

Teachers' Embracement of Communities of Practice in the Nepalese Context

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Abstract

This study explores the role of an ELT association in building communities of practice (CoPs), which is generally understood as a professional gathering for both personal and professional growth. Though this is a common trend across the fields at present era, it exclusively studies the case of NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association), its initiatives in building CoPs, and its impacts on teachers' professional lives. The main purpose of this study is to observe teachers' perceptions of CoPs, examine the role of NELTA in helping to form a learning community, and assess its effectiveness. The study has been initiated with a detailed study of existing literature on CoPs, guided by a few research questions and followed by data collection through questionnaires and interviews. The interpretation is based on an in-depth study of the ideas of three teacher-educators who are referred to as contributors in this study. At last, the conclusion duly acknowledges that the initiatives of ELT association in forming CoPs have been successful and meaningful in the Nepalese context.

Keywords: Challenges, Communities of Practice (CoPs), Impact, Role of ELT association, Teachers' perception

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Introduction

In this fast-growing world, classroom dynamics have drawn global attention. Conventional wisdom about the instructional phenomenon has little bearing on the present-day scenario. This is because the nature of the course contents, teaching philosophy, educators' advocacy for learners, teachers' own understanding of the classroom dynamics, and tacit knowledge essential for the learners' lives have leapfrogged to a larger extent. Hence, a teacher is expected to be proactive. As a main change agent of learners, a teacher is desired to be updated, knowledgeable and resourceful. Theoretically, it sounds okay; however, on the real ground, a large mass of teachers is target of the society in the sense that teachers are often thought to be unsuccessful whenever students miss the expected competencies to be achieved. The general assumption is that it is none other than the teachers who are supposed to overcome all other inadequacies related to students' academic performance. But the question arises whether this is possible

without teachers' professional development (TPD). Out of various strategies of teachers' professional development, building Communities of Practice (CoPs) is often seen to be a very effective strategies to identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge (Serrat, 2010).

When sharing and interaction were realized as very effective agents for fostering learning, the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) got prominence (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). It is professionals who create CoPs to share their best practices with each other or among the members who have similar interests in enhancing their professional development. The professionals in CoPs create new knowledge to advance the domain of professional practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) centered on the interactions between novices and experts, and the process by which newcomers create a professional identity. The interaction may occur face-to-face or virtually.

Though it is a sound idea to create CoPs for professional development, it's difficult to keep the community intact. Its longevity depends on the extent the common goal of its members is attained. Above all, the will to learn by sharing stands atop. Trust, respect and regard for the seniors and experts play a vital role in giving life to the CoPs. The question arises of how to build CoPs. ELT associations create an obligation to its members to build CoPs for both personal enhancement along with the promotion of quality education (Nelis, 2001). They help teachers be more innovative in introducing new trends in ELT. Teachers are sensitized to new challenges that they have to face at every step of their teaching career. In this regard, Loyo (2001) has a similar opinion and asserts the importance of having an ELT association because it helps the teachers develop the best possible working conditions and collective interest of teachers.

Here, in this article, I wish to talk about the teachers' perception of Communities of Practice (CoPs), the role of ELT associations in building CoPs, and the extent to which the members can benefit from it. The study has tried to serve three main purposes: To study how ELT professionals perceive the concept of CoPs in the Nepalese context; to investigate how the ELT association support its members to build CoPs; and to assess how these CoPs contribute to the professional development of its members.

And I wish to answer few questions, like, why is it important for prospective teachers to understand and internalize the concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs)? Can/ does an ELT association contribute to building CoPs? Who and what can support teachers in building CoPs? And What impact do CoPs have on teachers?

Theoretical Background

For the theoretical base of this work, Lave and Wegner's work on CoPs has been exploited to the fullest, followed by Li's, Gnanwali's and a few others.

Communities of Practice (CoPs): Tools, Needs, and Means of TPD

In 1991 A.D., Wenger and his colleague coined the term Communities of Practice (CoP) to acknowledge the essentiality of professional networks for sharing and exchanging information and for interacting with peers in their workplace. To them, Communities of Practice (CoPs) concern the whole person acting in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.49). Further, they clarify it as a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. It is all about an individual's and group's goals in terms of their professional development. It is a bottom-up approach to growing personally and professionally where the concerned parties share their common concerns, their common issues and common agenda that they think must be addressed. It is often and always of a sharing nature where best practices are expected to be shared among the communities of practitioners. Hence, participating physically or virtually in discussion and sharing fosters learning. Li et al. (2009) have nearly the same opinion about the concept of CoPs, yet they differ in the use of terminology in the sense that they describe it as learning among practitioners in a given social environment. By social environment, they mean learning through collaboration and cooperation in a group. Their dire focus is on how effective strategy CoPs are.

