

Exploring the Dualities of ODL Experienced by the Employed University Level Students in Nepal

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Abstract

This study purposes to explore the opportunities and challenges of ODL experienced by the employed university level students in Nepal with respect to the socio-cultural context. Moreover, it delved to shed light on their strategic dynamics to workout both the work (earning) and study (learning) at a time. For the study, I attempted to use the narrative inquiry as the research design and the purposive information were collected with the help of the in-depth interview and virtual Focused Group Discussion (FGD) comprehensively. Similarly, for this, I had selected both the rural and urban parts of Nepal as the research site and the Five employed university level students studying in ODL mode were selected as the participants purposively. From the study, it was explored that the employed ODL students were under pressures of work and study and the unnecessary social stigmas in the community level with respect to the socio-physical gaps among themselves. However, such misunderstandings got reformed after the encroachment of Covid-19 along with the use of the ODL and net/internet mediated instruction everywhere. Next, the context of ODL appeared more favorable and friendly to those with the extrovert and open personalities than the introvert and close ones concerning the way of course conduction. Conversely, with some shortcomings of the ODL, the employed university level students were able to pursue their work and study together. I think this study would be purposeful to anyone who wants to be familiar with the dualities of ODL in Nepal and outsides and the respective stakeholders could be benefitted to have been reforming the possible drawbacks and welcoming the favorable situation as soon as possible. In conclusion, it overviewed the dualities of ODL in Nepal.

Keywords: ODL, Dualities, Work and study, Employed and Socio-cultural

Introduction

Context

It was a day of just before COVID-19, one of the primary level teachers phoned me with a great surprise early in the morning. I guessed he wanted to say something that it was happened accidentally. Without any delay, he told that he wanted to be ensured about the matter that one of his colleagues pursuing his university level degree without any teachers and institution in-person along with staying in a remote village of Bajhang district. To his curiosity, I replied that it might be true if he was with the access of electronic gadgets and net/internet. However, he seemed quite unsatisfied and asked me again, how it was possible to have taken the classes without any teacher and classrooms. Then, I told him that if he had listened about ODL before. He replied, "Not, never." I added, "It is the means for home-take university degree." With great surprise, he said, "Oh, my God. What I listen today!"... "It's OK", I replied and told him that such an education named as Open and Distant Learning (ODL).

Background of the Study

Along with the transformation of human civilization, the nature of education has been immensely diversified with respect to its modality of teaching and learning. It is the same in the context of Nepal as well where the ancient form of *Gurukul System* has been evolving to modernized and technologically assisted kind of Education (Pangeni, 2016). In our context, the mode of delivering the university level education has been dominated by the in-person or on-campus traditional mode of education system even nowadays. Unnecessarily, it is supposed as a more valid and reliable to everyone than the Open and Distant Learning (ODL) everywhere. However, along with the accessibility of net/internet and gadgets from urban to rural areas, such a so-called habituation and consideration has got a paradigm shift to adoring the ODL. So far I believe, it is considered as an alternative mode of education for those who are geographically far away; hence, cannot join and pursue the on-campus degree of education (Bajracharya, 2014). I think, it has become more popular and widened after the worldwide impacts of the COVID-19 as a pandemic. In Nepal, despite not having the prolonged history of ODL, it has been more effective during and after the pandemic both in the school and university levels. To fulfill the learning goals of the students, various endeavors have been rehearsed both from government and non-government sectors. The school level students were facilitated through TVs, Radios and net/internet based programs; whereas, the university level students by the various web, net/internet, Google Apps, etc. based programming. In fact, the status of ODL in the university level was in premature and upbringing phase during the pandemic so far.

In Nepal, the concept of ODL was initiated from Tribhuvan University (TU) and Kathmandu University (KU) as a supplementary source for promoting the on-campus education system in the university level (ibid.). Thereafter, along with the establishment of Nepal Open University (NOU) in 2016, the academic programs of ODL have been launched formally. However, after COVID-19, some other universities like TU, KU, Far Western University (FWU), etc. have also launched the blended (semi ODL) programs; as a result, many of the professionals and other interested students have been pursuing their Masters', Master of Philosophy (MPhil.) and Doctoral degrees nowadays.

