Professors' Informal Learning in their Workplace: The Case of Nepali University

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Abstract
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Keywords
workplace learning, informal learning, professors, case study

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Professors' Informal Learning in their Workplace: The Case of Nepali University

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This study explores how Nepali professors engage in informal learning practices in their workplace and identify the potential for creating a conducive learning environment. We conducted in-depth interviews with five Nepali professors using a qualitative case study approach to explore their informal learning experiences at their workplace. The study revealed that professors engage in informal learning through various methods, such as enacting job roles, reflecting on work experiences, interacting with colleagues, seeking feedback, and initiating self-learning through reading, online courses, professional networks, and formal training programs. However, organizational constraints hindered their self-initiated learning activities. Future research can examine the organization constraints influencing self-initiated learning among professors.

This study contributes to the limited research on informal learning among professors in the workplace of developing countries and emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive learning environment for their professional growth.

Keywords: workplace learning, informal learning, professors, case study

Introduction

In today’s economy, employees need to collaborate, communicate, solve problems, and adapt to uncertain situations (Muzam, 2022). To meet these demands, the workplace has become a crucial space for acquiring new skills and knowledge (Clus, 2011). Informal learning refers to everyday activities that enhance an individual’s competence (Cerasoli et al., 2018) and can occur spontaneously or by the encouragement of the organization (Marsick & Watkins, 2015). For universities, it is important to recognize their institutional role in teacher development as they play a crucial part in preparing the next generation of professionals. This is especially critical in developing countries like Nepal, where informal learning opportunities are unfamiliar.

Nepal’s higher educational system has a brief history beginning with its first university, Tribhuvan University (TU), which began in 1959 (ADB, 2015). Since then, various universities have offered degrees in a range of disciplines. Today, Nepal has a total of 1,425 colleges that provide higher education to 423,996 students in various academic programs (UGC, 2020). TU has the highest national enrollment rate at 79.04 percent, while Pokhara University, Purbanchal University, and Kathmandu University follow with 6.94, 6.16, and 4.23 percent, respectively (UGC, 2020). Moreover, the report also states that there were 9,226 teaching staff in these universities as of 2017/18. Gaulee and Bista (2019) noted that Nepali universities suffer from creating graduates capable of succeeding in their fields and society due to limitations ranging from a lack of infrastructure, centralized systems, political interferences, adequate academic staff recruitment systems, and lack of focus on professional human resource development.
Additionally, they stated in their assessment of higher education that teachers in Nepali higher education are still far from research and knowledge production, two practices which are essential for inquiry-based teaching and learning in higher education. While several studies (Duţǎ, 2012; Gaulee & Bista, 2019; Lopukhova & Makeeva, 2019) emphasized the necessity of professional development, informal learning in the workplace is rarely emphasized in Nepal. Similarly, even universities in developed countries have limited investigations on informal learning as a tool to develop professors to improve quality education. Therefore, understanding professors’ informal learning in their workplace is crucial for improving the quality of higher education in Nepal.

In recent literature, studies (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Kahraman et al., 2021; Lohman, 2000, 2006; Sallán et al., 2022) have focused on improving teaching strategies among schoolteachers, particularly by emphasizing informal learning processes and the importance of informal learning among them. However, higher education institutions (HEIs) typically evaluate faculty’s professional productivity in teaching, research, and administrative services (Robinson & Hope, 2013), which creates a disconnect between the skills needed and those rewarded. Unlike schoolteachers, professors do not require teaching certification in HEIs globally (Kálmán et al., 2020), and there has been criticism about the lack of formal training for potential teachers in universities (Johnston, 1997; Weimer, 1997). To address these concerns, universities around the world have designed various professional development programs for novice and experienced teachers (Kálmán et al., 2020). However, formal professional development alone may not be sufficient for professors’ professional growth. For instance, Norton et al. (2005) in their study found that there was no significant difference in pedagogical expertise between professors who had attended formal professional development programs. Rather, networking, discussion, and participation in professional learning communities, among other informal learning methods have a collaborative impact on professors’ professional development (Vescio et al., 2008; Williams, 2003).

