

Reconsidering Teacher Instructional Leadership: Boundaries Between Teacher Guidance and Student Autonomy in Higher Education

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Abstract: Teacher instructional leadership is a key variable for improving the quality of higher education, but the reasonable boundary between it and student autonomy has not been fully clarified. Based on constructivism theory and self-determination theory, this paper adopts a theoretical speculative method to systematically analyze the relationship between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy in the context of higher education, reveals two typical manifestations of boundary confusion in university classrooms—"dominance suppressing autonomy" and "autonomy lacking guidance," and explores the deep roots of boundary confusion from three dimensions: traditional teaching concepts, teachers' professional quality, and the characteristics of higher education teaching. The study holds that teacher instructional leadership in higher education is not a one-way "dominance" or "control," but a dynamic balance between professional guidance and student autonomy. The definition of a reasonable boundary should take "the balance between guidance and autonomy" as the core principle, and its specific connotation is reflected in three aspects: knowledge transmission, ability cultivation, and value guidance. University teachers can realize the organic integration of teacher guidance and student autonomy by updating teaching concepts, improving professional quality, and optimizing teaching design, thus providing a theoretical reference for optimizing university classroom teaching practice and promoting the realization of talent training goals in higher education.

Keywords: Teacher instructional leadership; Student autonomy; Higher education; Teaching guidance; Boundary definition

Online publication: September 30, 2026

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The concept of instructional leadership originated from the Western "school effectiveness and improvement" movement in the 1970s, which had a profound impact on educational management research^[1]. With the in-depth development of research, scholars have gradually turned their attention to teachers—the main body of classroom teaching—and explored teachers' ability and effectiveness to influence students' learning,

guide the direction of teaching, and achieve teaching goals in the teaching process. In the context of higher education, teacher instructional leadership has a more complex connotation: on the one hand, university teaching is carried out around advanced knowledge and specialized disciplines, which is highly professional and academic, requiring teachers to have profound academic attainments and academic leadership capabilities; on the other hand, university students are in a critical stage of transition from youth to maturity, and their self-cognition, critical thinking, and independent learning abilities have developed significantly, with a strong demand for autonomous learning and academic exploration. Therefore, teacher instructional leadership in higher education is not a simple “dominance” or “control” of the classroom, but a force exerted by teachers as the main body of teaching to make teaching activities operate effectively towards expected goals ^[2]. This force is reflected in the professional guidance role played by teachers in the process of students’ learning, which can guide students to understand professional knowledge, master learning methods, develop critical thinking, and cultivate autonomous learning abilities.

However, in actual university classroom teaching, there is often a problem of boundary confusion between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy. Influenced by the traditional “teacher-centered” concept, some teachers overemphasize their dominant role, adopt a one-way indoctrination teaching method, monopolize classroom discourse, and ignore students’ needs and initiative for autonomous learning; other teachers, under the “student-centered” concept, overemphasize student autonomy, ignore teaching rules, weaken their own guidance responsibilities, and even adopt a “laissez-faire” teaching attitude, resulting in students’ learning lacking systematic guidance. This kind of boundary confusion not only affects the quality of university classroom teaching, is not conducive to the development of students’ in-depth learning, but also hinders the realization of higher education talent training goals.

1.2. Limitations of existing research

Existing studies have paid attention to the relationship between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy, but there are still the following limitations: first, most studies focus on the field of primary and secondary education, and insufficiently pay attention to the particularity of teacher instructional leadership in the context of higher education ^[3], failing to fully consider the professionalism of university teaching, academic freedom, and the maturity of college students’ physical and mental development; second, existing studies often regard teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy as an oppositional relationship, or emphasize the one-way restriction of the former on the latter, lacking in-depth exploration of the dynamic balance between the two; third, in the digital intelligence era, knowledge acquisition tends to be democratized and ubiquitous, and the role of teachers as “knowledge transmitters” in the traditional education system is facing an unprecedented impact ^[4]. However, most existing studies start from the single perspective of teachers, ignoring the subjective feelings of students as the lead, and failing to reveal the impact of cognitive differences between teachers and students on teaching effects. Therefore, it is urgent to re-examine the connotation and practice of teacher instructional leadership in higher education from a theoretical perspective, and clarify the reasonable boundary between teacher guidance and student autonomy.

1.3. Research purpose and questions

This paper aims to re-examine the connotation and practice of teacher instructional leadership in higher education from a theoretical perspective, clarify the reasonable boundary between teacher guidance and student autonomy, analyze the causes and negative impacts of boundary confusion, and put forward

theoretical thinking and suggestions for optimizing teacher instructional leadership in university classrooms. To this end, this paper focuses on the following three core research questions:

First, what is the connotation of teacher instructional leadership in the context of higher education? What is the relationship between it and student autonomy?

