

Adhyayana: Learning Methods from Ancient India

Introduction

Learning is defined as the acquisition of novel information, behaviors, or abilities after practice, observation, or other experiences, as evidenced by a change in behavior, knowledge, or brain function. A process that leads to change occurs due to experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning (Ambrose et al, 2010, p. 3). Learning takes place from the time people are born. Every new sensation becomes a unique experience that shapes the behavior of people. As one grows older, the amount of information and roles a person is required to play and adapt to keep increasing, thereby making the function of learning- efficiently and appropriately - a function that needs constant evolution and accurate understanding. Therefore, learning is a continuous process. No field remains devoid of this ongoing process, which makes it an inseparable part of the functioning of organizations as well. Learning in organizations therefore, is a necessary process that should be undertaken continuously due to the highly varied circumstances that an organization goes through, where there is a constant need for change and adaptability.

The importance of the process of learning therefore makes it essential for the study of different learning methods that would be allow an efficient flow of knowledge and skills and ensures complete understanding of the concept as well. However, it also seeks to understand the qualities of a learner and how learning depends upon the eagerness, urge and sincerity of the learner.

Think about it yourself!

Is learning a continuous process?

Is the teacher responsible or the student?

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Ancient India is known for its ocean of knowledge and the birthplace of innumerable *Rishis* and Seers. *Rishis* could not only learn what is there in the world, with complete clarity, but also delve into their own *Self* and unlock the secrets of the Eternal Truth - the *Brahman*. The word अध्ययन *adhyayana* is constituted of three components: 'अधि' - *adhi*, 'अय्' - *ay* and 'अन' - *ana*. 'अधि' -*adhi* here is a prefix, and as a prefix it means above, over, beyond etc. The next component 'अय्' - *ay* is a root-sound (connected with the root ३ - *i*) which means 'to go'. The third component 'अन' -*ana* is a nominal suffix which turns a verbal root into a verbal noun. So, the word 'अध्ययन' *adhyayana* means, 'going above or beyond - to go beyond all through which the knowledge is acquired, and enter into a realm higher than the mind, so then one can come in direct contact with the Light and the Truth' (Mishra, 2021) and *adhyetaa* is the one who seeks – the learner, the student.

The *Gurukula* system has been one of the most efficient ways of making the students experience the different facets of life, starting from household chores by helping their *Guru* as a part of learning, to gaining expertise in warriorhood and chivalry. Experiential Learning was the most common method used in the ancient eras of *Bharata*, where the students would be asked to engage in every activity of life to understand the core of the activity and uncover higher truths through them. Various incidences in the *Upanishads* such as- the *Kathopanishad*, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, the *Chandogya Upanishad*, and other ancient philosophies and traditions in ancient India, explore different methods of enquiry and learning that have been discussed in this article. Likewise, the qualities of a genuine learner, who is eager to know and learn are also explored in this article, citing examples of various young learners who have been known as the greatest of students of all time such as *Nachiketa*, *Svetaketu*, etc. Extracting the characteristics of these young *adhyetaas*, the duties and qualities of a learner have been analyzed as well.

Objective of the article -

1. To analyze the different learning methods from ancient India methods.

This section of the article begins with the explanation of the Dasha-vidhi as propounded by Adi Shankaracharya, that concisely summarizes the major methods of learning from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta. It also highlights the various learning methods used in the *Upanishads* and the application as exemplified in them.

Sources of Learning

A learner learns from various sources. A shloka from the 16th verse in the 44th chapter of the *Udyogaparva* in the *Mahabharata*, the four major sources of one's learning are described. It says-

*आचार्यात् पादमादत्ते पादं शिष्यः स्वमेधया ।
सब्रह्मचारिभ्यः पादं पादं कालक्रमेण च ॥*

*One learns one-fourth from the teacher, one-fourth from own intelligence,
One-fourth from classmates, and one-fourth only with time.*

(16.44, Udyogaparva, Mahabharata).

Therefore, the sources through which one can learn are from the teacher (the one who teaches), through themselves (self-learning), from their classmates (peer learning) and through time (experience).

