

UNITED WISDOM

The Need for Competence and the Fear of Being a Learner

Human Nature and Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I-11-N04 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

The Need for Competence and the Fear of Being a Learner

Epigraph

> *“I neither know nor think that I know.”*

Plato, Apology, 21d; Benjamin Jowett's translation, verified text. The Russian version uses an editorial translation of this short passage.

What this article is about

Imagine someone who has confidently managed a small business for years but cannot put together a simple sentence in their first foreign language lesson. They know why they came, have paid for the course, and chose a convenient time. Yet after several corrections they start explaining why the teacher's method is outdated. They may be right. They may also have encountered another difficulty: they want to learn but find it hard to occupy the learner's position. A single remark cannot distinguish these possibilities.

The need for competence is a wish to handle tasks and see that one's efforts have an effect. It can support development, or become entangled with a demand never to reveal ignorance. Protecting the outward image of ability then blocks the path towards ability itself. This article examines that fork through a psychological theory of motivation, philosophical scrutiny of knowledge, and different ideas of learning. It considers permission to begin, the cost of feedback, conditions for safe practice, and the possibility of leaving unsuitable training without passing a general verdict on oneself.

I. Being Capable and Appearing Capable

Competence has an object: what exactly a person can do, under which conditions, and to what standard. Reputation has an audience: who considers them capable and on what grounds. These two lines often support each other, but sometimes diverge. A new task exposes the divergence. A good accountant may swim poorly; an experienced parent may not understand a new school curriculum; a talented musician may struggle with ordinary negotiations. None of those boundaries, by itself, cancels earlier abilities.

Psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci include competence, together with autonomy and relatedness, in self-determination theory. In their 2000 review, pages 68–71, they discuss conditions supporting intrinsic motivation. This is a scientific theoretical framework with an

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

empirical basis, not a way to discover the cause of an individual reader's behaviour. It does not imply that every doubt about one's abilities indicates an unmet basic need.

For our topic, a simple editorial question is useful: what must be preserved now—the ability to act, or the impression that the ability already exists? In an illustrative scene, someone can manage a difficult meeting in their native language but mixes up tenses in another. If they protect their right to say “I need a prompt,” the meeting gradually becomes manageable. If they protect the image of an infallible manager, they have to avoid situations where that image cannot be maintained. From outside, both decisions may look like caution.

An image of competence is not always an empty shell. Clients' trust, work safety, and access to responsibility depend on reputation. A doctor need not show a patient every difficulty without preparation; a pilot does not learn a dangerous manoeuvre on a passenger flight. This article therefore does not propose displaying ignorance to everyone. It proposes finding a place where an acknowledged limit to ability makes learning possible without taking dignity away.

The distinction also changes language. Instead of “I turned out to be incapable,” we can say “I cannot yet perform this operation independently.” The second sentence does not console through false praise. It preserves the precise object of work. There is no reasonable examination after which the first sentence would become false: every mistake can again be directed against the whole person. The second has a next step that can be checked.

II. Why an Adult Role Can Make Beginning Difficult

Learning temporarily disrupts the familiar distribution of authority. A person usually consulted must ask a question themselves. Someone who sets deadlines receives an exercise. Someone accustomed to quick understanding encounters material where the speed of their earlier life offers little help. This touches not only the difficulty of the assignment but the order of relationships. In an illustrative example, an adult manager learns calmly from videos at home but freezes when a younger teacher asks them to repeat the same phrase before a group.

The reason for this difference needs investigation. The group may move too quickly; the teacher may give poor feedback; the person may find speech hard to hear in a noisy room. They may indeed fear looking ridiculous. A public format may be unsuitable while private lessons work. The word “fear” is helpful only when it distinguishes conditions; it becomes unhelpful when it replaces observation with a ready-made portrait.

Sometimes an unspoken contract is added to learning: a successful adult should understand after the first explanation. But years of experience are usually accumulated in particular recurring tasks. Respect for that experience can be transferred; every skill cannot be transferred without learning. A person is not beginning life again. They are beginning a

particular area of work with a different stock of available actions. This local beginning is easier to bear when it does not require abandoning their whole earlier history.

