

The *Upaniṣadic* Method: The Role of Conversation in Teaching

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ABSTRACT

While Socrates is lauded as one of the best teachers, capable of drawing out the answer from the student using just conversations and questioning, it is often forgotten that this conversational method of teaching is also characteristic of the *Upaniṣadic* texts from Ancient India. This paper aims to present the importance of the role of conversation in teaching, highlighting an Indian perspective. There is a brief description of the *Upaniṣadic* setting and method, before the modern views on teaching are presented. These include the constructivist theories of Piaget, the conversational theories of Pask and others using these methods, as well as the Blended Socratic Methods of Teaching. The paper also discusses the role of active learning on the student's part and highlights the importance of peer interactions as well. The comparative method adopted sheds light on an age-old pedagogy along with scientific proof of what works and what doesn't in the modern setting, referring to research work as recent as 2022.

Keywords: *Conversation, Indian Psychology, Teaching, Upaniṣadic method, Upaniṣads, Yoga*

The Socratic method of teaching prescribes a form of questioning that leads the student to an answer. Yet, the role of conversation and questions in learning and teaching has been established centuries before in Ancient India. Most of the *Upaniṣads* are presented as conversations between a teacher and a student. For example, the *Praśnopaniṣad*, having question or "*Praśna*," in the name itself, is presented as six sages - *Sukeśa*, *Śaivya*, *Gārgya*, *Bhargava*, *Kabanda*, and *Kausala* asking the Sage *Pippalada* questions about the nature of Reality, and the *Brahman*. This paper aims to examine such a "*Upaniṣadic*" method, a pedagogy that revolves around a conversation between a teacher and a student, through a psychological lens.

First, we examine the *Upaniṣadic* method and describe its components and conditions. This is followed by a systematic review that analyses various studies, from 1962 to as recent as 2022. The paper presents an overview of learning, especially with respect to the Conversational Theory, a brief examination of the definition of knowledge, followed by the types of conversations useful in the classroom, and the importance of peers and active learning. The paper ends with a comparative analysis of the *Upaniṣadic* method and modern pedagogy.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Upaniṣadic Teaching

The *Upaniṣads* are a reservoir of knowledge that deals with *Ātmavidyā*. While various schools (i.e., *Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Viṣiṣṭādvaita*) interpret these texts in different ways, the common underlying goal is the liberation of the *Ātman*. Further, they also share a common pedagogy, which we will discuss in detail.

The Pramāṇa-s

Most Indian schools of philosophy recognise three distinct ways of gaining knowledge. *Patañjali* summarises this in the *Yoga Sūtra-s* as — *Pratyakṣa*, *Anumāna* and *Āgamā* (Chapter 1 Sutra 7) — correct perception, inference and testimony of a reliable source. The *Advaita* school admits that there are 6 distinct methods — *Pratyakṣa* (perception), *Anumāna* (inference), *Āgamā* (testimony), *Upamāna* (comparison), *Arthāpatti* (postulation) and *Anupalabdhi* (non-apprehension).

Texts like *Tatvabodha*, *Vichārasāgarā*, and *Vivekachudāmani*, offer more clarity on these *Pramāṇa-s*. The *Śravanādi Trayam*, or the concepts of *Śravaṇa*, *Manana* and *Nidhidhyasana* are described in detail. It is said that without these three, the knowledge that “*Aham Brahmāsmi*” (I am the Brahman) cannot arise.

Śravaṇa is not mere perception but also an analysis of the *Upaniṣadic* statements. Naturally, in the context of the *Upaniṣads*, it involves both perceptual and cognitive aspects of auditory communication. The message is first received and consequently analysed.

Manana is reasoning. This is when the student must constantly reflect on the matter that is taught. It is key to not just focus on the material but also move on to *Nidhidhyasana* or absorption. In the context of the *Upaniṣads*, it refers to living in accordance with the message in the *Mahavākyas*.

In a more general context, this triad can be thought of as attention (and consequent perception) internalisation of the message and, finally, application.

In general, the Upanishads always specify four features before the teaching begins — *Adhikāri*, *Viśayaḥ*, *Sambandhaḥ* and *Prayojanam*.