Despite the prevalence of training as the primary method for employee development globally, it can be challenging to apply the knowledge gained in formal classroom settings to the workplace (Eraut, 2004). A university teacher’s professional development is incomplete if the informal learning that takes place in their workplace is not considered. Informal learning is acquired through experience and is context-driven, but workplace simulations are absent in formal training environments, hindering the development of professors’ competencies. Similarly, Nepali HEIs prioritize academic qualification when selecting teachers, and tenure-track faculty members are required to publish research. However, professors miss essential learning opportunities in curriculum design, student-centered approaches and improving pedagogy without formal or informal interaction.

Although informal learning was discussed in some Nepali studies such as (Giri, 2015) and (Baral, 2020), they primarily focused on learning spaces and typologies rather than how informal learning occurs in the workplace. This lack of understanding of informal learning has hindered the development of a conducive learning environment for professors in the context of Nepal. Competent professors build strong relationships with students, provide feedback, and offer social support that motivates students to engage in self-regulated learning (Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015; Schuitema et al., 2016), which is critical for developing lifelong learning skills essential for employability in today’s unstable economy (Ogawa, 2011). Given the demands of the current economy, it is necessary to understand how professors learn informally in their workplace so that Nepali universities can intentionally foster a conducive learning environment. In this study, we conducted a case study among five Nepali professors who spent considerable time in their workplace and were engaged in teaching, research, and service roles at their university.
Literature Review

Workplace Learning

Workplace learning (WPL) lacks a unified definition, and there is no consensus on the terminology used by different disciplines (Elkjaer & Wahlgren, 2005). Various disciplines have studied WPL, resulting in multiple interpretations of the term. However, in the myriad of models such as 3-P model of workplace learning (Tynjälä, 2013), three-dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2004), octagonal model of informal learning (Decius et al., 2019) based on dynamic model of informal learning (Tannenbaum et al., 2010). Thus, this study defines WPL as individuals learning at their workplace, where deliberate and informal learning occurs through teamwork, social interactions, reflections, and experiences (Marsick, 1988; Raelin, 1998; Unwin et al., 2005). Adult learning involves how people constructed meaning from their experiences (Merriam et al., 2007). The learning process aligns with constructivist viewpoints, highlighting that learners possess an internal locus of control in learning and in interpreting their experiences (Fenwick, 2003). Social aspects of creating knowledge are also crucial, where the individual’s interactions with their work environment, practice, and participation in work activities are essential (Dewey, 1938; Fenwick, 2003).

Theoretical Perspectives in Workplace Learning

In their earlier work, Marsick and Watkins (2015) categorized informal and incidental learning as subcategories of formal learning. However, they later described informal learning as a process that occurs within an institution but is typically not classroom-based or regimented, with the learning responsibility lying in the hands of the learners (Marsick & Watkins, 2015). This type of learning arises from task completion, interpersonal interaction, observing organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. WPL emphasizes continuous learning, departing from the traditional vocational training paradigm (Elkjaer & Wahlgren, 2005). Informal learning is essential for developing individuals and organizations within the work context, accounting for 70-90 percent of learning in the workplace (Noe et al., 2013). It offers more contextual and relevant competencies to help employees address their work challenges promptly. Thus, informal learning is more suitable in developing employees’ competencies.

Informal Learning in the Workplace

Malcolm Knowles’ (1984) research on informal adult education highlighted that people have varying learning preferences and requirements. He coined the term “informal learning” to describe every day, self-directed learning. Building on Knowles’ work, Marsick and Watkins (2015) emphasized individual control and social dimensions in their definition of informal learning. They believed that learners could choose when, where, and how they learn, and that social engagement and learning from others were integral components of informal learning. Eraut (2004) extended the concept of informal learning to workplace settings, where learning is often unplanned and difficult to identify. The Marsick and Watkins (1990) framework established a theory of workplace informal learning, which was updated to reflect modern workplaces. This framework encompasses the learning process, learning environment, learning outcomes and individual and organizational elements that impact informal learning.