In Plato's Apology, 22d–e, Socrates distinguishes genuine craft knowledge from the claim to judge everything on its basis. His conversation concerns philosophical investigation of human wisdom, not a modern confidence workshop. The editorial comparison here is narrow: acknowledging a boundary of knowledge may be more accurate than carrying authority from a familiar activity into an unfamiliar one.

The opposite extreme also exists: an adult's experience is ignored, they are treated like a child, and questions are forbidden in the name of discipline. That arrangement does not become good because the learner genuinely lacks some skill. Initial dependence on explanation does not give a teacher the right to take over another person's decisions. A respectful learning role involves a particular asymmetry of skill while preserving human equality. Accepting a correction and refusing humiliation can happen together. These actions do not contradict each other.

III. Not Knowing as a Precise Answer

“I don't know” can begin an inquiry, end a conversation, or honestly conclude what available information permits. What matters is not the formula itself but what follows. When someone says “I don't know which method to choose, so I'll compare two on a small example,” not knowing works. When it means “I have no right to try anything,” it becomes a prohibition. When another person demands certainty about a question that cannot yet be resolved, acknowledging uncertainty protects decision quality.

In the Analects, II.17, translated by James Legge, a boundary is drawn between what is known and what is unknown. The saying belongs to a Confucian conversation about cultivation and knowledge. It can be compared with Socrates' philosophical scrutiny, but the two traditions cannot be declared one doctrine. Their grounds of authority, the social role of learning, and their contexts of virtue differ. The limited common point matters to the reader: an honest boundary is not a complete rejection of knowledge.

Suppose someone is learning to use spreadsheets. They say they “understand nothing.” Closer examination reveals that they can enter data, sort rows, and recognise an incorrect total, but cannot write a conditional formula. This is no longer an endless void. Several operations exist, one requiring instruction. Clarification need not remove the unpleasant experience, but it makes help specific. The teacher can demonstrate the formula rather than repeat a course on the whole application.

Precision must not become a new examination, however. A learner does not have to describe all their ignorance in detail immediately. Sometimes their first useful answer really is “I got lost

after the second step.” The teacher's job is to help find that step, not require professional language before the skill is acquired. When someone must first prove that a question is intelligent enough to ask, access to learning once again depends on what they are still learning.

In ordinary practice, it helps to distinguish unknown content from an unknown method. The first calls for a fact, term, or example. The second calls for a demonstration of a sequence, a chance to try, and a correction. Criteria may also be unknown: a person does the work but does not understand what counts as a good result. More information without a clear criterion may then increase confusion. Precise uncertainty helps select an appropriate form of support.

IV. Correction Without a General Verdict

Feedback makes sense when it connects an action to an outcome and shows a possibility of change. “A condition was omitted at the second step” is a statement about the work. “You are an inattentive person” is a broad characterisation that may not help correct it. Even a fair observation becomes harder to use when it includes a general verdict. The learner has to understand the task and defend their human adequacy at the same time.

In an illustrative workshop, a beginner makes an uneven seam. The instructor can demonstrate hand position, movement speed, and an example of the result. They can also call the work a disgrace. The second response is more emotionally striking but provides no instruction about what to change. Yet the first does not guarantee calm: the learner may hear a specific correction as a threat to their entire role. Both sides of the conversation therefore deserve scrutiny—the message's content and how it was understood. We cannot decide in advance that only the learner's sensitivity or only the instructor's harshness is responsible.

In the Enchiridion, section 13, Epictetus connects progress in philosophy with giving up the protection of an impression of knowledge. This is a Stoic ethics of choice, not a scientific finding about teaching effectiveness. Its demanding nature does not justify humiliation: accepting the risk of appearing inexperienced and enduring unsafe treatment are different decisions. A contemporary reader is entitled to seek a learning environment where errors become material for work.

Useful correction answers at least three questions: what happened, why it matters for this task, and what to try differently. Feedback need not always be lengthy. A coach can say “move your foot closer” and demonstrate. A complex project needs criteria and examples. But the less definite a comment, the greater the room for general self-accusation. This suggests a practical request: “Show me one part that needs changing now.”

