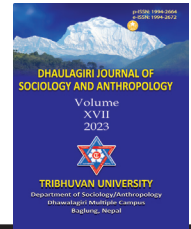


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Workplace Learning in Nepal Through the Lens of Employers, Principal, and Students

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Abstract

Workplace learning opportunities are considered to enhance an individual's occupation-related skills through work interaction. Workplace learning has become part and parcel of Nepal's policies in the last few decades. Internships and On the Job Training (OJT) have remained consistently a mode of workplace learning, but more recently, attempts have been made to execute dual vet apprenticeships. Nevertheless, studies in Nepal show a lack of well-built collaboration between education providers and employers in managing workplace learning. Furthermore, issues include a lack of access to and availability of relevant workplace learning opportunities. This paper discusses Nepal's workplace learning situation based on shared experiences by its actors, employers, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers, and students. The study uses five premises of workplace learning: learning is part of everyday life, it is spontaneous without a structured curriculum, learners need guidance and backing, an equitable opportunity to learn in a respectful environment, and integrating workplace learning with school learning proposed by Billett (2001) as a theoretical framework. The case study method suggested by Yin (2018) was used to explore their experiences. Twelve interviews, four from each group, employers, technical school principals, and students, were conducted to understand their views on workplace learning. Interview guidelines were followed for prolonged engagement in the field. The study's findings showed a lack of collaboration and preparedness among employers and TVET institutions for managing workplace learning. Workplace learning has become less of a priority for employers and TVET providers and is a neglected agenda.

Keywords: employers, school principals, students, TVET, workplace learning

Introduction

Workplace learning has gained increasing attention in Nepal in the last few years. Internships, on-the-job training (OJT), and, more recently, dual vet apprenticeships are different modes of workplace learning in practice in Nepal. The first two, which offer students workplace experience often towards the end of the course period, have been most commonly implemented since the second half of

the 20th century. In contrast, the dual vet apprenticeship that provides learners with an opportunity to learn theory in the TVET institution and practical experience at the workplace concurrently started only in the recent decade of the 21st century. Nevertheless, workplace learning existed embedded within occupational work in Nepali society for ages. Although it is challenging to locate such customary rules, the genesis of the formal social code that categorized occupations according to the caste system



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in Nepal, more specifically in Kathmandu Valley, can be traced back to the 14th century in the reign of the king, Jayasthiti Malla. In his *Jata Nirnaya* (Caste Decision), the king classified hierarchically four Varnas and 64 Castes with their prescribed job descriptions, such as Brahmin for religious work, Chhetri for armed force, Chitrakar for painting, etc. The *Varna System*, social and legal order according to the caste system, continued for a long time, and the promulgation of *Muluki Ain*, an old legal code, in 1854 is evidence (Sharma, 2004). Höfer (2004) noticed that in the transition in the occupational field, *Muluki Ain* did not specify occupational affiliation with a particular caste. However, a structured and organized family-based occupational learning that maintained transferred necessary skills from generation to generation. The long-standing skilling tradition was that the father taught his sons to follow in his footsteps toward career-oriented earning and a living, and the mother taught her daughters to follow her in learning household jobs (Shrestha, 1991). However, the practice was informal and conducted primarily within a family and their clan, which were ascribed to social responsibilities according to customary laws.

A formal workplace learning system was attempted to be institutionalized in some selective institutions, such as the Mechanical Training Center (MTC) (Present Balaju School of Engineering and Technology) in 1962 and the Butwal Training Institute (BTI) in 1963 (CTEVT, 1994). These were a handful of institutions. After establishing the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CTEVT), workplace learning expanded only in other technical schools, mainly through OJT and internship. OJT and internship are often synonymously understood for workplace learning in Nepal. It has been a part of formal TVET programmes, particularly at Pre-diploma (TSLC previously) and Diploma programmes in Nepal. Students go either for internship or OJT based on curriculum, mainly at the end of their programme, for three to six months. After completing the course at TVET institution, the students are provided learning opportunities for career-related experience through workplace learning.

Efforts were made in the past to formalize the apprenticeship programme in Nepal, but it did not function well despite some dedicated policies being introduced. For example, the Industrial Trainee Training Act of 1982 provisioned and aimed at running apprenticeship programmes to develop skills in youth through both classroom and industrial learning. Shrestha (1991) noted the lack of preparation and employers' unreadiness for stagnating policy initiatives. However, workplace learning has recently become a priority through dual vet apprenticeship programmes. Students spend five days in the workplace and one day in school a week in this learning mode. Such a programme has just begun in some selective occupations, which share only about 5 percent of total enrollment in the TVET stream (CTEVT 2020) and it would be early to generalize.