Adhikāri refers to the qualities of the student. Almost every text will specify the kind of traits the student must possess in the beginning. Consider the example of *Tatvabodha*. The text clearly states the *Sādhana Catuṣṭayam* or four-fold qualifications:

1. *Viveka* or discrimination to recognise categories — in the context of the *Upaniṣads*, particularly the discrimination between *Nitya* and *Anitya Vasthūni* (permanent and non-permanent objects)
2. *Vairāgya* or detachment — towards the impermanent and consequent attachment to knowledge
3. *Samādiṣadsampath* or the six-fold wealth — control of the mind (*Sama*), control of the senses (*Dama*), withdrawal of the mind (*Uparati*), forbearance (*Tithikṣa*), faith in the teachers and the teaching (*Śraddhā*) and absorption of the mind (*Samādhānam*)
4. *Mumukṣutvam* or the desire for liberation — the goal of all *Upaniṣadic* teaching is ultimately to liberate one from the cycle of birth and death.

Viśayaḥ refers to the material of the text. Each *Upaniṣadic* text will define its subject matter clearly, in order to enable correct *Sambandhaḥ* or connection between the qualities of the

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student and the subject he/she wishes to learn. In a modern context, this may be compared to matching the aptitude of a student with the course of study.

The last part is *Prayojanam*, or the need for the study. This relates to the goal or motivation to learn.

The *Upaniṣadic* method is not solely dependent on the pedagogy of the teacher and text but also on the student. It is necessary to not only be a student who fits the above qualifications but also be dynamic, resolute and physically fit (*Aśiṣṭah*, *Drudiṣṭah* and *Baliṣṭah* — as prescribed by the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad Brahmānandavalli*). Further, they must be active and involved. Consider the example of (the sage who gave experiments)

Additionally, the *Upaniṣadic* method is not rushed. There is no time limit as seen in the modern educational system with fixed semesters and an emphasis on brevity. The traditional *Gurukula* method had the student studying for many years under the same teacher.

And though usually, the *Upaniṣadic* method prescribes a single student, there is also a highlight on peers. Consider the cooperation, however brief, between *Indra* and *Virocana* when instructed by *Prajāpati* or *Brahma* in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Their teacher gave them impossible tasks, and the two, though ordinarily foes, cooperated while serving their master.

The entire method can neatly be summarised in the well-known sloka:

Acharyāt Pādām Ādatte Pādām Śisyam Svamedhaya |
Pādām Sabrahmachāribhyaḥ Pādām Kālakramena Ca ||

That is, a student's knowledge can be divided into four parts — a quarter is what he/she learns from their teacher, a quarter comes from their own intellect, a quarter from interactions with peers and the last part comes from experience, through the passage of time.

Learning in the modern concept

Learning refers to an experience-driven change in behaviour or thought that is relatively permanent. The evolutionary "need to learn" is hardwired as a survival advantage, so much so an aversion to boredom and novelty-seeking tendencies are instinctive (Scott, 2001).

There are several theories of learning, most stemming from the rather reductionist point of view of the behaviourist school. However, one of particular importance in the context of conversational teaching is the theory of Gordon Pask.

Conversational Theory

The Conversational Theory (CT), proposed by Gordon Pask (1975), uses the Piagetian Constructivist approach in a social context (Scott, 2001). Piaget (1964) suggests that children actively create representations of the world in their minds. He stresses that knowledge is not a copy of reality but rather a representation or construction in the mind that allows the individual to act on, transform and modify it.

Piaget spoke of the formation, elaboration, organisation and functioning of schemas in the brain and then proposed the four-stage cognitive model of development — sensory-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational. Piaget, in fact, used questioning to come to these conclusions, which, while receiving criticism, indicates the

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indispensable nature of questioning in psychological research. Other problems with Piaget's ideas revolve around his whimsical use of the already tangential French language.

Conversations can be conducted at a number of different levels:

1. Natural language (general discussion)
2. Object languages (for discussing the subject matter)
3. Metalanguages (for talking about learning/language)

Knowledge and Understanding

Opposition to Piaget's theory came from radical constructivists, such as von Glasersfeld. While he agrees that "understanding is not a matter of passively receiving but of actively building up," he differs in his philosophical approach. He believed that knowledge was passed on from teacher to student, after which a subjective interpretation can be built.

The idea of a flow from teacher to the student can be linked to the *Yoga Sūtra*-s, Chapter 1, *Sūtra 7 (Patañjali, ca. 5th-century B.C.E./1987)*

Pratyakṣānumānāgamāḥ Pramāṇāni || 7 ||

Translation: Comprehension is based on direct observation of the object, inference and reference to reliable authorities (here refers to a competent teacher or the Vedas).

Glasersfeld concurs with *Patañjali* that knowledge, or correct knowledge at least, must flow from a source, their point of convergence being a teacher.

