

LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATIONS – THE RISHI WAY

Abhishek Srivastava¹, Sonal Atreya² and Arunima Sharma³

¹Research Scholar, Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India

²Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India

³Assistant Professor, U. P. Institute of Design, Noida, India

ABSTRACT

As the dynamics of offline and online classrooms are evolving, ensuring student engagement and learning has become paramount and challenging. Research into the Vedic period literature indicates that the teaching method used by our ancient Indian Rishis emphasized conversations or conversation-based learning, thereby not just engaging learners actively but can also imparting knowledge of the content with the additional attributes of learning.

The paper shall present the role of conversations in complimenting learner's engagement and the benefits of conversation-based learning. Through examples from ancient literature, the article also looks at this approach of learning from the perspective of ancient Rishis who used it in a much more comprehensive way. The interesting observation from these examples is the additional attributes of learning like - interdisciplinary perspective, creative outlook, learning through relatable examples etc. which one can derive besides the resolution of the query.

Keywords: Conversation based learning, Educators, Teaching, Rishis

1 INTRODUCTION

India once served as a learning centre for learners from all over the world who came to study from Indian teachers. There are written accounts of many foreign scholars who had come here to learn from Indian teachers who were basically Rishis (Sages). It is indeed astonishing to recognize the array of subjects that were taught in gurukuls, including music, psychology, medicine, astronomy, etc. The subjects were taught by Rishis such as Brahmagupta, Bharata, Markandeya, Chanakya, Panini, Charak, Susruta, etc. who were teachers in the gurukuls and universities like- Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Shardapeeth etc.

With the evolving mode of teaching & learning, newer set of challenges have come up. Many institutions are embracing a hybrid or blended style of learning with the purpose of benefiting the learner in two ways: (i) receiving the benefits of digital learning and face-to-face teaching, and (ii) training them to switch as appropriate with ongoing situations. However, the key to have an enriching learning environment is to ensure learners active engagement and interaction in the classes [1].

When one considers the ancient India education system during the Vedic period, one can weigh the emphasis given to oral traditions of engagement like- Prashnottar vidhi (Question-Answer method), Vada-vivaada vidhi (Discussion-Debate method) etc. among the various teaching methods (vidhis) thus triggering conversations and thereby engaging the learners [2].

The article will delve deeper and give instances of conversation-based learning from the Vedic period. The article will investigate this learning approach through a literature review. Teachers, educators (both experienced and novice), will find the article useful in establishing and reinforcing their pedagogical practices. Likewise, learners and students will benefit by understanding the role of conversations for learning.

2 LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATIONS

In its early years, a kid is exposed to the richest learning environment possible, where it learns language, emotions, objects, social skills, among other things. All of this is made possible through frequent encounters and conversations with mostly parents and carers [3]. In addition, talking with child since birth can greatly help in their social understanding and development [4]. If the parent or carer is patient, these talks will develop longer and

more in-depth, with a variety of questions, but if they are impatient, the child's natural curiosity will be stifled, which would be difficult to reignite in further stages.

As soon the child progresses to school environment and beyond, learning through conversation is very much curtailed [3]. The majority of what we see now in schools and colleges is a diluted version like Q&A sessions among a select few participants and during oral or viva evaluations.

2.1 CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING OR CONVERSATION BASED LEARNING

Conversational learning, also known as conversation-based learning, emphasizes the learner's, sensory, emotional and physiological involvement in the learning process, as opposed to the traditional way of learning, which stressed abstract and conceptual aspects of knowledge [5].

This method of learning mainly consists of one-on-one exchanges which often lead to an arena of broad discussion having a flexible nature.

Hans Georg Gadamer, renowned German philosopher had articulated genuine conversation as following [5]-

“The more genuine conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct ...more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it...a conversation has a spirit of its own, and the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it - i.e., that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which hence forth exists.”

Conversations are powerful, and when they are perceived in the perspective of learning, they bring on even more significance and importance. Jay Cross, an American futurist in his book Informal learning, mentions “Conversation is the most powerful learning technology ever invented” [6].