The existing situation portrays that workplace learning in Nepal has become a priority in policy; however, in practice, it hangs over time. Studies (e.g., Acharya, 2011; Caves, K. & Renold, 2018) show a lack of good collaboration between education providers and employers in the TVET system. This weak coordination among them weakens the quality (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010]) and management of workplace learning (Collin, et. al., 2011). Collaboration among/between the relevant actors to arrange workplace learning supports students to learn necessary skills effectively. This study explored how different actors, particularly principals, employers, and students, explain workplace learning in Nepal. Furthermore, it demonstrated that workplace learning is a collective social action of relevant actors that provides a significant opportunity for a learner to acquire necessary skills.

Premises of Workplace Learning

Workplace learning is considered a means of enhancing a learner's skills. Although Job shadowing, On the Job Training, Internship, and Apprenticeship are among the familiar modes of workplace learning (OECD, 2010), according to Fuller et al. (2005), they may also occur in a day-to-day work setting. Billett (2001) argues that the workplace, which is equal to a structured school setting, provides a learning environment for students. He further postulates five presumptions: learning is an ongoing process of everyday life, the workplace setting offers the curriculum, learners need guidance in making effective learning, all the learners need equal opportunity to learn, and workplace learning is integral to developing vocational skills in learners.

The first premise is that learning does not require a structured classroom setting. Regular work practice becomes a source of learning and provides the opportunity for acquiring and upgrading knowledge (Collin et al., 2011). In a study, Baral (2022) also found different processes learners go through while learning occupational skills in their day-to-day activities. Learners observe or listen, think of it, and practice to acquire skills that generally accompany their daily activities. In this case, learning is a social process (Illeris, 2007), and learners' social interaction with the people in the workplace plays a significant role in their learning.

Secondly, learning happens spontaneously, and learning without a structured curriculum makes workplace learning different from classroom learning. Although learning happens in flexible and unstructured environments compared to classroom learning, it contributes significantly to the learners acquiring skills needed to perform in the world of work. Learning in school provides students with theoretical knowledge, while workplace learning provides the opportunity to learn soft skills (Bolli & Renold, 2017). The learner gets a chance to interact with the actual work

environment, which is comparatively different from the theoretical skills gained in the school. The learning does not occur in a structured way, unlike the defined environment provided in the school (Kolb, 2015). In this case, workplace learning becomes essential to students' learning in such a situation.

Thirdly, learners need supervision and backing to ensure their workplace learning opportunities. Most workplace learning occurs in unstructured environments; however, it is also necessary to ensure that experienced persons support learners. Skills transfer is one of the crucial processes in learning. Despite the great potential for learning from professionals, it is essential to note that skill transfer, particularly from senior to junior, is subject to their willingness to share (Chuang et al., 2013). Most skills developed by an individual are often tacit. Tacit knowledge also raises an individual's value (Nonaka, & Toyama, 2005). Experienced professionals can be reluctant to transfer their tacit knowledge for fear of losing their present status or even worry about the displacement by whom they coach (Billett, 1995).

Fourthly, workplace learning opportunities must be provided in a respectful environment and accessible to all. According to Kankaraš (2021), the workplace could also be a restrictive learning environment. The hierarchy between learners and experienced employees sometimes becomes a barrier to creating a favourable environment. If the learners are not supported in learning in the workplace, they get demotivated and do not develop their skills in the necessary direction.

Finally, integrating workplace learning with school learning benefits students in transit into the world of work. It provides an opportunity to learn necessary occupational skills in a natural working environment that supports students transitioning from education to work (Pilz & Li, 2020). Learning is through memorizing and storing structured classroom settings and experiencing usual activities in informal settings (Human & Pitsoe, 2019). Workplace learning integrates everyday socio-economic realities. In this case, it is also a social activity (Vygotsky, 1980), and individuals collectively learn to develop competency (Prosser & Allen, 1925). It is a favourable learning place for the students to learn practical skills and update acquired knowledge.

All in all, workplace learning has been considered an integral part of learning for developing competent learners. Billett (2001) posited its different dimensions and elucidated its importance in imparting practical experiences to learners. The existing literature, however, hardly explains the challenges students face in the workplace due to the lack of good collaboration between/among the actors in the context of developing countries where an opportunity for workplace learning in business/industry is limited. Hence, this study contributes essential knowledge on these aspects.

