Article

Researching Informal Skills Learners: Considering Work Interruption And Vulnerabilities

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Abstract

Informal skills learners are the workers who learn occupational skills during their work in an informal setting. Little research has been done on their learning environment and processes in a context similar to Nepal and many other developing countries. Such research deficit is more pronounced in informal skills learning research. In this paper, I address this gap. Based on two concepts - work interruptions and vulnerability of novice informal skills learners - I discuss methodological and ethical dilemmas while researching these people. Drawing from my PhD research carried out in four occupational sectors - pottery, metalcrafts, fast food and two-wheeler mechanics in Nepal (in Kathmandu valley), I first analyse the general features of informal skills learners' vulnerability which might further increase while spending time with the researchers. The ethical dilemmas researchers might face while researching vulnerable skills learners are about minimizing work interruption and avoiding harm to them. At the end, I propose specific ways of dealing with informal skills learners while conducting fieldwork. The study expects to increase the researchers' awareness while dealing with vulnerable workers and learners, and provides a track for further research in the area.

Keywords: informal skills learners, workplace learning, work interruptions, ethical dilemma, vulnerability, novices and experts

Introduction

This paper explores the ethical dilemma that a researcher studying informal skills learners can face during the fieldwork. A researcher might face dilemmas caused by work interruption in informal skills learners during the interview and while observing the work setting. Informal skills learners are more vulnerable (Baral, 2020a; Bhorat et al., 2016), and their vulnerability can increase by the probable work interruption during the researcher's interaction with them. Concerning this research, the originally planned formal interview sessions did not work, so I had to rely on the informal conversation in the form of *kurakani* (Dhakal, 2021) during the observation of the work, not hindering their workflow.

Informal skills learners are the workers without or with minimum educational qualifications employed at informal jobs and without basic formal agreements. In the countries where the informal economic sector is dominant, the prevalence of such workers

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is higher. These informal skills learners, particularly the novices, are vulnerable people (Baral, 2020a; Bhorat et al., 2016; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] & International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019; Sanders et al., 2014) due to different socio-cultural reasons. The probable work interruptions caused by the research activities can add to the vulnerability of informal skills learners, particularly the novice ones.

Informal skills learning is a less researched area in the overall workplace learning field. However, for some decades, the curiosity of the researchers in the field of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) towards informal workplace learning has been proliferating (Le Clus, 2011). As informal skills learners have unique features, such as informal work contracts and the possibility of losing a job at any time, their peculiar issues demand additional precautions in the research process (Coetzer et al., 2017). Due to such distinctive features, informal skills learners can hesitate to participate in the research processes, which might affect their workflow. A work interruption is a situation that a worker willingly or unwillingly faces disturbance in the workflow. This situation can put the researcher in a dilemma about how to manage fieldwork without disturbing them. Such a dilemma can create further predicament in the researcher on whether, and how to proceed with. In addition, researchers also face challenges of minimizing harm to those people during the research process. In this context, I aim to discuss how to tackle the work interruption dilemma while researching informal skills learners. To explore this question, I begin by analyzing the general characteristics of informal skills learners

that create their vulnerability associated with work interruptions.

Most informal skills learners face multiple challenges and experience vulnerabilities during the initial phase of their engagement with the enterprise. This is because most of them are unskilled workers. It means comparatively new entrants (informal skills learners) are more vulnerable than the experienced or experts. These terminologies (of novice and expert) are not very specific and clear to differentiate. Nevertheless, skills level, income, confidence in work, social identity, and maturity are some elements separating novices and experts. Although there are multiple studies available in the field of TVET research, study into this particular phenomenon of added vulnerabilities caused by work interruptions is in dearth (Bremer, 2008).

Before presenting the field findings, first, I provide some conceptual discussion on some related terminologies. After introducing the topic, it concentrates on understanding the vulnerabilities of novice workers with informal employment. I discuss the prevailing practices of differentiating novices and experts in the beginning. Then, in the following section, I describe the added vulnerabilities with informal skills learners due to work interruptions caused by researcher engagement with them. It is followed by the presentation of the features of informal skills learners based on the information received from the research participants and their vulnerabilities created by these features. After that, I discuss the researcher's dilemma while studying informal skills learners. I also debate the ways for tackling the work interruption dilemma.

