

EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNERS
OF NEPALI UNIVERSITIES

Lina Gurung

A Thesis

Submitted to
School of Education

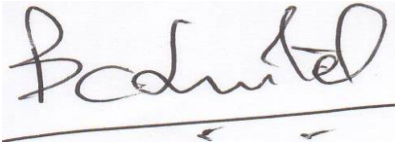
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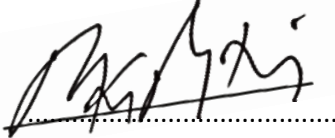
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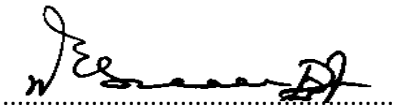
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July 18, 2021

Lina Gurung, Degree Candidate

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DEDICATION

To My Parent, My Family and My Academic Mentors

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree.

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July 18, 2021

Lina Gurung

Degree Candidate

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Lina Gurung for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy in Education* presented on July 18, 2021.

Title: *Experiences of Online and Distance Learners of Nepali Universities*

Abstract Approved

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Prof. Bal Chandra Luitel, PhD

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Online and distance education has emerged as an alternative way of providing accessibility to learners irrespective of time and space. Its implementation in Nepali universities started within this decade amidst the inadequate institutional preparation and less oriented learners. My work experience within the ODL unit and field visit outside Kathmandu Valley during the initial phase of its implementation made me feel that learners' experiences were overlooked in this new mode of learning. This study is therefore an inquiry into the experiences of online and distance education learners in Nepali universities. My research questions are a) How do the learners get motivated towards and throughout the online and distance education program? b) How do online and distance learners experience power relations in their learning context? c) How do online and distance learners construct their identity? I have applied the social constructivist theoretical lens and the narrative inquiry methodological approach for the study. I have used the inductive approach and interpretive paradigm to make meanings from the stories my research participants have lived with. The research participants of the study are the online and distant learners of the MEd program in two

universities in Nepal. Though I approached 11 participants, six participants were finally able to participate in the series of interviews and allowed me to visit their houses and workplaces. There are three male and three female participants from different MEd programs such as English Language Teaching, Mathematics Education, and Master in Sustainable Development.

The intrinsic motivation of an online and distance learner helps in their degree completion. The motivation is influenced by various positive perceptions, family support, tutor's feedback, and appreciation. Intrinsic motivation becomes sustainable if the learner can relate and use it in their professional and personal life. While exploring the discourse of the digital divide, the power relations of online and distance learners with ICT were visible. I got inference that learners gain digital skills and can transform their lives by being confident and technology-friendly. Access to the materials and skills enables the learners to experience the powerful position while those who do not have access, strive for it and make them feel powerless. I argue that in online and distance education programs, all learners do not necessarily transform or have positive learning experiences. The learners are controlled by disciplinary power where they try to maintain their image or align to the normalization as expected by society. However, the learners, irrespective of their gender, benefit from the advantages of ODL. While transitioning from conventional to alternative learning, learners have unique experiences with negative and positive emotions. In such a condition, adult online learners always strive to keep the highest hierarchy of their self-believed identity standard. During the process, they seek social interaction similar to face-to-face mode but they experience very minimal interaction between peers and with teachers. Learners face conflicting conditions in the new role, but they always try to create a conducive environment to retrieve their better image. The university has a

vital role in valuing their experience and provide support to learners to create a distinctive learning environment in online and distance education.

The complete paradigm shift from conventional to online mode has brought many challenges to Nepali learners due to the stereotypical society, social norms and individual as well as institutional unpreparedness. In this regard, the blended mode of learning can be effective to prepare the students gradually for the completely different alternative mode of learning. The teaching-learning practices in ODL in the Nepali context should equally consider the importance of the social and affective presence as of cognitive presence. The study has opened up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions and insights for further studies and strategies to enhance teaching-learning in ODL, institutional role and policy considerations to reshape ODL in a new paradigm. This study has drawn attention towards the gap between the new practices of the modern world and the conventional society of Nepal which is yet not ready to incorporate the alternative mode of learning completely. ODL demands better planning, more investment, training, learner centered designing of the curriculum and so on.



Lina Gurung

Degree Candidate

July 18, 2021

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the day I joined Kathmandu University as a student and later as a faculty. They are my real-life coaches.

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Lina Gurung, Degree Candidate

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ABBREVIATIONS

DEO	District Education Office
EFA	Education for All
ELT	English Language Teaching
ICT	Information Communication and Technology
LMS	Learning Management System
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MSD	Master in Sustainable Development
NORHED	Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development
ODL	Online and Distance Learning
PGDE	Post-graduate Diploma in Education
SLM	Self-learning materials
STEM	Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The human innovation of smart technologies has become a very integral part of our life. These growing integrations of technology have made learning more complex than ever before. It demands different skills, attitudes and knowledge from the learners to manage and excel in the contemporary competencies. In the introduction chapter, I ponder the complexities of this vague phenomenon regarding the online and distance education program of universities. I begin it with my own experiences of how I encountered and got engaged in this pool of online and distance learning. This way, I show my position and connection of my journey to this inquiry. My study and work experiences have guided me to the purpose of this study. Then I discuss the significance of this study and brief the readers on the organization of the following chapters. In this study, I highlight the learner's perspective in this alternative mode of learning. Since this study is focused on the students enrolled in online and distance programs of the Nepali universities, I have used the term online and distance learning. The program is neither completing online nor distance, rather a blend of both so this term has been used throughout the thesis as a practice in universities of Nepal. Those programs were internet based and had asynchronous learning.

I Migrated for Higher Education

My desire for higher study sprouted from the good result I had in the semester-based master's degree program, and I got awarded with the Dean's list for scoring more than 3.8 CGPA. It made me feel that I should study further for career growth and better knowledge. I had earned two masters' degrees so I wanted to upgrade the

qualification. Then I decided to migrate to Kathmandu in 2011AD to study MPhil at Kathmandu University. Had there been online and distance mode of learning available in the MPhil programs, I would have stayed back in Pokhara, my hometown, for the MPhil degree as well. There were no MPhil and PhD programs in Pokhara, so my desire to pursue further study took me to Kathmandu. Being a daughter-in-law and a mother of two children, I faced a difficult time migrating to Kathmandu for study. However, my in-laws did not oppose my desire, and most importantly, my husband had a deep respect for my willingness to study PhD degree. It was comparatively easy for me when my husband was already posted to Kathmandu from Pokhara when he got a job promotion. He was very instrumental in getting the required information and filling up the admission form for me. It was apparent that I would not be able to do a job immediately after arriving in Kathmandu, after all, there were two children to look after. However, my husband was ever ready to do everything to stay with me and the children in the crowded city. There were lots of jobs to do besides my study after I came to Kathmandu. I had to find a room for my family and a school for my children. So when I joined MPhil in 'Development Studies' at Kathmandu University, School of Education, in the beginning, I was quite drained with all those arrangements I had to make in a new place. I was an outsider or held the status of an 'in-migrant student'. The classes used to run during the evening from 5:30 to 8:30 pm. Most of the students in the MPhil program had full-time jobs and many years of experience in their profession. I found that I was the only one who was jobless in the group. I worked in Pokhara as a visiting faculty at Pokhara University and as a TV journalist in a mainstream media. I had to quit my job to focus on my study to do a PhD after the MPhil program.

I had never thought that I would be able to study at Kathmandu University one day, as it is the most prestigious university in Nepal. I got the feeling of being privileged after getting admission. When the result was published after the written test and interview, my name was published in the 11th rank. I was on cloud nine. I was excited about how the journey would go. The classes began. There were only five female students, including me, out of 28 students. In the first semester, I was timid to ask questions during the class lecture. My classmates were dominant, and they were brilliant, outspoken, and confident. I was the only one who had migrated to Kathmandu that same year. My classmates were already established in their job and had other residential settlements. Some were working in government offices, some in reputed non-governmental organizations, and some were teachers. They would come with their laptop to take note of the lectures. Since I had a mini laptop, I felt inferior and never dared to bring it into the classroom. Instead, I used pen and diary to write notes during class hours. Sometimes, I felt like an outsider and found myself naïve among them. In the beginning, I could not catch up with the heavy jargons and complex concepts used by the teachers. But as we progressed with the courses, I found the classes very interactive, which motivated me to raise questions, and I even made class presentations confidently. Slowly, I made some friends in the class by the end of the first semester.

Moodle, My Energy Booster in a New Environment

MPhil program introduced me to the Moodle platform for the first time in 2011 AD. The university was also launching it for the first time, and I got the opportunity to get familiar with it. Moodle stands for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, and it is an online learning platform. Moodle was developed in 2002 by Martin Dougiamas, and it has become a popular Learning

Management System (LMS). I made my online ID with a profile picture and some necessary information such as my address and the program I was enrolled in. The teachers gave us the code to enrol in their courses.

There were reading materials uploaded. Notifications used to come to our email. However, all the teachers did not use Moodle as some of them were not comfortable with the new technology. Instead, they would forward their PowerPoint slides to the group mail. I was quite excited about the new platform. I realized that if I had no basic computer skills, it would have been much difficult as all the assignments had to be submitted in digital form. I used to reach the university premises an hour before the class time to sit in front of a computer in the computer lab. On Moodle, there was a link to e-resources that gave access to journal articles and even some archived theses. I got stimulated to find the different reading materials related to my course topics and explore more through the internet. I never had access to such a large pool of resources before. I used to study all the reading materials provided to the students beforehand for class discussion. I used to chat with some of my classmates through the chat feature available on Moodle. I enjoyed seeing them online and had a chat with them. If there were some notifications in any courses, then it would come to the message box.

I remember one of the professors once put a question in the discussion forum, and I was the one who responded at first. I wrote a paragraph in a response to the questions put for discussion by the teacher. Then the teacher replied to my comment and asked other students to write their opinions, just like me. I was very happy, energized, and motivated to get an instant reply and appreciation from the teacher. It was my first time writing in such a discussion forum. The role of others in the individual construction of knowledge is important (Vygotsky, 1978). I acknowledge

that many people in my life have played an important role in gaining knowledge.

Since it is my personal trait to learn new things, I had so many new things to explore and experience in the MPhil program. In fact, I liked it.

Most of my friends who used to work in offices had less time to come prepared for the class discussion. Since I had no official job, I had enough time to go through all the reading materials, and I actively participated in group discussions and every time, I used to make comments on the presentations made by friends on those articles. I enjoyed the learning process. I became an engaged learner. I loved attending lectures of the well-experienced professors, and I got energized whenever I talked to them. The sophisticated university premises had all the modern amenities required. I felt worth leaving my hometown to have a great learning experience in such an ideal environment. I was fascinated because the public colleges where I studied earlier lacked such a conducive learning environment.

When I did my undergraduate and graduate programs in a public college, I had no time to regularly attend classes due to my pregnancy and antenatal care. Moreover, after enrollment, many students would appear only for their final examination without attending lectures. I was also one of the irregular students. The trend was only 25 percent of the students used to attend the lectures daily, and the rest would always depend on the guidebooks and questions bank readily available in the bookstore at a cheaper price. It was not less than a distance mode of learning. When I gave birth to my two children, in those particular years, I did the same. I could not pass the subjects on the first attempt. I failed in many subjects, and I was quite unhappy about myself and started doubting my capabilities. Then I realized that distance learning is not so easy to get self-motivated and get through the subjects with better grades. However, I passed the degree with second and even third attempts in one of the subjects. I really

had no opportunity to get engaged in learning as in the MPhil program. So, I was quite motivated and excited during my MPhil study.

