Integrating Self-Determination Theory and Social Cognitive Theory to Explain Student Engagement in Ideological-Political Courses

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Abstract: Student engagement is a core indicator of the quality of ideological-political (IP) education in universities, yet many students still experience these compulsory courses as exam oriented and boring. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) shows that environments which support autonomy, competence and relatedness foster deep engagement, while Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) highlights academic self-efficacy as a key mechanism linking social support to motivated learning. Drawing on recent empirical studies, this conceptual paper integrates SDT and SCT to explain how teacher support shapes university students' engagement in IP courses. We argue that teachers influence engagement through two connected pathways: by satisfying students' basic psychological needs they promote autonomous motivation, and by building students' academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning skills they enable students to act on this motivation in demanding ideological tasks. An integrative framework linking teacher support, need satisfaction, self-efficacy and multi-dimensional engagement is proposed, together with implications for the design and study of contemporary IP courses.

Keywords: ideological-political courses, student engagement, self-determination theory, social cognitive theory, academic self-efficacy

1. Introduction

In Chinese universities, ideological-political (IP) theory courses are intended to cultivate students' political identity, civic responsibility and value commitment. However, classroom observations and survey evidence suggest that many students report low interest and participation, especially in large classes and online formats[1]. Studies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic show that university learning engagement is fragile and strongly dependent on the quality of teaching and the broader learning environment[2]. From a motivational perspective, engagement reflects not only external requirements, but also how students perceive their own abilities, the value of the task and the degree of support they receive [3].

Two theoretical traditions are particularly useful here. SDT conceptualises engagement as the behavioural expression of autonomous motivation that emerges when students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied[4]. SCT emphasises the role of academic self-efficacy, outcome expectations and self-regulated learning in sustaining effortful learning (Bandura, as discussed in Wang, 2024; "The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy," 2024). Recent higher education studies indicate that autonomy-supportive and caring teaching predicts engagement, and that academic self-efficacy often mediates the relationship between contextual factors and engagement or achievement[5]. In IP education, new empirical work has begun to analyse student engagement in online ideological and political courses, but usually with limited

theoretical integration[1]. This paper integrates SDT and SCT to explain student engagement in IP courses and proposes a framework to guide pedagogical reform and empirical testing.

2. Self-Determination Theory and student engagement

SDT explains how social contexts support or undermine autonomous motivation and well-being. Ryan and Deci (2020) argue that people have three basic psychological needs: autonomy (a sense of volition), competence (a sense of effectiveness) and relatedness (a sense of mutual care and belonging). When these needs are supported in educational settings, students are more likely to internalise learning goals, experience intrinsic or identified motivation and display higher behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement[4].

Recent studies apply SDT to university and online learning. Chiu (2022) found that perceived autonomy, competence and relatedness predicted engagement in online learning during the pandemic[2]. Mulyani (2023) reported that virtual learning environments which allowed choice, timely feedback and supportive interaction were associated with higher engagement and satisfaction[6]. Yang et al. (2025) showed that social support and flow experience increased students' e-learning engagement via need satisfaction[7]. These findings suggest that IP teachers who provide meaningful rationales, offer opportunities for choice and voice, scaffold competence and build warm relationships are likely to foster more autonomous and sustained engagement with ideological content. By contrast, when IP courses rely heavily on control, monologic lecturing and rote repetition of texts, they risk thwarting students' needs for autonomy and competence and eliciting only superficial compliance.

3. Social Cognitive Theory and academic self-efficacy

SCT conceptualises learning as the result of reciprocal interactions between personal factors, behaviour and environmental influences, with perceived self-efficacy at the core (Bandura, as cited in "The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy," 2024). Academic self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs in their capability to organise and execute actions required to succeed in learning tasks. Students with high academic self-efficacy are more likely to choose challenging tasks, persist under difficulty and recover after setbacks[8].

Recent SCT-based studies highlight the central role of academic self-efficacy in engagement. Wang (2024) found that academic self-efficacy was positively related to college students' learning engagement and operated through psychological resilience and professional commitment. A SAGE Open study similarly reported that students who believed in their academic capabilities showed higher engagement under challenging conditions[9]. Chen (2025) showed that academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning jointly mediated the effects of teaching and social presence on cognitive presence in blended learning. In physical education, Xu et al. (2025) demonstrated that teacher support improved learning engagement through the serial mediation of academic self-efficacy and task orientation. Together, these studies indicate that self-efficacy is a motivational gateway through which contextual factors influence engagement[10].