Differentiating Novices and Experts

The work experience and the status in the workplace distinguish novice and expert workers. The workers who have less experience and are in the preliminary peripheral space in the skills development path are considered novices, whereas those who have already obtained a certain level of skills and expertise and enjoy higher status in the work community are the experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Experts and skilled workers understand their occupational field better and can apply the skills and competencies learned effectively in their work (Kolodner, 1983). However, Burdenson (2003) argues that considering an expert based on experience is merely a "perceived expertise" (Bou et al., 2006, p. 10) rather than in reality. The argument of Fuller and Unwin (2004) also supports this idea. They argue that it is not rational to treat the new entrants as a novice because they can also have obtained a certain level of expertise before entering the job. In different cases, such a person considered a novice can teach other workers who are considered experts.

For this study purpose, I have distinguished the research participants of this study based on expertise related to work experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The workers who have already obtained considerable work experience and skills level are the experts. Similarly, those workers who have entered the job comparatively recently and have low skills and competency are considered novices.

Informal skills learners are the vulnerable groups of people considering different aspects of their work, such as uncertainty of continuing the job. Although informal skills learners face similar situations during the initial phase of their work, the skilled workers with long work experience have already reduced vulnerability. In addition, the improved market demand, the increased income, social identity, and the social wellbeing of expert workers make them less vulnerable.

Recognizing Vulnerability of Workers in Informal Employment

Informal skills learning is associated with a job in the informal setting that creates multiple vulnerabilities. The vulnerability has multiple dimensions (Alwang et al., 2001). Although the understanding of the concept differs according to the field of study, it generally connotes the perception of risky situations that can exist diversely. According to Adger (2006), vulnerability exists when a person feels stressed and suspects harm, and there is an "absence of capacity to adapt" (p. 268). According to Alwang et al. (2001), resilience and sensitivity are two dimensions of vulnerability. It indicates that even in a similar situation, diverse persons can have a different level of vulnerability. A resilient person might be less vulnerable than a sensitive one.

According to Hufschmidt (2011), vulnerability is a complex concept, and different features determine it. Such features include context where vulnerability situates, its dimensions, temporal variability, presence of multiple scales, and their interdependencies. Thus, it is equally challenging to measure, for the concept itself is difficult to understand.

In the places where informal economy prevails, workers and employees are naturally vulnerable (Bhorat et al., 2016; Blaauw, 2017; Burgess et al., 2013; Mannila, 2015; OECD & ILO, 2019). Those workers employed in the informal sector and those having informal employment have multiple "layers of vulnerability" (Bhorat et al., 2016, p. 18). Mainly their vulnerability is created through the interaction of informal work and low pay. Furthermore, low-skilled workers with less experience face multiple vulnerabilities associated with the little education, competency, insecure job, weak economic condition of the family, etc. Most informal workers (except in traditional occupations) are always in danger of losing the job if they do not complete tasks in the stipulated time and of a given quality.

Blaauw (2017) studied the vulnerability of the informal workers of South Africa. He explored that the informal sector is a significantly less researched field, and therefore, many things remain unexplored. He characterizes these unsearched phenomena in the informal sector as "missing pieces in the vulnerability puzzle" (p. 339). However, there is no debate among scholars about the vulnerability of informal workers. A study conducted jointly by the OECD and ILO (2019) emphasizes that the present challenge is to tactfully manage the vulnerability of more than two billion workers engaged in the informal sector globally.

The dimension of vulnerability is more critical in places with less developed labor markets because they are deprived of many basic facilities and benefits, such as occupational safety and security, health protection, and other provisions mentioned by the national legal documents. According to Mannila (2015), those informal workers who are aligned voluntarily at work might not be that vulnerable. Still, those who have opted for informal employment as compulsion are more vulnerable. As he observed, the situation of Nepal in this regard is worse because there is minimal provision of vulnerability management.