Range and coverage of CoPs have been on the go since the inception of this term in the early 90s. It was introduced to highlight the importance of learning by sharing in the same workplace among professionals. In 30 years' duration, the research on CoPs has shifted from an interest in understanding the interactions between novices and experts in a particular field to investigations of the personal growth of individuals within a group (Li et al., 2009). It is more concerned about growing personally and professionally rather than learning certain skills from the expert. Now it believes not all knowledge exists in explicit forms such as books. Knowledge is also tacit, residing in individuals in any CoP, and is gained through real-world experiences. Ng and Tan (2009) also contend that participation in communities of practice serves to bridge the gap between the explicit knowledge that one gains through formal learning and the tacit knowledge which is found in CoPs. The conversations which take place within CoPs serve to disseminate tacit knowledge, and the extent to which such transfer of knowledge is successful depends on the creation of a climate for collaboration. Wenger (1999) in this regard mentions: CoP as an entity bounded by three interrelated dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, (p.4). Further, he elaborates the term 'Mutual engagement' as something represents the interaction between individuals that leads to the creation of shared meaning on issues or a problem. 'Joint enterprise' is the process in which people are engaged and working together toward a common goal. Finally, 'shared repertoire' refers to the common resources and jargon that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group. The three dimensions attempt to outline the process of individuals'

interactions within CoP groups, but it is not clear what distinguishes them from other group structures.

Role of ELT Teachers' Association in Building a Learning Community

Community generally implies a certain mass with a common interest and goal. Reil and Polin (2004) define the identity of the members of a learning community by their role and responsibility in their group. Learning community develops a certain unique texture having its own culture and ways of communication. In the long run, it gains a powerful status to have its say in a profession. And for this, the ELT association works as a booster.

Before I count the work, an ELT Teachers' Association does, let me present a scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yadav (2021) writes:

the lockdown caused by the COVID emergence in 2020, plus its sequel in 2021 gave us restlessness at home, the agony of uncertainty, and for some of us the pain of losing a job and, worse, of losing one loved ones. The second wave of the COVID-19 hit hard. Lots of stories were not shared...(p.1).'

The scenario speaks for everything. This is the common case for all teachers around the globe. In such a dreadful situation, the ELT association like NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association) must be acknowledged. It did a lot. When teachers were locked inside their homes, it developed a kind of strategy to bring the teachers back to an online forum where they got opportunities to meet and share their feelings, emotions, and others. It started organizing various online training, conferences, symposiums and workshops for its members. The prospective members were encouraged to be technocrats so that they would survive professionally. The members of the association were benefited a lot. Most of them came to connectivity, learnt how to work online, got an insight into various web tools, and lots of others. It created an obligation to build different learning communities. And those who were the members were the pioneers and were the first to run online classes.

To create CoPs and to develop a sense of belonging to that community, ELT associations have been playing an invaluable role in the Asian context. Teachers have different working contexts with different professional issues. They themselves are diversified in terms of understanding the nature of the profession, capacity to deal with professional issues, and willingness to grow personally and professionally. These are naturally common scenarios for teachers around the globe. In this regard, the role of teachers' professional association appears inevitable. For example, the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA), Bangladesh English Language Teachers' Association (BELTA), Malaysian English Language Teachers' Association (MELTA), All India Network of English Teachers (AINET), Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT), and many more like such have a significant contribution to the formation of CoPs for professional development of

its members. These associations bring the teachers to a common platform. In other words, they create opportunities for teachers to come together as mentioned by Gnawali (2016) stated in Odhiambo and Ngayni (2007). He highlights the importance of the ELT Association for enlarging connectivity among them. I believe connecting the fellow members is the first step in building CoPs.

Though the area and theme of this study are common to many researchers, this study exclusively focuses on the significance of building CoPs for the professional growth of teachers. It also sheds light on the role of the ELT association, especially NELTA in the Nepalese context in creating CoPs and its impacts on members.