2.2 TEACHING METHODS AND ROLE OF CONVERSATIONS IN THE ANCIENT INDIA

Our ancient rishis made use of varied approach in their teachings methods depending on the subject and content to be delivered. Ancient India's most prominent teaching methods included [2]-

1. Anukarana (Imitation), Punaravritti (repetition) and rote method
2. Vyaakhya-Drishtaanta vidhi (Explanation and Illustration method)
3. Prashnottar vidhi (Question-answer method)
4. Vada-vivaada vidhi (Discussion and Debate method)
5. Swadhayaya vidhi (Self-study method)

6. Pradarshana-abhayasa vidhi (Demonstration and Practice method)
7. Bhraman vidhi (Tour method)
8. Shravan, Manana and Nidi-dhyasan - (Listen, Ponder and Practice)
9. Katha kathan vidhi (Story telling method)
10. Tarka vidhi (Logic method)
11. Vyakhyaan vidhi (Lecture method)

Among the mentioned methods, one can see the emphasis of oral traditions in teaching. Although conversations played role in most of the mentioned methods, however it was more dominant in the prashnottar vidhi (Question-answer method). The rishis often used this method reinforced by the learner's curiosity, led to this method of learning for deeper understanding the topic.



Figure 1: Rishi teaching the learner's in gurukul

As the nature of these exchanges is fluid and often leads to unexplored domains, conversation-based learning demands the teacher to have a holistic vision and work on self. The teachers own perspective, experience, reasoning, among other things, equips them to deal with circumstances like these.

As per Pt. Shriram Sharma Acharya in his book- Sukti kosh [7].

“वार्तालाप जीभ का उच्चारण नहीं है, उसके पीछे मनुष्य का निजी दृष्टिकोण, व्यक्तित्व, चरित्र, चिंतन, स्वभाव, अभ्यास, अनुभव आदि बहुत कुछ जुड़ा होता है।”

Meaning: Conversation is not the utterance of the tongue, behind it is an individual's personal vision, personality, character, thinking, temperament, practice, experience etc. and a lot more.

And because of this reason, our rishis worked on self by meditation, restraint, minimal living etc. and practicing preaching through their actions and lifestyle. The gurukuls or ashrams where the rishis stayed with learner's, were basically residential schools and apart from teaching through sessions, learners also learnt by looking up to the rishis [8].

An interesting observation is that the learners were not only students, but included- villagers, kings, and even fellow teachers (rishis), and for this reason the term "learner" has been preferred rather "student" in this paper.

3 METHODOLOGY

The findings and conclusions are mostly based on research of ancient textbooks like- puran, vangmaya, and more. Some ancient scriptures like- the Bhagvada Gita, Yogvasisht, Upanishads (like - Kathopnishad, Prashnopanishad etc.), also includes conversational excerpts but there are no specifics or compilation of conversations in the ancient Indian context of teaching- learning where Rishi's play the role of teacher. Further, many conversational examples between the Rishi's and their family members like- son, daughter, wife, etc. were obtainable, but avoided to ensure that the findings are not affected by the relationship of teacher and the learner.

The approach was to identify examples of conversations between Rishi and learner, available from the perspective of ancient education in books, the web, and other sources, and then cross-validate them using the original texts and scriptures.

Numerous books and research articles on- Conversation based learning, Ancient Indian education system, Gurukul system, Guru-Shishya parampara (Teacher-Student Tradition), Ancient Indian teaching techniques, & more, were consulted, and are referred in the paper.

4 FINDINGS & TAKEAWAYS

The paper examines three examples of conversation from the ancient Indian context and present takeaways in terms of how the query is resolved through conversations and what one may learn as an additional attribute of learning.

When viewed as a whole in these cases, the conversations appear to be a perfectly made art of words that go into a variety of but related domains, topics, scenarios, examples, and

so on, assisting the learner in comprehending the inquiry with a holistic picture of the issue.

4.1 CONVERSATION #1 | RISHI MARKANDEYA & KING VAJRA

This conversation is between Rishi Markandeya (Teacher) and King Vajra (learner) where the king is seeking guidance on statue building [9][10]. The conversation has been documented under Chitra Sutra of Vishnu Dharmottraram Purana, third khand [11].

