

# Self-study on Diligence as a Continuous Professional Development: A Teacher Researcher's Perspectives

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## Abstract

Nepali teachers' professional qualities are discussed from non-socio-cultural perspectives, which seem insufficient for the continuous professional development of Nepali university teachers. Teachers' professional attributes that influence their professional and pedagogical practices are rarely researched, particularly in Nepal. The purpose of this self-study was to investigate how I, a university teacher, could improve my pedagogical practices to facilitate a Research Methodology course for Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) graduates. Adapting a socio-cultural perspective, I purposefully asked myself and my 27 graduate students whom I taught in 2021 from August to October. I collected and analyzed information adapting dialogue as a research method. Making dialogues with myself and my students, I unveiled five ways of improving my pedagogical practices. They were: by (1) creating a supportive learning environment, (2) enhancing curiosity, (3) enhancing inquiry skills, (4) enhancing evaluation skills, and (5) developing continuous learning habits. My reflective journal, classroom discussions, activities, and assignments hold evidence of my improved pedagogical practices. Finally, I learnt that my enhanced diligence contributed to my learning and my student's learning as my professional development.

**Keywords:** diligence, pedagogy, professional development, self-study

## Introduction

Generally, from a teacher's perspective, diligence can be understood as a hardworking nature of a teacher. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines diligence as a steady, earnest, and energetic effort; devoted and painstaking work and application to accomplish an undertaking. From a socio-cultural understanding, diligence is different. Diligence

refers to taking a small portion of a task, performing it with care, observing effort and effect, and appreciating small efforts and effects with delight (Rinpoche, 2012, p. 222). Although diligence remains the same, the *Bhaav* (essence, sense, or meaning) varies. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, passion is the *rajas* quality among the three inherent qualities (*tamas*, *rajas*, and *satva*) that arise from action mode. Here, I sense action as positive and negative. For me, action is positive unless it appears as restlessness within me.

Moreover, *Karma* (action) is Dharma; right action is *sat karma* (an action that gives happiness). From the Vedic perspective, diligence seems a *satva*-like quality. *Satva* is a mode of goodness that develops from openness and discernment (*bibek* in Nepali). For me, the word *bibek* refers to self-knowledge that one gets effortless, i.e. by common sense, or by putting effort, i.e. through critical self-reflection. Seemingly a discerning teacher judges or evaluates oneself and others well; an open teacher is inclusive and just. Here, unlike judgmental, judgment is not harmful to others but the quality of self-assessment. Openness is akin to open-heartedness, and *bibek* to open-mindedness. Openness is a spiritual value of the workplace (Marques et al., 2007, p. 40) so does discernment.

At first glance, a diligent teacher is a hardworking teacher, and hard work is sufficient for teaching. This perception failed to account when I made sense of a diligent teacher as hardworking, open and discernible. Diligence seems akin to the living values, love and critique, (Gjotterud, 2009, p. 69), in which teacher educators enhance love and critical reflective skills. Ministry of Education (2016, p. 37) encourages to promote value-based school education. My living value, “living love”, contributes to school teachers’ professional development (Dhungana, 2020, p. 66). Love and critical reflection seem necessary qualities of teachers, particularly university teachers (Gjotterud, 2009, p. 69). Seemingly, diligence motivates university teachers and students to engage in a continuous learning process. The study (Shakya, 2020, p. 49) inspired me to explore the nature of my (university teacher) professional quality in teaching, learning and assessing, and professional development.

Although the participation of teachers and students is the basis of teaching, learning and assessing, I adapted and followed the banking method that Freire (1996, p. 64) deconstructed in my teaching and learning process in my school classrooms. Here, the banking method refers to a teacher-centred, non-dialogical, or non-participatory approach to teaching, learning, and assessing. Teachers do not believe in co-construction of knowledge who try to transfer (depositing money in the bank) their knowledge considering students ignorant. For long, I did not challenge myself to try new and innovative pedagogy in the classrooms that caused problems in my teaching, learning, and assessing and my continuous professional learning (development). For instance, my

teacher-centred pedagogy was boring and monotonous that could not motivate the students fully, including myself, to enhance openness and discernment until I adapted a participatory pedagogy.