Work Interruption: An Established Research Field

Disturbances at work are universal phenomena. Except for planned and regular breaks, those interruptions negatively affect the work overall (Foroughi et al., 2014; Puranik et al., 2020). As a workplace is a complex system (Ellström et al., 2008; Illeris, 2007), the work environment plays a significant role in the presence of work intrusions. Despite the impact of work interruptions on both quality and quantity of work, industries and academia have paid attention to this dimension. As such, work interruption appears to be a promising research area. In fact, it is an established research field (Fisher, 1998; Lin et al., 2013; Puranik et al., 2020) although there is a great need for further research in different aspects of work interruption.

Understanding the work interruption is not that complex. According to Puranik et al. (2020), work interruptions are the situation where the ongoing work activity is interrupted, which include "suspension of behavioural performance, and suspension of attentional focus" (p. 3). It means a worker might have to stop the work. Furthermore, a work interruption diverts the attention of a person to other subjects (Fisher, 1998;

Keller et al., 2020), which negatively affects the work. The sources of work interruptions are of two categories - external and internal. The external work interruptions are those hindrances due to other people or the work context (Brumby et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2020). For instance, visitors coming to the workplace, telephone calls, and other communication, such as messages and urgent emails, sudden calls from the team members, including colleagues and seniors, are some examples of external work interruptions. Such interruptions occur without the willingness and control of the individual affected worker (Keller et al., 2020). However, internal work interruptions are those caused by the particular worker themselves.

Whether an interruption is external or internal, it affects the work negatively (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2013; Brumby et al., 2019; Fisher, 1998; Foroughi et al., 2014). Interestingly, external work interruptions can create the basis for internal disruption. For example, different adverse psychological conditions, such as frustrations at work, helplessness, and the need for repeating demand more effort and energy. Such situations can create "boredom" at work (Fisher, 1998, p. 503). Additionally, it can create internal work interruption within a worker (Brumby et al., 2019). Such a situation can increase errors, decrease accuracy, and ultimately degrade productivity and quality of work (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2013; Brumby et al., 2019; Foroughi et al., 2014).

Multitasking also can create work interruptions (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2013; Kirchberg et al., 2015; Puranik et al., 2020). Although how much multitasking an individual can manage depends on the individual characteristics, it affects overall work execution. For instance, a person with monochromic nature - who has the trait of working on one task at a time - has less capacity to perform multiple parallel tasks. On the contrary, those with polychromic nature can manage numerous tasks simultaneously, and such people are less affected by work interruptions (Kirchberg et al., 2015).

Dilemmas Related to Work Interruption

Qualitative researchers face multiple ethical and methodological dilemmas during the research process. Methodologically, the researchers strive to obtain the required information, and ethically, they have to work in the manner of causing no harm to the research participants. However, at times, researchers have to face dilemmas regarding the condition of no-harm. Depending upon the research field and contexts, such dilemmas can differ. Addressing dilemmas in the research process is not a one-time requirement; instead, it is a continuous process extending to the whole research period (Fujii, 2012).

According to Allmark et al. (2009), researchers generally face two types of dilemmas during the research. The first category of dilemmas is those which are prevalent in most cases. However, some dilemmas are specific to the context. Researchers dealing with vulnerable people can face typical dilemmas (Fujii, 2012). In addition, they have to negotiate with multiple people, as dilemmas occur from diverse relations, expectations, and demands (de Laine, 2000). Comparing the research process as a show stage and the research participants and other associated people as audience, de Laine (2000) argues that the

researcher/performer needs to avoid harm to the audience. According to her, researchers should be situational and cautious about reducing harm to the research participants and merely "codes are not adequate to deal with ethical dilemmas of fieldwork" (p. 144). In fact, the written protocol of research ethics may not apply in the Nepali cultural context (Dhakal, 2021), and thus researchers need to adhere to relational ethics (Tracy, 2013).