An instructor need not soften things endlessly. Some tasks have strict standards, and a dangerous error requires an immediate stop. Strictness can preserve respect: “Let's stop; this

is unsafe; we'll practise a safe sequence first.” That differs from saying the person should never try at all. A learning boundary protects the result and people. A general verdict closes development without sufficient grounds. Distinguishing them is useful before arguing about whether people speak gently enough to us.

V. A Trial Needs an Appropriate Scale

A beginning becomes clearer when its outcome is limited. “Learn a language” is too large for a first observation. “Order something, clarify its price, and understand the reply” is a sequence that can be examined. A limited trial does not prove overall talent but reveals a specific obstacle. Vocabulary may be missing; the response may be too fast; the phrase may be familiar but addressing a stranger difficult. The next step depends on the difference discovered.

Scale must not be reduced to meaninglessness. If someone wants to play with other musicians, endlessly pressing one key may cease to connect with the goal. A manageable task should preserve a recognisable part of the real activity. For negotiation, it might be a short discussion of terms; for writing, one finished paragraph; for new software, a small result useful in present work. A learning segment must both fit available resources and explain why it is worth doing.

Training must also be distinguished from responsible performance. In training, one can pause, repeat, receive help, and exclude dangerous parts. In performance, some errors affect money, health, or others' obligations. The right to be a learner does not authorise passing the cost of experiments to uninformed people. The first question sometimes concerns conditions rather than courage: where can experimentation happen without unagreed risk, who knows about the learning status, and how can the original state be restored?

Imagine an employee learning a new accounting system. They fear pressing a button because the change will enter real clients' invoices. “Stop being afraid of mistakes” is poor advice here. A training copy with invented data or work alongside an experienced colleague can change the situation concretely. If those conditions are absent, caution has a substantive basis. Psychology is not needed to see why someone refuses to learn through an irreversible action.

A limited trial also needs a stopping rule. Twenty minutes on one example, then a question about the difficulty; one learning session, then an assessment of the format; a spending limit after which the decision is reconsidered. Without a boundary, learning may seem like a contract to confirm one's weakness indefinitely. With a boundary, a person can observe a result and decide how to continue. A small step is useful as a source of information, not moral proof of determination.

VI. A Teacher Who Can Be Asked Questions

A good teacher makes their help open to examination. They show the task, criterion, and sequence, explain why they propose this order, and allow questions about applicability. This does not mean discussing every rule endlessly. In a driving lesson, a safe instruction is followed first and its grounds examined afterwards. But even an urgent learning instruction does not require a general promise never to doubt the teacher.

A learner's dependence is inevitable in a particular domain: they cannot yet evaluate every technical recommendation. That makes it necessary to distinguish trust from abandoning scrutiny. One can trust an expert's demonstration, ask about qualifications, establish terms of work, and compare the outcome with a clear standard. If a teacher claims that every failure is caused solely by insufficient devotion, the criterion becomes closed. No outcome can put the promise in question.

In some religious schools, discipleship has another meaning: transmission of tradition, discipline, belonging, and authority that cannot be reduced to an educational service. We do not automatically declare such relationships fraudulent. Yet a contemporary voluntary decision to participate requires understanding particular obligations. The general word “spirituality” does not cancel questions about money, personal boundaries, freedom to leave, and accountability. A psychological difficulty in admitting ignorance gives no one exclusive authority over a learner.

A person can change the format while keeping the goal. If a group moves too quickly, choose an individual session; if training costs too much, find another method; if a teacher knows the subject well but cannot explain it to beginners, ask for a recommendation. This need not mean avoidance. Sometimes precisely that adjustment makes regular participation possible. What changes after the switch should be checked: does practice appear, do questions become clearer, is feedback more accessible?

An uncomfortable counterexample also exists: someone changes teachers whenever they receive a first correction. The external reason may be real, but repetition deserves attention. Rather than accusing oneself of being difficult, compare specific episodes: what was unacceptable, how was it discussed, and which condition might have made continuation possible? The environment may need changing. Ordinary incompleteness in early performance may need tolerating. The distinction emerges from a sequence of events, not a general label of “bad learner.”