“द्वितीयोऽध्यायः :

वज्र ~ देवतारूपनिर्माणं कथयस्व ममानघ ।

यस्मात्सन्निहिता नित्यं शास्त्रवत्साकृतिभिवत् ॥ १ ॥

मार्कण्डेय ~ चित्रसूत्रं न जानाति यस्तु सम्यङ् नराधिप ।

प्रतिमारक्षणं वेत्तु न शक्य तेन कर्हिचित् ॥ २ ॥

वज्र ~ चित्रसूत्रं समाचक्ष्व भृगुवंशविवर्धन ।

चित्रसूत्रविदेवाथ वेत्स्य लक्षणं यतः ॥ ३ ॥

मार्कण्डेय ~ विना तु 'नृतशास्त्रेण चित्रसूत्रं सुदुविदम् ।

नृतशास्त्रं विधानजश्चित्रं वेत्ति यतो द्विज ॥ ४ ॥

वज्र ~ नृतशास्त्रं समाचक्ष्व चित्रसूत्रं यदिप्यसि ।

नृषशालत'विधानश्चित्रे वेत्ति यतो द्विज ॥ ५ ॥

मार्कण्डेय ~ आतोयं यो न जानाति तस्य 'नृतं सुदुर्विदम् ।

आतोयेन विना नृतं विद्यते न कथञ्चन ॥ ६ ॥

वज्र ~ आतो ब्रूहि धर्मज्ञं नृतशास्त्रं वदिप्यसि ।

तस्मिन्सुविदिते वेत्ति नृतं भार्गवसत्तम ॥ ७ ॥

मार्कण्डेय ~ न गीतेन विना शक्यं ज्ञातुमातो' द्यमच्युत ।

गीतशास्त्रविधानज्ञं सर्वं वेत्ति यथा"विधि ॥ ८ ॥

वज्र ~ गीतशास्त्रं समाचक्ष्व सर्वधर्मभृतां वर ।

गीतशास्त्रविदेवाथ सर्वज्ञं पुरुषोत्तम ॥ ९ ॥

श्री मार्कण्डेय ~ संस्कृतं प्राकृतं चेर गीतं द्विविधमुच्यते ।

अपनष्टं तृतीयं "तु" तदनन्तं नराधिप ॥ १० ॥”

Summarized translation in English

K. Vajra: “Oh Sage! Teach me the principles of statue building”.

R. Markandeya: "Oh great King! One who does not know Chitra-Sutra (Sketching) cannot understand Sculpture and statue building".

K. Vajra: "Then Teach me sketching".

R. Markandeya: "Oh, but without knowing art of dancing (nritya), one cannot master sketching".

K. Vajra: "Then share the knowledge of dance".

R. Markandeya: "But for that one needs to master the principles of musical instruments".

K. Vajra: "Then let know about musical instruments".

R. Markandeya: "But unless the principles of singing (geeta) and grammar of prose and verse (gadya and padya) are learned, one cannot proceed to learn about musical instruments".

Takeaways

If we look at the conversation between King Vajra and Rishi Markandeya above, we can see how the question about statue construction triggered a curious chain of questions that led from one discipline to another. Not only did Rishi respond to the questions, but he also addressed the need of an interdisciplinary approach for holistic learning in a subtle way.

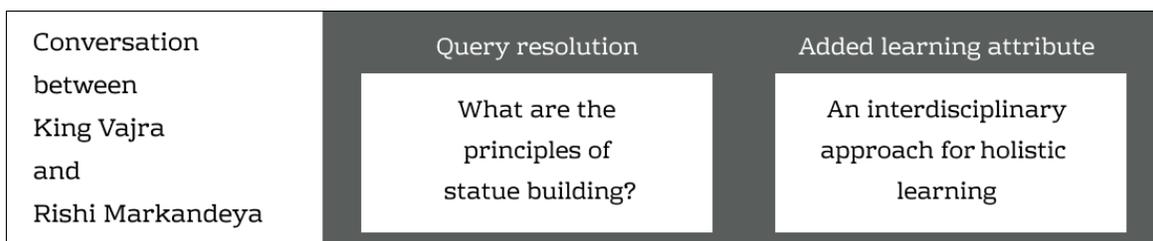


Figure 2: Overview of conversation between King Vajra and Rishi Markandeya

Ricky Maye, Author of An Emerging Spirituality, rightly says- "Conversation isn't about proving a point; true conversation is about going on a journey with the people you are speaking with".