Method

The study proceeded with a desktop approach whereby I gained deep insights into the impact of CoPs on the professional development of teachers. For this, I came across Gnawali's work, and then read Wegner's and others. I reflected on my own personal experiences of being a part of CoPs and its impacts on my professional life. As a mini-research, I reached out with a set of questionnaires to some prospective teachers who are active members of their professional associations and have been collaboratively working as professional community members. The targeted teachers were from my own province which comprises eight districts, from which two from each district were purposively selected maintaining gender balance. And three of them were asked for a virtual discussion on some of the issues which were not clear in their written response. The main portion of the discussion is based on the outcome of those three teachers' views and insights. I had rounds of discussions with some colleagues on the issues above. The written responses to the questionnaire were used only as a reference for the interpretation.

Interpretation and Discussion

I took the interview of three teacher educators/teacher-leaders whom I considered as contributors, referred to as C1, C2, and C3. The discussion was centered around the following issues: the concept of CoPs and its importance in TPD, the contribution of ELT association to building CoPs, the impact of CoPs in the professional growth of its members, constraints and challenges in building CoPs, and the way to nurture it.

Table 1*Contributors*

S.N.	Contributor	Designation	Roles/ Responsibilities
1	The contributor first hereafter referred to as C1	High school teacher/ trainer/ Branch head of one of the districts of NELTA of Madhesh province	--Cooperating, collaborating and conducting TPD-related events --plan/ organize and execute??
2	The contributor second hereafter referred to as C2	High school teacher/ trainer/ Branch head of one of the districts of NELTA of Madhesh province	--Cooperating, collaborating and conducting TPD-related events --plan/ organize and execute??
3	The contributor third hereafter referred to as C3	Associate professor/ HoD of a Department	Lead the department/ plan and organize research-related activities

Teachers' Perception of Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Communities of Practice (CoPs), a recent trend of TPD (Teachers' Professional Development) has been a common trend across different professional fields. When asked about their perception of the term 'Communities of Practice' they have similar ideas. Both C1 and C2 defined it as a professional gathering where the members interact over issues and challenges they want to overcome. C1 further elaborated that CoPs itself is a platform where they get opportunities to discuss professional issues. In the same way, C2 described it to be a gathering to learn collectively. C3 NELTA at the local, provincial and central.

When we study the literature on the concept of CoPs, we find the commonality. Lave and Wegner (1991) and Li et al (2009) seem to have focused on interactions between novices and experts in a particular field for the investigations of personal growth. However, the study has an intended question of whether each ELT practitioner has embraced this term. While in an informal talk about the concept with a few teachers, I found them unaware of it. Those who are the members of ELT association (NELTA in the case of English language teachers in Nepal) are somehow better than those who are not. This is the public discourse in the educational arena.

Importance of Building CoPs

The study found that building CoPs is very useful for professionals because it helps them to grow personally and professionally. It creates a forum for collective learning. Sharing common interests, solving profession-related problems,

discussing professional issues in groups, taking responsibility for common growth, introducing new practices as to the urgency, and developing a sense of collegiality among its members are some of the core concerns of CoPs. There has been a lot many researches on the importance of CoPs which acknowledges their needs for teachers' growth. Hermita, et al (2021) who studied the importance of CoPs in the Indonesian context write about their importance for continuously improving teachers' competence. In the same way, Mercieca (2017) claims its importance as the way to provide a regular, localized and supportive environment.

Role of ELT Association in Building CoPs

Inherently, human beings possess an interest in gathering to form a group or society in any form. Hence, professional gatherings appear to be natural, but in practical life, it does not happen that way. Here, a sharing culture is practised where the members are a part of any professional organization. A professional without any formal organization can hardly be seen sharing and exchanging ideas, knowledge, skills and expertise. In this regard, when an issue of the role of the association in the building was posed, the contributors had similar opinions. C1, one of the contributors to this study, duly acknowledged its role in doing so. NELTA (an ELT association) in Nepal creates a forum for English language practitioners to gather professionally. It energizes them by providing different opportunities, like, organizing training by providing experts from home and abroad. This training is generally relevant to their daily professional life. NELTA creates an obligation to assume some roles to lead the community. Different responsibilities are asked to be borne by its members where they experience and feel like growing professionally. It always backs up the support to keep involved in teachers' professional development-related activities, like, training, workshops, seminars, national and international conferences, and writing for publication.