Study Method

The study was carried out qualitatively using the case study method. Technical school principals, employers of business/industry where students are placed for their workplace learning, and trainee students from the agriculture, engineering, and hospitality sectors were interviewed in detail. The rationale for selecting research participants from these sectors was that the students have the highest enrolment trend in the last two years among other existing programmes. Initial interactions were made with 33 participants, including employers, school principals, and students. Drawing from the initial interactions, twelve (4 from each group), representing agriculture, engineering, and hospitality were interviewed about their interest in participating in the study. The initial interaction with the employers and principals was made virtually. However, individual interviews with employers and principals were conducted in person. The employers were busy with business, so I had to change the meeting time repeatedly.

Similarly, permission was taken from both schools and supervisors in the workplace to interact with students. Furthermore, consent was also obtained from students before taking their interviews at their favourable time. The interviews were transcribed, and themes were generated from each group's case (Yin, 2018). Themes were further interpreted and discussed by triangulating the reviewed literature. In the following sub-sections, I first narrate the experiences of these three sets of participants, analyze the information concerning the workplace learning framework, and conclude and implicate for future researchers.

The Employers' Lens

One of the core features of workplace learning is that it is rooted in the active involvement of various actors working together. This leads to multiple responsibilities, such as designing, managing, regulating, etc., for the actors on various levels. Employers also share a dual responsibility as they support providing space for learning and supervising the students. Nevertheless, employers hardly saw any benefit on their part, in providing students with opportunities for workplace learning. During the field visit, some employers were also found to charge levies from students for providing learning space, particularly for internships. In this context, one of the hotel industry employers shared, "Students will be employed in the market easily once they get a platform to learn in our industry. We have a brand, and we sell our brand." The employer was not convinced with the trainee students that they would be potent future employees for the industry. He added, "They come for a certificate, and the moment they get it, they would fly abroad." Foreign migration has been one of the challenges in Nepal as the official record shows that about one thousand youths fly abroad daily (Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security [MOLESS],

2020). However, employers in the agriculture sector have a slightly different view of trainee students. He argued that workplace learning was an excellent opportunity for the students to enhance practical knowledge; nevertheless, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the learning readiness of the students. He added, "Nobody wants to dirty their hands." A similar view was of an employer from the construction sector as he also shared, "Students do not want to dirty their clothes." In this sense, "students are only visitors, not learners." The situation shows employers have been arranging workplace learning but are unsatisfied with the existing practice.

Technical School Principals' Lens

Technical schools are the key actors in TVET programmes in Nepal. They enroll the students, manage classroom learning, and are responsible for final evaluation. Schools also manage the placement of the students during their workplace learning. According to a principal, the school sends a letter to the employer requesting placement for their students in the business/industry for workplace learning. In the interview, principals shared that they send their students to employers based on their "personal contact or relation with the employers." Principals have said workplace learning is essential but not necessarily desired in practice. One of the principals shared, "In my community, there are mostly family-based agriculture enterprises. It becomes tough to place students in workplace learning as these enterprises do not accept outsiders." He considered workplace learning a burden because searching for employers in cities has always been challenging, often far from the schools.

However, workplace learning was a strength for the principals whose schools were near an industrial area. A school principal running a diploma in mechanical engineering took it as an opportunity for both school and students. The principal added that students get to learn, and many get employed during workplace learning. Schools also benefit as students' attraction to the programme increases with employment opportunities. In this case, workplace learning was different for the principals, particularly in rural and urban areas.

Learners' (Students') Lens

The interview with trainee students also revealed their vivid experiences of workplace learning. More specifically, it was both gain and pain. Furthermore, there was a clear divide between rural and urban settings. Workplace learning was an opportunity for the students whose schools were located in the urban area. One of the opportunities is that businesses and industries are mostly urban-centred in Nepal. A student studying hospitality shared that she often gets work opportunities. She said, "Our school has contact with hoteliers, and they often hire us if they are overbooked. We also get engaged during street festivals. It is good and has become a good source of pocket money".

However, in schools located in rural settings, students either do not get the opportunity for workplace learning or have a hard time. One of the students studying agriculture shared, "Our school placed us in one of the government agriculture farms in the city area. It took two days to get there, and I had to rent a room since there were no relatives to stay with." The other trainee student who was placed for an internship painfully shared that our school sent us here (hotel) for an internship. My supervisor placed me in the sink, saying that everyone starts from there. The student initially thought that everyone would start work from there.

Further, the student shared that we are almost completing our internship, and I am still in the sink. I will never get a chance to learn in the kitchen. The student could neither complain in fear that she would be losing practical marks nor share with their teachers who were far away in the village. In the following section, I discuss these participants' lenses with Billett's framework for workplace learning.