When I reached the second semester in the MPhil program, I became very familiar with the new learning environment and was able to perform well. Luckily, I was noticed in the classroom, and I got appreciation from the professors. Once, when I visited a professor's cabin to get his feedback on my assignment, he asked me about my background. I told him that I was a full-time student and migrated to Kathmandu with my family for study purpose only. He expressed his concern about my unemployed status and said that he would inform me if there was any appropriate job for me. The professor even forwarded me some links to apply for the new job that came in his contact. Then on a Monday evening of March first week 2012, when I was in the third semester, the new Dean of the School called me to his office before the class hour. I was a bit nervous with no clue what he would tell me. To my surprise, the Dean offered me the job to be his assistant. When I heard it, I got elated and felt euphoric. I accepted the offer and agreed to join the office from next week. My desk was placed in the Dean's office to the east-south corner of the Dean's room. I assisted him in academic as well as administrative jobs.

Overlooked Distance Learning

It was about two years and three months since I assisted the dean. Suddenly, the Dean resigned from his post in June 2014 due to some dissatisfaction he had with the higher authority. He had an important role in grooming me for who I am today. His words of appreciation will always cheer me up. He said, 'Lina, you did your job very well, and you have been a very good assistant to me.' After he left the office, I was shifted to a vacant cabin with other faculty in a big room. I was continuing with other research projects that were initiated by him. Then after a month, our school

shifted to Hattiban. Then I was assigned to help in the online and distance learning unit operated by about two full time, two part-time faculties, and a technician. In Nepal, Kathmandu University was the first university that started its online and distance learning program in 2011 AD through the Post-graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) program. In those days, there were very few students enrolled in the PGDE and a one-year master's degree program. There were hardly a few who passed their program through ODL. I was a bit disappointed that there were many dropouts, and very few efforts were initiated from the university to retain them.

One of the part-time faculty left the job due to the other responsibilities he had. Then I had to take over the courses he had left in between. I was asked to facilitate about four courses and communicate with the students. I was literally freaking out as those were completely new subjects, and I had no idea how the ODL was actually functioning. My colleague told me that I do not have to prepare the courses as there are already prepared self-learning materials (SLM) for those courses. I just had to email them and get the updates. Then when they were ready to give the examination, I had to fix the time and provide them with the questions which were in the archive. Since there were few students, they preferred to come to the university to sit for the paper-based exam, similar to the face-to-face students. Neither I had training, nor did the students have a proper orientation in the process. So, there were no clear instructions, and it had fewer chances of attracting fewer students or even retaining them.

I was asked to communicate with 10 students about the courses given to me. I wrote them an email to ask if they had any queries. Moodle was not applied for these distance learners, so email and phone calls were the only way of communicating with them. So here, I mentioned only distance learning as I saw the absence of online

learning. None of the students reported using Moodle at that time. They were receiving materials through email, information through phone calls, and attending exams through physical presence in the university. Some students outside Kathmandu valley used to arrange their time for examination when they had to visit Kathmandu for their other personal and official purpose. Since these students were less in number and had different times for examination according to their availability, they used to write their exam papers in our office room itself. We did not have the problem of arranging a separate classroom for them. After three hours, they would submit their papers, get the required information for the next examination date, and would leave. There was no other communication with them. The questions for the examination had both objective and subjective questions but were limited to the given SLM. Reflective questions were missing. I believed that it would limit the learning outcomes of the student. I felt concerned, worried and discomfort, seeing the question pattern. I myself is a learner who does not prefer rote learning, and I do not even perform well in such a case. I had failed the subjects in the past. I had discomfort also because these students never posed a question about the chapters or the contents written in the SLM. They never wrote an email asking for more explanation from the tutors to the sections which they have not understood while going through the SLM. Did they really understood and did not need any more explanation? I had to assume that those students were really geniuses if they pass the exam with high scores. Learners' presence is very important to own the feeling of an online community member. They cannot understand their role or negotiate the meaning of their experiences if they do not have meaningful participation.

Indeed, identity is constructed through interactions between self and others.

This is a continuous process and a less researched discourse (Hughes, 2007) in online

and distance education. When a student unfolds clues about themselves, their knowledge and their perception when they interact virtually as well. Similar to other learning community, online platform also exists with the participation of the learners from where their identity develops (Chunliffe, 2003, as cited in Delahunty et al., 2014). In my professional experience, the teachers had less opportunity to understand the identity of online and distance learners. It was missing. Seeing the students only during the examination will not create a better relationship between teacher and student. It is understood by interacting with the students either synchronous or asynchronous. The teacher has a great role in contributing to the students' journey of becoming. Through communication, the teacher can identify the students' attributes and can facilitate accordingly. The weaker students or the students who are likely to drop out can build confidence with the teacher's support and know themselves better. Therefore it is important how the students develop their identity in online and distance learning.

Assumptions and Diverse Background of Students

After knowing about the university's online and distance education program, I convinced my sister to get enrolled in the PGDE program. She was in Pokhara, and I thought if she can get admission, it would be easy for her to continue higher education. She was teaching in a government school for 15 years and did not bother to pursue her study in the graduate program due to her family care work. She took my advice and got admission in August 2013. Whenever I used to ask the staff about her progress, it was reported that she was doing well in the beginning but have not appeared for the exam in any of the courses. Later she dropped the whole program. Then I talked to her twice to know why she did not complete the program. Earlier she had shared that she did not have a computer at home and being a mother and a

daughter-in-law, it was quite difficult for her to visit the internet café and do her studies to type her assignments, upload them, download reading materials and check the notifications. I realized that it was not so easy for her to continue as I had assumed earlier. The second time she told me that she was not interested as she did not find the process interesting. I did not bother to speak for the third time because I was helpless to assist her in that regard. After joining the ODL unit, it made me realize that the support to the distant learners was highly crucial to retain them in the program. She was one of the dropouts of the ODL program, whom I knew very closely. The rest were even out of touch, and I had no clue why they did not continue.

Once a female Nepali student who was residing in Qatar have her exams online. I came to know about her when I had to invigilate her online examination. The technician arranged the technical part, and I was asked to monitor the screen. She shared her screen, where she was writing answers to the given questions. The other requirement was that she had to put her video on to check her activities. She was taking an exam from her house and in between her son would come near her and ask something. Then she would request him to allow her to take the exam and would look to his needs after the exam. I appreciated the lady for writing her exam despite the frequent disturbances she had due to her son. However, she seemed no problem with internet speed and computer skills. She took all examinations of different subjects likewise, and she was able to pass with good scores.

There was another eye-opening incident for me; it was the second week of September 2014, a male student came to my office to consult about a course he would be taking under my supervision. I was glad that at least someone showed up physically for the course. We had a good discussion, and I explained to him the projects he could do for the course completion. I asked him about the areas of interest

in the project. He, too, seemed very happy. After having a conversation for about half an hour, I felt that he was highly self-motivated to complete the course and was dedicated to his learning. Then one of my colleagues entered the room and passed her comment, *'Oh, he is a very talented guy; he studied abroad and plans to do a PhD after he completes this degree. So he is very quick in completing the courses. He doesn't need much guidance as others'*. The boy smiled at her, but I was a bit surprised by her remarks. Again the happiness faded away with so many questions. Why did she say that he did not need any guidance when he was discussing many things with me for a course? Why was there an assumption that only talented people are good at self-directed learning? How do we assure that his learning was effective by just providing the SLM and believing in him when he said that he went it thoroughly? Why was there less support for both the weak students and above-average students? It made me feel that the role of the tutor was undermined, and fostering the relationship for better learning was not a priority. It exposed the implicit and taken for granted assumptions about learning and how it works in ODL. We assumed that since these adult students were busy people, they opted for online and distance mode just to get the degree. We assumed that it is the students' responsibility to complete the degree by themselves without seeking additional support as regular students. We assumed that these students will be able to submit their assignments with no difficulties after the self-learning materials are provided to them. We assumed that the relationship between the teacher and student is not needed in self-directed learning. We assumed that they don't need feedback from the teachers and the learning can happen in isolation. So I felt the need to explore more into such assumptions and realities that the learners face. Online learning which includes interaction between learners and between learners and their tutors, helps to stimulate

higher thinking among the learners (Papastergiou, 2006). So I strongly believe that interaction is very important in learning. The institutions had no handbook or guidebook for students on how to deal with the new mode of learning. Every student enrolled through the online and distance education unit were performing differently. The differences were visible. I learned that students had a diverse background, which is very important to understand for their success and failure, but it was overshadowed in the university. Sharing background information and participating in collaborative and cooperative activities is very important for learners to construct their understanding (Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). From my own experiences, I have understood that learners who receive support and guidance to perform the study activities will succeed in the program (Vygotsky, 1978). These experiences posed so many questions, and I got interested in exploring such issues and learning more about ODL.

My Designation and Activities

In 2013, KUSOED launched the NORHED QUANTICT project, which is entitled 'Enhancing Access Quality and Sustainability of Teacher Training/Education through the use of ICTs and Distance Delivery Modes'. The project was approved at the end of 2013, and it was funded by NORAD. The project has three partners, namely: Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, and OsloMet University. It aimed to equip teachers in their professional development through developing competencies in ICT use through the modularization of curricula. ICT denotes information, communication, and technology. ICT is a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, store, circulate, bring value-addition, and manage information (Kaushik, 2009). Upgrading the qualification of the faculty was one of its activities. For this purpose, there was a call from KUSOED to apply for the PhD

scholarship for the new intake of the 2014 February batch. The scholarship was for the faculties only, and there was reserved two seats for female faculties. I applied for the PhD program, and I was granted the scholarship under the NORHED QUANTICT project. The scholarship was very instrumental for me as I had doubts that I would not be able to enroll in the program without the scholarship. After joining KU, it was another most significant milestone for me.

It was 1st February 2015, when I was appointed as a gender coordinator of the NORHED project to plan and coordinate with project activities to address gender issues and ensure social inclusion throughout the project implementation. The project activities tried to provide equal access and participation to the enrolled students, teachers, and university staff in the online and distance platform. I had to conduct workshops, feasibility study, awareness activities about the university's ODL program under the project, and assess the newly prepared curriculum and SLM. During these activities, I got an opportunity to learn more about online distance learning and its g/local context. In distance learning, the students are not physically present in the traditional educational setting, but these days, distance learning has come to be synonymous with the term online learning as the traditional distance learning has changed into the web-based learning platform which is more user friendly and accessible any time through internet or intranet. So the online and distance education is used simultaneously in the learning experiences. Online education includes a broader range of services, from course content to student support through web-based technologies.

The NORHED QUANTICT project implemented online distance education for the master's degree in Nepal, which functioned first in the nation. Nepal Open University was yet not fully functional with its academic program until February

2018. Kathmandu University extended its ODL program in 2015 to two years master's degree programs in Mathematics Education, English Language Teaching, and Master in Sustainable Development. Likewise, Tribhuvan University, too, started a similar program in Mathematics Education and English Language Teacher. In the same year, TU established the Open and Distance Education Center to cater to more online students. Though Nepal Open University Infrastructure Development Board was established in July 2012 under the chairmanship of the Minister of Education, it launched its programs in distant online mode from 2018 with MPhil programs in the beginning and later with graduate and undergraduate programs in three different faculties. Besides these major universities of Nepal, various contact centers of different foreign universities enroll students in different programs through online and distance mode.

The use of ICT in education has been considered essential to achieve the long-term goal of Nepal (Ministry of Education, 2016). The SSRP had envisioned to integrate, increase and implement ICT assisted teaching/learning process in all schools. It was further continued in SSDP as well (2016/17 – 2022/23). Ministry of Information and Communication (2015) in Nepal tool prepared a Master Plan (2013-2017) for ICT and developed “National Information and Communication Technology Policy” which is intended to create the foundational groundwork for “Digital Nepal”. The objective of the policy was to enhance the nationwide ICT willingness. It further aims to be at least in the top second quartile of the international ICT development index and e-Government rankings by 2020. The recent amended National Education Policy 2076 of Nepal has prioritized the integration of ICT in education to make it ICT friendly, practical and result-oriented (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019). It aimed at producing competent, skilled and tech-savvy human

resources for the better transformation of the country. The NORHED QUANTICT project in Nepal contributed to these national goals through awareness and creating an online learning platform in higher education.

