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Online Classes in Tribhuvan University: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This article aims at identifying the opportunities and the challenges of implementing the online classes in Tribhuvan University (TU) which is the oldest and the largest university in Nepal. The opportunities and challenges have been identified based on the information collected through comparison of the involvement of the students in the face-to-face class before COVID-19 and the online class after the effect of Corona Virus in TU. I have collected the necessary information through naturally occurring environment involving the bachelor level fourth year students who have been studying English education in a TU campus. Although the article discusses some crucial factors that lead to the realization of the need of online class in Nepal, it attempts to justify the emergence of COVID-19 as an opportunity to commence the hot discussion focusing on the need of online classes and its implementation in TU. However, the implementation seems to be more challenging due to some common and hidden problems realized during the implementation of the online class in one of the oldest constituent campuses, i.e. Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus (MRMC), Ilam. Online classes can be run more successfully if the the common and hidden problems are addressed that have been identified in this article. The article indicates some serious challenges of implementing the online classes in TU; however, online classes can be implemented even in TU more successfully addressing those challenges if the stakeholders take some serious steps to address those challenges.

Key Words: attitude, constructivism, COVID-19, education system, and pedagogical shift

Introduction

E-learning has become a need and demand of the 21st century. Kidd (as cited in Pour, et al., 2010) views, "There is no single evolutionary point of which the

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e-learning originated nor there a single agreed definition of e-learning; e-learning has evolved in different ways since 1960s"(p.1). Campell (2004 as cited in Pour et al. 2010) clarifies, "In higher education sector, 'e-learning' refers to the use of both software-based and online learning" (p.1). Nowadays, online learning has become a part of many educational institutes in the world. Although the need of nationwide online learning has been realized in Nepal only after the serious effect of CVOVID-19 in the educational field, the emergence of COVID-19 is only the immediate factor to realize its need and demand in Nepal. Indeed, there are some other more considerable factors that have led to the need of applying online learning even in the context of Nepal. An evidence of such need is the establishment of Nepal Open University (NOU) in 2016 AD that has been applying the online learning in Nepal more successfully. However, the oldest and the largest university in Nepal is the Tribhuvan University (TU) which has been running its almost all of the classes through face-to-face mode that has become impossible to do so during the COVID-19. As a result, TU has been making some efforts to implement the different modes of online learning only after the attack of the COVID-19 which has become an immediate factor to commence the online learning in TU; but we need to realize other some crucial factors that has led to the implementation of the online learning whether there would be the effect of COVID-19 or not.

One of the most considerable factors is the pedagogical shift from behaviorism and cognitivism, which were more popular mainly in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, to cognitive constructivism (Piaget, 1977) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which have been gaining much popularity primarily after 1980s onwards (Fields, 2019). For, Kidd (as cited in Pour et al. 2010) "constructivism and cognitivist models were common since 1995" (P.3). The traditional pedagogy focused on the central role of teachers and the passive role of students, whereas the constructive pedagogy emphasizes the active role of students and the teachers play the role of only guides and facilitators to manage more meaningful learning environment. Similarly, teachers are major sources of providing knowledge to the students in the former mode of pedagogy, whereas students construct knowledge either through cognitive development following the four developmental stages like sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational stages as suggested by Piaget (1977) or following the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding, mediation of socio-cultural artifacts and prior experiences of the students as suggested by Vygotsky (1978). Moreover, rapid development of modern technology has changed the way of learning strategies of the students who construct the knowledge through global interaction using those technologies at their own need, interest and will; and they do not depend only on the knowledge provided by their teachers in the classroom through face-to-face interaction or giving lecture. More surprisingly, the young learners use those modern technologies

more perfectly in comparison with the teachers who are supposed to teach them. It is very surprising change in the sense that the teachers sometimes need their students' help to handle the modern technology instead of teaching the students those technical skills. In this way, the changing trend maximizes the roles of students who construct the knowledge observing and interpreting the authentic artifacts being engaged in different learning activities very actively; and the teachers help the students for meaningful learning connecting the contents to their prior experiences and encourage them to construct the knowledge through mediated interaction in different contexts. Thus, this global trend of pedagogical shift has become one of the most crucial factors to implement the online education even in TU.