VII. Ability Need Not Become a Competition

Comparison with others can reveal an example to follow, but it can quietly change the task. Someone came to learn something useful and starts measuring who mastered it sooner. In an illustrative group, one person already knows the material, another studies after a night shift, and another has more time to practise. The same lesson does not mean the same starting position. Differences in outcomes need context if they are to support a reasonable conclusion.

This does not call for abandoning standards. If work requires a certain quality, improving from a very low level does not yet mean one is ready to perform it independently. Two comparisons are useful: the outcome against the task's requirements, and present performance against earlier performance. The first reveals sufficiency; the second reveals direction of change. When both are reduced to a ranking, a person may see neither specific growth nor a specific missing skill.

Confucian cultivation, Socratic inquiry, and Stoic discipline do not form a single theory of achievement. In these texts, knowledge connects to different ideas of a good life. Their editorial comparison helps ask about purpose: why do we need this ability, which activity does it support, and what relationship with others does it make possible? The answer may be modest. Learning to speak with neighbours or pay one's own bills is a sufficient goal without a promise of becoming outstanding.

A competitive environment sometimes suits a person and helps them work. It need not be prohibited in the name of inner maturity. The question concerns cost and choice: does interest in the activity remain, is rest possible, can errors be acknowledged, and does losing erase the entire meaning of participation? If professional competition matters to someone, they need selection standards and a place to learn. Winning should not become the only permission ever to enter a practice space.

Attitudes towards other learners matter too. Helping a neighbour does not prove superiority; someone else's quick success need not be a threat. In safe practice, people can exchange particular discoveries without turning every encounter into a defence of rank. Benevolence should not be portrayed as a permanent feeling, however. Envy, frustration, and embarrassment are possible. It is enough not to make them the only rule of choice. One can notice an unpleasant comparison and still return to one's task without demanding immediate moral perfection.

A separate difficulty arises at a plateau: lessons continue but no improvement is visible. Comparison with others becomes especially tempting because one's work has stopped providing a clear answer. Yet the absence of rapid progress does not establish its cause. One can check which operations were actually repeated, whether feedback was sufficient, whether

difficulty matched available skill, and whether the outcome criterion changed. A different method of practice may be needed; more time may be needed; the stated goal may currently be unattainable. In an illustrative example, someone spends a month reading pronunciation rules but rarely says phrases aloud. They have studied the subject extensively and practised the required action very little. This distinction does not accuse them of laziness. It allows work to be reorganised and a new result checked. If practice was appropriate but progress is absent, discussing limits to expectations makes sense. An honest assessment of the obstacle is more useful than promising that any persistence necessarily leads to the same level of mastery.

VIII. The Right to Stop Learning Also Calls for Precision

Not every course begun needs finishing. The goal may have changed, the cost proved too high, the format unsuitable, or the original promise incorrect. Leaving can be a clear decision, or a way of no longer encountering the beginner's condition. Distinguishing these cases matters for future choices, not for granting permission to stop. Even an imperfectly understood reason does not take away the right to leave a voluntary activity.

A thought question is useful: if learning were possible without humiliation, at a suitable pace and an acceptable price, would we want to continue? “Yes” suggests the goal still matters and the difficulty may lie in conditions. “No” allows the direction itself to be reconsidered. This is not an infallible test: the imagined situation may be too ideal. It only helps separate the value of an ability from the present cost of reaching it.

In section 29 of the Enchiridion, Epictetus proposes considering an activity's prior conditions and consequences. This motif is used narrowly here: an attractive result is not the same as readiness to choose the whole route to it. His ancient ethical programme is considerably stricter than our everyday decision, however. We do not transfer its demands into an obligatory life contract for the reader.

Suppose someone likes the idea of performing on stage but cannot currently make time for regular rehearsals. They can temporarily choose occasional lessons for pleasure, or decline. A precise decision keeps the reason: “I am not choosing the present schedule.” The general verdict “I have no musical ability” adds a claim for which evidence may be missing. Conditions may change in a year, while the verdict remains and restricts a new decision.