After being appointed as a gender coordinator besides being a NORHED PhD scholar, I had to visit different colleges across the country to study the feasibility of online and distance education and create awareness about this new phenomenon in our Nepalese context regarding graduate programs. So my involvement in NORHED Project gave me opportunities to explore new ideas, first-ever reactions, and responses of people and experiences to inform, educate, and interact with the potential candidates. So it was ultimately a new experience for me.

New technologies have made it possible for people to communicate, network and collaborate on a more global scale than was previously possible (Gurumurthy, 2006). An empirical study carried out at the University of Arusha, Tanzania, found out that ICT integration in Universities can combat the digital divide (Makewa et al., 2014). However, there are many challenges in integrating ICT in higher education. ICT is rapidly modifying the ways higher education is structured and generates knowledge. In the present context, the basic role that institutions of higher education have played is questioned. Knowledge production in the digital era has moved far beyond the boundaries of the university because now information is abundantly accessible to everyone regardless of being a teacher or student. So with the growing prominence of information technology and addressing inequalities, higher education has integrated ICT in their teaching practices, operating mechanism and through online and distance education.

The Reality Outside Kathmandu Valley

During my job as gender coordinator, I had to travel to different places to interact with the college students and teachers on gender issues in education and, most importantly, their perception of online and distance learning mode. We were there to inform them about our new mode of education and increase their accessibility to our programs. For this purpose, I visited Butwal, Palpa, Bhairawa, Hetauda, Birgunj, and Dhankuta along with representatives from other universities. We went to colleges that were operating teacher education programs. We had a separate meeting with faculty and students. The classrooms were crowded. We learned that those students have not heard about online and distance education programs before. Surprisingly almost all of them had a Facebook account, but hardly a few were operating their emails. They reported that they rarely explore learning resources from the internet. It provided me with some insights on the practices of the students out of Kathmandu Valley which depicts that they were less informed on the alternative methods of learning and were most likely to depend on the teacher's lecture notes and the textbooks. I felt from the observation that conducting online and distance education programs in such an unprepared context will encounter many challenges.

When I came to Kathmandu in 2011, I was also unknown about online and distance education like those students mentioned earlier. So I was able to relate it to my own experience. My entry to Kathmandu University as an MPhil student and later as a faculty allowed me to explore this phenomenon. My field visit and interaction with the students in those public colleges gave me insight into our country's status where the students outside the Kathmandu valley do not seem informed, prepared, and equipped to undertake the online classes. They have been using the internet mostly for entertainment than educational purposes. Students were found rather using social

media such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. It made me serious about how we can operate online and distance education when they do not have an email address and computer at home. I felt that I was quite privileged to have computer skills after I passed my tenth grade. However, to access the internet, I had to visit the cyber cafe. Later after joining the university as a staff, the project gave me exposure to such a platform where we were trying to deliver education through the use of technologies amidst the ambiguity and insufficient prerequisites. The context made me think of how students will be motivated to join the program when they have not understood well, lack basic computer skills, and have no access to digital equipment. Further, when I am feeling privileged, I observed the different situations and contexts outside Kathmandu. There was deprivation and inaccessibility and it made me wonder about the divide and got interested to know these aspects too deeper.

Another dimension that I observed during my field visit was that the number of female students was quite visible in the education stream. A principal from one of the colleges from Butwal reported that the female students were about 75% in the education stream. He further explained that girls in his locality continue their higher education even after marriage as their parents and in-laws have understood the importance of education and support them. It gave me the insight to explore further the gap. I was interested in how the students' in the first cohort would perceive, manage, struggle and motivate themselves in learning through online and distance mode, which was a completely new phenomenon in Nepal regarding degree programs. I was interested in listening to the individual experience and exploring the stories of those learners who are tackling the stereotypes and struggling with the differences in ICT access. I was keen to know the adult learners' overall experiences in the new and formal digital space. My preliminary field visit gave me a sense of a

clear digital divide and its repercussions in the future. Also, I felt that the gendered relation with technology was pertinent, and it needed to be explored more in Nepal and a newly launched new mode of learning. In the 21st century, development without technology cannot imagine, but at the same time, the gender inequalities in the digital platform, too, cannot be ignored. To understand digital disparity, it is crucial to understand the environment (Holmfeld et al., 2013). This study is an attempt to understand the online and distant learner's context from where they perceive and act.

Though there were more female students in undergraduate teacher education programs and it was assumed that online and distance education would allow more women to enroll due to its features of flexibility (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014), I didn't find equal participation in graduate programs of Nepali universities. The unfriendly learning environment is one of the barriers that women cannot get benefitted from the opportunities brought by technology. The gendered power relations have governed the ICT use (Gurumurthy, 2006) in every endeavor. This power can either exclude or include a particular group in ODL. Though ODL may be open to all, still male and female students may not be able to access it equally. Through my field visit and work experience, I was really concerned about those missing female learners and worried about why they could not pursue their education. I was able to sense the power dimensions associated with online and distance learning. It could range from participation to accomplishment. It could be cognitive as well as affective dimensions and influenced by the learner's social and cultural locations.

Being a gender coordinator in the NORHED QUANTICT project, I did action research in 2015 A.D. In the first phase, I interviewed eight applicants who had shown interest in the ODL programs but were unable to get admission due to different

reasons related to their personal programs and some due to institutional inefficiency. The first phase of the interview helped me identify the problems such as not enough and clear information to the applicants, no follow-up or quick responses to their queries, and not affordable fees. Then I recommended the interventions accordingly and hoped to receive more applicants, especially from the women and marginalized community. My intervention included ample dissemination of the ODL programs, adding FAQs (Frequently asked questions) on the website, prioritizing the female applicants with scholarships, and orientation to the program coordinators to answer any related queries from the applicants to their earliest. Then in the second phase, after the admission was announced for the 2016 batch, I interviewed two female applicants who filled up the form but did not get admitted. When asked the reasons to them, they said that they stepped back due to their own reasons. The first one decided to continue next year, and the second one was scared that ODL would demand too much digital skills, and therefore, she thought that the online platform would not suit her to complete the degree. The study gave me insights that better institutional arrangements can receive more students but are not enough to motivate them all (Gurung, 2018). This gave me the idea that learners' perspective is important for the successful functioning and more participation of male and female learners in ODL.

Missing Efforts to Motivate Learners

The online environment is far more complex. It presents us with opportunities in the 21st century. At the same time, many learners have fear of choosing this alternative mode of learning due to their digital incompetency, ambiguity, and uncontrolled learning environment (Sendall et al., 2010). The project targeted mainly for developing teachers' capacity to deliver the courses on new learning platforms.

There were several trainings and workshops on the virtual learning environment, Moodle platform, video editing, gender sensitization, curriculum design, and developing self-learning materials. However, all the teachers still did not utilize the Moodle platform as expected and continued the communication again through emails as before. These efforts were expected to serve the teachers and learners both, but since there was not much improvement in the pass-out rates and the enrollments. So it depicts that learners were not benefitted even the least, and those trainings were not able to improve the relationships with students or activate the strategies to create a comfortable and learner-friendly online learning environment. There was less concern on how to motivate students except for a few scholarships. I felt that the online and distant learners were not given priority equally as face-to-face students. The emphasis was focused on the instructors rather than on learners. In this condition, we were expecting highly self-motivated students but was it possible?

Physical infrastructure such as solar energy, computer labs, and laptops distribution to the faculty was implemented besides the scholarship to the female students. The online and distance program seemed prepared than before. Users of Moodle increased. Teachers now were aware that they have some online students registered in the class. However, the platform was based on asynchronous learning. Neither there was frequent communication with students, nor did they show their active participation in the Moodle. When I taught a course in the Master in Sustainable Development (MSD) program in the fall semester in the year 2018, I was given the students' list for their attendance in the regular classes. The list had two sections. The first section had a list of face-to-face students, and the second section had online students. When I inquired about those eight online students, I could not get much information, and the students attending my course in face-to-face mode said

that they most probably have quit the program except for two of them. Since the university allowed the online students to attend the face-to-face classes if they wanted to, a student attended the classes like other regular students. He was the only one from the online section with whom I interacted throughout the course. The 16 weeks ended, and students appeared for the written exam. During my subject, I was assigned to invigilate the exam hall. To my surprise, I saw a new face sitting in the front row for the same exam. I went near him and asked which program he belonged to. I was shocked at his answer. He was taking the examination of my course and said that he was one of the online students. I felt angry to see him all of a sudden who did not communicate with me, not even once throughout the semester. I was watching him, thinking about what he might write on his paper when he had not got any lecture slides, reading materials, and notes from his classmates. In between, I again went and asked him with anxiety, '*Why you didn't contact me?*' He just smiled and uttered no words. Then I tried to help him by asking if there was any question in the paper, which was difficult for him to comprehend. He said, 'It's fine, ma'am.' After the examination was over, I checked his paper, and obviously, he did not write so well. I did not know anything about him except his name. He was not involved in any group projects and had not submitted his assignments for the internal assessment. After the examination was over, he again disappeared as if he did not exist. For the last time, I expected his email to receive his assignments, but he disappointed me again. This incident really shook me to the depth and triggered my curiosity to learn how the learners understand and create meaning from their experience with such minimum interaction with the teacher. My encounter with every enrolled distant learner of my university and potential candidates gave me unique experiences with the hints that they live different but exciting and enlightening stories.

The incidents made me think about the preparedness of learners and various factors influencing it. A study by Parkes et al. (2015) found that some students are less prepared to balance their study routine along with their social responsibilities. Further, they were identified with a low level of e-learning competencies associated with interactions and content, which contradicted the assumption of a high level of preparedness for competencies. Oztok (2013) argues that a lack of background knowledge could lead to a lack of understanding and disengagement from the learning community (Oztok, 2013). Learning is shaped by context, conversation, and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978), and it is even more important to explore where there is the physical absence of teacher and student in the classroom and mostly dependent on the asynchronous form of commitment. From my personal and work experiences, three major broad themes have emerged; namely, motivational issues, identity construction, and power discourses in ODL, and the major focus should be on the learner's experiences. The technology draws attention to the prospects as well as what is missing. The learners have lot many expectations in the ODL platform which are guided by their earlier experience in face-to-face learning. To address these expectations is important for their learning process. My personal journey made me feel that the problem exists. Therefore, this study explores this problem further.

Statement of the Problem

New technologies are offering more exciting and contextualized resources and environments than ever before (Koszalka et al., 2019). In fact, it is inevitable. Our daily life has driven towards more technology use. There is a growing integration of technology through well-equipped classrooms and high-tech teaching methods. These growing resources have advanced abundant learning environments to support independent learning. The intricacy of this online learning platform is to make an

appropriate learning environment for learners to interact and construct their own knowledge (Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). Though students might get motivated to join the ODL program, their engagement can impart both positive as well as negative experiences. Their prior experiences, socialization, ICT access, digital competency, social interactions influence their learning. In developing countries, the universities face many challenges such as administrative issues, technical complexities, student's management, quality delivery, technical support and social interaction (Muilenburg & Berg, 2005; Lerra, 2014). Though the students from diverse backgrounds have increased in higher education, the issues of isolation and digital competency are its key challenges (Stone et al., 2016). The facilitating conditions are not the same for all the students across the country to access the internet and resources. There are disparities and unequal distribution of the ICT benefits.