The second important factor that has made to realize the need of online education in Nepalese context is the outdated education system in Nepal. The existing education system in Nepal provides the certificates to the students based on the formal examination, and the students can hardly apply their knowledge and skill in their practical life primarily in the general education like humanities and education. Almost all the stakeholders realize the need of drastic change in this traditional education system and intend to engage the learners in different more creative, critical and practical activities rather than encouraging them just for rote learning and getting such certificates passing the formal examination based on the memorized content or information. The claim of the changing trend is that the students themselves are able to grab such content or information using the worldwide networked modern technologies. The students should not be confined only to the given content or information in their prescribed textbooks and the references. The students can easily search such necessary content or information through modern search engines like Google scholar, and they themselves can critically examine different texts based on their own individual need, interest and level. As a result, the students develop their creative and critical ability, and they can be free from outdated education system that always leads the students towards the rote learning and getting certificates giving less priority to practical knowledge and necessary skill. Thus, this factor has made to realize the need of online education in TU in the present context of Nepal.

Although these two factors existed even before the COVID-19, the need of online education in general and the online classes in particular in TU has strongly been realized only after the severe effect of the Corona Virus. In fact, the effect of pandemic is just an immediate factor that has become an opportunity to commence the online classes in TU; but it has become a challenge to implement it in our practical life due to the lack of necessary policy, planning and infrastructure and so on. Therefore, the focus of this article is to discuss both opportunities and challenges of implementing online classes in TU mainly realized after the effect of COVID-19.

TU has made some serious attempts to implement the online classes in its different institutes and campuses that are scattered in different parts of Nepal. When the government closed the all educational institutes scattered all over the nation due to the attack of the COVID-19, TU made such attempts to begin the online classes in its institutes and campuses as an alternative way of fulfilling the need of face-to-face classes that became impossible to run those face-to-face classes during the COVID-19. TU has attempted to implement the online classes in its institutes and campuses bringing about some changes at both policy and practice levels.

At policy level, TU developed different guidelines to manage and run the online classes more effectively. It provided the authentic email IDs to the teachers, staff and the students of different institutes and campuses. Different trainings were conducted for both teachers and other staff focusing on the effective implementation of the online classes at practice level. TU provided the email IDs and conducted such training even for the teachers and employees of Mahendra Ratna Multiple Campus (MRMC), Ilam. There are three faculties, i.e., Education, Humanities and Management, and one institute of Agriculture and Animal Science in this campus. A small number of students study in the institute from the different parts of the nation, and the number of students is large in the faculties; however, they study mainly from Ilam district and other neighboring districts rather than from the different parts of the nation like in the institute of Agriculture and Animal Science. Although most of the students of the institute have been enjoying the online classes even during the pandemic situation, the students of the faculties have been facing some serious challenges to run the online classes more effectively. I also tried to run the online class in the department of English education in MRMC. However, I could not enjoy this opportunity as successfully as I intended to implement it in the practical life due to the different challenges I faced during that time. This article is the result of my same experience that made me unable to enjoy running the online class due to some serious challenges. Thus, this article aims to critically examine the opportunities and challenges of running online classes in TU based on my own experience realized while attempting to implement it in the practical life in one of the constituent campuses of TU, i.e., MRMC, Ilam.