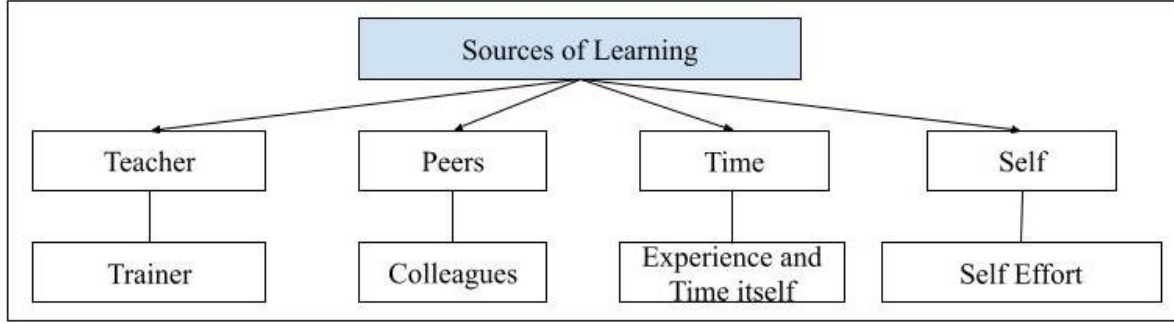


Fig. 1: The Sources of Learning from Mahabharata

तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।
उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥4.34॥

Learn the Truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him with reverence and render service unto him. Such an enlightened Saint can impart knowledge unto you because he has seen the Truth (4.34, Bhagavad Gita).

In every aspect the Indian knowledge system, learning from a teacher (called a *Guru*) had always been one definite source of learning everything. Starting from skills of profession, the use of weaponry, the mastering of the Vedas, to receiving the knowledge of the Supreme Truth, a teacher is the one who makes learning easier for the students. In the Gurukula systems, the teacher was able to give personal attention to each student and help them out in their difficulties and guide them through.

Likewise, in the organizational context, the training programs for the new recruits is an example of how the one who teaches also plays an essential role in the learning process- in this case, the acquiring of new skills.

Learning Methods from Ancient India

Learning was giving optimum importance in the ancient times of India, where the focus was on a holistic development of the learner. Ancient learning has always focused on the growth of learner-mentally, physically, and spiritually. Knowledge was imparted through various means such as discourses, commentaries, analogies, etc. but a lot of emphasis was also put on the eligibility and mental development of the student to understand the concepts and to be able to grasp them.

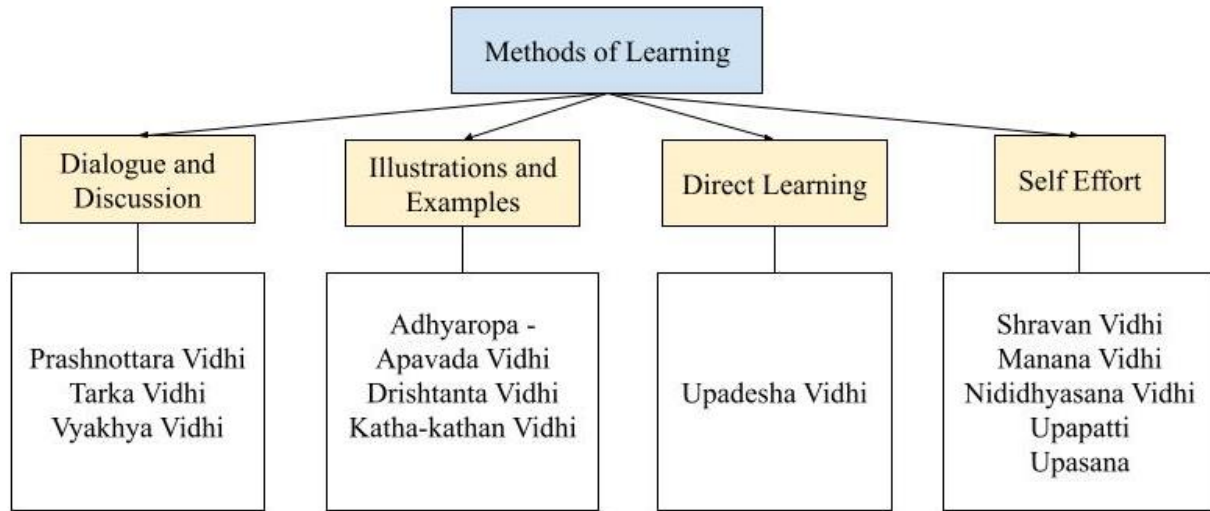
Creating a Learning Environment – The Spirit of Gurukula Education