As universally, the ODL has been operated through internet, intranet/extranet, print, audio, visual and audio-visual materials, interactive TV, etc. (Singh, et al., 2003; as cited in Boezerooij, 2006) in Nepal as well. However, it is the matter of researching on the dualities experienced by the students and teachers residing in the urban, suburban and rural areas. ODL can be considered as the most suitable platform for those who want to pursue both their work (earn) and study (learn) together (Pangeni, 2016). Such university level students may be benefitted from their earning to afford the learning and vice-versa. However, if the employed university level students are not habituated and acculturated with the nature of ODL, it might be somehow irrelevant and burden during their professional life. In Nepal, the context of ODL is sometimes blurred especially in the rural areas with respect to the connectivity. With this study, I want to explore such dualities which the employed ODL students experienced during their learn and earn at a time.

Stating the Problem

ODL can be the privilege for those who are deprived from the learning opportunities due to the on-campus education system and want to accomplish both earn and learn together (Ghimire, 2019). Similarly, it becomes the attraction for rural people, household workers and those who are busy in different professions and occupations (Pangeni, 2016). Sometimes, it is considered as the leisured based degree providing center as well.

In Nepal, most of the ODL students are employed professionals so far I know. Being it is the youngest mode of learning in Nepal, there are lots of misconceptions, hearsays and barriers in the form of virtual dynamics behind its implementation. With this study, I attempted to explore such strengths or shortcomings which were especially influenced by such hearsays along with their overburden of earning and learning together. Similarly, though it is said to have provisioned for the rural areas especially, the target people have not been benefitted due to the poor connectivity there (Bajracharya, 2009). I think the study would explore the prevalent dualities with respect to the ODL so profoundly.

The study purposed to have explored the dualities of ODL experienced by the employed university level students with respect to the socio-cultural contexts. Obviously, the study attempted to address the issues like; the dualities of ODL experienced by the employed university level students during earn and learn together; and, the socio-cultural misconceptions that influence their ODL study.

Methodological Study

This study is purely a narrative inquiry under the qualitative approach. The narrative inquiry is mainly purposed to “Exhibit the human activities as purposeful engagement in the world (Polkingorne, 1995, p.5). I think the employed university level students under ODL might have their own purpose to pursue both earn and learn at a time. For that, they have to be completely engaged to conduct the respective professions and study concurrently. During the occasion, I think, the participants would have their own lived experiences and perceptions

which needed to be explored and written down narratively. To interpret the narratives as the social events of the participants (Crotty, 2003; as cited in Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013), I used Interpretivism as a research paradigm so that the dualities could profoundly be interpreted in the context. With each of them, the reality would individually be constructed i.e. subjective and multiple in nature. And, to have explored their duality-based experiences and perceptions with respect to ODL, both in-depth interview and Focused Group Discussion (FGD) were used to generate the necessary information.

For my purpose of study, Five employed university level students pursuing their Master of Philosophy (MPhil) from Open University, Kathmandu, had been selected purposively. To have the study more inclusive, I selected both males (four) and female (one) participants both from their rural and urban situatedness.

Results and Discussion

For this study, I had purposed two research questions to have explored the dualities of employed ODL students' experiences during earn and learn at a time. During the study, I attempted to narrate their experiences with respect to the strengths and shortcomings which they had experienced both in the rural and urban settings. Similarly, their experiences which were injected due to the socio-culturally localized hear and says both in the working institutions and community levels were also explored and narrated meaningfully. Some key information gathered from the participants can be thematized in the forms of results as below:

Balancing work and study

So far, it was understood that all the participants could be able to balance both their work and study concurrently. Before their enrollment in ODL, they entertained the leisure without accomplishing any purposive tasks. Regarding this, Mira's lived experience could be narrated as:

Mira is in her early forties and teacher of a private school in western Nepal. She always gets up early in the morning and starts accomplishing the home chores and looking after the children. As the school time begins, she hurries up to reach there. Around six hours, she remains there and facilitates the classroom dutifully. Since she has known the duty is beauty, she is pretty punctual and hardworking all the time. After all, she returns at home and looks after the children. In case, she gets leisure, she scans the social media sometimes. Otherwise, she is fully busy in household chores. In a way, her life passes on before she started her study along with her work.