When online and distance education was recently implemented in Nepali universities amidst the inadequate institutional preparation, not sufficiently trained teachers, and not properly oriented learners, it is encountering many challenges. In the Nepali context, the challenges could be massive which is unexplored. Consequently, online learners will suffer the most with fewer outcomes and there remains a high probability of experience dissatisfaction by the end-user (Johnson et al., 2007). The students' learning experience is influenced by different elements such as their socio-cultural background, social structures, class, gender and socialization (Alhawsawi, 2015). Some are privileged to get a conducive environment from online learning while some have to struggle a lot with minimum skills. These disparities and diverse contexts have created discourses in the society where the students are entangled and affected by the extended power relations of ICTs in online and distance learning. The students might feel a sense of isolation. In the early phase due to less organizational

efficiency, such disconnected feelings might be stronger. When the students move into a different world, their negotiations and engagement are necessarily not the same as in traditional studies (Tomei, et. al, 2008). When they enroll in ODL program, they engage with teachers, peers and contents, which confers them to reflect their performance and understanding self in a new situation. The new and complex experiences of the Nepali online and distance learners can raise questions about self and relations, in the process of being a part of the global and local discourse through their first-hand experiences. The learner's experience in ODL matters not only in relation to technological aspects but also due to their diverse and temporal social setting which has been shadowed by the mounting infusion of an alternative mode of learning in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to inquire into learners' experiences in online and distance education.

Main Research Question

What are the learners' experiences in online and distance education and contexts that influence their learning?

Specific Research Questions

1. How do the learners get motivated towards and throughout the online and distance education program?
2. How do online and distance learners experience power relations in their learning context?
3. How do online and distance learners construct their identity?

Significance of the Study

There have been tremendous changes in the education sector due to the integration of ICTs in teaching and learning practice. So in the age of information and technology, if we discard digital literacy skills, our discussion of 21st-century skills will not be complete. Technology is shaped by the way of our thinking and practice in our daily lives. Thus, it is necessary to examine the status and participation of online distance learners after entering into the new mode of learning. This study reveals the experiences of adult learners that would serve as a reference to emphasise the importance of designing online and distance education with priority given to learners' active participation. This study emphasized understanding the social, economic and cultural background of the learners to foster the cognitive and affective skills for their overall wellbeing and effective learning. The learner's views, which was missed earlier, would be realized and the study would contribute to the discourse crucial for comprehensive learning, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

The online mode of learning has been beneficial for those who cannot have a physical presence at the university but wish to continue higher education. Higher Education provides strong skills and knowledge for professional and personal development. Some students were not able to pursue their higher education previously due to various social and economic reasons such as inability to attend regular physical classes, household responsibilities, job transfer and so on. Online and distance education can help to update their qualification while Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) help to gain knowledge for their professional development. In addition, the internet provides unlimited resources for teaching/learning. In such a scenario, online-distant play a significant role in closing the gap between accessing higher education and preparing competent human resources. Briefly, I see the significance of this

research in terms of policy, research, and personal and professional significance. The research aimed at knowing how online-distance learners are motivated and sustain throughout the program. Therefore, the learners' experiences through this study can provide important insights into instructional design, better communication, pro-student online environment and many more to improve the overall ODL program through better strategies and action.

Though Nepal's two universities (Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University) have partly responded to the global need for online education, it is in its infancy period. This study is of utmost importance at the policy level to feed to the analysis of the online education conducted till now from the learner's perspective. When universities understand the learner's context in Nepal, they can make provisions for their motivation, retention, active engagement and degree accomplishment with positive experiences.

This study could provide educational researchers in distance education with a broader perspective of online learning beyond the current set of assumptions. The insights gained from this study would inform for the better practice of online teaching. The teacher educators might feel the need to be empathetic, improve digital skills, give clear instructions, and understand online learning from the learners' perspective rather than being dominant and imposing their perspectives while teaching and assessing.

Corona Virus Disease (or COVID-19) discovered in early January in China, spread rapidly worldwide, and there was an emergency condition worldwide. During the global pandemic due to covid-19, people's mobility was at a halt, and it disrupted every aspect of human life. Schools, colleges, transport, and the business industry were closed. By the first week of September 2020, more than 26 million people in

over 215 countries were infected by the virus, and 864 thousand casualties were observed (World Health Organization, 2020). To mitigate the impact on education, educational institutions had no options except for depending on online and distance mode. But since there was inadequate preparation in Nepal and a higher range of inaccessibility to the internet and devices among the population, there was inequitable implementation. Though there were efforts from the Government of Nepal, it was not sufficient to reach all the learners effectively. This study also offers important insights for the educational institutions that have recently started online education due to the global pandemic. It helps them take care of the crucial issues that learners might face while taking online courses. In a way, it makes them aware, conscious, and responsive to the current global and local needs.

Delimitation of the Study

The development history of online and distance education in higher education is not so long in the world. In the context of Nepal, it is even at its very infancy stage. In fact, it began in 2011 when Kathmandu University School of Education (KUOSED) accepted applications in Post Graduate Diploma Program. After the NORHED QUANTICT project was officially launched, Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University received their first cohort of students in 2015 AD. My research was intended to explore the first-hand experiences of the first cohort of students in both universities. Since it was the initial phase, the LMS was completely not functional due to many reasons. This research is solely based on the learner's first-time experiences. In addition, the Nepalese society too had less information about these ODL programs. It was not that common and even unheard of in most of the population. Considering the learner's experience will help in understanding the

learner's social context, respond to their needs, provide adequate support and provide appropriate practice.

In some developed countries, many universities have been providing free and paid online courses at different levels. Many open universities in different nations have been able to make a better impact on quality services. They have open courses, thousands of students, and offer PhD programs too. So my participants' experiences are the stories picked from the students from a developing nation (i.e. Nepal), who have less used online platforms with no enough orientation. Furthermore, the teachers too had a similar first-hand experience. Tech-savvy young students will have a different experience. There are many aspects in online and distance education such as instructional design, curriculum, online pedagogy and synchronous online learning. These factors were less practised in the study period. My study delimits such experiences that would have come from sophisticated and well developed online and distance education program.

Regarding the methodology, I have not been able to apply the natural settings at the time of collecting data. I actually did not observe them doing the assignment, interacting with their teachers, reading at home and attending examinations. The data were based on the observation at home and workplace rather than in the virtual classroom itself. So my participant observation and observing them as they are would have definitely influenced my data analysis. So the scope of my research is based on the knowledge I have gained from the narratives shared by the research participants. The study was focused more on the socio-cultural aspects of the learner's location and narrating their experiences in different stages throughout the program.

Organization of the Thesis

My thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter begins with my narrative, my story about how I got into my PhD and my interest in the topic. In the background, I reveal the status of Nepal from my field visit, how unprepared the society was. Further, the class, gender, region intersects the problem of the digital divide who posed challenges to the goal of two universities to reach as many as possible. These problems were put as the problems of the study. Then I have stated the significance and delimitation of the research after writing the purpose of the study.

In the second chapter, I have presented the relevant literature on my research area while undertaking the study for understanding concepts, generating research problems, theoretical linkage, and analytical themes. In the third chapter, I have focused on the methodology which I applied for the study. My philosophical orientation, approach, the strategy of inquiry, the profile of research participants, ethics, and quality standards of the study are included in the chapter.

The fourth chapter explores why and how learners are motivated to enroll and sustain in the online and distance education program. Their perception of the new platform, their responses, and various myths that they encountered are discussed. The discussion in the fourth chapter made me curious about exploring the divide among the learners. I had got the clue from my visit to the public colleges. Learners do change, feel powerful or powerless when they get attached to the digital world or digital devices through online and distance education programs. Two different stories in the fifth chapter give us the idea of power relations that are amplified with digital need and participation. I realized that power is associated with identity as well. The insight helped me take up the identity construction theme in the sixth chapter to

understand the social, economic, and cultural context of learners when they take up the new role and start understanding self through the learners' lens.

In the seventh chapter, I have summarized the research study and discussed the findings further. The findings are discussed about the global and theoretical contexts, and finally, I have concluded followed with some important ways forward and the contributions of this research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter gives an overview of the literature review that formed my concepts and assumptions for identifying the research problem and questions. Here, I have synthesized the available literature most relevant and critical to my study about the basic concepts of my research topic, history and policies, relevant empirical studies, discourses on these contemporary issues, and theoretical review. Establishing the scholarship of these topics from the literature has provided me with the focus, scope, foundation of research design, and expand the horizon of learning through various debates and issues. In the end, I have discussed the research gap which highlights the unpreparedness of students for online learning, social context of the learners in developing countries, insufficiency of application of learner centered approach to ODL and the doubts on the quality of program delivery. Overall, the learner's participation in the online learning context has been less explored. In Nepal, it is an untouched issue.

Global Emergence and Expansion of ODL Programs

The emergence of ODL was primarily based on a simple assumption that teaching-learning is possible and can be effective even without the physical interaction between teachers and students (Holmborg, 2005). In the beginning, correspondence was a medium of distance education. According to Peters (2003), historically distance education program emerged in three different periods as; first to instruct the labor in industries to fill the gap of education deficiency as vocational training; second Universities, especially in industrialized and developing countries, manage an increasing number of school dropout students to ensure the path of higher

education which helps to develop the capacity of the university as well as combines work and study, and third distance and online education now conveys the most significant space in the Universities. Unprecedented innovation of web-based digital technology in online distance education has been increasing and expanding globally. About the future of such education, Baer (2002) has predicted that with the rise of new technologies, in the future, higher education will likely divide into three types; campus-based 'brick' institutions, virtual based 'click' institutions and the blended-based 'brick and click' institutions.

A study by Kumar et al. (2017) discussed the different phases of emergence as first-distance education based on correspondence education and which followed by printing materials, and with the invention of the internet, it was in transition until online education 1990s. The second phase of this emergence has been with unprecedented advancement in technology that allows education institution to expand through online education. The third wave has been a model of online education called MOOC (massive open online courses). And after 2014 the fourth phase, especially online education evolution that focused on new tools, have been used in pedagogical models that create much engaging with personalized learning experiences.

There have been different media used for online and distance education along with its evolution. Box 1 describes the detailed use of medium and foundation of online and distance education.

Box 1. Evolution of Online and Distance Learning

1852 - First correspondence course was developed by Pitman for Shorthand training program

1892 – Distance learning achieved academic recognition after the first college-level distance learning program created by University of Chicago

1921 – First educational radio licenses was granted. By 1923, over 10 percent of the all the broadcast radio stations were owned by educational institutions.

1934 – Using television as an instructional medium began

1960 – Satellite television systems created to make distance learning cost-effective

1976 – Open University launched its first online classes

1978 – First computer Bulletin Board System was established.

1985 – Online degree courses used satellite transmission to access course materials from universities.

1989 – The University of Phoenix launched the wholly online collegiate institution to offer both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees

1991 – The World Wide Web went public and provided linkages for virtual interactive classrooms

(Adapted from Simak & Kelsey, 2010)

The rapid technological growth and the emerging needs of the 21st century have brought changes in distance education (Patterson, 2009). There are asynchronous and synchronous forms of distance education. The online learning system demands students to have additional ICT skills and be responsible for their learning (Kim & Zhang, 2007). There is maximum use of educational technology in online and

distance education, which widens the experience of students. The use of ICT is more rigorous in online distance learning. To understand the expansion of the ODL programs, I have reviewed its emergence continent wise.

Africa – Africa has demonstrated successful distance education since the 1990s. It primarily began to improve the quality of the conventional system through in-service training of teachers in Sub-sahara Africa. From the beginning, it has a foremost prominence on the print books, correspondences by mail and further connections by radio, text and email (Leary & Berge, 2007). The first online university was operated by the University of Kenyatta in 1996 which was set up in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe under the project of the World Bank. African Virtual University project was the first satellite-based attempt to integrate ICT to deliver university programs (Darkwa & Mazibuko, 2000). It was later handed over to the African governments in 2003. There are efforts to integrate the newest technology in ODL but the traditional distance education delivery methods have been used and proven effective for many years in Africa (Leary & Berge, 2007).