Ministry of Education (2016) encourages adapting learner-centered pedagogy for active teaching and learning. Participatory pedagogy could be a learner-centred pedagogy in my context. Context-responsive approaches (e.g. collaborative approaches) are teacher-centred and learner-centred simultaneously as they engage educators, school teachers, and students in the teaching, learning and assessing processes (Dhungana et al., 2021, p. 14). The teachers and students could learn from the teaching, learning, and evaluating strategies. However, I did not let my students engage in teaching and assessing. My students engaged only in the learning process. While I was using the non-participatory approaches, I could not expect my students to adapt participatory pedagogy in their classrooms.

Participatory pedagogy could be supportive for me to be open and discern. The participatory approach was inclusive and reflective (Kemmis, 2007, p. 129). Jenkins's (2004, p. 3) participatory approach effectively engaged learners in the course planning frameworks. In Peace Education (Jesudason, 2019, p. 93), an embedded part of the participatory approach added transformative value to adult learning. Therefore, I saw the possibility of adapting participatory pedagogy to challenge the traditional, possibly preaching way of teaching (Koivula, 2015, p. 9) in my university classes.

Participatory pedagogy could have multiple forms. I think three ways can assure active participation: individual reflective activities (journal, blog, individual assignment and presentation); peer feedback and evaluation (paper and presentation); group (community of practice) feedback and evaluation. Participatory assessment is the active participation of the students in the assessment process (Partti et al., 2015, p. 482). According to them, there are three functions of students' assessment: assessment of learning (to examine the students' achievement to ensure learning outcomes); assessment for learning (to provide feedback and direction for future activities); and assessment as learning (to produce learning in itself by involving students actively in the assessment process). For instance, I evaluated students (previous group of students) to examine whether they achieved learning outcomes or not (e.g. in the end-semester assessment). That seems like an assessment of learning. I assessed students providing feedback intending to improve their understanding (in the in-semester assessment). That seems like an assessment for learning. I involved students in their assessment process (e.g. self-evaluation, peer evaluation in the in-semester assessment) that seems assessment as learning. Thus, participatory assessment appears to be the assessment of/for/as learning.

My concern was to facilitate students with possible ways to prepare them to face the world being active, open and discernible. However, I did not get such a supportive learning environment in my time. Thus, the participatory approach seemed the context responsive approach for creating balance in cognitive and affective learning domains as it envisioned developed 21st-century skills among students. According to Johnston et al. (2011), a critical student needs to have the following personal qualities and values:

*(1) a well-developed, robust, confident and aware self, able where necessary to challenge and reconstruct existing understanding and modes of operation; (2) an awareness of the values, priorities and power structures implicit in a context and a capacity to be constructively critical to them; (3) appropriate values such as respect for reasons, an inquiring attitude, open-mindedness, independent-mindedness. (p. 80)*

Knowing about the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills of students, being a teacher, I felt the urgent need for total reconstruction of my pedagogical practices in my class. I understand it is not a one-shot task; it needs slow and steady progress through this transition stage of implementing and realizing the need for a more flexible, discerning, and open approach.

The aim of this study is to explore ways of improving my pedagogical practices to facilitate a Research Methodology course for STEAM graduates. In the following section, I shared what methods supported me to explore ways of enhancing my pedagogical practices.

### Methods

I adapted self-study research methodology inspired by Whitehead (2009, p. 107) and LaBoskey (2004, p. 820). According to them, teacher-researchers engage in the inquiry process intending to transform themselves first and then to their students by critically self-reflecting on professional (every day) practices. I, a university teacher, found the self-study methodology an appropriate approach to explore ways of improving my pedagogical practices from my regular classes. In everyday teaching and learning, I found dialogue as a research method appropriate to collect information and analysis (DeLong, 2020, p. 89). So, I purposefully selected 27 graduate students whom I taught in 2021 from August to October as my participants for inquiry. Making dialogues with myself (i.e. critical/self-reflection) and students, I collected information in my reflective journal, classroom discussions, activities, and assignments. Critical skill plays a vital role in the self-study process. Unless students develop critical skills, they may not be openly critical to teachers when asked who I am as a teacher and how I can improve my teaching, learning, and assessing by their teacher. Therefore, before asking the questions, I analyzed the recorded class video of 21 hours to explore students' criticality. I assumed

all the students as critical and engaged them in the inquiry process, which might have influenced the results.

