Teaching design still follows traditional indoctrination approaches, and online courses are mainly one-way lectures by teachers, lacking self-directed projects, topic selection, and online review for self-leadership and implementation. Course assessment continues the final online paper-based scoring model, with process data only used for simple recording of regular scores, without relying on platforms to build periodic review files. This prevents students from being forced to plan daily life through assessment-oriented guidance. The educational potential of digital platforms is limited to knowledge transmission and cannot be extended to self-cultivation of self-cultivation.

3.2. Students' Digital Autonomous Learning Abilities Vary Widely, and the Foundation of Self-leadership is Differentiated

Before enrolling, freshmen are long in passive exam-oriented learning mode, accustomed to teachers assigning fixed tasks. After entering the university's digital environment, faced with vast course resources and unable to filter them, goals are often blurred and learning procrastination is common. Some students with weaker self-discipline are disturbed by short videos and entertainment pop-ups, making online courses AFK and rushing tasks to become the norm; A few self-disciplined students can plan independently, but lack a systematic method for breaking down their own goals. Their goals are set too high or too low, resulting in insufficient sense of achievement and difficulty relying on natural rewards to maintain long-term motivation. Combined with the characteristics of tiered learning conditions, existing digital courses adopt unified tasks and a unified progress model, lacking flexible task design and failing to meet the growth needs of students with different self-management foundations.

3.3. The Digital Platform Has Single Functions and Lacks Supporting Modules for Self-leadership

Mainstream platforms like Xuexitong and Yu Ketang focus on course release, assignment submission, and grade statistics, with only basic data retention functions. They do not add supporting sections for self-leadership, such as goal ledgers, weekly review check-ins, personalized achievement selection, or setback discussion zones. Students cannot keep personal task lists online, reviews rely on offline documents, fragmented online learning lacks systematic recording channels, and natural rewards lack multiple achievement submission ports, forcing them to submit written assignments uniformly, making it difficult to achieve intrinsic motivation through interest.

3.4. Fragmented Cultivation Methods and Lack of Normalized Systematic Cultivation Mechanisms

Currently, content related to self-leadership is scattered throughout entrance education and online mental health courses, mostly theoretical popularization, lacking online project-based training throughout the semester. There is no phased implementation of digital hybrid courses, such as goal setting, weekly reviews, and cognitive guidance. Online mindfulness courses and self-leadership training camps are held infrequently and have limited coverage. Referring to the mindfulness + self-leadership online training model by Sampl et al. (2017), the popularization rate of related normalized courses in domestic universities is low, and cultivation lacks closed-loop design.

3.5. Shortcomings in Teachers' Digital Education Capabilities

Some teachers only use platforms to publish courseware and assign homework, lacking the ability to integrate self-directed instructional design through digital tools. They are unfamiliar with the implementation methods of the three major strategies, and online classrooms still have full authority to assign tasks and set content, continuing the teacher-led model. They cannot return the right to select topics or split tasks to students. Project-based online courses become mere formalities, and self-leadership cultivation is difficult to integrate into daily teaching.

4. Systematic Cultivation Path for College Students' Self-Leadership in the Digital Learning Field

Building on the previous difficulties and combining the three major self-leadership strategies with digital scenario characteristics, an integrated cultivation path is built from five dimensions: curriculum, platform, tiered teaching, extracurricular cultivation, and student internalization, achieving full-chain implementation of pre-class goal anchoring, in-class two-way incentives, and post-class closed-loop review.

4.1. Optimize Digital Course Teaching Design and Embed Three-stage Self-leadership Cultivation into the Stage

Relying on a 16-week blended cycle of regular professional courses, a three-stage course model is created: "self-set online goals before class - mixed practical motivation and cognitive training during class - closed-loop review after class."

Before class (Week 1 online general education micro-course): Teachers publish a streamlined self-leadership course on the platform (referring to ASLQ scale accompanying popular science content), explain the method of goal breakdown, cancel the unified teacher assignment of online tasks, each group independently researches topics online, students fill out their personal phased task lists in the platform's electronic ledger, complete behavioral focus goal setting, and answer questions online without modifying student plans.

During class (Weeks 2-13 blended teaching): First, weekly fixed online group review check-ins, with students filling out weekly self-assessment notes on the platform to implement self-observation; Second, the platform opens channels for uploading research reports, short videos, and physical projects, allowing students to choose the form of their achievements and achieve natural rewards based on their interests; 3. Relying on the online seminar zone, hold cloud-based frustration seminars on project obstacle cases, guiding students to correct negative thinking and implement constructive thinking strategies.