America –America has its origin of distance education from the late 1800s after the establishment of the first department of correspondence teaching at the University of Chicago. In the United States of America, few states promoted distance education in the 1980s but now it is being offered by the individual states, institutions and associations (Matthews, 1999). In the USA, the majority of the higher education institutions are offering programs in online and distance mode (NCES, 1997, as cited in Matthews, 1999). There are 31.6% of higher education students taking online and distance courses from different universities in the United States (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Ginder et al. (2017) pointed out that, in the USA, online education has been rapidly expanded since the last decade, and at present, nearly one-third of the

college student has been taking at least one online course through their schooling period, and 15 percent are enrolled degree program totally based on in the online course. Students' enrollment in Brazil, according to Litto (2018) 50 institutions are providing open and distance education. Out of them, 33 were private, and 17 were public institutions that were offering services to undergraduate students.

Australia – In Australia, distance education began with the establishment of the Department of External Studies at the University of Queensland in 1911 (Matthews, 1999). This Correspondence study was the first phase of distance education. Later there was the use of multi-media and two-way communication from the early 1970s to mid-1980s to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Latchem, 2018). Then the open, flexible and online learning with the use of the internet and digital technologies is taken as the third phase of distance education in Australia (Latchem, 2018). In Australia, nearly 75% of all online enrollments are from six universities and the rest are from other 49 universities (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). So there is not equally balanced in the student distribution among universities in Australia.

Europe – The Open University in the UK was established in 1969 and began online distance programs. It marked the beginning of the technology used to supplement print-based instruction in distance education. It was one of the first open universities in the world. It pioneered distance education on a massive scale (D.N. 1997, as cited in Matthews, 1999). However, due to the increased tuition fees and decreased public funding in the open and distance education of the UK, there was a 7.2% annual decline in the enrollments from 2010 to 2015 (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). On the other side, there is growth in ODE (online and distance education) enrollment in other countries like Germany which has dual-mode

institutions – campus-based institutions offering blended or online courses (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). In the UK, while the federal level of government controls higher education and in Germany, the state-level government has taken the responsibility.

Asia – The first Asian Open University is the Korea National Open University which was established in 1972. However, the Indira Gandhi National Open University of India established in 1985 is the largest university in the world. It served around 4 million students via online education. Srilanka was the first country in the South Asian Region and the seventh in the world to establish an Open University. China has a long history of distance education which began in the 1960s as it delivered courses via radio and television mostly. Now it has become one of the leading nations in online education. In Asia, there is a huge gap among the countries status in ODL. Some countries like South Korea, China, Srilanka and India are more advanced and ahead for digitalization of teaching and learning (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019) while some countries are struggling to make the transition from conventional to online distance learning like Nepal.

ODL History and Policies in Nepal

In Nepal, online and distance learning culture has been growing smoothly at the Universities' level. The distance education program at school level teacher training through Radio technology was already practised before being introduced in Universities of Nepal. It is found that an adult education program for youth was initiated in 1958 through radio conducted by the College of Education (Dahal, 2014). The three universities, Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University and Nepal Open University at present are offering programs at different levels. However, a private institution, known as International Centre for Academics (ICA), in Kathmandu has

been offering programs of different universities outside Nepal via distance mode since 2002. Table 1 shows the history of online and distance education programs in Nepal.

Table 1

History of ODL in Nepal

Decades	Achievements/Activities	Challenges
Mid 60s	Started using radio to teach children of primary grades in association with UNICEF	- Weak radio signals due to short wave transmission. Lessons were not recorded.
Early 70s	Distance Education program started through teacher training	-Targeted for remote areas of the hilly western region - Difficulty in monitoring
Mid 70s	Nepal Television started in 1984 and TV program for Nepali, Science and Social Studies subjects started in 1986	-Most houses had no television so it was discontinued after 2 years
Late 70s	Radio Education Teacher Training Project (RETTP) under MOE funded by USAID. It focused on teaching English to unqualified teachers at the primary level	-Teachers had difficulty in comprehending due to their weak English language skills. -The program was not successful
Mid 80s	Distance Education Center (DEC) was established under MoE in 1994 to conduct teacher training programs through distance mode	-
Late 80s	Open University Bill was prepared and submitted to the government. An executive committee was formed.	-
Early 90s	TU started an education program in Primary Education through distance	-There was low enrollment due to a lack of motivation among

	mode with support from UNICEF	the students. It discontinued after 3 cycles.
Mid 90s	PU started B.Ed programs through distance mode in collaboration with a private institution	- Credibility of the program was frequently questioned
Early 20s	KU started one-year MEd program on distance mode and later continued with other programs under the NORHED QUANTICT project	-There were few enrollments in the beginning due to a lack of information about the ODL in university programs.
Mid 20s	-ODEC was established in TU in 2015. -Nepal Open University was established in 2016 -KU, TU and NOU are offering ODL programs.	-

(Adapted from the presentation of Wagle, 2019)

Sinha (2014) states that the open learning and distance education program emerged and expanded in Nepal due to weaknesses, issues and challenges in formal education. Though Nepal initiated distance education through teacher training program for more than sixty years, the university programs through ODL mode began only in 2011. Nepal Open university's programs were functional only from 2018. So Nepal has a very short history of ODL in higher education.

Policies related to ODL are Open Education and Distance Learning Policy 2007, School Sector Reform plan (2009-2015), The reports of National Level Education Commission, Education for All National Plan of Action (2001-2015), National Curriculum Framework 2006, Non-Formal Education Policy 2007, Directives on Distance Education/Open Learning Program 2007 with third amendment, Education Act (1971) and Education Regulation (2002) are related to

distance education and open learning (Dahal, 2014). Besides this after the integration of technology in education, IT policy 2010, Periodic plans from 13th development plan, ICT in Education Master Plan (2013-2017) and School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023) focuses on the expansion of the internet, equitable access to education and promote online learning (Wagle, 2019). After the outbreak of the Corona virus in 2019 and the global pandemic due to it, the Government of Nepal emphasized continuing school education, including digital and distance learning provisions. For this purpose, it has prepared ‘Student Learning Facilitation Guide, 2020’ to be implemented during school closures in the pandemic period.

After the outbreak of coronavirus disease in December 2019 in Wuhan city of China, it spread across the world leading to a global pandemic. The Government of Nepal imposed the nationwide lockdown on 27th March 2020 which lasted for more than six months. The schools, colleges and universities were closed besides other non-essential services. Gradually the formal learnings took place through a virtual platform. Tribhuvan University, which is the oldest and largest university of Nepal serving 80 percent of the total population of higher education students responded very late to start the online classes. It issued a guideline on April 27, 2020, for conducting online classes during the lockdown. The guideline (TU, 2020) focused on the preparation, different stages and code of conduct for conducting online classes. In response to the crisis, Kathmandu University had already developed prerequisites for online classes but all the schools and faculties were not fully prepared. Kathmandu University also prepared ‘Online Learning Teaching Guidelines 2020’ which emphasized online pedagogy, technological tools, strengthening technological infrastructure, increasing learning resources, faculty trainings, course delivery, monitoring, assessment, examinations and general code of conduct (KU, 2020). A

similar guideline in Nepal Open University was embedded within the university governance policy due to its principles and values of the open education system. The university act (NOU, 2016) focused on access, learning management, curriculum, human resource management, quality certification, networking, infrastructure set up, programme delivery, publication, study visit and training. Since these three universities have been operating online and distance education program, I have reviewed their policy regarding online learning. The guideline was issued by Tribhuvan and Kathmandu University only due to long time closures of physical classes during the lockdown. These university policies were mostly attentive on the institutional arrangement, accessibility, infrastructure setup, trainings and administrative management. The students were not at the centre of these policies. The policy from the learner's perspective seems untouched.

ICT in Teaching and Learning Practice

The rapid advancement of ICT during the last decades has transformed the industrial-centered society into a new, dynamic and information (Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2010). In the economy, it has been a growing need for handling the technology for information dissemination rather than the mere production of goods and services. It has been increasing the use of digital technology in daily life to be connected to the internet around the world. ICTs are used for various purposes to solve problems, collect and disseminate information. Due to easy access to information on the internet, sometimes teachers felt that students know more about ICTs than teachers (Kavanagh & O'Rourke, 2016). In universities and colleges, ICTs serve both managerial and educational functions. Students using ICT can save the institution's time and money by making e-payment of bills, filling up online forms, receiving financial aids and/or scholarships, obtaining class schedule and official

notices (Kavanagh & O'Rourke, 2016). Thus ICT has become an integral part of teaching and learning besides the administrative and economic aspects.

Digital technologies have been an important driver for change in the knowledge society. There is a global trend of 'massification' that challenges universities to provide wider access to a larger proportion of the population (Kirkup, 2010). Using ICT, a teacher can overcome individual challenges and improve teaching practices (Vieluf et al., 2012). Teachers can share access to learning materials, good practice of teaching-learning, videos on the online forum according to their field of expertise for professional development through ICT. There are many social learning virtual platforms where educators can manage their classrooms and share lessons and tips. They can build a professional and learning network to collaborate and share ideas.

The use of technology in the field of teaching-learning has been much needed, useful, and effective for professional development. For example, according to Thakara (2015), technology is used for presentation tools for understanding difficult concepts through display and simulation in the classroom like LCD projectors, television, electronic whiteboards, which may promote class understanding. So its daily use can make teaching and learning effective. The use of technology for teaching and learning brings better education opportunities by removing traditional boundaries and restrictions to knowledge (Katz, 2010). It has changed the nature of education, its delivery and the roles of students and teachers in the teaching-learning process (Bhattacharjee & Kamal, 2016). The information age has become the age where knowledge is explored faster and easily, updated, exchanged, and communicated well.

Much of the ICT has been used in education-related professional development as well learning processes. South African Institute of Distance Education (1995) has shown that in the 1990s one-third of the total workforce were studying online and distance courses. It helped them both in the learning and teaching process. Students can learn independently even with less or no physical involvement of their teachers (Carlson & Gadio, 2002). Hampels and Pleines' (2013) central finding was online activities increased when it was integrated with the course and assessment structure and more participation when activities were related to assessment. The study suggested that linking tasks with assessment, integrating into the course, making navigation easier, allowing more engagement of students and sufficient feedback from teachers can increase students' participation in online learning.

Technology has helped to train teachers for their professional development regardless of the countries they belong to. Dlamini and Mbatha (2018) studied the discourse of ICT for teacher professional development in the South African teachers' union by interviewing 986 teachers. The study found that 80% of teachers opined the necessity for professional development in ICT, and 81% expressed professional development activities in teaching for special needs learners and 73% expressed the need for diverse learners' issues.

The access and flexibility could increase the number of students in the program however there is a high rate of student drop-out and late completion of the teacher education program due to institutional and socio-cultural related challenges (Zirnkle, 2001, as cited in Musingafi et al., 2015). Training and professional support to instructors to deal with self-concerns will help in better facilitating the classes. Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998) mention that technology in today's time provides a digital learning atmosphere that helps in creativity and communication needed to

nourish engagement. The engagement could be through online video conferencing, webinars, web databases, group work, and writing in the discussion forums. It helps students in motivation to learn and develops student skills in learning. The results of a study conducted by Nabushawo et al. (2018) have emphasized that in the course design, it is important to design for active online participation, providing a guide for the course unit and relevant resources. The assessment should be integrated into the online activities, so they participate actively in activities. Likewise, they found that tutor presence and feedback were significant for learners while studying online. The tutors' presence, feedback, query, and questions enriched the students' interactions.

