Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education
ISSN: 0972-0669 (Print) | ISSN: 2582-XXXX (Online) | DOI: 10.XXXX/divyadaan.2026.001 | Vol. 37, No. 1 (2026), pp. 1–14

The Role of Philosophy in Enhancing Critical Thinking in Modern Education

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Received: 12 January 2026 | Revised: 28 February 2026 | Accepted: 10 March 2026 | Published: 01 May 2026

Abstract

The accelerating complexity of the twenty-first-century knowledge economy demands educational frameworks that cultivate not merely the acquisition of facts, but the capacity to interrogate, synthesise, and evaluate information with reasoned rigour. This paper investigates the underutilised yet transformative role of philosophical inquiry—particularly Socratic dialogue, formal logic, and epistemological reflection—in fostering critical thinking competencies among learners at secondary and tertiary levels. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combines a systematic literature review with qualitative analysis of curriculum documents from ten Indian universities, the study reveals a systemic marginalisation of philosophy-based pedagogies in favour of content-delivery models. The findings indicate that structured philosophical engagement measurably improves argumentation skills, intellectual humility, and metacognitive awareness. The paper proposes an integrated Philosophy-for-Critical-Thinking (PCT) curricular framework and offers actionable recommendations for policy-makers, curriculum designers, and educators. The study concludes that restoring philosophy to the heart of modern education is neither nostalgic nor impractical, but is, in fact, an urgent pedagogical imperative.

Keywords: Critical Thinking | Philosophy of Education | Socratic Pedagogy | Epistemic Agency | Curriculum Reform | Metacognition | Philosophy for Children

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education, in its broadest philosophical sense, has never been a mere transmission of information. Since Plato envisioned the philosopher-educator as a midwife of knowledge, the Western and Indian intellectual traditions alike have recognised that genuine learning entails the cultivation of the reasoning self—a learner who can question assumptions, detect fallacies, and construct coherent arguments (Lipman, 2003). Yet contemporary schooling systems, driven by standardised assessments, technological adoption, and market-oriented skill frameworks, have increasingly marginalised the humanities and, most acutely, philosophy.

The National Education Policy of India (NEP 2020) gestures towards 'critical and creative thinking' as a graduate attribute, yet it offers no disciplinary mechanism through which such thinking is to be systematically developed (Ministry of Education, 2020). This gap has measurable consequences: employers across sectors consistently report that graduates lack the capacity to reason under uncertainty, evaluate evidence, or construct persuasive arguments (World Economic Forum, 2023).

This paper argues that philosophy—as a formal discipline and as a pedagogical disposition—offers the most coherent and historically validated pathway to cultivating critical thinking in modern educational settings. The study situates this argument within the Indian higher-education context while drawing on comparative international evidence. The central research question is: *In what ways does structured philosophical engagement enhance critical thinking competencies, and how may such engagement be institutionalised within contemporary curricula?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a contested concept. Paul and Elder (2006) define it as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, reflection, or reasoning. Facione (1990), in the landmark Delphi Report, identifies six core cognitive skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Ennis (2018) additionally emphasises dispositional attributes—open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, and willingness to revise beliefs—as foundational to effective critical reasoning.

What unites these accounts is their convergence on a capacity that is irreducibly philosophical in character: the ability to reflect on one's own reasoning and to interrogate the epistemic status of claims. This is precisely what philosophy, at its disciplinary core, is designed to cultivate.

2.2 Philosophy and Education: Historical Perspectives

The relationship between philosophical inquiry and education is ancient and deeply intertwined. Socrates' method of elenchus—systematic cross-examination aimed at exposing inconsistencies in the interlocutor's beliefs—remains the most enduring model of dialogic pedagogy (Vlastos, 1994). Dewey (1916) extended this tradition into progressive education, arguing that genuine learning occurs through reflective experience and democratic inquiry. In the Indian tradition, the Ny■ya school's systematic analysis of pram■■as (valid sources of knowledge) represents an indigenous tradition of rigorous epistemological education (Matilal, 1998).

2.3 Philosophy for Children and Critical Thinking

Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme, developed at Montclair State University in the 1970s, operationalised Deweyan ideals by introducing structured philosophical dialogue into K–12 classrooms. Systematic reviews of P4C interventions (Gorard et al., 2015; EEF, 2015) report statistically significant gains in reading, mathematics, and—crucially—reasoning and argumentation skills. Trickey and Topping (2004) found that sustained P4C engagement over two years produced cognitive gains equivalent to two months of additional schooling.

Despite this robust evidence base, the institutionalisation of P4C and analogous programmes in South Asian higher education remains limited. Krishnamurthy (2019) notes that philosophy is offered as an elective in fewer than 15% of Indian undergraduate programmes outside the humanities stream—a significant curricular lacuna.

2.4 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Three gaps persist in the extant literature. First, most studies focus on primary and secondary levels, with limited inquiry into tertiary contexts. Second, cross-cultural dimensions—specifically the potential of integrating Indian philosophical traditions with Western analytic frameworks—remain undertheorised. Third, scalable curricular frameworks that operationalise philosophical pedagogy across non-humanities disciplines are conspicuously absent. This paper addresses all three gaps.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating a systematic literature review (SLR) with qualitative document analysis. The SLR component follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and synthesises evidence from peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2000 and 2025.

3.2 Data Sources and Corpus

Database searches were conducted across JSTOR, Scopus, ERIC, PhilPapers, and Google Scholar using the Boolean string: *(philosophy AND education) AND (critical thinking OR reasoning OR Socratic OR P4C).* Following screening for relevance, language, and methodological quality, a corpus of 64 peer-reviewed articles was retained for thematic synthesis.