The Gurukula system was one of the most used systems for imparting education to the student. The students were supposed to live with their guru and their family, where they would also be engaged in household chores and other activities as well. The gurukula system provided a pleasant and undisturbed atmosphere for the learner, where they would also get the love, affection, and emotional comfort they required at that age from the guru's family. This also provided the opportunity to the student to learn by practically doing what they learnt as well as learn by observing the guru, the

family members, the interaction between other members, etc. it also provided a place where the guru could give personal attention to the students and observe them beyond study hours. One of the most fascinating features that facilitated the learning process of the student was the development of an intimate bond of trust and interaction between the student and the Guru. Another peculiar feature was that service – *seva* for the guru and their family was considered as a part of the learning process. The teacher encouraged the students with reverence, faith, and devotion. This selfless work prepared the young minds for learning (Swami Vireshananda, n.d.).

Learning methods from ancient India -

Following are the most common methods used in Ancient India for the Vedantic stream of knowledge in the teaching-learning process. They include various techniques by which the learner was made to get hold of concepts and get a clear understanding of the same.



Learning through Dialogue and Discussion-

1. *Prasnottara vidhi* – learning by asking questions

*शिष्याचार्य प्रश्नप्रतिवचन रूपेण कथनं तु
सूक्ष्मवस्तुविषयत्वात् सुखप्रतिपत्तिकारणं भवति ।*

*The method of Question and Answer between the shishya and the guru makes even complex topics like the Brahma-vidya very easy to understand without much effort.
(Shri Shankaracharya, Kenopanishad) (Jayarama B., 2014).*

Inquisitiveness is natural to a child when they are born. However, as the child grows and is required to behave as per the standards set by the society around the, the inquisitiveness and wonder to know more slowly starts fading. However, if learners are encouraged to ask questions and indulge in discussions, then learning becomes a much easier process and the understanding of complex topics also dawn upon the learner.

Most of the stories from Upanishads are set with a background of questions asked by the student and hints provided by the guru, to ignite the inquisitiveness of the student. There is an Upanishad called the *Prashnopanishad* which translates as ‘the Upanishads of questions’.

2. *Tarka vidhi* – learning by reasoning and discussions

The learner should indulge in rational thinking and reasoning. This is done as the guru only gives hints to the answers (also known as the *temporizing method*), to urge the learner to come up with their own understandings of the questions asked by them. A discussion would then help the learner confirm or modify their viewpoint and gain knowledge.

3. *Vyakhya vidhi* – learning through commentaries

More like a source of learning, by going through different commentaries of experts of the subject-matter, the learner would get a holistic perspective into the various kinds of explanations available as well as the different ways in which the same subject/ concept can be approached. It also helps the learner be open to all kinds of perspectives and promotes flexibility in their approach to learning as well as open their mind to a newer way of looking at the matter.

One of the biggest challenges that one faces as a learner is the problem of rigidity towards other perspectives. This method allows the student to be open to ideas and promote flexibility and openness of the mind.

Learning through Illustrations and Examples-

4. *Adhyaropa Apavada vidhi* – the Projection-Reason Method

A very popular example of the snake-and-the-rope has been used to understand the plays of the mind and the how the mind is capable of misinterpreting and projecting what it wants to, and not see things as they are. The *Adhyaropa Apavada Vidhi* makes the learner aware of the superimpositions of the mind that can hamper a clear understanding of the subject. Such superimpositions (*Adhyasa*) result in misinterpretation of the subject, thereby diluting the understanding of the learner. The learner must be careful and analyze every facet of the subject with honesty and with an unbiased attitude in order to understand the true nature of things around them.