Empirical studies (Enos et al., 2003; Fuller et al., 2003; Joo et al., 2022; Kittel et al., 2021; Park et al., 2016) have been conducted on informal workplace learning and its impact on job performance in various types of organizations, as well as on the informal learning of school
teachers (Hoekstra et al., 2009; Lin & Huang, 2020; Lohman, 2006; Sallán et al., 2022). Similarly, a study (Encinar-Prat & Gairín Sallán, 2019) found that novice university professors use informal learning approaches to develop specific competencies such as interpersonal, methodological and classroom planning and management practices. However, there is limited studies in research on professors’ informal workplace learning especially in developing countries. We can use learning theories such as constructivism and andragogy to understand how professors engage in informal learning. Constructivist learning theory suggests that prior knowledge, preconceived notions, and mental models frame and inform understanding, while (Knowles, 1984) andragogy model highlights the importance of learning modalities, self-concept, prior experience, relevance, internal motivation, and personal progress in adult education. Moreover, social learning theory incorporates both constructivist and social dimensions to explain informal learning in the workplace, where learning is increasingly social and socially created (Wenger, 1998) concept of communities of practice emphasizes participation, creativity, and alignment for learning. Informal learning occurs through practice, group work, projects, and self-initiated activities in different work settings, including deliberate learning where individuals set learning goals and allocate time to acquire requisite skillsknowledge on the job. Given the importance of social context in informal learning, understanding informal learning socially in university settings is crucial for teachers’ development. However, there is limited research on professors’ informal learning. Thus, further research is needed to explore.

**Informal Learning and Faculty Development in Nepali HEIs**

The growing field of online informal learning among professors, as elucidated by (Yu et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic, has initiated scholarly discourse. However, the exploration of informal learning in the day-to-day professional lives of university professors, especially beyond crises, remains significantly under-researched. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Nepali higher education, where the focus on faculty development is paramount yet inadequately explored. Studies such as Gaulee and Bista (2019) have assessed aspects of Nepali higher education but have not sufficiently addressed the scope of teacher development through informal learning, a critical element in preparing graduates for future challenges and in cultivating a competent workforce. This oversight highlights the need for comprehensive research in this area. The present study aims to fill this void by delving into the informal learning processes of university professors in Nepal.

While Nepali school teachers are required to obtain formal educational qualifications, professors often enter academia with discipline-centric degrees, lacking structured pedagogical training. This trend is not unique to Nepal but mirrors a global educational challenge faced by both developed and developing countries. Worldwide, educators often adopt teaching methodologies influenced by their own educational experiences, rather than empirically grounded pedagogical principles. This pattern highlights the need for an integrative approach in faculty development, combining informal and formal methods to enhance teaching expertise across the higher education spectrum (Gibbs, 2013; Lueddeke, 2003). Further, study by Cintra et al. (2023) brings to light issues such as workload, administrative challenges, and resource constraints for faculty development in developing countries globally (Cintra et al., 2023). By examining the informal learning experiences of Nepali professors, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of faculty development in a specific geographical setting while offering insights with global relevance applicability. The study supports the importance of longitudinal and collaborative learning experiences, including team learning, mentoring, and communities of practice, supported by organizational structures, as foundational for faculty development in diverse educational contexts globally. This research, therefore, advances a crucial global
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discourse on enhancing pedagogical effectiveness in higher education institutions, emphasizing the need for comprehensive faculty development strategies (Phuong & Chai, 2018). In this context, the central research question guiding this study is: How do University Professors learn informally in their workplace? This question aims to explore informal learning practices among professors, contributing to the broader conversation on effective faculty development in higher education.

Researchers’ Perspective and Engagement in the Study

As an Assistant Professor at the focal university of this study and with my Ph.D. supervisor as co-author, my professional and academic journey deeply intertwines with this research. My interest in informal learning among university professors emanates from my own experiences of skill acquisition through informal workplace learning. Observing disparities in faculty development, especially in the context of developing countries with limited formal faculty programs, sparked my curiosity. This study aims to explore informal learning as a potential avenue for competency enhancement among university professors, a topic of both personal relevance and academic significance.

Methodology

Our study employs a qualitative case study approach, ideal for examining the complex, real-life context of informal learning among university professors. This method, supported by Baxter and Jack (2008), and Merriam and Tisdell (2015), facilitates an in-depth exploration of educational practices within their natural settings. Following )Merriam's (2009) constructivist approach, we focused on understanding multiple realities as constructed by the professors in their workplace learning experiences. This interpretive paradigm, reinforced by Yin's (2018) case study protocol, enabled us to capture the nuanced dynamics of informal learning, contributing to the discourse on faculty development in higher education.