As the informal skills learners are the vulnerable workers, how to avoid their harm during the research should be the concern of the researchers working with them. Although informal skills learners face multiple challenges, one of the significant challenges is that they always have to work under time pressure. Thus, the researchers' major dilemma is how to minimize work interruption of the informal skills learners while performing the fieldwork. To explore this phenomenon, it is necessary to look at the issue qualitatively.

Methodology

Positioning myself in the interpretive paradigm, I have prepared this paper adopting a qualitative research approach. The paper is an outcome of my PhD research entitled 'Informal skills learning: A case study of small-sized enterprises in Nepal'. In this paper, I discuss one dilemma that researchers might have to face while researching with the participants who are vulnerable because of socio-cultural and political reasons. I discuss that informal skills learners are often not interested in us (i.e. researchers) or even might try to avoid us while we try to interview them, as they are a vulnerable group of people. They can be affected by work interruptions while conducting interviews during the research process. Therefore, they can hesitate to participate in interviews. However, researchers can minimize such hesitations considerably and avoid harm to them through tactful conduct of the interviews.

Among the 17 research participants from my PhD research - from four occupational sectors, namely pottery, metalcrafts, cafeteria, and two-wheeler mechanics - I have selected 14 research participants for this study and obtained information on their vulnerabilities. I have used different pseudonyms to refer to them. Among these fourteen participants, six were novices from the vulnerable category (see Table 1), considering different aspects, such as poverty, low educational qualification, ethnicity, language and gender. The major basis for categorizing novices was their relatively lesser work experience and the junior position in the enterprise. However, the other eight research participants were relatively matured and in higher work position. The main rationale for selecting the research participants was their present and past experience about the vulnerabilities associated with work interruptions.

Table 1

Brief Information of Research Participants

Occupation	No. of participants	Name (Gender/Age)
Pottery	4	Lambodar (M/55), Keshav (M/50), Damodar (M/35), **_Indralaxmi (F/30)_**
Metalcrafts	4	Yuvaraj (M/50), Amod (M/45), Gaurav (M/30), **_Jiwa (M/25)_**
Cafeteria	2	Ramila (F/40), Chandrika (F/25)
Two-wheeler workshop	4	Ratna (M/45), Dinesh (M/40), **_Suraj (M/25), Sanju (M/20)_**

Note: Research participants in vulnerable category are mentioned in bold and italics.

I performed *kurakani* with these research participants during the observations of their natural work settings. My fieldwork was prolonged for fifteen months (from September 2018 to November 2019). I met my research participants during their work hours from 7-8 in the morning till 7-8 in the evening. I transcribed the information received from the interviews and observations, and analyzed using the eighth version of Atlas.ti. Based on the fieldwork, I also presented the general features of my research participants or informal skills learners, which makes them vulnerable to work interruption and other associated consequences, such as psychological pressure and tension. I found that informal skills learners are multi-role and time-scarce people. These findings supported me in analyzing informal skills learners' vulnerability and dilemma it created for a researcher. Finally, I discuss and present a model for addressing the work interruption dilemma while dealing with informal skills learners and minimizing their harm.

In the following section, I present the information received from the field on the general characteristics of informal skills learners. These characteristics make them vulnerable, which a researcher has to take thoughtfully.

What Makes Informal Skills Learners Vulnerable? The Research Experience

Informal skills learners are different from other workplace learners (e.g. who work in the formal work provisions and learn skills comparatively in an organized way) because of the type and nature of their work, work setting, and social conditions (Baral, 2020b). Therefore, characterizing informal skills learners require dedicated studies in the field. Following are some of the features of the research participants I identified during the study and their vulnerabilities associated with these features.

Multi-Role Makes Informal Skills Learners Vulnerable

Informal skills learners learn diverse skills according to the nature of their job. In general, such a multi-skill approach to working and learning is more necessary than those with narrow and focused specialized skills (Lindbeck & Snower, 2000). This study revealed that informal skills learners mostly have general work and very few cases of specialized work. Among the four occupational fields researched, work specialization was prevalent only in the metal arts and crafts. In the other three occupations - pottery, two-wheeler mechanics, and fast-food workers were engaged in multiple works and have learned numerous skills simultaneously. Nevertheless, they were under time pressure performing multiple tasks in parallel as they had to work with minimal resources and rely on comparatively traditional technology.