Through these analogies of projection, learners can understand the nature of the mind and the unconscious tricks it can play in the acquisition of knowledge.

5. *Drishtanta vidhi* – learning through illustrations

Illustrations and examples have been used in countless texts and dialogues while making the student understand a concept that might be difficult to understand. The analogical method is used for things that cannot be explained by plain reasoning (Chakravarthy, 2013).

For instance, *Uddalaka* in the *Chandogya Upanishad* gives the analogy of many rivers finally merging into one ocean and the juices in the constitution of honey to explain the concept of everyone being a part of the same Brahman and would eventually merge into the same.

Through such illustrations, the understanding of a learner becomes much clearer.

6. ***Katha-kathan*** – learning through stories

Stories have been an integral part of ancient Indian learning. The Panchatantra tales were brought into being for the purpose for teaching two young princes, who would not sit at a place and take formal education. Through the medium of stories, deep aspects of life, moral and ethical values, strengthening of character, etc. were taught. Stories have been one of the most used and easiest way of learning and understanding concepts that also keep the learner interested as well as keen to know more.

Direct Learning –

7. ***Upadesha vidhi*** – learning through lectures

As mostly used today, the method of lecturing was also used in ancient to impart knowledge to the learner. *Upadesha* provided the insight of the Guru to the student and allowed them to grasp a basic understanding of the subject before moving on their own rational thinking. Lectures in the ancient times were mostly used to give food for thought to the learners, so that it would ignite their thinking capacity and allow them to come up with their own understanding. It is also noticed, that only hints of the Truth were provided by the Guru in order to facilitate the thinking and learning process, where the self-effort of the student mattered the most.

Learning through Self Effort –

8. ***Shravan vidhi*** – learning by listening

The method of *Shravan* involves complete focus, attention, and a mind clear of any preconceived notions about the subject matter. When the mind is free from preconceptions, the possibilities of misconceptions are reduced and knowledge can be transmitted with utmost clarity. Hearing with clarity cannot take place if the mind is not ready to accept change and listen to the (Guru) without a barrier already set between what is being taught and what is being understood. Dr. Sridevi Yerrabati in one of her essays called ‘How adults learn: A Reflective Essay’ (2017) says, ‘one of the things that surprised me was that the students were relying on culturally and socially imposed experiences or preconceived notions, rather than what they had experienced directly’.

9. ***Manana vidhi*** – learning by contemplating (explain more)

The *Manana vidhi* consists of thorough reflection of what has been learnt -contemplating on the subject matter and understanding the concepts clearly. The learner should reason and

analyze until the real understanding is achieved. The learner should work through doubts and misunderstandings, and clear the same by questioning and discussing.

10. Nididhyasana vidhi – learning by practical application

Nididhyasana refers to the practical application of the learning for a better understanding so that the knowledge is deeply rooted into the learner. Practical application of any learning always helps in the complete understanding of a concept. Especially, if the knowledge/ learning can be practically applied, only such learnings can be used and valued. Practical application also helps in the entire learning process.

11. Upapatti – extracted from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, this method is also known as taking an ‘intellectual adventure’ this method involves deliberation and rational explanation of the Brahman. The learner is encouraged to reach the right conclusion through proper thinking processes. Extracting information from the Upanishads, ‘proper thinking process’ is described as the thinking process that facilitates one to reach the objective of one’s education. That is the essence of the learning process (Vireshananda, n.d.).

12. Upasana - this method deals with the contemplation of Truth through various imageries and concepts. This is said to help the student rise to higher levels of Transcendental Consciousness and increase their levels of absorption. Likewise, for any other learning to take place, deep reflection of the topic needs to be done by the learner. Be it in any context, the learner must put in some effort and spend time with the concept to know about it completely.

Abhyasa – The Essence of Practice

The concept of *abhyasa* has been discussed extensively in various texts of ancient Indian wisdom that strive to impart the knowledge of a higher Truth to individuals. However, as the popular saying goes – ‘practice makes one perfect’.

Irrespective of the method of learning used (as mentioned above), true learning can only take place if the learner puts in effort and engages in practice. Be it a new skill or role that an employee must acquire and fit into respectively, even if the employee has learnt them in theory, practice can only give experiential learning to the employee.