Research Participants and Their Selection

Full-time professors were selected from one of the central Nepali universities in Bagmati Province since the province has most higher education institutions. 43.3 % of the colleges are in this region (Acharya et al., 2022). Similarly, since most institutions are in the capital city, Kathmandu, students from other provinces come to obtain higher education in the city. The university in this study has around 256 full-time teachers (UGC, 2020). The teachers belonged to management, education, and arts faculties and served in various ranks of professorship: Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor.

In this inquiry, our participant cohort comprised full-time university professors, representing a spectrum of disciplines within the academic landscape. These educators, ranging from early career to veteran status, embody a diverse array of pedagogical approaches and academic interests, yet are united in their engagement with the phenomena of informal learning within the university setting. Their ages varied, primarily falling within the mid-30s to late 70s bracket, offering a rich tapestry of life and professional experiences. Hailing from both urban and rural educational backgrounds, these professors collectively reflect the intricate tapestry of higher education experiences in Nepal, encompassing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in their professional journeys.

Similarly, the university has fixed office hours which allows teachers to spend ample time in the workplace. A total of five teachers from different schools within the same university were interviewed to understand how they learn in their workplace. The study used a purposeful
participant selection approach to ensure information-rich participants. Information-rich participants are those from whom one can learn a great deal about issues central to the study’s purpose (Patton, 2002). Purposive selection ensures that teachers were in diverse professorship levels and schools and were of a different gender. The data saturation threshold for this study was reached when no additional meaningful codes or themes could be generated from the interview data. We stopped interviews after the fifth participant since there was no added information generated. The “true job of a case study is particularization, not a generalization,” (Stake, 1995, p. 8). Similarly, Creswell and Ploth (2018) have stated that four to five cases are enough participants for case studies. Five full-time professors were interviewed for purposeful participant selection.

Data Collection Process

We identified and contacted full-time faculty at the school of Management, Education, and Arts. Each of the five teachers who accepted the invitation participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews using atopic guide ranging from 50 to 90 minutes. We conducted two rounds of interviews to gain and clarify their perceptions. The topic questions include a few questions we identified based on literature focusing on the research questions (Knott et al., 2022). In our study, we conducted interviews with university professors, starting with questions like: “Can you briefly describe your academic journey?” and “What are the key roles that you fulfill as a professor?” followed by “How did you learn to perform your duties and responsibilities in your work?” These questions were aimed at understanding their experiences and perspectives on informal learning. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed verbatim. Similarly, field notes were prepared immediately after each interview to enhance the depth of interview findings (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The rigorous transcription process ensured a faithful representation of participants’ responses, forming a reliable basis for our subsequent analysis. We maintained strict confidentiality throughout, with all recordings and transcripts securely stored to protect participants' privacy.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis guided by the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data analysis followed a six-step process: (a) familiarizing with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the researcher transcribed the interviews to engage deeply with the data. These transcriptions were validated through discussions with participants, ensuring the integrity of the information. In the initial stages, preliminary codes were established as the researchers independently examined the transcripts, later reconciling any discrepancies through discussion to achieve a unified coding scheme. This collaborative refinement ensured a comprehensive foundation for the thematic framework. The subsequent phase focused on distilling and finalizing these codes into distinct themes. This phase was critical, involving a detailed review and definition process that highlighted three central themes: Learning by Doing, Learning from Others, and Learning through Self-Initiated Activities. These themes were meticulously developed, with repeated data examination to affirm their alignment with the research objectives, thus demonstrating a thorough and systematic approach to uncovering the study's insights.
Ethical Consideration and Credibility

In this study, ethical research practices were meticulously observed, despite the absence of a mandated Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight in our local context. Informed consent was obtained through a transparent verbal process, with each participant being fully briefed about the study's purpose, interview duration, and their rights, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw at any point. Interviews were conducted at mutually convenient times. These measures, alongside our commitment to participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality, ensured the ethical integrity of our research, respecting the well-being and rights of all participants throughout the study. All participants consented to recording the interviews. Following ethical guidelines, we maintained privacy, voluntariness, and no harm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Finding

This qualitative case study explored the informal learning experiences of professors within their workplace. Participants shared various ways they utilize informal learning for their work. Through thematic analysis, the major themes emerged as: Learning by Doing, Learning from Others, and Learning from Self-Initiated Activities.