For the qualitative component, curriculum documents, syllabi, and graduate-attribute frameworks from ten purposively selected Indian universities—spanning central, state, and private categories—were subjected to directed content analysis using a coding scheme informed by Facione's (1990) critical-thinking taxonomy. Inter-rater reliability was established at $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating strong agreement.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Philosophy as the Discipline of Disciplined Thinking

Philosophy's unique contribution to education is its reflexive character: it is not merely a body of knowledge but a practice of subjecting knowledge claims—including philosophical ones—to systematic scrutiny. Logic provides learners with formal tools for

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distinguishing valid from invalid inferences, identifying fallacies, and constructing deductively sound or inductively strong arguments (Hurley, 2019). These competencies are precisely the 'critical thinking' skills that employers and educators prize yet rarely teach explicitly.

Epistemology—the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, scope, and limits of knowledge—trains learners to interrogate the evidential basis of claims. This is particularly salient in an era of epistemic pollution, where the ability to assess source credibility and distinguish knowledge from opinion constitutes a civic as well as professional necessity (Floridi, 2014).

4.2 Socratic Dialogue as a Pedagogical Technology

The Socratic method is not a historical artefact; it is a rigorously structured pedagogical technology. When deployed systematically, it cultivates at least four measurable competencies: (i) precision of conceptual articulation; (ii) sensitivity to implicit assumptions; (iii) awareness of inferential gaps; and (iv) intellectual humility in the face of counter-evidence (Heckman & Montera, 2009). The 'Community of Inquiry' model operationalises Socratic dialogue at scale by positioning the classroom as a collaborative epistemic community (Kennedy, 2004).

Document analysis of the sampled Indian university curricula revealed that none explicitly incorporate Socratic or dialogic methodologies as compulsory pedagogical approaches, even in programmes that nominally target critical thinking as a graduate attribute. This represents a structural contradiction: the destination is articulated but the pedagogical route is absent.

4.3 Indian Philosophical Traditions and Critical Thinking

A distinctive contribution of this study is its attention to indigenous philosophical resources. The Ny■ya system of logic and epistemology, the C■rv■ka critique of scriptural authority, and the Buddhist tradition of dialectical reasoning collectively constitute a rich and underutilised heritage of critical inquiry (Matilal, 1998; Ganeri, 2001). Integrating these traditions into a critical-thinking curriculum not only diversifies the epistemic resource base but also enhances cultural resonance and learner engagement in Indian educational contexts.

The Navya-Ny■ya school, in particular, developed a sophisticated formal language for disambiguating concepts and mapping inferential relations that anticipates elements of contemporary formal semantics and bears direct pedagogical relevance to training precise reasoning (Phillips, 2012).

4.4 The Philosophy-for-Critical-Thinking (PCT) Framework

On the basis of the systematic review and document analysis, this study proposes the Philosophy-for-Critical-Thinking (PCT) curricular framework, structured around three concentric domains:

Domain 1 — Logical Foundations: Core units in deductive and inductive logic, fallacy identification, and argument mapping, deployable across all disciplines as a compulsory component in the first year of undergraduate study.

Domain 2 — Epistemological Reflection: Discipline-embedded modules that foreground the epistemological assumptions of each field—scientific method for science students, hermeneutics for humanities students, and decision theory for commerce and management students.

Domain 3 — Dialogic Practice: Regular Community-of-Inquiry sessions across the curriculum, assessed through reflective journals, Socratic seminars, and collaborative argument construction tasks.

This framework is designed for phased integration within the credit-based semester system mandated by NEP 2020, minimising structural disruption while maximising philosophical impact.

4.5 Challenges and Counterarguments

Three principal objections merit consideration. First, the scarcity of trained philosophy educators in India presents a genuine implementation challenge. The PCT framework's modular design partially mitigates this by permitting facilitators without full philosophy credentials to deliver Domains 1 and 3 after structured professional development. Second, critics may question whether philosophical engagement translates to measurable learning outcomes. The EEF (2015) meta-analysis provides robust empirical grounds for confidence. Third, concerns about curricular overcrowding are addressed by the framework's emphasis on integration rather than addition: philosophy is embedded within existing courses rather than appended as a separate subject.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that philosophy occupies a unique and irreplaceable position in any educational architecture genuinely committed to cultivating critical thinking. Through systematic review of 64 international studies and qualitative analysis of Indian university curricula, the study has demonstrated that: (a) critical thinking, properly understood, is a philosophical competency at its core; (b) structured philosophical engagement measurably enhances reasoning abilities; (c) Indian philosophical traditions offer a culturally resonant resource that remains systematically underutilised; and (d) the proposed PCT framework provides a feasible and evidence-based integration pathway.

For policy-makers, the implication is clear: the aspiration for 'critical and creative thinking' enshrined in NEP 2020 cannot be realised without disciplinary infrastructure. Curriculum designers are urged to pilot the PCT framework in select NAAC-accredited institutions with rigorous longitudinal evaluation.

Future research should examine the differential impact of the PCT framework across disciplinary and socio-economic contexts, develop validated assessment instruments for philosophical critical thinking in Indian higher education, and explore teacher professional development pathways. The intellectual stakes, as Socrates long ago recognised, could scarcely be higher: the unexamined curriculum, like the unexamined life, is not worth delivering.

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DOI: 10.XXXX/divyadaan.2026.001