The concept of *abhyasa* has always been paired with *vairagya* in most of the texts in which there is a mention of these terms. Texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Vashishtha and the Yoga Sutras talk about the essence of practice in the path of spirituality and how *vairagya* is an inseparable part of the pair.

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलम् ।
अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते ॥ 6.35॥

“O Mighty armed one. It is doubtless that the mind cannot be controlled and is restless. But Son of Kunti, it is restrained through Practice (*abhyāsa*) and Detachment (*vairāgya*)”.

The reason why *vairagya* is an essential part of the pair is because of the fickle nature of the mind. A popular analogy by Madhusudhana Sarasvati ji conveys the idea that the mind is like fire and the contents are like fuel. However, when there is no fuel, the fire stops burning. Likewise, when there is *vairagya* toward everything, one can truly focus in *abhyasa* without any distractions. He gives yet another analogy that states the importance of both the phenomena to go together – “*The river of the mind flows both ways (unlike earthly rivers) – one flows towards good, and one flows towards evil. Now the current flowing towards evil / non-discrimination needs to be blocked by a dam – which we can call “vairāgya”. Whereas the current that is flowing towards the good can be augmented by constructing a canal of sorts and channeling it – think of this as “abhyāsa”. So the dam and the canal serve different ends. Hence both are essential*” (Krishnamachary, 2020).

Patanjali in the 14th sutra of the 1st chapter in the Yoga Sutras has defined the term *abhyasa* by making the reader understand the qualities true *abhyasa* contains.

स तु दीर्घकालनैरन्तर्यसत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः ॥1.14॥

“*Abhyāsa is successful only if -*

1. *It is fully adhered to without despondency (asevitah)*
2. *Adhered to for a long time (dīrgha kāla)*
3. *Adhered to without a break (nairantarya)*
4. *Adhered to with great regard / confidence (satkāra)*

And only when all the above four conditions are fulfilled, abhyasa is said to be successful and is firmly grounded (dṛḍhabhūmih).

for achieving the four qualities as mentioned as the steps to perform true *abhyasa*, the quietening of the mind is essential for attaining complete focus. And this can only happen when there is *vairagya*.

Conclusion

Learning has always been of utmost importance in any setting that goes through constant change and evolution. The human mind itself is an entity that is bound to change every moment. Therefore, areas of work that involve the application of the human mind and constant change, the role learning, unlearning, and relearning plays a big role.

Organizations are a place where all the people involved in the varied hierarchy of the structure go through constant change quicker than any other field of work. Therefore, learning, unlearning, and relearning new concepts and methods is essential at an organizational level.

The Indian Knowledge Systems are regarded as the one of the deepest of knowledge that was transmitted majorly through the process of listening – *Shruti* tradition. This makes one wonder how the process of learning must be taking place during that time in order to be known as the Age of Rishis. They provide a plethora of methods and ways by which one can understand the content as well as practically apply the concepts in the world, especially at the level of an organization, where countless people as a group and as individual need to constantly adapt to new situations, new people, new scenarios, etc. – giving the place the essence of change, adaptability, and constant learning throughout. The scenario of merger-acquisition is an example of the need to constantly be able to learn new roles and rules – said and unsaid – for the best functioning of any organization at any given task or time. Most companies face the issue of difficulty in being able to adapt to new scenarios and provide training to their employees in the most efficient manner. It is also noticed that the companies and organizations that have grown to be popular have always been able to come up with new ideas and implement them efficiently and effectively.

Such scenarios reinstate the importance of learning efficiently, quickly and effectively to be able to adapt to any given scenario.

The analysis of the learning methods used by and mentioned in the ancient texts of ancient Bharat has been carried out in order to put forward some of the most effective methods of learning in literature and practice during that period. It also gives a scope for further practical researches to provide interventions and evaluate the given methods and analyze what suits best for this era, especially in the field of management, in the surroundings of an organization.

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About: this site gives a detailed description of the Cittabhumis from Vyasa's commentary of the Yoga sutras with information on the related Trigunas as well.

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