Engaging the students in the information collection process, I asked them to send their answers privately via email to maintain anonymity. Intending to engage in the analysis process, I designed group activity to reduce collected information (email information and activity) into codes, develop them into categories, and make sense. Then, like Willink and Jacobs (2011, p. 2), critically self-reflecting, I drew on my professional development evidence that emerged as categories which I developed as themes through my reflective journal (4 pages), assignments, classroom discussions, and activities. The participation of the students in the analysis process and debriefing the study makes the research process participatory and ensures the trustworthiness of the research. I took oral consent with the students in the first class.

### Results and Discussion

I talked to myself and students and critically self-reflecting. The continuous dialogues emerged into the following five themes that hold the evidence of my ways of improving pedagogical practices.

#### Creating a supportive learning environment

My adaptation of participatory pedagogy created a supportive learning environment. Perhaps it was evidence of my motherhood, the qualities of openness and inclusiveness. For instance, I created a safe open space for applying knowledge into practice as a student said *your teachings made me realize that whatever you are discussing in the session has its implication and you are not facilitating but supporting us to generate learning through self-practice. I can relate the 5 E-model (engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate) that was based upon the experiential learning philosophy of John Dewey.*

I created a safe space where students could enhance their application skills. A student called me *you are a teacher as a friend. You are soft and comfortable...It feels like you are consoling me.* The student meant to say that I was friendly. Another student said *you are a teacher as a rhythm because you spoke in a smooth flow in a soft voice, which was pleasing to me.* The student found me gentle.

Similarly, students find me as *teacher as a relative, teacher as a mother.* Perhaps the students found me caring and loving. A student said on the first day, *I found you as a relative; I knew you from long before.* Thus, I created a supportive learning environment. Perhaps it was because I adapted participatory pedagogy. Or maybe I had the qualities of openness and discernment. Here, I have realized that I could enhance my pedagogical practices by creating a more supportive learning environment for the graduates.

### Enhancing curiosity

My participatory teaching enhanced curiosity. My small effort of participating students in open discussion using multiple art forms (e.g. pictures, metaphors) enhanced students' curiosity. As curiosity is an inherent quality, fostering it enhances goodness (the *Bhagavad Gita*). In the beginning, intending to enhance curiosity, I integrated art. Here, art refers to the images of Gods and Goddesses as metaphors of researchers (e.g. interpretivist, criticalist, postmodernist) that I downloaded from the internet and developed a collage. Then, I narrated a story/myth to facilitate multiple paradigms. I could use the metaphors for fisherman (e.g. Taylor & Medina, 2011, p. 2) and limit it by explaining. However, I used the Hindu Gods and Goddess to take students' minds which was never explored before. For instance, a student said *I never thought that the use of Gods and Goddesses as metaphors could connect the concept of multiple paradigms. In the beginning, I was surprised. I could not connect. But when you related to the qualities of the researcher with the qualities and actions of Gods and Goddesses, I could easily understand.*

Connecting the fisherman metaphor (Taylor & Medina, 2011, p. 3) with the Hindu mythical characters, I described *Narada* as a post/positivist fisherman who used to report the happenings observing from a distance. Then I explained *Parvati* as a critical fisherman who reached human beings and explored issues intending to support and explore ways. Further, I described *Shiva* as a postmodern fisherman who uses multiple *kalaa* (art) in his teachings. Considering *Ardhanarishwor* as an integral fisherman, I explained the principle of *samasti* (oneness, completeness, or non-dualism). Students began to use the metaphor to make sense of what they learned in the class.

I realized I was a spiritual teacher because a student said, "In our first class, I thought you were a religious teacher because you shared the pictures of spiritual value and interpreted the pictures in the same way." Perhaps my use of collage made the student believe that I was spiritual. My small effort of art integration influenced the students.