Conversely, Rubas experienced his lifestyle quite differently than Mira. I think, being he is a male, his responsibility might be socio-culturally alike with the common Nepali males. Before his enrollment in ODL, his way of living could be narrated as:

Rubas is in his mid-forties and teaches in university level in western Hilly part of Nepal. Per day, he goes to campus early in the morning and remains there up to midday. After

that, he keeps on doing anything without any plan, purpose and consistency. Consequently, he seems quite haphazard during his leisure.

As the above participants, rest of the others had the same habits of passing their leisure. So far, it was known, most of them were inconsistent of utilizing their leisure. However, after their commencement of the journey of earning and learning, all of them were habituated to be consistent in accomplishing both of them together. Here, I would like to explore Mira's endeavor to accomplish both earn and learn together:

Along her profession, her university level study needs to be accomplished right then together. It means she has to kill two birds with a stone at a time provided that she has to be well prepared and plan for undertaking the household chores among the family. For her support, her husband starts taking some responsibilities in the kitchen and outside. She starts being busy in pursuing her academic degree during leisure and extends the time to bed and gets up early in the morning too. During 10 to 4 in the school as well, she blooms with some kinds of brainstorming in case she entertains leisure. Really, her way of living becomes more scheduled, consistent and productive after her engagement both in earns and learns at a time.

As Mira, other participants balanced their time of earning and learning consistently. In the early days, they were in transitional phase; as a result, their trajectory of both earn and learn remained imbalanced with ups and downs. However, along with the continuous habituation, they were experienced to have accomplished both of them in systematic way.

Misconceptions and Hearsays on ODL

My participants experienced some kinds of misconceptions about ODL from their co-workers and in the community level too. In Nepal, the university level education has been chiefly dominated by the traditional mode of on-campus teaching and learning phenomena. To say exactly, since the ODL was rarely practiced in the university level, most of the people were unknown about it before the impact of COVID-19 in Nepal. To the misconceptions raised about the ODL among the co-workers and in the community level, both of my participants Rabi and Rubas's experiences could be narrated as:

Due to the on-campus university level provision, both of them were unable to pursue their post-graduate degree along the continuity of the assigned jobs till few years before. As a result, their quest of earn and learn together remained worthless. However, along with the legalization of Open University just before the COVID-19 in Nepal, little hope got nurtured in them and enrolled for graduation. During early days, both of them experienced some kinds of bitter experiences from their co-workers and neighbors. To both of them, their co-workers usually used to tease with the expressions: off-campus study? Oof! Airy and virtual platform! Busy for nothing! Let's leave it and join for the real study! Etc. Noised the same in their neighboring as well. Their neighbors used to blame for such a valueless degree achieved within the corner of the room. ...

It was somehow similar to the other participants as well. However, after the impact of the COVID-19, the misconceptions and unnecessary rumors got transformed to the acceptable and credible discourse among the co-workers and community people. It was well-known that the instruction was mediated through Radios, TVs, Google Apps, etc. wherever possible and feasible during the pandemic. With respect to the transformative discourse about the ODL mediated instruction, three of my participants (Mira, Rubas and Bam) reported that the encroachment of the pandemic acted as the milestone to have transformed the traditional hearsay and misconceptions to the civilized and credible ones. Thereafter, anyone was ensured about the status of ODL socio-culturally.

Virtual Dynamics in ODL

As in outside, the on-campus physical instruction is/was hardly possible to the ODL students in Nepal. As a result, both the teachers and students could not meet and share their identity, attitudes, behaviors, habits and other socio-cultural constructs to each other as physically as possible. Regarding the purpose of my study, I would like to explore the perceptions of the participants with respect to the facilitators' behaviors, attitudes and judgment towards them. Out of all, two of my participants (Tul and Rubas) expressed quite desperately about the virtual impacts of ODL. Their lived experience could be narrated as:

Both of them are teachers and introvert in personality. Usually, they are quite less expressive in every situation. In the ODL sessions too, both of them did as usual and thought that it had not been necessary to be expressive all the time. However, they understood the subject matter quite well and submitted the assigned task in time. Unlike some other colleagues, they partially communicated with their course instructors. However, their sincerity towards them remained higher in every respect. Nonetheless, they experienced the partial judgment during the assessment. Oof! They were treated quite inhumanly as if the facilitators were unfamiliar about their socio-cultural reality.

Similarly, rest of the other participants experienced the virtual dynamics quite variously. Being the virtual context is purely artificial with respect to the socio-cultural presence, they were obliged to behave in a way whether they liked or not. It means they experienced quite unusual things since the context was new for them.