Returning to the opening language lesson does not require a triumphant victory. The person may request a different explanation of corrections and continue. They may choose another group. They may discover that they presently need an interpreter rather than a course. In every case, preserving the boundary between ability, image, and conditions is useful. Being a learner need not become a new identity. It is a temporary relationship to a particular task: I

cannot yet do something, can receive help, and may choose how much of this work to undertake.

What this means in practice

Choose one particular ability if you actually want to acquire it now. Do not choose an area where a trial could cause unagreed harm for this exercise. Write down what already works, what does not yet work, and which small result would make sense. “Become more confident” can remain a personal wish, but find an observable action for practice: explain one request, perform one operation, or repeat one sequence.

Then name the audience separately. Before whom is revealing ignorance especially difficult? What change in their attitude do you anticipate? Which information supports this threat, and which remains a guess? You need not prove to yourself that no danger exists. If the environment truly mocks mistakes or punishes questions, seeking another practice space may be useful. If the danger is chiefly anticipated, choose a limited encounter with a right to stop.

Agree on feedback: one particular segment, one criterion, and one possible correction. After the trial, describe the result without a general verdict. For example: “I did the first part myself, needed a prompt in the second, and still don't understand the third.” Separately note what happened to the expectation about others' reactions. It may have been calmer; the teacher may genuinely have spoken unpleasantly; evidence may still be insufficient. All these outcomes are more useful than a predetermined demonstration of your courage.

Check the cost of continuing: time, money, effort, assistance, and safety. Decide which next step is manageable and when to assess it again. Continue, change the method, reduce the scope, or stop. A lengthy programme need not be promised for the sake of one trial. If the experience of not knowing involves strong, lasting distress beyond the learning situation, an individual exercise need not resolve everything; support can be sought separately and voluntarily.

The main outcome here is a more precise choice, not compulsory relief. A beginner sometimes remains embarrassed but now knows which help to request. Sometimes they stop proving talent and start doing the work. Sometimes they leave a course without destroying their interest in the subject. The need for competence gains room for action when the initial incompleteness of ability stops being a final answer about a person's human worth.

Key quotation

> *“Learning without thought is labour lost.”*

Confucius, Analects, II.15, James Legge's translation, edition text. The quotation concerns the relationship between learning and reflection, not a requirement to understand everything beforehand.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Common point	Substantial boundary
Self-determination theory ↔ Confucian learning	Ability develops in activity and relationships	A psychological theory of motivation differs from an ethics of social cultivation
Socrates ↔ Analects II.17	Editorial question: is there enough evidence for the next step?	Philosophical inquiry and Confucian discipline have different grounds
Stoic learning ↔ contemporary feedback	An impression of knowledge can obstruct work	Ancient ethics does not prove a teaching method's empirical effectiveness
Craft ↔ philosophical scrutiny	Competence has a domain of applicability	Mastery of one activity does not create universal authority
Practice ↔ voluntary choice	Conditions and costs enter the decision	The right to stop does not cancel particular obligations to others

The similarities in this table are editorial comparisons of limited motifs; they do not establish doctrinal unity or the traditions' historical independence.

Sources

1. Richard M. Ryan, Edward L. Deci. Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 2000, 68–78; pages 68–71 and the beginning of the discussion of regulation on page 72 were read. A theoretical review, not individual diagnosis.

2. Plato. Apology, translated by Benjamin Jowett; passages 21b–23b and 38a were read. A philosophical primary text in a historical English translation; Russian quotations are editorial translations.

3. Confucius. The Analects, translated by James Legge, Project Gutenberg #3330, updated 2021; I.1, II.9–18, III.4, and VII.2–3 were read. A Confucian primary text in a historical translation, not contemporary psychology.

4. Epictetus. The Enchiridion, translated by Elizabeth Carter; sections 1, 5, 13, 29, and 46–52 were read. Stoic ethics; its requirements are not proposed as an obligatory contract for the reader.

Tags

competence, being a learner, adult learning, not knowing, motivation, autonomy, feedback, reputation, beginning, skill, practice, criterion, teacher, learning environment, Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Epictetus, self-determination, comparison, dignity, error, responsibility, choice, conditions, boundaries, question, development

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, unity across traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding operate in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.