Methods and Materials

This is qualitative study that considers major features of qualitative research like purposive sampling, only a small number of participants, context, focusing on meaning, and the thematic analysis and interpretation of data. The naturally occurring data has been collected through observation. The population of the study were the bachelor level fourth year students who have been studying English education at TU. Thirty four students who attended the classes in MRMC, Ilam before the COVID-19 were the sample for this study. Although the students who attended even the online

classes were the major sources of collecting primary data, the responses and the behaviors of the students who joined only the messenger group in face book but could not join the online classes were also important sources for collecting primary data mainly for the identification of challenges of the online classes. The books and articles downloaded through Google scholar were secondary sources that provided necessary literature of online education in general and the online classes in particular.

Results and Discussion

Results

As mentioned in the methodology, thirty-four students attended the face-to-face class before the COVID-19. I taught them the course entitled "The Research Methodology in English Education (Eng. Ed. 445)". The course requires one hundred and fifty classes to be taught during a session. I taught them one hundred and twenty seven classes before COVID-19. The nature of the course is both theoretical and practical. I almost finished the theory and I had been involving them in different practical activities just before the campus closed due to the effect of corona virus. The following table presents the actual number and the attendance of the students before the COVID-19.

Table 1: Number and Attendance of the Students before COVID-19

S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (127)	S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (127)	S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (127)
1.	1.	123	13.	44.	75	25.	119.	45
2.	2.	90	14.	47.	112	26.	136.	90
3.	3.	108	15.	51.	118	27.	140.	98
4.	4.	106	16.	54.	101	28.	148.	62
5.	5.	113	17.	63.	82	29.	165.	98
6.	6.	114	18.	73.	76	30.	177.	119
7.	13.	30	19.	77.	25	31.	178.	98
8.	17.	95	20.	78.	97	32.	184.	22
9.	20.	101	21.	98.	96	33.	186.	88
10.	21.	115	22.	102.	113	34.	236.	48
11.	23.	78	23.	105.	121			
12.	35.	125	24.	117.	94			

Source: Attendance record of the students from 22 July 2019 to 19 March 2020

Table 1 presents the attendance record of the thirty four students who attended the classes before the COVID-19. The students' attendance ranges from 22 to 125

out of 127 total classes that I taught them. When TU published notice to begin the online classes during the COVID-19, I attempted to contact the students forming the messenger group of those students in the face book aiming at conducting the online classes following the notice of TU. Thirty two students joined the group out of thirty four students listed in the table above. When they joined the group, I suggested them to continue their study through online classes even during the period of COVID-19. No students rejected my suggestion. Then I began to teach them through online class. Three students (Roll no. 3, 35 & 44) joined the first online class. The number of students gradually increased. I taught them regularly for two weeks. However, only nine students (Roll no. 3, 17, 35, 44, 63, 98, 102, 136 & 148) could join the online class during that period. Table 2 presents the actual number and the attendance record of the students who attended the online classes during the COVID-19.

Table 2: Number and Attendance of the Students during COVID-19

S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (13)	S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (13)	S. N.	Roll No.	Attendance (13)
1.	3.	9	4.	44.	13	7.	102.	7
2.	17.	9	5.	63.	8	8.	136.	1
3.	35.	12	6.	98.	2	9.	148.	3

Source: Attendance record of the students from 1 May 2020 to 17 May 2020

Table 2 shows that only nine students could join the online classes during the period of two weeks. The attendance of the students in online classes ranges from 1 to 13 out of 13 total classes that I taught them during that period. The attendance of the students who attended both face-to-face and online classes differs to a great extent. The nine students (Roll no. 3, 17, 35, 44, 63, 98, 102, 136 & 148) attended the face-to-face classes 108, 95, 125, 75, 82, 96, 113, 90 & 62 days respectively out of 127 total classes. However, even the same nine students could not attend the online classes as regularly as they could attend the face-to-face classes. For example, two students (roll no. 98 and 136) who attended 96 and 90 face-to-face classes attended only 2 and 1 online classes respectively. Rest of the seven students also faced different challenges while attending the online classes. Other twenty-five students could not join the online classes at all even though they had no negative attitude towards the online classes. The poor result of the students' attendance in the online classes made me to critically examine the challenges of the online classes in the context of TU. I discussed the challenges of the online classes through the messenger and the phone as well with the students who could not join the online classes at all. I also asked the students, who attended the online classes, their problems of being unable to join the online classes more regularly as in the face-to-face classes. Moreover, I also asked the more regular students who faced different challenges while joining the online classes. The same

challenges of the online classes that the students indicated have been discussed as follows.