The potters I interviewed mentioned that they had learned all types of skills, starting from quarrying clay to preparing and marketing the produced items. The only exception was in the potter-couple Damodar and Indralaxmi, who run their traditional pottery at Nikosera, Thimi. Although their present work focus was making art items, Damodar acquired all the skills required to produce pottery utensils. However, as Indralaxmi learned the pottery skills only after getting married and entering the family of Damodar, she does not have other pottery skills, such as producing

simple utensils. Even in making pottery art items, Indralaxmi performs multiple tasks.

In the metalcrafts sector, a single worker/skills learner was also learning diverse skills simultaneously. However, such diversity of work was not feasible in all circumstances. For example, a young metal artist, Gaurav, the son of a metal enterprise owner, thought learning all skill sets is generally not possible. *"If a person has to do everything, it is more time consuming",* mentioned Gaurav and added that one has to know the general skills. A similar version was of another young artist, Jiwa, who shared that though his concentration was on preparing *buttas* [patterns] and artistic clothing items, he also had to work in other works, such as *Thojya[1], Majya[2]*, and *Katanjya[3]*.

In two-wheeler workshops, informal skills learners were engaged in multiple tasks, starting from simple cleaning and storage skills to highly technical engine assembling skills. Not only the workers but also the owners were found performing each type of task as their juniors. Multitasking is found rampant also in the cafeteria sector. I noticed that the café-workers were performing every task as demanded by the situation. So, they all know the skill set required by the occupations. For example, Chandrika, a young café worker, performed simple cleaning works to calculation, billing, and customer-dealing as her owner performs.

It is not always appropriate to compare small-scale enterprises with large organized firms because of their different features (Coetzer

et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the multi-role and multitasking opportunities that informal skills learners obtain can be instrumental in their future careers. For example, Lindbeck and Snower (2000) insist on the superiority of multi-skills upon specialized skills. Similarly, de Grip (2015) stresses the "growing demand for multi-skilled workers" (p. 3) in the contemporary occupational world. Such multitasking contributes to enhancing competency and the effectiveness of work performance.

However, the multitasking of informal skills learners is also associated with the limited resources and little use of technology. This situation creates pressure on them to complete the assigned task on time. Once, Chandrika, a lady café worker, expressed how they have to perform works manually:

> *Regarding the use of technology, we do not use any technology except one grinding machine. We use this machine for crushing raw meat. In other tasks, we absolutely have to rely on our manual work. We have to spend more time for mixing flour, chopping vegetables, cleaning dishes and pots. If we had such facilities, I could accomplish the work timely and also learn how to operate these devices. [Field note, 17 April 2019]*

The expression of Chandrika shows that they have to compromise with the work environment. Furthermore, they have to work with very little freedom of interruption of work voluntarily. Instead, they have to follow the instructions of the supervisors and owners, which can be derogative in certain circumstances. From this, I inferred that despite multiple benefits, informal skills learners have to work under extreme time pressure, creating vulnerability.

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1   Making shapes from the sheet metal

2   Fixing the prepared sheet metal shapes as per the design

3   Cutting of the unnecessary part of the art item

Time Pressure at Work Makes Informal Skills Learners Vulnerable

Time as a resource is scarce for all, including informal skills learners. Nevertheless, the situation of informal skills learners is found more critical. Surprisingly, I had no single case of meeting with the novice research participants for the interview at the agreed time. Therefore, I had to postpone the planned interviews and reschedule the fieldwork. I noted some reasons for such situations of postponements. Firstly, the informal skills learners' work nature is such that they rarely have planned free time. If they have such free time, a prior estimation of such free time is not viable due to the possibility of the sudden arrival of the customers. Secondly, I mostly met those workers busy- engrossed in their work, and it was thus not easy to interrupt their work in between. The third, informal skills learners, except the senior ones, could not decide independently for their time allocation other than workplace activities.