Second, what are the manifestations of boundary confusion between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy in university classrooms? What kind of negative impacts will they have?

Third, how can the reasonable boundary of teacher instructional leadership in higher education be defined? How to achieve the balance between teacher guidance and student autonomy?

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Constructivism theory

Constructivism theory holds that students are the main body of information processing and active constructors of meaning, rather than passive recipients of external stimuli and objects of indoctrination^[5]. This theory emphasizes the subjectivity and initiative of learners, and holds that effective teaching should create a supportive learning environment to guide learners to construct knowledge through independent exploration, collaborative communication, and meaning negotiation. In the context of higher education, constructivism theory provides important enlightenment for the reasonable exertion of teacher instructional leadership: teachers' role should be transformed from "knowledge transmitters" to "guides" and "facilitators" of learning, and the focus of instructional leadership should be on guiding students to actively construct knowledge rather than unilaterally indoctrinating knowledge. Teachers should give students sufficient space for independent exploration and thinking, while maintaining necessary professional guidance and academic leadership.

2.2. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory holds that human beings have three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness^[6]. Among them, the need for autonomy refers to an individual's desire to be the initiator of their own behaviors and the tendency to independently choose and regulate their own activities. The theory points out that when the external environment supports an individual's need for autonomy, the individual will generate intrinsic motivation and show higher engagement and persistence; on the contrary, when the external environment excessively controls or suppresses autonomy, the individual will generate psychological resistance and reduce learning enthusiasm. Based on this, teachers' instructional leadership should be based on meeting students' need for autonomy, and guide students to develop their own learning initiative and creativity by providing space for choice, supporting independent decision-making, and encouraging self-regulation, avoiding excessive intervention that violates students' need for autonomy.

3. Boundary confusion of teacher instructional leadership in university classrooms: Manifestations, impacts, and roots

3.1. Two manifestations of boundary confusion

3.1.1. Excessive teacher instructional leadership: Dominance suppressing autonomy

Excessive teacher instructional leadership refers to teachers overemphasizing their dominant position in

classroom teaching, adopting one-way indoctrination and strict control teaching methods, monopolizing classroom discourse, and ignoring students' needs and initiative for autonomous learning. There is a close correlation between university teachers' teaching ability and the quality of talent training ^[7]. In current university classrooms, it appears that in terms of teaching content, teachers teach mechanically, imparting textbook content to students intact without leaving space for students to think and question; in terms of teaching methods, teachers adopt the "cramming" teaching method, and students listen passively, lacking opportunities for discussion, exploration, and interaction; in terms of teaching evaluation, teachers measure all students with a unified standard, ignoring students' individual differences and diverse development needs. This kind of over-dominant instructional leadership regards students as passive knowledge recipients, suppresses the development of students' critical thinking and autonomous learning abilities, and is contrary to the goal of cultivating innovative talents in higher education.

3.1.2. Insufficient teacher instructional leadership: Autonomy lacking guidance

Insufficient teacher instructional leadership is manifested in teachers excessively weakening their professional guidance function in the teaching process, one-sidedly understanding student autonomy as "laissez-faire," resulting in teaching activities lacking necessary direction, guidance, and systematic support. Its specific characteristics can be examined at three levels: first, the emptiness of teaching design. Some teachers extremize teaching concepts such as "flipped classroom" and "student-centered," and simply hand over the classroom to students without sufficient teaching preparation and process design, leading to a serious disconnect between learning content and professional training goals, and students falling into a formalistic dilemma of "autonomy for the sake of autonomy." Second, the absence of learning support. Some teachers turn a blind eye to the cognitive obstacles and difficulties in students' learning process, failing to provide timely feedback, scaffolding, and targeted guidance, making students linger in cognitive misunderstandings, and independent exploration becoming inefficient or even ineffective knowledge trial and error. Third, the dissolution of value guidance. The German educator Herbart believed that "teaching without moral education is just a means without purpose" ^[8]. Some teachers separate professional teaching from value education, ignoring the organic integration of curriculum ideology and politics, leading to students lacking correct value coordinates and ethical judgments in academic exploration, and being difficult to form professional identity and social responsibility.

The above "laissez-faire" teaching orientation, on the surface, respects the dominant position of students, but in fact, it dissolves the core function of teachers as "professional leaders." Due to the lack of effective guidance, students' autonomy deviates from the correct direction, failing to achieve the expected effect of autonomous learning, and ultimately deviating from the goal of cultivating innovative and compound talents in higher education.