For instance, a student said *while doing a literature review, I felt like my grandmother who gets confused after collecting different vegetables from the kitchen garden but unable to decide which to cook.* The collection of literature was like collecting vegetables, reviewing was observing which to select, and arranging what to mix for appropriate curry for her family. For instance, a student said *I developed searching skills of different related materials from the internet and websites.* Another student remarked *I feel you seem to be an inquirer who often raises a question on our perception in speech and writing.* Another student called me *a teacher as a researcher.* Perhaps, the student realized that I was 'walking the talk'. I was not only teaching how to conduct research. Instead, I researched with them as a part of teaching and learning activities. Perhaps it was going beyond

traditional schooling that focuses on testing, ignores students' knowledge, and makes them feel invisible and marginalized (Gonzalez et al., 2005, ix). Similarly, a student called me *teacher as a drone camera*. Hopefully, the student meant to say (hopefully) that I observed them and their activities minutely.

Not only to make sense of my role, they also chose metaphors such as 'fisherman', 'gardener', 'Narada' and 'farmer' to make sense of their role as researchers in the initial classes. Thus, I enhanced some students' curiosity adapting participatory pedagogy as some students could metaphorically make sense of research paradigms and the qualities of researchers. Here, I realized that my pedagogical culture was non-participatory, non-metaphorical. I think the non-participatory approach was not sufficiently enhancing my openness and critical reflective skills.

### Enhancing inquiry skills

Moreover, I adapted participatory learning. For instance, I used a technique, reading-together, that enhanced students' inquiry skills. Inquiry skill is an integral part of research students. Although we had a culture of asking questions for seeking knowledge in the Eastern Wisdom Tradition (e.g. teachings of Buddha, Prasna Upanishad, the Bhagavad Gita), I could not realize the value of questioning or inquiring thoroughly. Reading together is a simple reading strategy for reading journal articles, book chapters, or reference materials. We read together in two ways: before class and while facilitating. For instance, I reminded students to go through the reading materials before the class. This small effort was meaningful to many of the students. For example, a student said *firstly, we get instructions to read and understand the materials. She (I) shares them before the session. Perhaps it was inquiry-based learning. Different queries come up in our minds while going through those materials. We understand some concepts. We explore some. But still, some things remain as questions in our minds. Through this process, we involve (entirely) from our side.*

Reading together was adequate, but I had never practised before. Perhaps my teachers always promoted reading-alone, in which students and teachers read alone in different spaces and times. Then teacher explains what is in the texts, and students listen to the teachers.

Here, I realized that reading-together enhanced the curiosity and participation of some students. The curious mind is an inquiring mind. Participatory pedagogy enhanced exploring skills. Although we have a rich culture of 'reading together with teachers' in the Buddhists' teaching practices, we might have forgotten our socio-cultural practices. However, a small effort made a difference. Perhaps my pedagogical culture was non-participatory, that is, reading alone, insufficient to enhance my inherent quality and openness.

### Enhancing evaluation skills

I empowered learners by enhancing their evaluation skills to evaluate themselves and their peers. I believe that all of us are discernible (*the Bhagavad Gita*). For instance, a student said *your role was to guide, explain, elaborate and evaluate our performance...that enabled us ...rather than filling knowledge*. Perhaps he could differentiate when he was ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and when he had to say ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Here, I felt I was going beyond my long-practised disempowering banking approach. I think a participatory assessment activity can empower the students in better ways.

For instance, I can engage the students in a peer/group assessment the way I did with my previous semester students. I invited students for peer assessment of an art-based reflection activity in the activity. We selected a content/topic, paired up/ formed a community of practice, discussed and decided evaluation criteria, divided work, observed/evaluated the presentation/text, shared evaluation, discussed, reflected, and shared experience. In the process, we had a conflict. I took the lead and resolved the dispute. In that participatory assessment activity, the leadership of the teacher, inclusive/balanced members of evaluators, and facilitator/s and students’ practice of a culture of respect were prerequisites. Intending to engage the students in the reflection process, I asked why participatory assessment is needed. According to my reflective journal, the students said *participatory pedagogy is for empowerment, integration (arts & ICTs), pedagogical inventiveness, critical-self reflection, continuous improvement, mutual relationship (among students and facilitators), intended & unintended learning outcomes (cooperation, trust, collaboration, respect, care), validation of community of practice, ownership, motivation (for active participation in the class activities), and improvement of curriculum*.