In IP courses, academic self-efficacy involves students' confidence in understanding theoretical materials, analysing ideological claims, expressing their views in discussions and completing related assessments. When students doubt their ability to participate meaningfully in ideological debate or to write reflective essays, they may disengage even if they recognise the value of the course. Teachers' feedback, modelling, scaffolding and encouragement therefore play a crucial role in shaping efficacy beliefs and related self-regulatory strategies (Chen, 2025; Huang et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025).

4. An integrated SDT–SCT framework for ideological-political courses

Although SDT and SCT originate from different traditions, they converge on several assumptions: students are active agents, social context matters and motivation predicts engagement and achievement [8]. SDT focuses on the quality of motivation arising from need satisfaction, whereas SCT highlights efficacy beliefs and self-regulation that channel motivation into sustained action. Integrating the two theories therefore offers a more comprehensive explanation of how IP teaching practices influence engagement.

In the proposed framework, teacher support and institutional conditions form the contextual foundation. Need-supportive practices—including meaningful choice, rationales, scaffolded tasks and respectful interaction—promote students' autonomy, competence and relatedness, thereby fostering intrinsic and identified motivation for IP learning[2][4][6].

At the same time, these practices provide mastery experiences, social persuasion and strategy instruction that build academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning[9][10]. Basic psychological need satisfaction can be viewed as a distal condition: students who feel autonomous, competent and connected are more likely to endorse the goals of IP education and to value learning activities. Academic self-efficacy functions as a proximal belief that determines whether students act on this motivation in specific tasks, such as engaging in controversial discussions or writing policy analysis essays[4][8].

The framework conceptualises engagement as multi-dimensional: behavioural (attendance, participation), emotional (interest, enjoyment), cognitive (deep processing, critical thinking) and agentic (asking questions, proposing topics). Evidence from online and blended learning suggests that students with higher need satisfaction and self-efficacy show more persistent engagement and better learning outcomes. Successful engagement experiences feed back into both perceived competence and self-efficacy, creating a positive motivational spiral, whereas repeated failure or humiliation in ideological discussions can erode need satisfaction and self-efficacy and lead to disengagement unless teachers intervene with additional support.

5. Implications for teaching and research

The integrated framework has clear implications for IP teaching. Teachers should deliberately adopt autonomy-supportive practices: explaining the meaning and contemporary relevance of ideological positions, connecting content with students' concerns, inviting questions and allowing limited choice in topics or project formats . Competence support should be embedded in course design through clear expectations, stepwise tasks and feedback that emphasises strategies and progress rather than fixed ability; empirical studies show that such support enhances academic self-efficacy and engagement[10]. Teachers should also cultivate relatedness and a climate of trust, particularly in online IP courses where feelings of isolation are common; interaction opportunities and visible teacher presence are critical. Finally, explicit training in self-regulated learning—goal setting, strategy use and reflection—can strengthen students' sense of agency in engaging with ideological issues [9].

For researchers, the framework suggests several directions. Quantitative studies could use structural equation modelling to test the hypothesised pathways from teacher support to need satisfaction, academic self-efficacy and different facets of engagement in IP courses[3][8]. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs could explore how these processes evolve and how engagement in IP courses relates to later civic attitudes and behaviours. Intervention studies could manipulate autonomy-supportive and efficacy-building strategies to provide causal evidence of their impact on engagement [9].

6. Conclusion

Integrating Self-Determination Theory and Social Cognitive Theory provides a rich lens for understanding student engagement in ideological-political courses. SDT highlights the importance of satisfying students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, whereas SCT emphasises academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning as proximal determinants of engagement. The proposed framework suggests that teacher support and institutional conditions shape need satisfaction, which in turn nurtures self-efficacy and self-regulation, leading to multi-dimensional engagement in IP learning. For practitioners, this means that high-quality IP education depends not only on the accuracy of ideological content, but also on the motivational and efficacy processes through which students come to see that content as worth learning and acting upon.

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