Discussion

Indeed, COVID-19 has ironically become an opportunity to begin the online classes even in TU which is the oldest and the largest university in Nepal. Although there are many challenges to implement the online classes in most of its institutes and faculties, the effect of COVID-19 has compelled to realize the need of online classes which has become obligatory in the modern era mainly due to the rapid development of information technology which has turned the world into a small village or even a room. At least the effect of COVID-19 has created an atmosphere for hot debate and discussion focusing on the need of online classes even in TU; and considerable number of individuals has been taking part in such discussion through media, social network, face-to-face interaction and the online interaction as well. Such massive discussion indicates the need of implementing online classes in this or that form even in TU that is obviously an opportunity in the life of TU created by the severe attack of the COVID-19. However, the experience shows that the implementation of the online classes in TU seems more challenging but not impossible.

When the leadership of TU realized the need of online classes and published different notices and guidelines focusing on the online classes in the different institutes and faculties of TU, most of the teachers and students were able to enjoy the online classes mainly at higher level programs like PhD, M. Phil and Masters. Even the bachelor level students of some institutes where a small number of students study enjoyed the online classes. However, it was more difficult to implement the online classes in the faculties like Education and Humanities in which a large number of students study from the different parts of the nation. Although the teachers of those faculties were ready to take the online classes, the students did not join the classes more successfully for different reasons. For example, as mentioned earlier, I myself made an attempt to handle the online classes as far as possible; but I was unable to continue the online classes mainly due the absence of the students in those classes. Consequently, I planned to critically examine the challenges faced by the students who could or could not join the online classes despite their interest of joining those classes.

Common challenges

As mentioned above, thirty two students joined the messenger group and none of them rejected to continue their study through online classes even during the period of COVID-19; but only nine students were able to join the online classes. Then I asked them to mention their real problems in the messenger. Almost all the students

pinpointed the following common challenges of the online classes that made them unable to join the online classes successfully.

- No or poor access of internet
- No or poor facility of electricity
- No or low quality of technical devices like smart phones or computers or laptops
- No or little skill in handling the devices perfectly
- No or little idea in downloading the necessary apps like zoom and MS-teams.
- Lack of recharge card mainly in the villages and rural areas
- Unaffordable cost of internet
- No or little experience of joining such online classes in the past

These challenges were identified mainly through interaction with the students who joined the messenger group. These are some of the common challenges of online classes indicated by the majority of the students who could or could not attend the online classes successfully. These were not only the problems indicated by the students who joined and could not join the online class but I also realized the problems when I attempted to teach them through online classes. Although both the students and I realized these common challenges while practicing the online classes about two weeks, the students who were keenly interested to continue the online classes requested me to do so. I also planned to continue the classes thinking that the number of students would gradually increase if I could continue the online classes. However, I was unable to do so because I faced some hidden challenges that prevented me continuing the online classes.

Some hidden challenges

The hidden challenges are not related with the students who are supposed to attend the online classes. Instead, the problems are mainly related to the student organizations and the teachers as well. Some of the student leaders raised the voice that the campus should teach through online classes when all the students are able to join the online classes which was almost impossible mainly due to the lack of easy access of internet and electricity in the rural areas. I could not continue the online classes neglecting that demand of those student leaders. Similarly, all teachers were also found not to have a positive attitude to teach through online classes that created discouraging environment in the academic institutions. The informal talk and behavior of some teachers showed that some of the teachers were indifferent towards the online classes because of the lack of necessary knowledge and skill to handle the technical devices. Baur (2005 and Franklin, 2007 as cited in Finney,2015) state, "Equipment problems