Chogo (2020) evaluated online learning experiences among students at Higher Education Institutions in Tanzania. The study indicated that though students had a positive attitude toward online learning, they did not have a good learning experience. This was because they did not learn as much as they would do during face to face sessions. The main reasons for this included the high cost of the internet, failure of self-manage, failure of getting reliable internet access, lack of conducive learning environment at home, and failure to comprehend provided materials.

According to Webb (2006), while exploring ICT-based learning, which has flexibility and greater participation despite geography, however, state that the latest form of learning alone cannot overcome entrenched social inequalities. The study present that it is not just as simple as solving the inequality and disparity in education access. In the context of Nepal, which has a diverse population and diverse geography where education access has been unequal. So, it is important to address the social inequalities that already exist and how ICT-based learning can close the gap.

The use of ICT for learning and teaching brings hope, confidence and prospects for education. It liberates both teachers and students by removing the

traditional barriers to gain knowledge (Katz, 2010). According to Levy (2018), teaching and learning in the digital world help students to use search engines and challenge teachers to provide information to the students beyond search engines such as Google. It can help close the digital divide, promote digital citizenship, and unlock new teaching strategies (Levy, 2018). On the other side, students can learn in collaborative and interactive learning environments that help them communicate, share information, and exchange ideas or experiences effectively (Hussain & Safdar, 2008). So ICT has brought a shift in the teaching and learning approaches which has both its benefits and challenges as well.

Perception Towards ODL

The way we perceived and view education has changed in the 21st century. There are many terms used for online learning such as e-learning, hybrid, blended learning etc. Online learning began as a type of distance education technology in the 1980s and 1990s. Online education happens from the transmissions through internet-connected computers or any technological device as smartphones, iPad, and tablets. The teacher does not need to be in the same place at the same time. According to Ghosh et al. (2012), the basic idea of open learning and distance education is to increase accessibility and operate mass education with no time and space limits. It is one field where education delivery is increasing likewise with the development of Internet-based information technologies; it is ever-growing.

The flexibility feature of ODL has promoted lifelong learning. There is no time and place limitations as it is organized and consider the other adjustments which would not have been possible otherwise in face-to-face learning. The internet and online mode of learning have flexibility in educational opportunities. ODL should be designed and implemented for students from diverse backgrounds (Kara et al., 2019).

Therefore, it should be able to reach all regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, etc.

Online and distance learning is a process of adapting a new pedagogy, and educational institutions need to be innovative for the learning and teaching processes to be smooth. There might be some obstacles and challenges for instructors as well as for the learners. The success of online and distant mode learning depends on different factors such as student-teacher friendliness with technology, access to the internet, learning environment at home, students' self-discipline, and teachers' pedagogy to institutional investment and framework in distant learning (Barr & Miller, 2013). An institution should not only consider technical knowledge necessary for an alternative mode of learning but a wider range of concerns that could be faced by the instructors/facilitators while shifting from in-person to online teaching (Kayaduman & Demirel, 2019). The alternate mode of learning for students needs a holistic approach to curriculum, institutional role, student, and teacher familiarity in the online mode of learning and teaching.

Distance education can transform an individual's life who is less privileged. In fact, it has built a bridge across the digital divide to span not only technology deficits but also educational, social, economic, and career-opportunity gaps (Holstrom, 2003). Barr and Miller (2013) mention that though the online environment provides autonomy in learning, it demands self-discipline from the students to practice self-directed learning. Bali and Liu (2018) conducted a study on students' perception of online learning and face-to-face learning courses, which found that the students valued the face to face higher than online due to social presence, social interaction, and satisfaction. However, no preferences about both ways of learning and no statistically significant difference. Some students found online learning very

comfortable as it gave them an opportunity for innovative use of computer technology. Liu et al. (2010) studied cultural differences in online learning from the international student perceptions and found there were certain cultural obstacles that may affect international students' learning performances. According to Oguz et al. (2015), students are concerned about four issues: a sense of isolation from their peers and teachers and, a lack of access to academic events and networking opportunities with classmates.

The student learns from online peer feedback in comparison with conventional learning as they can exchange their feedback on text interactively (Yeh et al., 2019). In this way, teachers should encourage the student by giving feedback to each other and learn from each other. The interactive self-assessment tool was found to be an attractive tool that students perceive as useful and valuable (Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010). Likewise, a comparative study on the quality of the learning experience found that the instructors and students view synchronous interactive online instruction favorably (Ward et al., 2010). The study conducted by Bhagat and Chang (2018), studied cases from different countries (Taiwan versus India) and found the differences in student's perception of online learning by gender which denotes that the cultural background of students influences their perception towards online learning. Similarly, it may vary in Nepal too.

This section of the literature review informs that there have been many comparative studies of students perception of online and face-to-face learning, country-wise or from the digital divide. Little research has been carried out on the experiences of students from countries where only a few universities offer online programs (Fidalgo, et. al, 2020). The social aspects of the students' perceptions on

attempting the entirely online and distance education program for the first time are still less explored.

Myths and Challenges of ODL

Traditional teaching and learning methods have been a long-established culture globally. Against this traditional practice, online and distance learning have been evolving to promote a knowledge-based society accessible for everyone. However, there are some myths or stereotypes that existed regarding online and distance education. A forum insight of National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) published some myths. The myths are (a) the cost of online education is cheap, so it comprises in providing high-quality education, but it is evidenced that the startup cost of online programs is highly expensive. b) teachers have less engagement so they have spare time to spend on research work but the online courses require teachers' involvement in detailed program design and supporting learners c) digital native as young people are experts in technology use but it all depends on student's active participation and d) diminished quality of online teaching but if the courses are well designed, it can be delivered effectively.

A professor of psychology, Pelz (2004), has analyzed three main principles of myth about online learning. First, let the student do (most of) the work, but he argues that his teaching is based on the student-led discussion in all reading courses. Students helped each other with peer discussions and assistance. The second is the lack of interaction due to the absence of the teacher. Pelz (2004) stated that online interactivity requires reading and writing which is even superior or effective to listening and talking which is the way done in face to face classroom. He practised the interactive like a collaborative research paper, research proposal, and team project in

which interaction takes place. The third is to strive for presence. But he argued that since the online student's don't sit side by side, their bonding is even better (Pelz, 2004). In a study about online degree and stigma, Kizilcec et al. (2019) revealed a similar type of myth that online learning programs are considered less social (and more solitary), respected, legitimate, interactive, selective, supportive, and rigorous. Yet, they are considered more flexible, affordable, and efficient. About the lack of face to face interaction myth, Holmberg (2005) argues that distance study is itself a self-study; however, the students interact through the course contents and the interaction between students and the teacher is mediated through the written text.

Online learning has been massively adopting by educational institutions globally after sophisticated technological innovation. It also created the myth about only technological oriented learning and its effectiveness. Justice (2017) argues in an article that "many continue to assume that the technological design and instructional format of delivery are most important in its degree of effectiveness" (p. 1). Taking this myth, she studied three Cs for whether these variables affect effectiveness or not. The Cs include and connectivity, communication, and compassion. She found that among the three Cs, communication was the most important variable for online and distance learning education effectiveness rather than technological design and instructional format. Another important misconception is that online and distance learning is the question of course sustainability, and such a course is a high risk of cheating; students are robotic.

Mantravadi and Dallas (2017) discussed sustainability tools as course design and delivery in their study. There are several components for sustainable course design as; learning objectives, assessments, online tools and materials, learner interaction, construction, and the sustainment of online courses. They highlighted that

“QM (quality matters) certification processes can be discussed in the context of improving course design, to sustain the use of online courses or tools” (p. 110).

However, they further argue that QM is the most disruptive platform-based innovation in online education.

The online and distance mode has significance; however, we cannot overshadow the challenges. According to Barr and Miller (2013), the challenges are a sense of isolation not due to distance but from the instructor and fellow learners in trust due to limited opportunity and technical support for technical problems.

Additionally, Kara et al. (2019) found that individual challenges depend on their age, gender, knowledge and skills, and situation/context they study. They broadly mention three categories as internal, external, and program-related challenges which are interrelated. Interrelated challenges include an individual’s characteristics to cope with the challenges. External challenges include those from the job and domestic situations. Likewise, program-related challenges are either institutional or tutor related. So, the study shows that these challenges are related as program-related challenges might give rise to tutor related challenges or vice versa.

A study conducted by Musingafi et al. (2015) of Zimbabwe Open University on open and distance learning (ODL) found challenges at individual student, instructional and institution levels. Individual’s challenges include time for study, social and economic constraints, accessibility, and use of ICT, and travelling to the regional center for any face to face purpose. Instructional challenges include not getting sure feedback on assignments and examinations to result and not grasping what is being taught. Institutional challenges were lack of study resource materials, required support to the students, and not enough, and prompt academic support and services at the regional center. According to Al-Imarah (2020), the challenges in

online learning are dropouts, lacks of pedagogical values, limited interactive environment, assessment, teaching and learning, and also facilities.

Rashid (2016), in his study, argued that digital inclusion is important for people under study because of its strong association with social factors. The study's statistical findings show that "the correlation between social (dis)advantages and digital inclusion highlighting various country nuances of how digital exclusion is reinforced by social disadvantage" (p. 328). He further added more than being women determined who would get access and be digitally excluded but overall gender was not as strong as socioeconomic factors, notably education. The social and economic aspect was crucial in determining who got access and opportunity in higher education. According to Holstrom (2003), from the experiences of distance program delivery, the challenges include "Delivering training to low-tech-oriented, low-income learners requires ingenuity, adaptable technologies, resourceful and dedicated instructors and trainers, supportive partners, a ready market, and institution/ corporate commitment and flexibility" (p. 62). In online learning also, there is the presence of a flexible learning environment; however, the learner could experience isolation and alienation. So, the social presence of learners in the online environment could be vital and play a significant role in reducing isolation and alienation and making online learning environments interactive and fun.

According to Kara et al. (2019), the adult learner's challenges in online distance education are related to internal, external, and program-related. They also found that the learners' challenges vary depending on age, gender, knowledge, and skill as well as the context of their study. So, the challenges of online and distance learning in the context of Nepal should not be looked at from only one lens but a different intersectional lens. Adult learner's challenges are not only technological but

sociological too that emerge from their everyday experiences. So, they should be given time to learn new skills, and care must be given to why they are learning. However, these adult learners have progressed rapidly and can adapt to the digital competency in the online learning platform.

In the present context, it is possible for people to communicate, network, and collaborate worldwide due to technological advancement which was previously not available (Gurumurthy, 2006). ICT has a profound effect on modern life. The use of digital and social media has shrunk the world. It has created a platform for people around the globe to discuss different issues and campaign to support different events and people (Nadkarni & Joseph, 2014). An empirical study carried out at the University of Arusha, Tanzania, found out that ICT integration in Universities can combat the digital divide (Makewa et al., 2014). However, there are many challenges in integrating ICT in higher education. ICT is rapidly modifying the ways higher education is structured and generates knowledge. With the growing prominence of information technology and addressing inequalities, higher education has integrated ICT in their teaching practices, operating mechanism, and online and distance education.

Learner's Participation and Motivation in Online Social World

Online learning is best accomplished when learners participate and collaborate (Hrastinski, 2009). Kuong (2015) conducted a study to understand adult students' perception of online education, motivational factors, and their sense of community in the virtual environment. The study revealed that since students did not have a strong social connection through interaction with peers and immediate feedback from tutors, their satisfaction decreased, and they could not feel a sense of community and meaningful participation. User satisfaction in online learning is a

critical measure of learning outcome and factor into the success of online education system implementation (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Social constructivism extends the notion that learning is prominently contingent upon the interaction, relationship, and social exchanges in the learner's learning context (Ward et al., 2010). Rather than reaching more students, the major challenge is to engage them in online learning by creating a learner-friendly environment and ensuring their meaningful participation (Chogo, 2020). Though ODL intends for the massification of education, the learner's engagement in the learning process is important and should be the priority of the universities offering online courses.