Although some potters mentioned that one of the significant reasons for enjoyment with their occupation is its flexibility, they were found busy in their work whenever I met them. Once, when I was requesting Lambodar, an aged potter, for facilitating to introduce his elder son Damodar (the next research participant), he alerted me that the son might be busy and *"can talk while working."* Only after I promised not to disturb his son, he brought me to the workshop of Damodar.

Informal skills learners working in metal art and crafts were also acutely busy. For Yuvaraj, the senior artist and the enterprise owner, it was apparent that he had multiple roles to perform. He led the enterprise and also provided drawings of all art items to the working units. But, all other workers were also busy during the work hour. I had multiple instances of postponement of the interview due to the unavailability of their time. The following field note depicts such an event of cancellation of the interview with Jiwa, a young metal artist:

> *I had the first initial conversation with Jiwa in the group of workers [Enterprise] on 23 May 2019. After that, I tried repeatedly to obtain his time for the interview. However, it was not possible due to his busy work routine. The last time when I requested him, it was on the eve of Dashain⁴ vacation. I got the information from other senior colleagues of the same firm that they are too busy during this festival. So, I had decided to contact Jiwa only after upcoming important festivals. [Field note, 9 November 2019]*

Some of the metalcraft works are also related to religious practices and thus make workers extra busy. Such postponement and repetition of the visit were also in the motorcycle mechanics enterprises. I had such experience during the field visits to three two-wheeler workshops. In the initial days of my field visit, once I had scheduled a meeting with Suraj at 8:00 am. However, he could not provide me the time and I had to postpone the scheduled interview. The field note depicts:

> *...But when I arrived, the boy was already busy removing the tyre from a motorcycle. When he saw me, he smiled and said, "Uncle, actually, I thought this time would be free but (showing the customer) he*

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4   Dashain is one of the greatest festivals celebrated by large majority of Nepalis.

came with this punctured motorbike. So, I think I will not be able to manage time now." [Field Note, 9 November 2019]

It is natural that as informal skills learners work in an informal setting in small-scale private enterprises, free time is rare. Another constraint was that they have very few off-days. For instance, there was only one day leave each month, as Sanju, a novice mechanic, shared me once. I could not catch him for the interview despite multiple encounters during the observation visits. One of my reflections of such an unsuccessful attempt at the meeting is as follows:

I was trying to have a separate conversation with Sanju for a long time but did not get the opportunity. Last week, he did not receive telephone when I called at the agreed time. The discussion could not be held. During my observation visit, when I asked Sanju why he did not pick the telephone last Saturday, he replied that he was exhausted and busy with other works at residence. [Field Note, 01 July 2019]

This expression of Sanju indicates that their working condition is such that they do not have sufficient leisure and recreational time. Similar to motorcycle workshops, I saw hectic workers also in the café. As a result, I had to postpone multiple appointments because they were not free from regular work. Furthermore, all three persons have to manage works in addition to the café. For instance, Chandrika, a novice café worker, had to balance her education, another part-time job tutoring small children, and the café work simultaneously.

Thus, informal skills learners are extra busy people. The version of Curran and Blackburn

(2001) in the small business sector strongly supports this conclusion. They alert the novice researchers that they have to take special care in performing the research activities with the participants from this field. First, due to the scarcity of time, they might not prioritize participation in the research process. Next, the research participants might not see the relevance of research with their work. Therefore, they generally are not in the condition to allocate time for lengthy interviews. These cautionary statements support the general condition of informal skills learners that they work and learn under time pressure. On one side, they have to accomplish the tasks in a given time frame, whereas, on the other, they have to learn the occupational skills because they do not have separate dedicated skills training. Thus, their skills learning process is slower and steadier than other intentional learners. They actually do "work" rather than "learn". Their learning is the bi-product of the work. So, not having separate skills learning opportunities and working in insecure job conditions make people vulnerable.