After class (last 3 weeks): Reform of online assessment rules, total score = 40% online review ledger + 40% group digital results + 20% online classroom self-performance. Students submit full-cycle growth reports online and complete a self-feedback loop.

4.2. Iterate the Digital Platform Functions and Add a Special Self-leadership Supporting Module

On top of the original teaching platform, five new functional modules have been added: (1) Electronic goal ledger module, where students independently enter short- and long-term tasks, with system setting up periodic reminders; (2) Weekly review check-in area, with self-inspection content submitted at fixed intervals; (3) Multiple achievement upload portals, supporting non-text work such as video, planning, and design; (4) Online psychological seminar section, regularly pushing academic setback cases, and conducting cloud-based cognitive counseling; (5) Mindfulness Online Check-in Area, weekly short-term mindfulness practice resources, referencing Lee & Jung's (2022) mindfulness cultivation approach, indirectly enhancing self-leadership through empathy training. The platform automatically retains full-cycle learning data as a basis for process assessment.

4.3. Implement Layered Digital Flexible Teaching to Adapt to Differentiated Self-leadership Foundations

Before classes begin, students are divided into levels through a simple online self-leadership self-assessment questionnaire, grouping based on the platform: the weaker group has simplified online tasks and prioritizes completing small goals to check in; Groups with strong capabilities open up and expand research resources and independently increase the content of online projects. Groups form online teams with heterogeneous strengths, leveraging community mutual support to gradually develop planning habits among weaker students, aligning with the intrinsic motivational logic of natural rewards and avoiding unreasonable goals that discourage learning enthusiasm.

4.4. Build a Digital Support Cultivation System for Extracurricular Education to Achieve Integration between Inside and Outside the Classroom

First, the department regularly holds online self-leadership training camps, adopting a 10-week regular online training model, drawing on the Sampl mindfulness + self-leadership training program, and conducting goal training and frustration awareness online practice modules; Second, relying on WeChat and platform communities, a regular Q&A circle is established. Teachers regularly compile common questions for online answers, add a self-experience sharing section, and publicly display outstanding growth reports online; Third, connect with external industry resources by introducing online corporate lectures and cloud-based research resource

libraries to enrich student project materials, reduce negative emotions caused by resource scarcity, and ensure the implementation of constructive thinking.

4.5. Strengthen Digital Teaching and Research Capabilities for Faculty and Consolidate the Foundation for Cultivation and Implementation

Departments regularly organize special online teaching and research sessions, focusing on self-leadership theory, digital curriculum integration methods, and guidance on students' passive cognition, organizing interdisciplinary online lesson polishing, and sharing experiences in project-based blended teaching. Teachers are encouraged to apply for digital education teaching reform projects, optimizing classroom implementation details through teaching research, ensuring teachers can skillfully integrate self-leadership into daily teaching based on platforms.

4.6. Guide Students to Internalize and Develop Autonomy and Stimulate Initiative in Self-cultivation

Using the platform, regularly push short science articles on cutting-edge research related to self-leadership, guiding students to proactively learn how to use strategies; Students are encouraged to voluntarily form online learning support groups, supervise each other's task implementation, optimize self-planning habits through peer interaction, and shift from passive curriculum cultivation to active self-cultivation.

5. Conclusion

Digital learning has become a regular educational vehicle in universities. Relying on the digital environment to cultivate students' self-leadership is not only a practical need to solve the procrastination and lack of autonomy in online learning, but also an inevitable choice for cultivating quality-oriented talent under the new education reform framework. The open and flexible nature of the digital field provides a unique platform for implementing the three major self-leadership strategies. However, the current misconception of valuing hardware resources over literacy cultivation in university digital construction has led to fragmented and formalized self-leadership cultivation. Based on classic theories of self-leadership and relevant research achievements from domestic and international universities, this paper constructs a full-chain cultivation path from six dimensions: curriculum reconstruction, platform transformation, tiered teaching, extracurricular support, faculty development, and student autonomy and internalization. It embeds behavioral focus, natural rewards, and constructive thinking into the entire digital learning process.

From the perspective of practical implementation, different disciplines can fine-tune digital project content according to their professional attributes; liberal arts focus on online research projects, while science and engineering rely on simulation platforms to carry out physical design online tasks. This study is purely theoretical and has not conducted practical data verification. Subsequent universities can rely on parallel classes to conduct online peer-to-face teaching, dynamically iterate course details in practice, continuously improve self-leadership cultivation schemes in digital scenarios, and truly realize the shift from resource construction to the collaborative cultivation of knowledge and autonomous literacy.

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