Learning By Doing

Professors at the university level engage in a continuous process of skill acquisition through active participation in their routine professional responsibilities. This theme reflects the hands-on approach to learning, where teaching, administrative duties, and research activities serve as primary avenues for skill development.

Professors learn and develop their skills through their everyday work roles. The university guidelines dictate that Assistant Professors should dedicate 70% of their time to teaching, 30% to research, consulting, or training, and 10% to service roles. Associate Professors and Professors, on the other hand, are expected to allocate 50 percent of their time to teaching, 30 percent to research, consulting, or training, and 20 percent to service roles. Although different work roles may not occur daily, professors are engaged in academic research, consulting projects, training, and workshops. When teachers begin their work, they usually adapt to the routine in their workplace and learn by performing the tasks that are part of their job. As per P5:

I think in my context, I learn by doing it. Ours is different, an artistic fraternity, so there is nothing static. We learn through experience rather than by studying. In art, what is written is that "Yellow" and "Blue" makes green. By studying that only is not enough; you have to experience it.

Several teachers may have joined the university with extensive teaching experience at the secondary school level, indicating that their informal learning occurred through prior experiences in similar jobs. Likewise, teachers who have had past teaching experiences recall having a role model teacher and attempting to emulate them in their previous teaching roles at secondary schools. P4 shared that:

He had come from America to finish his Ph.D. In class, everyone used to request him to teach in Nepali. I was the only one who wanted my teacher to teach in
English. I used to wish he would speak in English; I wanted to develop in English. I had some kind of passion for English.

Some teachers who did not have prior academic experience before joining the university learn through on-the-job learning and by reflecting on their work practices in their workplace. In fact, for all teachers, their other roles were primarily based on hands-on learning and practice, with a focus on improvement. However, it is noteworthy that only two participants reported deliberately reflecting on their work daily, while others had a more casual approach to reflection through introspection. While informal learning through experience is valuable, deliberate reflection can enhance a teachers’ experiences and identify the areas for improvement. P3 shared her reflection experiences:

In my case, I think I give time to myself. At that moment, I thought about what I had done all day. I separate time for myself, so my schedule is like walking. When I am walking, I think. I reflect on what happened all day long. One would not remember small things that happen throughout the day, but some incidents remain in your mind. I wish I had done it this way, or if I had done it that way, so how can I better plan better what is coming up? Maybe I should do it this way.

Professors identified learning through their experiences in their workplace as a specific informal learning practice. When referring to their experiences, participants mentioned that while they reflected on their work activities, they developed self-awareness about their teaching in the classroom, managing undergraduate programs, dealing with students and colleagues, and assessing students. This self-awareness created a reservoir of experiences that built competencies. Even the mistakes they made helped the m revise their approach to teaching, managing, and providing services to different stakeholders, such as students and visiting faculty members. P1 said:

You learn through your experience in the classroom. You deal with students and learn to connect with them. It is essential to make them happy. After spending a lot of time with the students, you know the effective teaching methods. You learn to handle them.

Similarly, participants who deliberately reflected stored their experiences in their journals to understand their improvement, crystallizing their experiences and more clarity about their learning. P5 enthusiastically stated:

I think through my own experience. No one tells you that you are not doing things correctly. Everyone is finishing their work. So, I have a habit of writing in a diary or creative journal. The practice is called a creative journal. When I write a diary where I write which work I did and when and that gives me self-realization, so I know from there.

Professors learn by doing and repeating their routines in their daily work. They gain experience from teaching in the classroom, administrative roles, and working as consultants and researchers. They reflect on their work informally and formally through activities such as keeping a diary or setting aside time to ponder on daily work and make amendments that enhance their performance. By learning through their work experiences, they develop
competencies, prioritize tasks, and correct their mistakes. This process leads to better time management and outcomes.

Learning from Others

The collaborative environment of the university acts as a conduit for learning, where faculty members enhance their skills through interactions with their academic peers. This theme underscores the importance of learning from shared experiences and feedback within the academic community.

