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Contextualizing True Knowledge: Oral Transmission in Balinese Tembang and Hindustani Classical Vocal Traditions

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ABSTRACT

In classical and traditional vocal music, oral tradition remains a vital epistemology where knowledge is transmitted through direct interaction between teacher and student rather than through written notation. *Hindustani* classical vocal and Balinese *tembang* represent this paradigm, where knowledge is understood and sustained through oral transmission within the *guru-shishya*, or teacher-disciple, relationship. This study aims to understand how oral transmission shapes the meaning of "true knowledge" within the vocal pedagogy of Hindustani classical and Balinese *tembang* traditions, and how this knowledge is inseparable from the context in which it is taught and practiced. This study uses a qualitative literature-based approach to explore how oral transmission influences teaching, memory, and understanding in Hindustani classical and Balinese *tembang* vocal traditions. In both traditions, musical knowledge is not simply transferred but developed gradually through imitation, attentive listening, and a trusting relationship between teacher and student. Hence, oral transmission does not merely transmit musical information; it cultivates embodied musical knowledge. This study suggests that sustaining oral vocal traditions requires attention not only to the songs themselves, but also to the relationships and contexts through which musical knowledge continues to be taught, understood, and renewed across generations.

KEYWORDS

Oral Transmission, Knowledge Transmission, *Hindustani* Classical Vocal, Balinese *Tembang*, Contextual Knowledge

Introduction

Long before the invention of staff notation or any visual method to pin down sound on paper, human societies had developed sophisticated way to protect and pass down their musical heritage. Throughout many Asian cultures, the human voice served as the ultimate tool for sharing this knowledge—a process deeply rooted in memory, constant repetition, and the close, personal mentorship between a master and a disciple [10]. It is through this oral legacy and

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hands-on practice that traditional music survives not as a frozen artifact, but as a living, breathing part of the community.

Interestingly, this reliance on the voice and memory has not vanished with the rise of modern literacy. Instead, it continues to flourished alongside with written scores, sometimes even challenging the rigid boundaries of sheet music. The tradition of *tembang* vocal of Bali, Indonesia, and the Hindustani classical vocal music of North India exemplify this phenomenon. They provide a wonderful glimpse of what it is to be truly "mastered" of an art form when the music is not written down on a piece of paper, but instead lives entirely within the performer.

In Bali, this oral lineage takes shape in the practice of *tembang*, encompassing sung poetic forms ranging from the simple *gegendingan* to the more elevated *pupuh* (*sekar alit*), *kidung* (*sekar madya*), and *kakawin* (*sekar agung*). Rather than being learned from notation, *tembang* is transmitted through direct vocal modelling, in which the teacher sings a phrase or an entire verse and the student is expected to absorb the melodic contour, ornamentation, and breath through repeated joint singing rather than through segmented, phrase-by-phrase instruction [6]. Much like Balinese *gamelan*, where notation plays no role in playing, teaching, or archiving the repertoire, *tembang* relies on an embodied process—a form of physical, muscular memory woven directly into the learning experience itself [7]. This principle is documented more broadly in Balinese musical pedagogy through the twin methods of *meguru panggul* (learning through the teacher's physical demonstration and the student's direct imitation) and *meguru kuping* (learning through attentive listening), both of which locate musical competence squarely in the body and the ear rather than in a text [12]. What truly sets *tembang* apart, however, is that its music cannot be separated from the ritual, theatrical, or social space it occupies. The Balinese aesthetic philosophy of *desa kala patra*—which translates to place, time, and context—dictates not only how a melody is brought to life but also how its deep spiritual meaning is understood in that exact moment [6].

In Hindustani classical vocal, this oral tradition is known as the *guru-shishya parampara*, a literal passing down of knowledge from master to disciple. For centuries it has been the primary and often the only means for transmitting complex ragas, intricate compositions and subtle aesthetics of vocal embellishments [3]. The word *Parampara* itself represents an unbroken chain of living, physical practice rather than a mere textbook collection of codified facts, drawing its meaning from an "uninterrupted row or series". Historically, this profound transmission took place in *gurukul,* an intensely immersive residential setting where the disciple lived in the teacher's household. There the student learned not only technical musical skills, but a whole lifestyle of devotion, strict discipline and service to the master [4]. Even though modern conservatories, institutional academies, and digital video lessons have dramatically changed the landscape of music education [3], the legendary *guru-shishya* bond is still passionately upheld by musicians, students, and audiences alike as the ultimate stamp of legitimate musical authority [5].