4.2 CONVERSATION #2 | RISHI YAGYAVALKYA & KING JANAK

The conversation between Rishi Yagyavalkya (Teacher) and King Janaka (learner) where the rishi is emphasizing on the importance of performing yagya (a Vedic ritual of sacrificing and sublimating havan samagri in the sacred fire or yagya-agni along with chanting of mantras [12]) is in the context of constraints like- unavailability of resources,

as raised by the king. The conversation is mentioned in the Vangamaya 25- Yagya ka gyan vigyan [13].

“जनक और याज्ञवल्क्य का संवाद यज्ञ के साधन ना मिल सकने के संदर्भ में हुआ है।

जनक कठिनाइयाँ बताते रहे और याज्ञवल्क्य उनके लिए आपातकालीन सुझाव बताते हुए यज्ञ की अनिवार्यता पर ही जोर देते रहे। जनक पूछते हैं कि यदि हव्य - चरु आदि सामग्री ना मिल सके तो क्या करें ? उत्तर में कहा गया है कि नित्य खाए जाने वाले अन्न से ही काम चला लें। अन्न भी ना हो तो ? वनस्पतियों से काम चला लें। वनस्पतियाँ भी ना मिल सके तो ? मात्र समिधाओं का ही हवन कर लिया जाए। अग्नि ना मिले तो ? श्रद्धारूपी अग्नि में ध्यान- भावना की सामग्री होमकर मानसिक हवन कर लिया जाए। यही है उपयुक्त संवाद के विस्तार का सार-संक्षेप।”

Summarized translation in English

K. Janaka: “How to perform yagya if one does not have the samagri”.

R. Yagyavalkya: “In that case one can make use of grains that one uses for daily consumption”.

K. Janaka: “What if there are no grains”.

R. Yagyavalkya: “One may use plants, vegetation”.

K. Janaka: “What if there are no plants, vegetation”.

R. Yagyavalkya: “One may use wood only”.

K. Janaka: “What if there is no fire”.

R. Yagyavalkya: “In that case one may do a symbolic havan, with feelings as samagri and reverent fire (imaginary)”.

Takeaways

The conversation between King Janaka and Rishi Yagyavalkya is more of a scenario-based enquiry where the learner is questioning the responses from the teacher by adding constraints in hypothetical scenarios. The Rishi highlights the importance of performing yagya and presents solutions under various constraints, thus demonstrating a creative outlook with solution-based mindset.

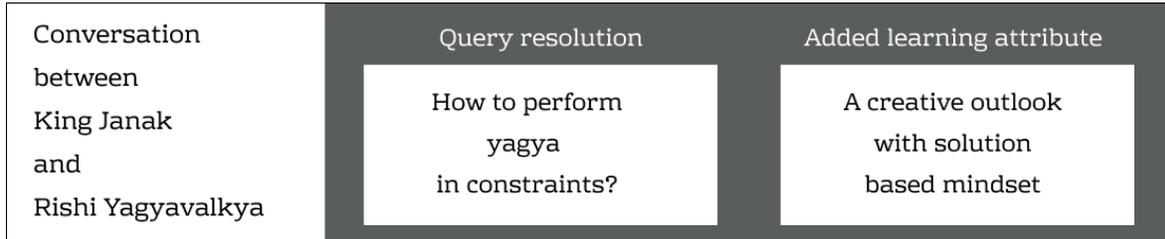


Figure 3: Overview of conversation between King Janak and Rishi Yagyavalkya

In the words of Biz Stone, Co-founder of Twitter- “Constraint inspired creativity. Blank spaces are difficult to fill, but the smallest prompt can send us in fantastic new directions.”

4.3 CONVERSATION #3 | VĀLAKHILYA RISHIS, GROUP OF RISHIS & KAVASHA

The conversation between Vālahilya Rishis (Teacher) and group of rishis (learner) is around understanding of who is superior and its true knowledge. The conversation starts with Kavasha Ailūsha (son of a slave) who wanted to join a group of Rishis performing yagya but was ignored for his caste. Kavasha, made them realize his power by an act of miracle after which, the group of rishis wanted to know more about the true knowledge [14]. Kavasha, guided them to seek learning from Vālahilya Rishis, who addressed their queries and doubt through simple and relatable examples.

Summarized translation in English

Kavasha: “May I join in performing yagya”?

The Rishis refused to let him attend their yagya.