Professors spend a significant amount of their work time interacting with colleagues. Collaborating with co-workers is a crucial part of their administrative roles, external consulting, and research projects, and they often communicate with their program directors, Head of Departments (HoDs), and Deans. These interactions range from small team meetings about academic programmes, informal talks at lunchtime about research work and projects, improving work practices, to achieving the mission and vision of the schools within the university. Discussions also occur within the department, with senior teachers sharing their experiences with junior colleagues when approached... One of the participants shared an incident during the interview:

Like how we were here talking about research related, my question was related to my Ph.D., I had an issue like we did a thematic review, theoretical review, and empirical review, and I am in that part. But, in the thematic review of the professional identity, I am unclear exactly the process to be followed. I have my approach, but I was asking whether there are other processes or where am I right; I was trying to ask that but could not reach that point in the discussion. (P4)

Similarly, class observation is a frequent practice among professors, allowing participants to learn about various teaching methods and techniques used by experienced teachers. This practice is especially helpful for new teachers with no prior teaching experience, as they are often asked to audit senior classes to familiarize themselves with teaching norms and practices while experienced teachers collaborate in co-teaching. P4 narrated the culture of co-teaching, where senior and junior faculty team up to take a course:

In co-teaching, a sizable portion of the teaching is done by the principal teacher; I take up a few aspects. I did some co-teaching with others. I also keep others as co-teachers. I learn from them, and they learn from me.

However, not everyone is comfortable observing and learning from others by observing and evaluating the techniques and methods of others. P2 in the School of Management, who teaches English courses in the management school understood informal learning as copying others. P2 said:

Informal learning… Frankly speaking, I don't know much about it; I have not studied it. But in my context, do I do informal learning? I don't do it usually. So for me to easily copy others, I don't prefer to do so. I like that one should have a separate identity and a different style. Even if someone wears a shirt like mine, I don't wear it the next day. Similarly, I feel if I follow and adapt, they might call me a copycat.
Professors also learn from collaborative projects, including research grants and services to organizations such as development sectors, government, inter-school activities within the university. These projects are done in teams, and interactions occur through meetings where different tasks are assigned, and feedback is given. P4 shared his experience related to working on a project:

As a British Council curriculum expert, I am reviewing the Class 1 to 10 curriculum. In addition to that, I am working on a UGC (University Grants Commission) project and have applied for the UGC grant as a principal investigator. I have to write a proposal. Once the grant is received, I need to research and form a team. These are so things. You are learning from the morning to the evening.

Professors also learn through exposure to formal development processes, including formal programmes and international contexts. Informal learning can occur during these experiences as. P 1 shared how he learned about various MBA programs, their curriculum, and teacher competencies while studying as an MBA student in the United States:

Once I returned from the US after my MBA degree, I was already working in a university and had a good team in management school. I went to IIM training, where I saw how they ran management programs; I interacted with them. I got a Fulbright scholarship to study in the US, which has the best teaching and learning and provided me with the experience. I was already teaching here, so my goal was not just to get an MBA degree, but to know how the system there works, its structure and the autonomy teachers had, and that experience helped in management school here.

Professors also participate in national and international projects such as University Capacity Building, Erasmus+ Projects, and World Trade Organization (WTO) Chairs Programs, which aim to enhance universities’ capabilities to collaborate and contribute to community development. In the process of operating these projects, teachers acquire new skills such as project management and communication, which are not necessarily intended but are learned through practice. P3 shared her experience working in a Finnish Project:

I was part of one of the design thinking; I went abroad to learn about it. I learnt through those foreign mentors how to conduct workshops, speak in public, and handle crowd. I became confident after interacting with them, especially in public speaking.

She also said that sometimes learning happens when your team members don’t do their assigned duties. Even though it is not pleasant, sometimes one learns something that is not your subject domain and that creates more understanding about another discipline. When other team members do not work, you are the one who is working; you will learn everything. It has been my experience once or twice (P3).

Professors engage in various forms of informal learning, including observing their colleagues and seniors, collaborating with them and international peers on projects, attending formal workshops and academic programs, and even taking on others’ responsibilities when necessary.
Learning from Self-Initiated Activities

This theme recognizes the autonomous efforts of faculty members in pursuing personal development activities. Despite organizational challenges, such as high workloads and limited recognition, these self-directed pursuits play a crucial role in the holistic development of academic professionals.