Although Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal music developed in very different historical and cultural settings, they offer an interesting basis for comparison because musical knowledge in both traditions is closely connected to practice and interpersonal learning. In Balinese *tembang*, vocal knowledge is closely connected to the type of *tembang*, its function,

and the ceremonial context in which it is performed. Studies of Balinese *Dharmagita*, for example, show that vocal techniques and ways of performing differ according to the classification of the *tembang* and the ritual context in which it is used [9]. A similar emphasis on embodied and contextual learning can be observed in Hindustani vocal music, where learning has traditionally depended heavily on direct interaction between teacher and student. This tradition transmits the musical ideas through listening, demonstration, imitation, repetition, and correction rather than relying primarily on written notation [8].

These practices invite us to reconsider what it means to “know” a piece of music. Knowledge may not simply consist of remembering a melody or text correctly. Rather, knowing may involve being able to perform the music appropriately within a particular tradition, learning situation, and performance context. This becomes especially important when considering the idea of “true knowledge” in the context of the present conference. Musical knowledge often easily be imagined as something fixed and portable: a melody, a text, or a technical procedure that can be separated from the person who teaches it and the context in which it is learned. However, oral traditions challenge this perspective. In these traditions, musical knowledge cannot just be detached and carried away; instead, it is gained through embodied experience and interaction. Consequently, its meaning and appropriate expression may become clearer only when considered in relation to the people, practices, and contexts through which it is transmitted.

The purpose of this study, accordingly, is to examine how oral transmission within the pedagogical relationships of Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal music shapes what practitioners within these traditions come to regard as "true knowledge" of their art. This study asks how knowledge is enacted, negotiated, and re-created every time it is taught. It explores how the meaning of a given song or vocal technique is inseparable from the relational and situational context of its transmission, rather than treating musical knowledge as a stable object that simply moves from one mind to another.

Oral transmission, Practice, and Context

One of the persistent problems in the study of oral musical traditions from the standpoint of a literate academic culture is the temptation to see orality as a transitional stage on the way to a "proper," notated art form. Walter Ong’s popular perspective of orality and literacy provides a corrective to this assumption. Ong argues that primary oral cultures are not simply “without writing.” Instead, they structure knowledge, memory and communication according to a singular logic appropriate to sound, a logic that only exists in the moment of its enunciation and vanishes as soon as it is spoken. Unlike written texts, primary oral knowledge relies on human memory and embodied practice, making continuous re-performance essential for its preservation. Ong also differentiates between primary orality and what he terms secondary orality. The secondary type is a more deliberate and self-conscious mode that relies permanently on writing and prints. This distinction is useful for understanding contemporary Balinese and Hindustani vocal pedagogy, both of which increasingly employ recordings and video in addition to face-to-face teaching, without losing their fundamentally oral character [10].

In both of the traditions examined here, Ong's framework helps to explain that the accuracy in oral traditions is evaluated by how precisely a student replicates the live performance of an instructor rather than by adherence to a fixed written text. This doesn't mean that either tradition is entirely without notation. Balinese vocal practice, for instance, utilizes textual and mnemonic conventions in genres like *kidung* and *dharmagita*, while Hindustani vocal music has employed systems such as Bhatkhande's notation since the early twentieth century. However, such notation serves merely as an archival trace rather than the authoritative standard for judging performative correctness. That standard remains the teacher's body, voice, and memory—transmitted, in the Balinese context, through master-disciple relationships documented in the study of *dharmagita* pedagogy [9], and, in the Hindustani context, through the relational structures long described as *guru-shishya parampara* [5]. This has significant implications for what "true knowledge" can mean in such contexts—an issue to which this study returns in the discussion.