According to Kim and Frick (2011), there is more probability for learners higher motivation if they can link their learning goals with self-directed learning and able to show digital competence. The online discussion that aims to increase students' participation has been assumed as online learning, but such online discussion is just to support off-campus learners. However, tutors and learners can gain insights into learning opportunities in such asynchronous online discussions (Bain, 2011). So, it highlights the importance of articulation as a key process in learning.

Students are motivated in online courses due to their personal goals. There is a different perspective of motivation for learning through online participation. First, motivation from the perspective of *instructional design* and second for necessity. The first is related to a learner's trait which indicates the proper designing of the learning environment. The second depends on the individual autonomous behavior of learning (Keller & Deimann, 2012). Both views are very important frameworks for researchers and learners in education.

ICT is widely incorporated in higher education to meet the demand of the global as well as the local context. There are face to face approach, blended approach,

and online distance education. The online and distance provides students with greater flexibility and increased accessibility despite their geographic, gender, and socioeconomic situation. The opting for online and distance learning demands are also important to consider the perception and attitude of adult learners. In a study conducted by Wong and Fong (2014) female students have a moderate positive relationship with the use of technology in online learning technology while male students had no significant relationship. Their major finding from the result Wilcoxon Rank Sum tests show that there were no substantial differences between to face to face or online learning preferences in terms of gender, but in general, students chose face-to-face learning over online learning.

Interaction is important, which can foster interpersonal connections with tutors and peers, and students will feel that their educational needs are being met (Rovai, 2002, as cited in Delaunty et al., 2014). In fact, it will encourage students to participate regularly in various tasks, which may develop satisfaction in their learning experience (Delahunty et al., 2014). The success of providing ODL depends on meeting the adult learners' needs (Devisakti, 2016). So, it is important to meet the needs of learners, and institutional factors are vital in motivating and encouraging participation from adult learners. According to a study conducted in the ODL Engineering program of Open University of Sri Lanka by Dadigamuwa and Senanayake (2012) found that ODL needs strong student commitment, self-motivation, and time management- the success of the ODL program is dependent on the student approach and commitment. Moreover, the responsibility of academic staff is equally important.

A study conducted by Zaikin et al. (2016) on teachers and students' motivation found that interaction between them is essential for a successful learning

process in ODL. Likewise, Pulist (2018) conducted a study which found that the learners' interest in courses and new knowledge, upgrading qualification for job promotion, self-confidence, fear of failure, mentorship, educated family background, easy access to the study center, and conducive learning environments are some of the reasons that motivated learners towards ODL.

When I inquired about the number of students enrolled in the ODL programs of two universities, I was surprised to know that very few students were motivated towards the program. Many students choose the online program to avoid travelling time to class and scheduling problems (Fidalgo, et. al, 2020). Like other faculties and administrators of the universities, I too had expected quite a good number of inquiries and enrollment since it lately started in Nepal. The unexpected less number made me feel that this motivation issue in ODL is one of the major issues and a beginning point to explore the experiences of the online learners.

Disparities and Power Associated With ICTs

ICT has its impacts not only on teaching-learning practice, but its impacts are ubiquitous. Innovation, access, and use of ICTs have made some countries powerful and developed while some countries are striving for the basic needs and infrastructure for their development. Regardless of the expansion of technologies and their use in daily life and professional development, many marginalized and disadvantaged communities and persons still do not have access to ICTs or the Internet. In the USA and other respective countries around the world, initiatives are doing to provide access to everybody. However, digital divides among countries and within countries exist. African regions have low Internet technology and less market penetration (Alden, 2004). Now, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been started, which will be a new revolution in human society in technological use and professional

development globally. Altheide (1995) considers how technology integration defines social conditions and expand the divide where the most portion of the population becomes even more vulnerable.

The online learning platform can make learning inclusive of diversity due to the flexibility of time and space (Hughes, 2007). He has mentioned that inclusion appears through correspondence between learner's social identities and the identities evolved through interaction in the online community. To build identity congruence, e-learning communities need spaces for both commonality and diversity (Hughes, 2007). However, there is little evidence supporting the argument of inclusive diversity in online learning than in traditional groups (Hughes, 2007). So it is important to know whether inclusion and diversity have been equally transmitted to the online learning environment the same as in the face-to-face classroom.

Nikulin (2016) studied the impact of ICT on women's economic empowerment in 60 developing countries in the period of 2004- 2014. The study found a positive impact of the use of ICT on the participation in the labor force in developing countries, and the gross national income, income inequality and fertility rate were influenced by women's engagement in the labor market. However, the researcher argues that ICTs in developing countries are rapidly increasing, and women's labor participation is low. Hopefully, ICT creates possibilities to obtain a better job, and women will be active in the labor market.

In developing countries, ICT plays a major role in empowering women through access to education (Carm & Øgrim, 2013, as cited in Carm & Acharya, 2016). A study carried out on gender awareness in ODL practices in Nepal found that Nepal is still a way backward comparative to other developing countries (Carm & Acharya, 2016). However, it states that the ICT interventions in the traditional courses

through ODL have added value to ICT as they were positively perceived by the students, and the teaching approach was gradually shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered in the Nepalese Context (Carm & Acharya, 2016). Likewise, a study highlighted that the acculturation of web-based distance learning in Nepali HEIs demonstrates a promising future of higher education with options for flexibility and quality to traditional on-campus teaching culture (Pangeni, 2016). The study emphasized that by tapping the possibilities of integrating various interactive learning tools to enhance a web-based learning environment and student support system, ODL can foster education quality.

When learning is mediated through technology in the virtual platform, the learners go through different experiences than in a face-to-face classroom (Hratinski, 2009). Learning in higher education should not be limited within the classroom. Online learning requires self-discipline to grab self-directed learning opportunities. There are numerous web tools available on the internet for learning, and these are rapidly developing. The learners have greater flexibility and freedom to control their learning by interacting with others through those web-portal. It fosters students' e-decision competency, which includes the ability of information processing, critical thinking, and problem analysis (Hsu et al., 2013). This autonomy empowers through informed learning processes (Mayes & De Fritas, 2007, as cited in Hratinski, 2009). However, the use of technological tools in online education simultaneously reveals some things while concealing others (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). So it depends on the relations of the learners with the technology whether they are empowered or marginalized. This issue is connected with my concern in understanding the power relationships that an online and distant student goes through before, during and after

joining the program in a situation where people have less knowledge, competencies and uncertainties in society about ODL.

The Space of Identity in ODL

The virtual space is a new space where students' have very limited exposure to their identity as they have less social interaction, no physical presence and mostly maintain anonymity. The virtual learning environment is equally real from social and emotional aspects (Delahunty et al., 2014). The challenges are to understand how online communication impacts learning. Further, this lack of physical presence might contribute to the sense of isolation among the learners (Delahunty et al., 2014). The learner's space in ODL is prompted by social interaction that raises questions of 'who am I?' and like to have self-doubt and self-openness (Alvesson et al., 2008) sometimes in different periods of life. In ODL, they ask 'who am I when go online? How do others know that I am there and how do they perceive me?' (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). The social interaction in the online group helps a learner to know self and his/her action while finding a space (Delahunty et al., 2014). Hence, the identity evolves effortlessly in such interaction and it is less explored in online learning (Delahunty et al., 2014). Learners create meanings through negotiations that are related to the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Indeed there is a social space in the virtual classroom where the students exchange their opinion and participate in dialogues in asynchronous learning. If the students are from a marginalized background, remote place, no access to the internet, techno-phobia etc, they may have challenges in creating space for them. However, in this process, they make meanings and construct their identity.

From a social constructivist's perspective, knowledge is socially constructed through the meaning-making process about one's self (Hung et al., 2011). According

to Vygotsky (1978), human activity is connected with different interacting moments which brings consciousness and stimulates higher mental functioning. Designing an online learning environment in which individuals can articulate who they are is critical for social constructivism since individuals bring their own values, beliefs, and experiences when they log into an online learning environment (Oztok, 2013).

Identity, therefore, is evolving with changing dimensions, through relational and dialogic notions. So identity is not understood in isolation but an individual sees and confirms from the other's eyes.

Ragusa and Crampton (2018) conducted a study on "Sense of connection, identity, and academic success in distance education: sociologically exploring online learning environments" which emphasized the student's sense of connection affecting their experiences. The author mentioned that sense of connection is a way to identify if students have felt isolated or connect to others. Thus students' identity can be explored through their experiences with peers and teachers.

For Edwards (1996), personal identity, distance education and open learning pave ways for learning opportunities provided by distance education and /or open learning through space-time compression. There are challenges to the identities of individuals with changing differing practices of learning. However, this individuation could bring challenges to support the multiple identities of learners (Edward, 1996). As students, we are part of something and belong to an institution even in online and distance learning. The sense of belonging is important in establishing a sense of identity. Even online distance education provides us with a certain status that is important to ourselves and negotiating boundaries with others.

Bliuc et al. (2011) study focused on the socio-psychological dimensions of student's social identity and student perception of their learning community affects

learning at the university. The study referred to social identity as those aspects of an individual's self-image originated from their membership of a social group. The study integrated phenomenographic research into student learning with ideas from research on the social identity of two studies (N=110, and N=97). The relationships between student social identity, perceptions of the learning community, approaches to learning, and academic performance were explored. The study findings suggested a strong student social identity, which is associated with a deep approach to learning, which is linked to higher academic performance. The perceptions of the learning community mediate the relationship between student social identity and deep approaches to learning. It emphasized that student social identity provides a good way to answer questions about how some students align themselves with disciplinary values of their learning context and how the extent to which they perceive themselves as part of a larger group of students is related to their actual learning and learning outcomes at university. In the context of online learning, a student's identity is contingent on his/her's social location. So it helped me to learn and explore the importance of social perspectives and context in identity construction.

Why Gender and ICT Again?

When we say that gender is a cross-cutting issue, many questions arise about repeating the same issue. Lie (2003) answered that we are dealing with the constantly changing concepts associated with technology. People, particularly men and women, change their practices and enter into new relationships with each other and their environments. So, we need to deal with the constantly changing content of gender and technology. Lie (2003) termed it as dealing with unstable concepts. The western academic tradition has systematically ignored women's experiences and embodied mythical assumptions about men's and women's capabilities or relations with

technology in theories, empirical studies, and research methods (Reddock, 2000). This assumption has been extended to non-western societies (Reddock, 2000) along with the rapid expansion of technology in our social life and even more distinctly in online and distance education. However, there are changes observed in the perception, practices, and how men and women are motivated and engaged with technology across the world. The relationships are not the same in different generations. There is a shift in the one-sided perspectives in terms of this relationship, and the discourse has changed from the frame of problem-oriented to dynamic definitions and explanations (Lie, 2003). So, gender and technology from the cultural perspective cannot be explored separately and are intricately interwoven (Huges, 1988, as cited in Lie, 2003). So there is changing relationship between gender and technology which requires constant research and discussions.

Gender is a social institution (Martin, 2004). It is a process of creating different social statuses. Thus, it is an important building block in the social structure built on those unequal statuses (Lorber, 1994). Martin (2004) argued that gender as a social institution increases awareness of gender's thoughtful sociality by making the intricate interactions or dimensions with other institutions more evident for critical analysis and bring change to some extent. Adding to this, Lorber (1994) stated, "*in social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order*" (p. 60). Gender is present everywhere and our experiences are influenced by our gender identity.