Professors take self-initiated activities to enhance their work capabilities such as reading books, joining professional networks related to their fields, taking online courses, engaging in social media, and self-funded training. Additionally, when renowned international academics visit the university, teachers volunteer to attend their classes to learn about their teaching methods, materials, and exposure they bring to the classroom. They also attend formal training programs to improve their silks. For instance, a teacher went for a one-month self-funded training program to develop his/her work capabilities. P2 said:

I paid around 1 or 1.5 lakh for training in Thailand. I self-initiated it; nobody gave me money. I had a hunger for knowledge. I talked about Nepal English Language Teachers Association (NELTA) as a novice teacher or beginner, I attended many trainings and international conferences every year.

Likewise, another participant recounted how reading books on philosophy and psychology helped him attain his goal of becoming an effective teacher. Similarly, other participants recalled how certain books they read earlier in their careers changed their outlook. Some even mentioned that regularly reading books outside their field of expertise gave them wider perspectives. P4 even said that reading books transformed how he approached his teaching profession, he learned more from informal means than formal: “I feel like I learnt more from outside than from the classroom. More from personal initiation. Now also, from the books I read, especially of philosophy from Osho to Krishnamurti, I have learned more lessons from those.”

In addition, they read research papers and set goals for their self-directed learning. One participant, who had dual career roles as an academic and a professional artist, brought his artistic experiences into the classroom, allowing them to instruct students based on their artistic and academic expertise. Teaching and interacting with students also allowed participants to learn about the changing context of art, which they incorporated into their artistic work. This duality in his career supported his learning and allowed him to use his knowledge in different contexts. P5 expressed:

My artistic work is a learning process where I face challenges like doing my exhibitions. These learnings are after 4 or 5, and I go to my studio to learn. As an artist for the outside world, the learning process is different, like how to increase public relations, utilize enterprise skills, and what the things that occur in exhibitions are.

Professors highly value self-initiated learning as it is crucial for their growth and improvement in their practices. However, they face challenges due to organizational work practices. Despite their strong interest in self-initiated learning activities, they often cannot manage their time due to preoccupation with tasks that should be managed by others. Furthermore, they feel that the university does not consider self-initiated learning activities important enough. P4 had a tough time juggling his doctoral studies and full-time job. Although the university-supported his degree program, the workload was no different from that. He recounted his experience, saying:
The kind of support that the teacher should receive in informal and formal learning is not there. As I said, I will prepare the draft in six months, submit it to the department, and present it. I need to sit down to write my thesis rigorously; it is time. I requested the teaching break but will not get it because others did not. Not providing a teaching break cannot be considered as support.

Even though universities prescribe that Assistant Professors dedicate 10 percent of their time and Associate Professors dedicate 20 percent of their time to administrative duties, a significant amount of additional time is often required for such tasks. As a result, professors are often left with less time to perform their academic duties. They are required to engage in a high volume of administrative roles daily, which can create a lack of time for self-initiated learning. This problem is compounded by everyday problem-solving and a shortage of human resources within the administration, which necessitates professors engaging in all kinds of administrative jobs. P3 described the challenge:

I find it hard. I am the coordinator. I have to take classes. I don’t have time. I feel like I am not free at all. MBA classes are just over, and there will be BBA classes soon. I feel fed up sometimes; there is no time. Something is happening here and there all the time. I want to learn, but the lack of time makes learning challenging.

Professors value engaging in self-initiated learning to achieve their career goals of becoming Professors and leaders in their schools. However, workload, rules, and regulations, and a lack of supportive systems hinder their engagement in such activities. Consequently, many self-directed learning activities are put on hold due to workplace constraints. Nonetheless, some participants manage to find time outside of work to engage in learning activities such as reading or online courses at a slower pace.

The workplace offers a learning environment for employees, with learning-by-doing, observation, and reflection woven into daily activities. Additionally, social learning through interaction and collaboration in the workplace fosters knowledge, skills, and work attitude growth.

Discussion

This study thoroughly investigates informal learning practices among university professors in a Nepali University, aligning with the well understood phenomena of informal learning in the workplace (Encinar-Prat & Gairín Sallán, 2019; Kyndt et al., 2016; Lohman, 2006; University Grant Commission, 2020; Ünlühisarcıklı, 2018). While previous studies have focused on schoolteachers, this research extends these findings to the context of university professors, highlighting both similarities and unique aspects such as exposure and engagement in separate professional work.