Situated Learning and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

A second body of theory relevant to this study comes from the sociology of learning, particularly by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger about the concept of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger argue against the view that learning consists of an individual internalizing decontextualized information. They argue that the best way to think about learning is as a process of increasing participation in a community of practice, in which newcomers move from the periphery toward full participation in the activities, relationships, and shared understandings that define that community. Crucially, on this view, knowledge is not separated from the community that enacts it. Knowledge is treated as part of the conditions of the community of practice itself. It does not exist as something that is owned separately by any single individual [11].

This framework maps onto but also complicates the master-disciple training structures found in both Balinese vocal pedagogy and the *guru-shishya parampara* of Hindustani classical vocal. In this discussion, the Balinese vocal pedagogy encompassing genres such as *kidung* and *dharmagita*, here treated as instances of what is more broadly termed *tembang*, or metrically bound sung poetry [6], [7], [9]. Documentation of Balinese musical apprenticeship relies through the paired methods known as *meguru panggul* and *meguru kuping*. Through these practices, musical competence is absorbed progressively through sustained proximity to a teacher, rather than delivered as separate instructional content [12]. This pattern consistent with Lave and Wenger's account of legitimate peripheral participation. In each case, a novice does not simply receive a body of musical facts from a teacher but is gradually absorbed into a network of relationships, obligations, and occasions for performance. Within this process their technical competence, social identity, and status as a legitimate practitioner develop together. Historical notes of *gurukul* residence exemplify this process most vividly on the Hindustani side [4]. This residential model, however, has become less common in contemporary, non-residential forms of instruction. Whether the same trajectory from newcomer to recognized practitioner still holds under these more attenuated conditions — on either side of this comparison — remains an open question. It is one that future fieldwork, building on the

comparative synthesis offered here, would be well positioned to address, rather than one that can simply be assumed from the historical record.

Read alongside the framework proposed by Ong in the previous section, Lave and Wenger's account also requires a point of reconciliation. If, as argued above, the individual teacher's body and memory function as the living standard against which a student's realization is judged, this need not contradict the claim that knowledge is communally constituted. Otherwise, the guru may be understood as the community of practice's most legitimate embodiment of shared knowledge—a node through which communal standards are transmitted and enacted—rather than a private possessor of information standing apart from that community. It should also be noted that Lave and Wenger's framework was developed primarily from craft-based apprenticeships (tailoring, midwifery, butchery) characterized by relatively flat social structures; applying it to traditions as hierarchically and ritually inflected as Balinese sacred vocal transmission or *guru-shishya parampara* therefore requires some caution, a point this study returns to in its discussion.

Music as Social Practice: The Concept of Musicking

A further theoretical perspective useful for this study is Christopher Small's concept of *musicking*. Small proposes that music should not be understood exclusively as a stable object, composition, or sound product. Instead, music is better understood as an activity: something that people do. To "music," in Small's formulation, means to participate in a musical performance in any capacity, whether as a singer, instrumentalist, teacher, learner, listener, ritual participant, dancer, organizer, or member of an audience [13]. The meaning of musical activity is therefore produced not only by the sounds themselves but also by the relationships established among the participants during the performance.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal music because both traditions resist an understanding of music as an isolated and portable object. A *tembang* is not fully defined by its text or melodic contour alone. Its meaning depends on the occasion in which it is sung, the people who perform it, the community that recognizes it, and the ritual or social purpose that it serves [7]. Similarly, a Hindustani *raga* is not simply a collection of pitches or an abstract melodic structure. Its musical identity is realized through performance, interpretation, vocal practice, the teacher's lineage, and the relationship between performer and listener [3], [8].

The concept of *musicking* therefore provides a useful bridge between the theories of orality, situated learning, and embodied knowledge developed in the previous sections. Ong explains how knowledge is organized and transmitted in oral cultures. Lave and Wenger explain how learning takes place through participation in a community of practice. The concept of embodied knowledge clarifies how musical understanding is stored and expressed through the body. Small's concept of *musicking* brings these perspectives together by emphasizing that music becomes meaningful through social action and situated relationships.