Discussion

The presented narratives of employers, TVET school principals, and students portray workplace learning practices in Nepal. Reflecting these stories from [Billett's \(2001\)](#) framework, workplace learning in Nepal "persists a deeply rooted ambivalence towards learning" (p. 2). TVET school principals believe it is helpful for both students and schools. On the contrary, employers see it as less or unimportant. According to [Billett](#), a workplace can occur with usual activities, even in an unstructured setting. However, workplace learning is formal for both principals and students and requires a structured workplace setting, as expressed in the interviews. The school is located in a rural setting, so neither could it create a learning place in their community nor be convinced that it could happen locally. Instead, they perceived workplace learning as a structure that requires a formal business/industry. [Steedman \(2012\)](#) also argues that promoting informal workplace learning adds value as it is a cost-effective investment method compared to costly formal arrangements. In this case, workplace learning can be a space for developing entrepreneurship among the students in their community ([McCallum, 2019](#)). It can become an innovative and alternative work in the rural setting of Nepal, where a large industry is lacking.

Developing entrepreneurship also would help reduce unequal learning opportunities, which was distinctly articulated in narratives. Some students, mostly from urban settings, had better access. On the other hand, completing course requirements was a priority rather than learning in an unfavourable workplace setting for students from rural areas. Some students were placed in an inappropriate workplace and forced to perform irrelevant work. The situation also adds value to Billett's argument that learners' equitable learning opportunity needs to be ensured. On this

point, Fuller et al. (2005) also advise backing and providing support to confirm that learners are provided with relevant learning opportunities in the workplace.

Employers' lack of trust in learners was also noticeable in their narratives. The opportunity for students was created based on principals' relationship with employers. Neither was it based on employers' needs, nor did they foresee it as a future aspect. Employers repeatedly complained that students lack readiness for working in a workplace environment. According to the employer, students hesitate to dirty their hands and clothes. In other words, they are less likely to be involved in the blue-collar job. In their study, Leeper et al., (2021) found a strong desire for white colour jobs, which resulted in the failure of youth in their career progression. Although Billett (2001) envisages a respectful workplace environment for learners, their readiness for learning is equally important, along with a favourable environment. The key actors lacked ownership in implementing it. They were reluctant to support the students' learning. The situation also shows that principals are less likely to engage formally, as principals shared when they contact someone they know personally.

Further, Billett sees integrating workplace learning with school learning as a benefit for students in transitioning into the world of work. Students from urban settings were found placed in irrelevant workplace situations. Nepal is an economically least developed country with insufficient labour market absorption capacity. The informal sector still dominates, engaging over 62% of youth in employment (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2019). This significant informal sector can contribute to workplace learning, making it more relevant to developing interpersonal skills and fulfilling the required workplace venue in rural settings.

Conclusion

The opportunity for workplace learning expanded in Nepal with an expansion of TVET schools, particularly after establishing CTEVT. Internships and OJT have been popular modes of workplace learning, although attempts have been made to execute apprenticeships. However, it would be too early to generalize about the programmes. Reflecting on the premises of workplace learning, it happens in an informal setting. Workplace learning has also been an important opportunity for students to learn occupation-related specific skills in a real workplace environment. This qualitative study, nevertheless, explored a divide among the students accessing the opportunity for workplace learning. The country's limitation of formal occupational workplaces (Industries/Enterprises) needs to be considered to ensure all the trainee students are provided with the opportunity for relevant skills. Recognizing the informal sector as an alternative to a learning place seems beneficial in making students learning relevant and developing entrepreneurship. Institutions need to motivate students

to believe that workplace learning can happen along with everyday work, even in rural settings. Employers are also less convinced that workplace learning also adds value to them in the long run. Increasing employers' ownership would help students to receive better opportunities to learn relevant skills in the workplace. Similarly, students' readiness for learning counts equally to reducing the white-collar job mentality that often becomes a roadblock to an individual's career progression. Workplace learning mainly occurs in informal settings, which need a solid mechanism to ensure that quality learning opportunities are provided to all. This study mostly explored barriers to students' learning in the workplace. However, future researchers may examine the drivers that would support making learning in the workplace more effective.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:

I conducted this study independently as a part of my Research. Before conducting interviews, I obtained consent from all participants.

Consent for Publication:

Not Applicable

Availability of Data and Materials:

Data can be shared

Competing Interests:

There are no competing interests in this study.

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Authors' Contributions:

All work has been done by the author.

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