3.2. Negative impacts of boundary confusion

The confusion of the boundary between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy has a significant negative impact on teaching effectiveness, student development, and teachers' professional growth. For most students, excessive instructional leadership will inhibit their learning initiative and creativity, make them form passive and dependent learning habits, and affect the development of their critical thinking and ability to solve problems independently; insufficient instructional leadership will make their

autonomous learning lack direction and depth, leading to fragmented learning content and low learning efficiency, affecting their academic development and future career development. For teachers who are responsible for guiding students to learn knowledge and cultivate independent thinking abilities, excessive instructional leadership will increase their own teaching burden, make them fall into the misunderstanding of “working hard but not being effective,” and affect their teaching enthusiasm and professional development; insufficient instructional leadership will make them unable to effectively exert their professional value, affecting their sense of teaching achievement and professional identity. For higher education, the existence of boundary confusion restricts the improvement of talent training quality and hinders the realization of the goal of cultivating innovative and compound talents.

3.3. Deep roots of boundary confusion

3.3.1. The influence of traditional teaching concepts

The traditional “teacher-centered” teaching concept has a profound impact on university teachers. Some teachers still hold the concept that “teachers are the main body of the classroom and students are the objects of teaching,” and believe that the main task of teachers is to impart knowledge, so they overemphasize their dominant role and ignore student autonomy. On the other hand, in the wave of higher education reform, some teachers are influenced by the extreme “student-centered” concept, opposing teacher guidance and student autonomy. However, with the development of the Internet, the form of knowledge has changed from a traditional linear framework to an open and flowing network structure^[9], overemphasizing student autonomy while ignoring their own guidance responsibilities, leading to insufficient instructional leadership. Both of these concepts fail to correctly understand the dialectical unity relationship between teacher instructional leadership and student autonomy.

3.3.2. The restriction of teachers’ professional quality

University teachers’ professional quality is an important factor affecting the boundary of instructional leadership. Some teachers lack the ability to balance teacher guidance and student autonomy, do not know how to effectively guide students, or cannot grasp the degree of guidance, leading to boundary confusion. In addition, influenced by the evaluation orientation of “valuing scientific research over teaching” in universities, some university teachers ignore the improvement of teaching ability, lack systematic teaching design and method training, resulting in the lack of effective methods and strategies in classroom teaching, and are unable to flexibly adjust the exertion of instructional leadership according to students’ needs and teaching content.

3.3.3. The restriction of the characteristics of higher education teaching

The characteristics of higher education teaching, such as strong professionalism, diverse teaching forms, and large differences in students’ learning levels, also bring challenges to the definition of the boundary of teacher instructional leadership. Different courses, different teaching content, and different students have different needs for teacher guidance and student autonomy, which makes it difficult for teachers to grasp the reasonable boundary of instructional leadership in actual teaching. In terms of breaking the “classroom revolution,” professional barriers, and the barriers between the first and second classrooms, most universities are still adhering to the traditional teaching model, lacking effective reform measures^[10]. In addition, the large-class teaching model in some universities makes it difficult for teachers to provide targeted guidance

to each student, leading to a “one-size-fits-all” teaching method—either unified dominance or unified letting go—and then causing boundary confusion.

4. Defining the reasonable boundary of teacher instructional leadership in higher education

4.1. Core principle of boundary definition: Dynamic balance between guidance and autonomy

The definition of the reasonable boundary of teacher instructional leadership in higher education should take “the dynamic balance between guidance and autonomy” as the core principle. This principle includes three meanings: first, teacher guidance and student autonomy are not oppositional, but a dialectical unity that is interdependent and mutually promoting—effective teacher guidance is the premise for stimulating students’ autonomous learning ability, and the development of student autonomy is an important symbol to test the effectiveness of teacher guidance; second, the balance between guidance and autonomy is not a fixed proportion, but a flexible relationship that dynamically adjusts with factors such as teaching content, students’ development stage, and course nature—in basic courses or theoretical difficulties, teacher guidance should be appropriately strengthened; after students have a certain foundation, the space for autonomy should be gradually expanded; third, the ultimate goal of balance is the all-round development of students—the reasonable exertion of teacher instructional leadership should focus on stimulating students’ learning initiative and critical thinking ability, rather than unilaterally occupying the dominant position of the classroom.

4.2. Specific connotation of the reasonable boundary

4.2.1. Boundary in knowledge transmission

In the aspect of knowledge transmission, teachers’ instructional leadership should focus on guiding students to understand and master professional knowledge, rather than simply indoctrinating knowledge. Teachers should systematically introduce the core content, internal logic, and cutting-edge trends of disciplinary knowledge, helping students establish a complete knowledge framework; guide students to think deeply about the source, applicable conditions, and limitations of knowledge; and encourage students to construct their own knowledge system through independent reading, cooperative discussion, and academic exploration. In terms of boundary grasp, teachers should clarify the distinction between “giving fish” and “teaching how to fish”: for basic disciplinary concepts and core theories, teachers should provide sufficient explanation and demonstration; for the expansion and application of knowledge and critical reflection, teachers should give students the right to choose learning content and methods, let them arrange their own learning progress, and cultivate their autonomous learning ability.