In the context of Balinese *tembang*, the act of singing may involve multiple forms of participation. The teacher transmits vocal knowledge through demonstration, the student listens and imitates, other singers support the performance, and the wider community provides

the ritual context in which the performance becomes meaningful. The validity of the performance is therefore not determined solely by the isolated ability of one singer. It is produced through a network of relationships among sound, performer, teacher, ritual space, audience, and community. The same principle can be observed in the *guru-shishya Parampara* of Hindustani classical vocal music. The musical event is shaped by the interaction between the guru, the disciple, the lineage, the audience, and the conventions governing the performance of a *raga*. Musical knowledge is therefore not merely transmitted from an individual teacher to an individual student. It is enacted within a broader social world that defines authority, discipline, aesthetic value, and legitimate participation.

The concept of *musicking* also allows this study to avoid an overly individualistic understanding of musical knowledge. The student does not simply acquire a skill that belongs to them as a private possession. Instead, the student learns how to participate appropriately in a tradition. This participation includes understanding how to listen, when to enter, how to respond to the teacher, how to adjust one's voice, how to behave within a ritual space, and how to recognize the expectations of the community. In this sense, learning music means learning a way of relating to other people and to the cultural world.

For this study, *musicking* is therefore defined as the socially and contextually situated activity through which musical sound, embodied practice, ritual meaning, and human relationships are brought together. This concept reinforces the argument that "true knowledge" cannot be separated from the activity through which it is enacted. A student may memorize the text of a *kidung* or the structure of a *raga*, but such memorization does not necessarily constitute complete knowledge. True knowledge is demonstrated when the student can participate appropriately in the musical and social world of the tradition.

Taken together, the theories of orality, situated learning, embodied knowledge, and musicking demonstrate that musical knowledge cannot be separated from the relationships and contexts through which it is learned and performed. These perspectives provide the basis for developing a situated concept of "true knowledge" in Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal traditions.

Toward a Situated Concept of True Knowledge

Taken together, Ong's account of oral epistemology and Lave and Wenger's account of situated learning point toward a shared conclusion: that what counts as valid, "true" musical knowledge in these traditions cannot be abstracted from the relationships and occasions through which it is transmitted [10], [11]. In the Balinese context, this conclusion resonates closely with the indigenous aesthetic principle of *desa kala patra*—place, time, and context—which holds that the correctness and spiritual efficacy of a performed *tembang* depend not on the song as an isolated text but on its fit with the specific place, moment, and social-ritual occasion of its performance. A *kidung* sung correctly in one ceremonial context may be considered inappropriate, or even spiritually void, in another, regardless of its melodic or textual accuracy—a judgment that only the guru, as custodian of both the repertoire and its proper occasions, is positioned to make [6]. Logic governs the Hindustani *guru-shishya parampara*, where the appropriateness of a *raga* to a particular time of day, season, or emotional register

(*rasa*) is likewise inseparable from its "correct" performance, and where the guru's authority rests on embodied judgment rather than codified rule [3]. These two traditions suggest that "true knowledge," in an oral pedagogical context, is not a fixed content to be verified against an external standard, but a contextually enacted competence—one that must be continually re-authenticated by a living authority attuned to the specific demands of place, time, and occasion. It is this understanding of knowledge-as-context, rather than knowledge-as-content, that the remainder of this study explores through comparative ethnographic attention to Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal pedagogy.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative comparative literature-based research design. The study does not generate new primary data through interviews, participant observation, or field recordings. Instead, it analyses and synthesizes existing ethnomusicological, historical, pedagogical, and cultural studies concerning oral transmission in Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal music.

A literature-based design is appropriate because the central concern of this study is theoretical and interpretive: it seeks to understand how musical knowledge is transmitted, embodied, contextualized, and validated within two oral vocal traditions. The study does not attempt to measure musical performance statistically or establish causal relationships between variables. Rather, it examines how previous scholars have described the relationships among oral pedagogy, teacher–student interaction, memory, embodied learning, ritual context, lineage, and musical authority.

An analytical dimension is added through Christopher Small's concept of *musicking*. This dimension focuses on the social relationships and forms of participation created through musical performance [13]. The analysis therefore considers not only how musical knowledge is transmitted, but also who participates in the transmission, how authority is organized, how the learner is positioned within the performance community, and how the meaning of the music is shaped by ritual or social interaction. This additional dimension is important because oral transmission does not take place in an abstract pedagogical space. It occurs through actual acts of singing, listening, observing, correcting, performing, and participating in community life.