Reflecting on this success story, I felt motivated to continue the participatory assessment activity. However, I need to be ready to face possible contextual issues in participatory assessment as it is not common practice in diverse contexts. I think teachers’ own best practices motivate more than others.

### Developing continuous learning habit

Continuous learning is an integral part of students and teachers. As our life is *chakra*-like, learning is an ongoing lifelong process. Participatory pedagogy developed a sense of learning as an ongoing lifelong process among students as I connected curriculum with everyday life. For instance, a student said *you taught to connect everything in daily life and actions. I will know about myself. I think you are a teacher as a bridge*. The student found me as a connector who linked curriculum with everyday life. My small efforts of asking students the question like-is it relevant to your context? Who are you? What is your concern? Why are you concerned? Students developed continuous learning habits to



(re)conceptualize themselves and their research methodology. A student said *in this stage, a teacher can never be a sufficient source of information to all the students with their personality, capability, learning habit, etc. So the teaching profession is a profession that opens a way of life learning from different generations that pass each year to year, and teachers' role is to support students' learning.*

Perhaps I was motivating students for continuous learning. For instance, a student said *you are a teacher as a motivator. You kept on motivating to come out of the comfort zone.* The student meant to say I developed a learning habit (hopefully). Some students critically reflect on their assumptions and freely engage in discourse, which is a transformation process (Mezirow, 2000, p. 31). Continuous learning habits would be the constant development of professional qualities and pedagogical practices.

Reaching here, I realized that I enhanced my diligence that contributed to my learning and my students' learning as my professional development to some extent. For instance, I developed openness and critical self-reflection. When a student said *I learnt collaborative working skills*, I realized that I was open to promoting more collaborative learning activities. It is because a student aspired for more joint activities as he said *it may be better to give some more group works to develop collaborating works in learning.* I was promoting openness through collaborative activities. However, it was insufficient.

Similarly, when another student suggested me for adapting multiple online platforms in my teaching process, I explored my inefficiency in using enough online educational tools. I could use more tools to facilitate through online teaching and learning context. Thus, my self-judgment (which I did by critically self-reflecting) and openness were integral in my teaching, learning, and assessing.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From this study, I explored context-responsive five ways of improving pedagogical practices to facilitate STEAM graduates. The five ways are: by creating a supportive learning environment, enhancing curiosity, enhancing inquiry skills, enhancing evaluation skills, and developing continuous learning habits. Improvement of pedagogical practices was evidence of my continuous professional development.

However, at times I faced challenges. For instance, when I asked students to respond to my question- How can I improve my teaching and learning?-I sensed a kind of doubt developed among the students. At times they doubted me as I might seem not/less confident about my content, pedagogical, research knowledge and skills. Some other times, I took their critical comments negatively. However, I continued managing critical awareness and strategically enhancing students' necessary skills, i.e., encouraging students to integrate multiple forms of art (e.g. poem, story) in teaching, learning, and assessing in general and particularly in research. Art integration supported STEAM

graduates (Barber et al., 2020, p. 380) to enhance research knowledge and skills. Using various art forms as logic/genres in research engages researchers in transformative learning (Luitel & Taylor, 2019, p. 10). I think students find art integration meaningful as a student called me *teacher as a mirror*. The student meant that I metaphorically showed them the value of reflection in my first class, and I was clear about the course's learning outcomes. I think using multiple forms of arts can enhance learners' critical, creative, evaluative, and integral skills in research.

From the findings of this research, I recommend further investigations in future. A collaborative self-study would be interesting to compare the results of more than one class, course, school, university, and nation. Quantitative research with a significant sample size would help many teachers and educators of diverse contexts to compare results.

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