prevented many teachers from using computers and support for technology was another problem" (p.21). The teachers of TU who were also less technology-friendly might feel more challenging to be involved in online classes using those technologies. Next, the poor management and the lack of necessary infrastructure had also negative impact on continuing the online classes. As discussed in the introduction, although there are crucial factors to realize the need of online classes in TU, the leadership had not taken serious steps to address the need of online classes before the severe attack of COVID-19. As a result no or only a few infrastructures have been managed in the campus. Such poor management of infrastructure also could not create an encouraging environment in the campus. Thus, these hidden challenges like the less interests of both students and teachers in running the online classes and the poor management of necessary infrastructure as well prevented me continuing the online classes following the notices and the guidelines published by the leadership of TU.

Addressing the challenges

Online classes have become obligatory for all the educational institutes in the 21st century. No one can imagine quality education without creating technology-friendly environment in these educational institutes. The teachers, students and all other stakeholders should have positive attitude to address the both common and hidden challenges discussed above. Gold (2001) suggests some policy level ways of addressing the problems faced by the teachers as "more technical help, more instructional design support, more hardware and software, more networking of existing hardware, more internet access, more training, better policies in general, and more research about education and technology." (p.48). Similarly, Young (2010 as cited in Trombley, 2018) suggests seven items for effective teachers such as "adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively and showing concern for student learning" (p.104). Young suggested these items to the teachers based on the responses of "199 online students" who were involved in her study. The seven principles developed by Chickering & Gasman (1987, as cited in Kontos, 2015) such as "contact between students and faculty, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, communication of high expectation, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning" (p. 36) are equally considerable even in TU in addressing the challenges faced by both teachers and students while implementing the online classes in different institutes and faculties of TU. Kontos (2015) further concludes that "we make good of the current technology if we pay attention to these seven principles" (p. 49). Likewise, the seven principles developed by Chickering & Gasman (1987, as cited in Kontos, 2015) such as "contact between

students and faculty, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, communication of high expectation, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning" (p. 36) are equally considerable even in TU in addressing the challenges faced by both teachers and students while implementing the online classes in different institutes and faculties of TU. Kontons (2015) further concludes that "we make good of the current technology if we pay attention to these seven principles" (p. 49). Hence, this study and the available literature show that the attitude and the roles of both teachers and students play key role to address the challenges faced by both teachers and students while implementing the online classes even in TU.

Conclusion

Although the need of online classes has become a burning issue and demand for many reasons in the present day world, worldwide attack of COVID-19 created an opportunity of commencing the journey of online classes even in TU which is the oldest and the largest university in Nepal in terms of the number of students, teachers, staff, programs and its campuses scattered all over the nation. The leadership of TU attempted to grab this opportunity and tried to implement the online classes in its institutes and campuses situated in different parts of the nation. However, the attempt of implementing the online classes in all institutes and campuses was not found more satisfactory due to the different common and hidden challenges discussed above. In this way, if all the stakeholders of TU have positive attitude to implement the online classes addressing the challenges in an integrated way contemplating all these discussed principles and ways, it would be possible to implement the online classes more successfully in the days to come. Some of the challenges like necessary training for teachers or staff and unaffordable cost of the internet are in the process of being addressed too. Ironically, the growing spread and effect of the Corona Virus even in the community level has also been justifying the increasing need of implementing the online classes in TU as well as other educational institutes in Nepal. The students and the teachers who have negative attitude in applying the online classes have also been becoming more positive day by day with the rapid increase of the effect of the corona virus either in home or abroad. Therefore, the COVID-19 has really become an opportunity in the life of TU regarding the implementation of the online classes if the stakeholders really address the challenges of online classes discussed above and any other challenges indicated by any other research works and studies as well.

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