C2, the next contributor, had a similar claim regarding the role of ELT association in the formation of CoPs. He said that NELTA always focuses on professional development and provides a venue for exposure at the deeper level which enhances their proficiency. It helps in developing positive perceptions culminating in pro-activeness in the members. Helping in developing collegiality is another important contribution of NELTA.

Mechanism of NELTA to Help Build CoPs

Forming a learning community itself is a big feat. And helping to form the community paves the way for other professionals to join it. In the Nepalese context, NELTA has a strong mechanism to build CoPs. While talking on this issue with all three teachers' educators, who are the main contributors to this study, and while analyzing the response from the questionnaire, I got a clear idea of how NELTA's mechanism works for building CoPs. First, it goes with the 'teacher-educator hunt' scheme through which a teacher-educator is identified. He/ she is asked to lead a

team forming a group. Then, any relevant professional event is organized and an expert is sent to deal conduct the event. Along with the delivery of the content, the expert, and the participants were brainwashed regarding joining the association and forming a learning community. Opportunities are created for the members for paper presentations, article writing, proposal writing, designing training sessions and their delivery, and lots more like such. Sometimes, members of such communities are given opportunities to get exposure in their fields through different scholarship schemes provided by different international agencies.

NELTA asks each branch at the district and provincial level to devise short and long-term strategic planning for the smooth running of the communities and keeping ahead of all professional events. Different committees and sub-committees, like, research editorial committee, training coordinating committee, executive committee and the like as to the requirement. Planning, implementation and evaluation are done through top-down and/or bottom-up approaches. With the spirit of developing teacher leadership, it has achieved a bigger success.

Challenges of Building CoPs

While discussing the issue above with the contributors, they focused on five different sorts of challenges: (a) psychology-related challenges (attitude, wrong perception about the ELT association, lack of interest, etc.), (b) Real-ground challenges (membership sizes, geography, teachers geographically dispersed, lack of technological knowledge, (c) expensiveness, (d) over-consumption of time by an institution and (e) ignorance.

All the contributors emphasized that some teachers are not well aware of its importance. Some are victims of culture- the culture of not sharing nor asking to share. The contributor 1highlighted that in some cases, teachers were found demotivated because of the unavailability of monetary benefits in learning communities. Managing time is also challenging for some teacher professionals because some of them are busy from morning to night in their workplace. Teachers are geographically dispersed. They cannot work together because they live away from each other. They need to take the help of technology, that is, they need to have a laptop, internet connection and the like. These all cost money which is also problematic. Furthermore, permanent job status in the Nepalese context is also a hurdle for some of the teachers. Once they enjoy it, they think they need not require anything else then. Contributing time, energy and money is unquestionably a bigger issue in building a community of practice.

Impacts of CoPs on its Members

It has been observed that communities of practice have had a big impact on the personal and professional growth of teachers. ELT association, like NELTA which keeps helping teachers form learning communities, have produced many more polished professionals in different zones of the country. Lots of teachers have been

good writers since they joined the community. Many more of them have been good trainers, good educators and good teachers after they joined it. Some of them have already been noted by academicians across the country. Their impact is seen in their classrooms. Developing teacher-leadership is not less achievement of CoPs. There is a lot of practical evidence that those who were very poor in using technology for classroom purposes have been good technocrats.

Conclusion

A large number of English language teachers, whether novice or experienced, and teacher-educators across the nation have internalized the spirit of Communities of Practice (CoPs). They have understood its meaning in their professional life. Building a learning community sharing, caring and exchanging knowledge, skills and expertise along with nurturing the community seem to be their priority. This is so because CoPs have had big impacts on their personal and professional growth.

NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association), an ELT association in Nepal has contributed a lot in different ways. It encourages the teachers to gather together for collective learning, develops a sense of professionalism in them, and helps them to grow professionally. It provides opportunities to get exposure through training, seminars, workshops, conferences, and write-ups. Developing teacher leadership is its main concern. Because of NELTA's initiation, a great many teachers have been identified as noted professional members across the country. From trainers to presenters, from writers to reviewers, and from teacher-educators to teacher-leaders, NELTA's contribution cannot be underestimated. In short, its initiation in building communities of practice is worth highlighting.

The study recommends the prospective teachers to form a learning community, technically called CoPs (Communities of Practice) so that they can be grow personally and professionally. It will create a platform for them to share their information and knowledge and can update culminating in their professional development. They can bring in positive changes in their practice of dealing with their professional affairs.

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