However, the key aspect here is that learning and knowledge are seen as a process of construction. Pask's view of learning and teaching is cybernetic, attempting to unify theories and concepts across disciplines. He believed that conversation is an essential part of the cybernetic theory. Pask gets rather philosophical as he proposes, "Everything that is said is said by an observer," and "The environment contains no information; it is as it is."

Both Pask and Glasersfeld believe "having knowledge" meant the process of knowing and coming to know. This thought can be traced back to Aristotle, who spoke of four causes (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925):

- Formal cause: "What is it?"
- Material cause: "What it is from?"
- Efficient cause: "What made it?"
- Final cause: "What is it for?" Or Telos

In the following passage, we will return to these questions when discussing the types of questions needed to be asked and answered while teaching.

Learning and Conversation

Cognitive construction, as proposed by Kolb, using Lewin and Piaget's foundation, proposed that learning was cyclic with four stages — concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This model, too, looks at why and how knowledge is more psychological and philosophical than Pask's cybernetic view that reflects the input and output conceptualised in artificial intelligence.

Active experimentation is not a particularly novel idea. Vygotsky (1962) proposed the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD, in which peers and seniors could act as a scaffolding to help individuals achieve things, they are incapable of on their own. In his language-oriented

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teaching system, Pask uses the aforementioned Aristotelean model and distinguishes between causal interaction and linguistic provocative interaction. Scott (2000) also stresses the role of conversation in learning. Pask explains "Teach-back" as verbal explanations of "how" and "why", along with non-verbal demonstrations from the learner to understand a topic.

Laurillard (1993) elaborates on these exchanges by defining "tasks" as the learning activity where a learner is asked to engage in the process that generates an outcome that benefits further discussion. Augstein and Thomas (1991) further explain the importance of "commentary on commentary", the process of imparting knowledge of how to learn. Their teaching paradigm modifies Pask's model and comes up with the following components of a "learning conversation":

- A conversation about the how and why of a topic (as seen in Pask's model)
- A conversation about the how of learning
- A conversation about purpose, the why of learning, with an emphasis on encouragement and responsibility

The final goal or Telos of Aristotle is made explicit here since Augstein and Thomas emphasise clarification of the "why" of both the learning process and the subject matter at hand. It is interesting to note that motivation is also common in *Vedic* and *Vedāntic* texts. The results or benefits of certain education or texts are clarified in the text itself. Let us consider the *Yoga Sūtra*-s again. The first two aphorisms define *Yoga*, while the third one explains its purpose:

Tadā Draṣṭuḥ Svarūpe 'vasthānam || 3 ||

Translation: Then, the ability to understand the *Draṣṭā* fully and correctly is apparent.

It is clear to the student that they must pay attention since only through *Citta Vṛtti Nirodha* (as *Yoga* is defined in *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra*-s, Chapter 1, *Sūtra* 2, ca. 5th-century B.C.E/1987), the nature of the Self will be made clear, and the distorted perceptions of the world can be clarified.

It is not just the ancients but also other researchers who resonate with the importance of goal clarification and motivation. Consider the metastudies of Dixon & Hertzog (1988). Further, biologically too, the Augstein-Thomas model corresponds to the formation of connections and synapses. Long-term potentiation is modulated by motivational factors (Almaguer-Melian, Martínez-Martí, Frey & Bergado, 2003), and involving the learner in the teaching process can act as a positive reinforcement as well.

Active Learning

Active learning involves including students in the learning process, allowing "Any questions?" to be greeted by chaos instead of the silence most lecturers face today. Frederick (1987) proposes beginning lectures with students calling out all they know about a topic and the lecturer connecting these concepts in the class. He suggests open-ended questioning or group discussions to make the learning active and engaging. Further, students may be invited to deliver speeches or presentations on a theme in groups, conduct debates, and perform role plays. Giving a case study and asking for compelling and practical solutions can also improve problem-solving abilities.

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Learner engagement is of interest not only to teachers and professors but academicians as well. Several studies have indicated the importance of engagement in the learning process. Broadly speaking, engagement refers to the time and energy spent on an activity (NSSE, 2014). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) distinguished between behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Further, learner engagement can be increased by using games, as seen by Mallon and Webb (2000) when they studied the differences between cognitive, emotive, and sensory engagement in multimedia learning experiences.