4.2.2. Boundary in ability cultivation

In the aspect of ability cultivation, teachers’ instructional leadership should focus on guiding students to develop critical thinking. This kind of critical thinking, also known as reflective thinking, is an important part of an individual’s logical thinking. It not only represents an individual’s ability to make rational decisions and reflect, but also indicates a purposeful high-level rational thinking process^[11]. Teachers should design challenging academic tasks, guide students to carry out independent exploration and academic research, and

help students master research methods and academic norms; they should gradually cultivate students' ability to solve problems independently through demonstration, scaffolding, and feedback. In terms of boundary grasp, teachers should follow the logic of "scaffolding teaching": in the early stage of ability cultivation, teachers should provide more demonstrations and guidance, building learning scaffolding; with the improvement of students' abilities, teachers should gradually remove the scaffolding, give students sufficient space for independent practice and exploration, let them solve problems encountered in the learning process independently, and finally realize the internalization and transfer of abilities.

4.2.3. Boundary in value guidance

In the aspect of value guidance, teachers' instructional leadership should focus on guiding students to establish correct academic values, social responsibility, and professional mission. Education is essentially a value-laden practical activity, involving personality cultivation, ethical judgment, and cultural inheritance^[12]. Teachers should organically integrate professional teaching with value education, guide students to recognize the social value and ethical responsibility of their major, and cultivate their critical reflection ability and moral judgment. In terms of boundary grasp, teachers should respect students' independent thinking and value choices, and guide students to form their own rational judgments through academic discussions, case analyses, and value clarification, rather than imposing their own values on students. The boundary of value guidance lies in: teachers should adhere to the guidance of bottom-line values such as academic integrity and social responsibility, and at the same time give students space for independent choice and integration of diverse values.

4.3. Paths to achieve the balance between guidance and autonomy

4.3.1. Updating teaching concepts and reshaping role orientation

University teachers should update their teaching concepts, abandon the binary oppositional thinking of "teacher-centered" and "student-centered" which are mutually exclusive, and establish a dialectical teaching concept of "teacher-led and student-centered." Teachers should clarify their own role positioning, understand that real education lies in "guiding individuals to complete the socialized learning process through experienced others"^[13]. In the current social development, teachers are guides, helpers, and academic partners of students' learning, rather than controllers or onlookers of the classroom. In teaching practice, teachers should give equal attention to teacher guidance and student autonomy, and flexibly adjust the proportion of guidance and autonomy according to teaching goals, content difficulty, and student characteristics, so as to realize the organic integration and dynamic balance of the two.

4.3.2. Improving professional quality and enhancing boundary awareness

University teachers should strengthen the cultivation of their professional quality and improve their ability to balance teacher guidance and student autonomy. The cultivation of high-quality talents in universities depends on a large number of excellent teachers with a solid professional foundation and exquisite teaching art^[14]. On the one hand, teachers should actively participate in teaching seminars and professional training, learn advanced teaching concepts and methods, and master skills to guide students' autonomous learning, such as the reasonable application of teaching strategies such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and flipped classroom; on the other hand, teachers should pay attention to communication and interaction with students, understand students' learning needs and characteristics through classroom

observation, learning feedback, and individual guidance, and establish a keen perception of students' learning status, so as to accurately grasp the degree of exertion of instructional leadership.

4.3.3. Optimizing teaching design and constructing flexible space

Teachers' teaching ability includes three dimensions: ability composition, organizational level, and teaching field. The ability composition dimension includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes; the organizational level includes macro (leadership), meso (coordination ability), and micro (teaching ability); the teaching field dimension includes development, organization, implementation, guidance, evaluation, and assessment^[15]. Teaching design is precisely the direct embodiment of teaching ability. Teachers should optimize teaching design, design teaching activities with both guidance and autonomy, and give students sufficient space for autonomous learning and exploration. For example, teachers can adopt teaching methods such as problem-based learning and project-based learning, guide students to carry out independent exploration and cooperative communication around real academic problems, and realize the combination of teacher guidance and student autonomy in the process of problem solving. At the same time, teachers should flexibly adjust the teaching process according to the actual situation of the classroom, establish a teaching feedback mechanism, timely perceive changes in students' learning status, and maintain the dynamic balance between guidance and autonomy. In addition, teachers should make full use of information technology to construct an online-offline mixed teaching space, expand the space-time boundary of students' autonomous learning, and strengthen precise guidance on students' learning process through online interaction and data analysis.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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