The comparative dimension of the study is not intended to claim that Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal music are identical. Instead, comparison is used as an analytical strategy for identifying structural similarities and culturally specific differences. The two traditions are examined as distinct historical and cultural systems that provide insight into how oral transmission shapes practitioners' understanding of "true knowledge" in vocal music.

Discussion

Across both traditions, the literature converges on describing oral transmission as fundamentally embodied rather than textual. In Balinese *tembang*, competence is documented as being absorbed through direct vocal modelling and joint singing, in which the teacher's rendition serves as the immediate reference point for the student's own voice, rather than

through segmented, phrase-by-phrase instruction [7]. This is consistent with the wider Balinese pedagogical vocabulary of *meguru panggul* (learning through the teacher's demonstration and the student's direct imitation) and *meguru kuping* (learning through attentive listening), documented for Balinese gamelan instruction and plausibly extending, with appropriate caution, to vocal genres such as *tembang* [12]. A broadly comparable emphasis on embodied learning appears in the Hindustani literature, where transmission is described as proceeding through listening, demonstration, imitation, repetition, and correction, with written notation playing at most a secondary role [8]. The two traditions are not documented in identical terms — the available Balinese sources emphasize joint singing as the primary vehicle of transmission, while the Hindustani sources describe a somewhat more differentiated pedagogical sequence — but both accounts locate musical competence in the body and ear of the learner rather than in a text.

A related pattern concerns the place of notation. Balinese vocal practice is documented as retaining textual and mnemonic conventions associated with genres such as *kidung* and *dharmagita*, yet these are described as functioning primarily as an aid to memory or an archival record rather than as the standard against which a performance is judged correct [9]. Existing accounts of Hindustani music likewise note the availability of notation systems, such as Bhatkhande's, without according them the same authority as the living demonstration of a teacher [3]. Neither tradition, according to the sources reviewed here, treats a written text as a substitute for the guru's embodied model as the final arbiter of correctness — though the extent and history of notation use appears to differ between the two, and this difference deserves closer attention than the present literature-based synthesis can offer.

The relational structures organizing this transmission are broadly, though not identically, comparable. Balinese sources describe the master-disciple relationship as embedded within specific ritual and community occasions, such that learning to sing is inseparable from learning when, and for whom, a given piece is sung [7], [9]. The Hindustani *guru-shishya parampara*, by contrast, is documented in the literature as an even more institutionally elaborated relationship, historically organized around residential apprenticeship (*gurukul*), in which the disciple's obligations extended well beyond musical instruction into domestic service and personal devotion to the teacher [5], [4]. This is one point at which the two traditions appear to diverge as much as converge: the Hindustani sources describe a more formalized, explicitly named institutional structure than is evident in the literature on Balinese *tembang*, and this asymmetry should be read as reflecting, at least in part, a difference in how each tradition has been documented by scholars, rather than necessarily a difference in underlying practice.

Finally, and most directly relevant to the question of "true knowledge," both bodies of literature describe correctness as contingent on context rather than fixed within the song itself. In the Balinese case, the principle of *desa kala patra* — place, time, and context — is described as governing whether a given *tembang* is performed appropriately, such that the same piece may be judged fitting on one ritual occasion and inappropriate on another. A structurally similar logic is described for Hindustani music, where the appropriateness of a *raga* to a particular time of day, season, or emotional register (*rasa*) is treated as inseparable from its correct performance [3]. These two forms of contextual sensitivity rest on different theological and

aesthetic foundations — one rooted in Balinese ritual cosmology, the other in North Indian aesthetic theory — and should not be treated as equivalent; nonetheless, both converge in locating the authority to judge correctness in a living teacher attuned to context, rather than in a fixed, portable rule.

Taken together, those dimensions point to a shared structural logic beneath two otherwise distinct traditions: in neither case is "true knowledge" treated as a fixed content that can be verified independently of who performs it, when, and where. Rather, correctness is judged relationally and situationally, by a recognized authority — the guru — whose own legitimacy rests on embodied, orally transmitted competence rather than on credentialed access to a written standard. This convergence suggests that the notion of "true knowledge in context," central to the present conference, may be less a claim unique to any single tradition than a broader epistemological feature of orally transmitted expertise — one made especially visible through comparison across traditions that might otherwise be assumed to have little in common.