University Professors are found to acquire work-related knowledge through informal learning practices that are inherently embedded within their daily routines and work activities (Kyndt et al., 2016; Marsick & Volpe, 1999). This study explains three primary ways through which university professors learn informally: by direct involvement in tasks, learning from others via collaboration and feedback, and through self-initiated activities like reading and engaging in professional networks. The study shows that teachers learn informally through the everyday act of doing their job, and the nature of learning is intentional (Sjöberg & Holmgren, 2021). The learning activities are intentional because they are aware of problems in their teaching, coordination issues, and students’ feedback on their teaching (Boud & Hager, 2012).
The nature of the job entails planning, preparing, and evaluating teaching—additionally, day-to-day administrative roles of preparing routines, orienting visiting faculties, preparing the academic calendar, and admissions. Further, university teachers engage in collaborative consulting and project their academic research. Collaborating with coworkers and clients and facing new challenges contributes to employees’ learning in the workplace (Schürmann & Beausaert, 2016; Tynjälä, 2008). They willingly seek feedback and support from their peers and colleagues. These teams serve as their primary networks, with strong personal ties and an understanding of each other’s experiences and competencies (de Laat & Schreurs, 2013; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Teachers who learn individually and cooperatively can benefit from reflection with others and joint efforts such as co-teaching, composing texts together and developing curricula collaboratively (Henze et al., 2009; Sjöberg & Holmgren, 2021).

They were aware of the changes happening around their subject field and paid attention to the talks around their subjects from the practitioners in their field. They even planned their learning, linking it with future growth in their teaching area. Notably, these methods not only align with the existing research on self-initiated learning activities (Merriam et al., 2007) but also reflect the theory of deliberate learning (Eraut, 2004), emphasizing a goal-oriented and conscious approach to acquiring new knowledge. Self-initiated learning relies on the theory of deliberate learning where there is a definite learning goal and time is set aside for acquiring new knowledge and engagement in deliberative activities such as planning and problem solving, for which there is a clear work-based goal with learning as a probable by-product (Eraut, 2004). The activities university teachers are engaged such as taking up an online course, reading different books, engaging in professional networks, and going for self-initiated training and exposure visits, show that they deliberately engage in these self-directed informal practices for their professional growth (Lohman & Woolf, 2001). Similarly, informal learning driven by individual agency enables teachers to pursue learning opportunities that are relevant and meaningful (Noe et al., 2010; Tannenbaum et al., 2010).

The lack of learning opportunities, access to learning resources, meaningful learning incentives, and decision making authority create constraints for informal learning in the workplace (Lohman, 2000). However, the study found that self-initiated learning is valued, but some professors experience constraints due to workplace context (Sjöberg & Holmgren, 2021). Some limitations, such as lack of time for learning, limited learning resources, no rewards for performance, and limited authority to make decisions, are well documented as inhibitors to informal learning in the workplace (Lohman, 2000).

Conclusion and Implications

The implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are substantial. To nurture an environment conducive to informal learning, HEIs should provide tools, time and incentives for faculty development, aligning with Ellinger’s (2005) advocacy for organizational support in informal learning. Facilitating collaborative learning opportunities and integrating practical applications in formal programs can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical applicability (Billett, 2001). Resources like online courses, professional networks, and exposure tours can further enhance self-directed learning, fostering a lifelong learning culture beneficial to educators and students alike (Jarvis, 2012).

This study, while providing valuable insights into the informal learning practices of university professors in Nepal, is not without its limitations. The primary constraint arises from its focus on a single university setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other universities, both within and outside of Nepal. Given the unique social cultural and institutional context of the studied university, the informal learning practices observed here might differ significantly from those in other educational settings or geographical locations.
Another limitation is the potential underrepresentation of certain faculty groups. The study’s focus on professors may have overlooked the informal learning experiences of adjunct faculty, and other teaching staff, whose experiences and challenges might differ significantly.

Future research can aim to broaden the scope of investigation, incorporating multiple universities, a diversity of academic disciplines, and a range of faculty roles to provide a more comprehensive view of informal learning practices in higher education. Comparative studies across different countries, especially contrasting developing and developed nations, could also provide a richer, global perspectives on the dynamics of informal learning in academia.

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