Rishis: “We are high-born Brahman, however your mother was a slave. How can a person like you participate in our sacred ceremony?”

Kavasha was disappointed by their behavior. He was well-versed in Vedic lore and shastras that, through his prayers, he was able to redirect the Saraswati River from its natural path towards him. The Rishis witnessed the miracle and realized that he possessed exceptional merit.

Rishis: “Kindly enlighten us with the true knowledge”.

Kavasha: “Go to Naimisha forest and ask the Vālahilya Rishis to enlighten you.”

The Rishis then left Kavasha Ailsha and made their way to the Vālahilya Rishis for the resolution.

Vālakhilya Rishis: “Just as a chariot is just a piece of wood and metal without the driver since it can't go anywhere, so is the body just a corpse without the ātman (soul), which keeps it alive. The body will never be able higher than the ātman. And the same ātman resides within every one of us” [15].

Takeaways

The conversation between a group of Rishis and Rishi Valakhilya highlights the need of conveying complicated theories or concepts in simpler ways using relatable examples, thus making it easier for the learner to absorb. The example also shows that it is set in the time period when kings used to go by chariot and visit ashrams to seek advice from rishis. As a result, the example is considerably more user-friendly and relevant from a contextual perspective while being relatable and simple for learning at the same time.

Conversation between group of rishis and Rishi Valakhilyas	Query resolution	Added learning attribute
	Who is superior and what is the true knowledge?	Learning through relatable and simpler examples

Figure 4: Overview of conversation between group of rishis and Rishi Valakhilyas

5 CONCLUSION & WAY FORWARD

The ancient teaching method of adopting a conversation-based approach to learning has a lot of promise and advocates for a more dynamic and engaged learning environment. It's worth noting that our Rishis welcomed the conversational inquiries and made sure that the queries were adequately answered with an added takeaway of learning. The three examples mentioned, demonstrate the same.

	Conversation #1	Conversation #2	Conversation #3
Query resolution	What are the principles of statue building?	How to perform yagya in constraints?	Who is superior and what is the true knowledge?
Added learning attribute	An interdisciplinary approach for holistic learning	A creative outlook with solution based mindset	Learning through relatable and simpler examples

Figure 5: Mapping the three conversation examples

Many of us may acknowledge that we use conversation-based learning in principle but leveraging it in the way our ancient Rishis did would be something to learn and build. We all want to create a meaningful conversational learning paradigm, and in order to do so, both teachers and students must improve themselves.

As a teacher, one must be patient, calm, promote inquiry, encourage questioning without being dismissive, have a holistic view of the subject, simplify complex topics, and have intent to not only answer questions but also develop ways to inculcate values, creativity, and help learners develop a holistic view, among other qualities.

As a learner, one must be an active listener, imaginative in thinking, inquisitive in mind, and persistent to grasp things rather than having a let-go attitude.

As initial steps, teachers may initiate this conversational journey by -

- Building opportunities to talk and have conversation with learners
- Visualizing how the topics link with broader subject areas
- Documenting the conversations for analysis, improvement and future reference
- Slowly integrate this practice with their current teaching methodology
- Contextualize conversations with respect to varied learners
- Guiding via explorative way, instead binary -Yes or No responses

6 SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The approach of conversation-based learning or the examples above may look simple and straightforward, but it necessitates homework not just on oneself and the subject, but also on articulation, connections, observations, and other skills.

Although there are works around Conversational learning like- The Conversational framework proposed by Diana Laurillard, which embraces the notion that teaching is a dialogue and claims that there are four main aspects (i.e. the teacher's concepts; the teacher's created learning environment; the student's concepts; and the specific actions of the student) of the teaching-learning process and that various educational media may be studied (and used) in terms of these qualities [16]. The framework may aid us in developing our teaching methods, but a beneficial area of research would be to create a procedural or step-by-step guiding tool for teachers that assists them in incorporating this approach (of resolving queries and imparting additional learning attributes through conversations) into their teaching methodology as per the context. This may be tested further in the present-day environment, with the results being shared with a broader audience for takeaways.

There are also evidences on the relationship between physical spaces, conversations, and social interactions [17]. Hence, additional research is needed to explore and investigate the role of spaces especially in the backdrop of triggering conversations and promoting conversational based learning.

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