At the same time, the comparison also exposes a limitation of relying solely on existing literature: published ethnographic accounts tend to foreground moments of successful, exemplary transmission, and are comparatively quiet on cases of failure, disagreement, or contested authority between teacher and student. They also vary in depth and institutional framing between the two traditions, which means the parallels drawn above should be read as provisional orientations for future inquiry rather than as settled equivalences. Future fieldwork attentive to these less visible dynamics — within both Balinese *tembang* pedagogy and Hindustani *guru-shishya parampara* — would be well positioned to test whether the convergence proposed here holds under the friction of everyday teaching practice.

Epistemological Re-framing of True Knowledge

The expanded theoretical discussion suggests that oral transmission in Balinese tembang and Hindustani classical vocal music should be understood as a process of social participation rather than as the simple movement of musical information from teacher to student. Ong's theory clarifies the epistemological character of oral knowledge [10]; Lave and Wenger's theory explains how learners gradually become members of a musical community [11]; the concept of embodied knowledge shows how musical competence is acquired through the body and the ear; and Small's concept of musicking demonstrates how musical meaning is created through relationships among performers, teachers, listeners, ritual participants, and cultural contexts.

From this perspective, "true knowledge" is neither entirely textual nor entirely individual. It is relational, embodied, contextual, and performative. In Balinese *tembang*, this knowledge includes the ability to understand the relationship between vocal practice and *desa-kala-patra*. In Hindustani classical vocal music, it includes the ability to participate meaningfully in a lineage-based system in which the interpretation of a *raga* depends on embodied learning, aesthetic judgment, and the *guru-shishya* relationship.

The comparison also shows that modernization does not necessarily eliminate oral transmission. Notation, recordings, educational institutions, and digital media may change the conditions of learning, but they do not automatically replace the need for embodied guidance and contextual

interpretation. The continuing relevance of oral pedagogy depends on whether these new media are integrated into living relationships rather than used as substitutes for them.

Consequently, the preservation of Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal traditions should not be limited to archiving texts, recordings, or repertoires. It should also support teachers, learners, performance contexts, community participation, and the cultural values that make the music meaningful. The most important object of preservation is not merely the musical product but the social process through which the music continues to be learned, performed, judged, and renewed.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined how oral transmission shapes the meaning of "true knowledge" within Balinese *tembang* and Hindustani classical vocal pedagogy, drawing on Ong's account of oral epistemology [10] and Lave and Wenger's account of situated learning [11] to reframe orality not as a deficient mode of knowledge transmission, but as a distinct epistemology in its own right.

This paper has also demonstrated, through a structured comparative synthesis across four analytic dimensions, that both traditions converge on a common structural logic: correctness, or "true knowledge," is judged relationally and situationally by a recognized living authority — the guru — rather than verified against a fixed, external, written standard. This convergence is articulated through the Balinese concept of *desa kala patra* [1], [6] and its structural counterpart in the Hindustani sensitivity to *raga*, time, and *rasa* [3].

However, this paper critically acknowledges its own limitations. As a literature-based comparative study rather than an ethnographic one, its conclusions rest on existing scholarly accounts that tend to foreground moments of successful, exemplary transmission while remaining comparatively silent on instances of failure, disagreement, or contested authority between teacher and student. The propositions advanced here should accordingly be read as a theoretical synthesis awaiting verification through direct fieldwork, not as confirmed empirical findings.

Even so, this paper underscores the value of comparative, cross-cultural analysis for illuminating epistemological patterns that might otherwise remain invisible within the study of a single tradition, and it highlights the particular relevance of Balinese indigenous philosophical concepts — such as *desa kala patra* — for theorizing "true knowledge" beyond frameworks developed primarily within literate, Euro-American academic contexts.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis suggests that "true knowledge" in orally transmitted vocal traditions is best understood not as a fixed, portable content, but as a contextually enacted competence, continually re-authenticated through the living relationship between teacher and student.

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