Indeed, there were lots of misconceptions and unreliable hearsays about ODL before COVID-19 in Nepal. It was believed that the university level study should be limited to the on-campus or In-Person status only; as a result, such domination had been sustained until the establishment of Nepal Open University (NOU) in 2016. There, the teaching and learning activities were completely acculturated with *chalk-talk* mediated instruction (Pangeni, 2016). The situation was/is more widespread in rural areas than in the urban ones. Some educated and most of the common people keep on thinking that the standard of university level education is directly proportional to the on-campus education system even now. Such people believe that unless the teachers and students rehearse in the classroom physically, the students cannot read and write properly. In addition, for the socialization as well, both of them need to come in contact and communicate to each other, they think. To support this hearsay, Vigotsky (1978)

believes that the learning is a social process and the intelligence is resulted from the interaction among the people. However, it is believed that the university level students can interact through technology more flexibly and easily among the people around the world (Anderson, 2010). Surely, wherever the accessibility of net/internet, the students can join in the virtual webinar, conferences, meeting, and so on for the sake of learning.

Concerning the misconceptions experienced by the employed university level students from their co-workers and community people, it is, I think, quite normal since the provision of ODL in higher education has recently legalized in Nepal. After COVID-19, really the status and scope of ODL in higher level has immensely been towered; as a result, the universities like Tribhuvan University (TU), Kathmandu University (KU), Nepal Open University (NOU), Far Western University (FWU), etc. has been conducting various programs in the blended mode. Moreover, the voice for upbringing the purely open and distant mode higher education has been grown up recently. I think, it will act as a milestone to abolish the misconceptions and rumors after ODL in Nepal.

Similarly, ODL has become a common and comfortable platform to those who are jobholders, remote dwellers and household workers (Pangeni, 2016). Such people can pursue the university level degree along with the adoption of their profession or occupation concurrently. Participants of this research had also been accomplishing both earn and earn together from their working areas. From their statements, it can be understood that their professional lifestyles had been transformed academically because of their attachment with the ODL. On the one hand, they achieved their academic degree along with the job retention; on the other, they became techno-friendly all over their professional life.

So far, I assume, learning through ODL mode may be the best opportunity for anyone in this 21st century i.e. the era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Interested higher level students can interact with the open and virtual world with the help of ICT and teachers for retaining and generating knowledge (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). If the students are good at using the technology, they can learn anything within a minute or more, and; in case of any problem to solve, either they can use any of the suitable ICT tools or contact with the teachers immediately. Along with the merits of ODL mode, there are some drawbacks as well. As per my participants from the rural, they experienced the inconsistency of net/internet; as a result, neither they could become regular in the sessions nor submit the assignment in time. I think the digital gap has become one of the serious issues of ODL (ibid.) in Nepal. Similarly, the status of the socio-cultural understanding and sharing between the teachers and students might be poorly developed in ODL; as a result, the chances of impartiality and credibility might become lower during the system of evaluation. To overcome the issue, the ODL teachers should understand the diversity of the students first. Later on, they should try to interact with each of them more frequently. I mean that the teachers should be even-handed and virtual session-friendly. More they become so; more the ODL environment will be acceptable to the variety of the students.

Conclusion

Along with the advancement of ICT, the status and scope of ODL has been developing continuously around the world. In the context of Nepal too, it has grown up so fast after the impact of COVID-19 as a pandemic. So far, it was purposed to explore the dualities of ODL with respect to the endeavors of the employed university level students during their earn and learn together, I come to know that there are both strengths and shortcomings behind this. Firstly, there are some misconceptions about ODL among the people in Nepal. However, such have been reforming positively after the encroachment of COVID-19. Secondly, for the employed students, it has become the well accepted platform to grade up their academic career. So, I think, its scope has been grown up not only among the employed professionals but also anyone who wants to pursue the higher level degree from wherever they are in. Among lots of its strengths, this research explored some of the shortcomings too. Like, it has been suffered from the digital gap, especially in the rural areas. Similarly, because of its extreme virtual form, the students experienced some kinds of socio-cultural problems at the time of communication and interacting with the teachers. As a result, the students assumed that their teachers could not instruct and evaluate them as per their diversity. Finally, this study explored that ODL is supposed as a comfortable platform for anyone to pursue the university level degree in Nepal.

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