Addressing Work Interruption Dilemma While Interviewing

This section analyzes how informal skills learners face work interruptions and what types of dilemmas the researcher can face while interviewing them. For doing this, I first point out those typical situations and subsequent conditions of dilemma. In the second sub-section, I present my field experience of tackling these dilemmas with a model of addressing work interruption dilemmas.

Sources of Informal Skills Learners' Vulnerability

Novice workers who have a low level of skills face difficulties to manage. The need for timely completion of the stipulated job with acceptable quality puts them under pressure. When a researcher requests for an interview or *kurakani*, informal skills learners can feel extreme time pressure about which they might not express openly.

Researchers could ask to arrange an interview during leisure or off-days. Unfortunately, being informal workers, they might not make dedicated free time. Mainly, such times depend upon the supervisors' or the owner's discretion. So, there is always a possibility of the postponement or cancelling the scheduled interview. Multiple instances of postponement keep researchers in quandary whether to wait for the same research participant or search for another appropriate one. I faced numerous such dilemmas during the fieldwork.

Informal workers with the occupations related to the traditional culture have their workload intensified during certain festival seasons or events. During such periods, informal skills learners face the extra burden of delivering products or services. My field experience indicates that informal skills learners cannot see whether they would be able to give time to the researcher and agree to sit for the interview, which later has to be cancelled or postponed. A researcher faces the dilemma of avoiding such special work periods of informal skills learners.

Naturally, a human needs two other things together with the work or labor - rest and entertainment. But, novice informal skills learners are generally like "precariat" (Standing, 2011; p. 1) who have a very fragile job. Due to such conditions, they might be in the situation of ignoring the pre-scheduled interview. For example, during my fieldwork, some research participants refused to sit in the scheduled time and expressed without hesitation that they could not participate in the conversation due to fatigue.

Another crucial point is that informal skills learners are not, in reality, *learners* from employers' perspectives. For the supervisors or the owner, the primary goal of employing a person is to produce goods or services. So, informal skills learners also have to assure their seniors that they participate in the interview without compromising their work. During the fieldwork, I mostly found supervisors and owners of the enterprises cooperative. However, another associated problem was that the workers could not express their views openly, particularly when their supervisors were near them. A point to be noted is that it is not always possible to sit with informal skills learners in different venues than their workplaces.

Moreover, frequent change of workplaces was also the reason for making informal skills learners vulnerable. Those who had already spent sufficient time in the particular enterprise were more unrestricted for deciding their time. On the contrary, it was not under their control for the new entrants and comparatively novices. They had less possibility to devote time for interviews.

During the fieldwork, I had adopted some strategies for tackling the situation of dilemma and avoid harm to the research participants. In the following sub-section, based on my field experience, I present how I addressed

these dilemmas. I also present a model (see Figure 1) depicting features of informal skills learners that make them vulnerable and ways of tackling the situations.

**Tackling Work Interruption Dilemma**

Whether a researcher wants or not, my field experience shows that he/she might have to repeatedly visit informal skills learners to complete the interview and conversations. Continuous effort is the only way to deal with such a situation. A researcher has to make a *Plan B* for envisioning the possible cancellation or postponement of the interview schedule with the informal skills learners. To avoid the probability of refusal from the

supervisors or owners, the researcher needs to obtain their prior consent. Except in very few cases, this is a must.

The next crucial point the research should consider is that informal skills learners do not have the privilege of sitting for a lengthy interview. It can push them into a further challenge in meeting the demand of quantity and quality of the work, ultimately putting them under pressure. So, if possible, the interview duration should be as minimum as possible. I tried to make interview sessions concise which were also interrupted frequently in between due to unavoidable urgent tasks.