Such engagement and, more importantly, conversation in learning increase motivation, which has been linked to memory performance. This was true not just for school-age children but also adults, as seen by Dixon & Hertzog in 1988, Palmer & Goetz in 1988 and Sinkavich in 1991. Their work indicates that motivational factors can account for individual and group variations in memory performance.

Questioning

Apart from questioning and involvement from a teacher or professor, questions from students impact the learning process. One model for this is put forth by Misra and his colleagues (2018) — called the LBA or Learn By Asking paradigm.

An Agent or student must ask a question directed to an oracle or teacher that provides the answer that will, in turn, stimulate another question, creating a positive cycle of inquisitiveness. The Agent acquires supervision, and the Oracle interacts with the environment. Unlike the Visual Question Answering paradigm, the potential of the Agent to ask stimulating or "good" questions is incorporated into this model. This is closely linked to explanatory learning, which centres around an Agent, or student exploring their environment, under supervision in order to learn. In the context of an infant, this would mean simply allowing the child to roam about the house, touching and playing with things; however, in college students, perhaps internships and simulations create a space for exploration.

Boa, Wattanatorn & Tagong (2018) came up with the Blended Socratic Method of Teaching (BSMT) model and found improved results in the critical thinking skills of students, particularly undergraduate business students. This BSMT was systematically developed based on the teaching model developed by Groccia (1997) and improved by Joyce et al. (2009).

Interaction with Peers

Just as influential peer pressure is, so too, peer learning is a powerful motivator. Not simply as Vygotsky (1962) proposed with scaffolding to help someone learn, but rather also through conversations and discussions. In language learning especially, it has been noticed, through two meta-analyses (Hillocks, 1986; Graham & Perin, 2007), that learners performed better when given feedback from peers than when revisions were self-initiated and self-governed. The effect of collaborative learning on writing was significant as well, as discussed by Hillock (1986).

Not just feedback but also peer-to-peer teaching and ability tracking have shown positive impacts on performance. Kimbrough, McGee, and Shigeoka (2022) studied this through an experiment conducted in a laboratory using logic problems and obtained compelling results. The heterozygosity of most classroom environments poses a problem since absenteeism in high-ability peers invariably impacts the learning in their low-ability counterparts. Grouping

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similar students together seemed to mitigate this effect, but some results indicate that low-ability students were more motivated when taught by high-ability students. Carrell and their colleagues (2013) propose that middle-ability students act as mediators between low and high-ability students and thus have a positive peer effect on the low-ability group.

In the Context of the Pandemic

The effect of school closures and a pandemic on scholastic achievement and learning cannot be ignored. This lost time at school has not only negatively impacted students' educational outcomes but also their long-term well-being (Aucejo, French, Araya, & Zafar, 2020; Azevedo, Hasan, Goldemberg, Geven, & Iqbal, 2021; Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021; Eyles, Gibbons, & Montebruno, 2020). Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen (2021) showed through a statistical analysis of pre and post-lockdown scores that in the Netherlands, learning had declined in math, spelling, and reading, more or less uniformly from the ages of 8 to 11. Clark, Nong, Zhu, & Zhu (2021) showed that in Chinese Middle schools, high-quality teachers mitigated academic losses. The effect was most significant in low-performing students learning online from external higher-quality teachers (measured by the Chinese Education system and termed superior-class, Ding & Lehrer, 2007). While access to resources also played a role, the role of the teacher is more vital. Combette, Camenen, Rotge and Schmidt (2021) found that students who were more motivated, i.e., thought their homework was useful for the future, spent more time on it and were more involved in school-related activities.

CONCLUSION

Whether you are partial to the constructivist view and decide that accurate knowledge generation requires a series of careful questions, as followed by Socrates, or you believe that, like *Gārgi*, when students ask important questions to a teacher, as she did to *Yājñavalkya*, there is a flow of knowledge from one person through another; or perhaps you prefer to leave the teacher at a distance and instead promote unbiased and free discussions among peers with the same knowledge level — you will invariably conclude that learning is a collaborative process. The review of literature, whether you consider the *Upaniṣadic* repository or the vast ocean of modern psychology, comes to the same conclusion.

The *Upaniṣadic* method is rather ideal — a small student population, direct attention, accurate matching of student qualities to the subject matter, and careful use of language. All of these are possible today but are rarely implemented. The recent trends in education are tending towards the opposite, and in the context of the changes already made due to the pandemic, a shift in paradigm has never been more needed. Further research should be directed to understand new possible pedagogies like the Blended Socratic Method of Teaching proposed by Boa, Wattanatorn & Tagong (2018).

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