Figure 1

Creation of Work Interruption Dilemma and Ways for Tackling Them
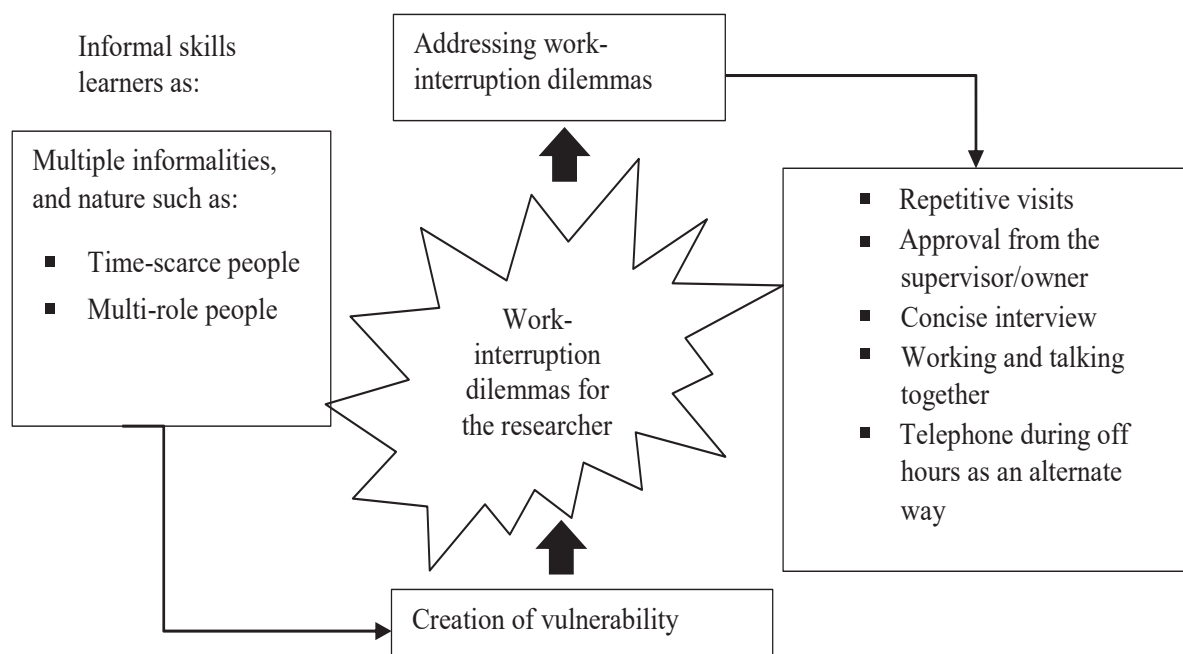
According to my field experience, another strategy for studying informal skills learners is frequent visits to their workplace. Whether stipulated interview could or could not happen, the workplace visit aimed for the interview can provide numerous information. In other words, the researcher can convert the specified interview hours to observations and perform *kurakani* during the observation as appropriate. Furthermore, such frequent visits support strengthening rapport and having informal conversations (if their task permits). The researcher can also fulfil some of the voids of information obtained from informal communication through telephonic conversations. However, there is always a possibility of not picking the telephone calls due to different reasons. For example, experience of fatigue and the presence of a senior might lead the participants to not respond to the calls. In such a case, the researcher should not bother the participants by repeatedly calling on the same day, but can try next day or in a few days' interval.

Conclusion

This paper explained how researchers studying informal skills learners could perform their fieldwork without harming their research participants. Notably, it focused on addressing one of the crucial challenges of saving novice skills learners as research participants from interrupting their workflow due to lengthy interviews. Although the researchers working with informal skills learners have to face work interruptions, it is also a concern while working with the research participants from other fields. However, this article accentuates that the job situation of the informal skills learners and their associated vulnerability are peculiar, which need serious consideration during the fieldwork.

There might be different ways and strategies to address the vulnerabilities and work interruptions of informal skills learners during the fieldwork with them. For instance, the researcher's experiences of conducting telephonic interviews with informal skills learners during their off-hours can be presented more specifically. In addition, this article also shows the need for further research, particularly in understanding thoroughly the work environment of the informal skills learners. However, the concluding message of this paper is the urge to the researchers to save the already vulnerable group of people from the additional vulnerabilities during the research process.

Acknowledgements

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