When we speak about gender, we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply differences (Kimmel, 2000). Kimmel (2000) used the term gender with the concept of plural and powerful. He argued that the differences among

men and women are often more decisive than the differences between women and men. He says differences that are the result of being in different positions or arenas. This perspective helped me to explore the differences not just between men and women but within women themselves. My field visits and work experiences helped me understand that there are such differences, and so I looked into the stories of every individual, not limiting them to only one perspective. My understanding was further shaped by various empirical studies that I went through for this study.

In the present context, as new technology is entrenched in our daily life, it has impacted our roles. When we understand that gender is a social construct, we view online participation from both subjects and objects, and social constructionism offers a range of choices along these two conceptual continuums (Beech, 2008). Social constructionism is the anti-essentialist view and informs much of the work on gender identity (Cerulo, 1997). According to Beech (2008), when we try to incorporate the new aspects of the discourse we either adapt to the acceptable difference or reject by holding the opposition discourse. All these three strategies are dynamic and can shift during the dialogical interactions (Beech, 2008). The online interaction contributes to this shift.

Lassen (2011) studied gender-stereotypical perception and gender identities construction by employees of a Danish bank. She used the appraisal framework for analyzing stereotypical categorizations made by the interviewees. The article argues that employees in the bank tend to reproduce and perpetuate a patriarchal management system despite various forces pulling in a new post-patriarchal direction where gender is just one of many identities. She found that women themselves play a significant role in the social exclusion of their own gender by accepting the

essentialist's versions of femininity and constructing themselves as 'other'. In contrast, a man constructs a positive identity for himself.

Society worldwide is digitalizing very fast, and the digital divide is of more concern in developing countries like Nepal. The handful of people in the cities have access to massive information while in the rural areas on the other side, the people are still engaged in conventional ways. There is an uneven distribution of technological and internet opportunities. Our social values, gender roles and different stereotypes affect the use of technology and accept its benefits (Buskens & Webb, 2009). The social and cultural factors are responsible to some extent for existing digital inequalities (Gorski, 2003). New opportunities are created by the access of ICT by free interaction in more egalitarian ways. However, the divide has also led to the reproduction of patriarchal social norms within ICTs, to further reinforce gendered inequalities (Philip, 2018). Purshothaman (2011) showed the barriers in India as not having infrastructures at schools and universities, poor understanding of students' backgrounds like technophobia and mobility of girls, cultural prejudice like removing village and small towns are not culturally appropriate and lack of motivated and trained faculty for female students. This widening gender digital gap is also observed in the online distance learning platform where women struggle to get a better education through technology use and change the traditional perception towards their representation in ICT access and use.

Sanda and Kurfi (2013) analyzed some challenges of learning ICT in the case of Nigeria in particular and developing countries in general. The study found that the ICT infrastructures are concentrated in urban areas and do not benefit women as most women live in rural areas. They further argue that due to the socio-cultural attitudes

towards Nigerian women, they have limited access to ICT than men, due to which the gender imbalance continues.

ICT not only empower women in economic, political, and educational sector but it also supports in combating violence against women, especially in developing nations. Tafnout and Timjerdine (2009) studied the use of ICT by women to fight against gender-based violence in Morocco. They found that the Counselors at the legal aid center used to collect documents from visiting faraway villages or contacting at Telephone center before the invention of the internet and mobile. It used to take time to settle the case. But now ICT made it very easy to contact victim-survivor very easily, and the survivor can also easily contact the legal aid center even from far rural areas. Survivors in the past had to wait for the family's decision to file the case and now immediately contact the legal center without permission of the family.

Hilbert (2011) argues in her study that though some women might have technophobia, they were more active consumers of digital devices than men, which allowed them to improve their lives. It also challenges and tackles the longstanding gender inequality, mostly in developing countries. The study recommended that digital tools also provided them with access to income, education, health service, and employment opportunity. This study has contributed to the argument that ICT use has gradually minimized inequalities. So, the research on developing countries has been conducted to examine the gender perspectives on the digital divide and suggested the need for more training and IT resources to overcome the technical and social barriers (Spiteri et al., 2015). The online and distance learners learn digital skills when they encounter the new platform and the female learners too can acquire digital competency in this process of ODL.

Secreto (2013) studied gender equality in online learning at UP Open University of the Philippines. The finding shows that distance learning gradually getting popularity among Pilipino students. The result showed that female students had greater enrollment in education, communication, health, and management sciences than male students in online courses. On the other hand, there was male dominance in IT-related programs. The female enrollment is 63%, which indicated that both genders were attracted to online learning. The growing access to education and technology that are gender-neutral alternative modes of learning get momentum in the coming generation. In developing countries, online and distance education could bring a transformative change in the educational landscape.

Pena-Bandalaria (2007) wrote a paper on how ICTs influenced and shaped the development of ODL in the Philippines. She says that in the Philippines, the digital divide is more the rule than the exception. Access to ICT is not a priority when people are struggling to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. So, Pena-Bandalaria argues that the use of technology should be both pedagogically sound and socially driven to be relevant for its use through ODL.

The social norms, cultural constraints, and gender inequalities have limited female students in ICT use. ICT could give a major lift to the economic, political and social empowerment of women and the promotion of social justice but socially and culturally constructed gender roles and relationships remain a cross-cutting element in shaping the capacity of women and men to participate on equal terms in the information society (Primo, 2003). As a result, women had less access to ICT in developing countries in Asia and Africa. Women are not equally able as men in accessing ICT because of income, education, and social position, but they also have

less digital skills than men, which affects their confidence, demotivate in pursuing IT-related career, and counter the social and cultural practice.

In nutshell, the gender aspects cannot be overlooked while studying the learner's experiences in ODL. The learners' gender and being in different social positions provide them different experiences which either benefit them or increase their struggle.

Why Social Constructivism in ODL?

Though there are various learning theories such as behaviorism, humanism and cognitivism, these explain only some portion of adult online learning theories. Therefore we need more contextual theories that can be utilized to improve and understand online learning (Arghode et al., 2017). According to Arghode et al. (2017), all theories and approaches share a common strand of improving learning, yet differ in explaining the learning process. Humanism focuses on the affective domain apart from cognitive abilities (Jackson 2009 as cited in Arghode et al, 2017). The cognitivists focus more on the internal mental processes, assimilation, and interpretation of knowledge, while the behaviorists stress observable behavior, and ragogists emphasize individual motivation and proactivity. Still, both are less imposing on knowledge conceptualization. Social constructivism has been appropriate and mostly referred to or applied to various current research from a theoretical perspective. This study is on the premise that individuals and their backgrounds matter in making sense of their learning contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Oztok, 2013). There is an emerging need for a rich theoretical study in the area of online and distance learning practice. The role of social constructivism is imperative for highlighting the sociocultural theoretical shift in scaffolding knowledge as a process or transformation rather than a mere product (McKinley, 2015).

Social constructivism was developed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky (1978), a child's cultural development appears in two levels which are social and individual. The first is between people (interpsychological) and the second is within the child (intrapsychological). Social constructivism based on Vygotsky's work sees learning as a historical, social and cultural phenomenon in an environment controlled by social interactions (Freidus & Kruger, 2017). However, it has its roots in Piaget's work that emphasizes the role of collaboration and interaction with others in the learning process (Mbatl, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) has three core concepts concerning the model of social constructivism: zone of actual development (where the learner actually and currently developmentally); the zone of potential development (where the learner potentially should or could be); and the zone of proximal development (the amount of assistance required for a learner to move from the zone of actual development to the zone of potential development) (Deulen, 2013). Learners can be assisted at varying zones of proximal development, such as supports for time management, reduce isolation and increase interactivity and supports to reduce writing anxiety (Schweizer, 2002). In online distance education, individual setting home, technological access, and the online environment play a vital role in learning.

Vygotsky (1978) places more emphasis on the social-cultural context of learning and its impacts on what is learned. Online learning stimulates higher thinking through the social constructivist paradigm (Mbatl, 2012). Huang (2002) in his study discusses the instructional principles from constructivist perspectives to guide the teaching practice and designing the courses in online learning. In doing so, the idea of social constructivism in online learning helps instructors to have a learner-centered and collaborative environment. Likewise, the online discussion group as interactive,

collaborative, authentic learning would help the learners learn in the new space as online and distance learning where social interaction takes place online rather than physical.

The significance of social constructivism in learning lies in being grounded in collaborative and interactive social activities which helps in creating meanings (Swan, 2005). The main concern here is knowledge construction through social interactions. Vygotsky's theory reflects that first, the learner endorses such interactions socially and then internalized individually. The core of Social constructivism is that learning is achieved when knowledge is shared (Makri & Vlachopoulos, 2019). Social constructivism helps to grasp the nature of social constructs in knowledge construction. In online and distance education, social constructivism is often invoked as it is grounded on the principles of constructive activity for authentic experiences, tutor-learner interaction, and social activity, which is influenced by both personal characteristics and social factors (Makri & Vlachopoulos, 2019). According to Au (1998), social constructivism includes that there is no objective basis for knowledge claims, as our knowledge is always human construction, which is among the social groups. The intersubjectivity occurred through the interactions of the group. The way we describe and perceive the world includes our language, social context, and environment. The construction of knowledge is embedded with the reality that is created through the process of social exchange, historicity, where a generation of people make the meaning out of their life, experience within and among people.

Knowledge is individually constructed but constantly negotiated through interactions within the learning community, which leads to evolving communal and individual knowledge (Angelo, 2000, as cited in Papastergiou, 2006). Through structured and purposeful online dialogue, students become more engaged in their

learning, articulate ideas, negotiate meanings, and collaboratively construct shared knowledge, which leads to their reflective discourse and critical thinking being promoted and their learning experiences become enhanced (Papastergiou, 2006). Social constructivists describe adopting technology as an innovative process including different social groups which is based on learner's experiences, knowledge and practices (Bondarouk, 2006). Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding a phenomenon in the community (Kim, 2001, as cited in Buraphadeja & Dawson, 2008). To ensure a quality learning experience, instructors and designers must not regard online education as identical to the traditional classroom; instead, they should find ways that best suit this new learning arena. We believe that asynchronous discussion-based learning is one of the promising online instructional activities because it can increase learner's level of thinking, such as critical thinking on upper levels in blooms' taxonomy.

According to social constructivism, learning is neither solely inherent nor purely acquired but rather as a connecting process that exists each time people consciously interact with each other in the world around them (Bronack et al., 2006). Mcloughlin et al. (2000) describe several tools and applications such as emails that can be used as online scaffolding mechanisms for collaborative problem solving, articulation and elaboration of views, hyperlinked resources to promote exploration, searching and resource selection and evaluation, collaborative workspaces to provide a multitude of perspectives and social responsibility, and online chat to promote socio-cognitive dialogue, questioning, and peer support. Effective learning environments must support learners through communication and co-construction as they are an important part of the community practice (Bronack et al., 2006). So it matters in my research as I look into each research participant's background and how

they participate in the learning process which ultimately shapes their experience. The online learning environments are unlike those in traditional distance education programs. Therefore the social composition associated with the technology in ODL is highly interconnected. The technology itself is meaningless unless it is given space in the discourse which is an adjoining process. So these aspects can be analyzed appropriately from the lens of social constructivism than any other perspective.

Research Gap

The learner-centered approach envisions societal development through individual transformation by creating new knowledge that is situated and contextual. People's self-presentation is based on their experiences in different situations and interactions of everyday life.

There is an increasing acknowledgement of the significance of ICT for development globally and locally. ICTs have been shown to have developed applications in education, governance, environmental monitoring, health, human rights promotion, economic growth, and other areas. Concurrently, the problem of the growing technology and/or knowledge gaps between and within countries, placing certain groups of people further in the shadow regions of global information flows, has been noted. These gaps continue regarding accessibility of ICT as well as in the level of understanding and the information for its access (Primo et al., 2000).

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has brought various social and cultural impacts to society. There are changes in interaction and mode of learning. Such reforms have engaged people differently and have brought diverse impacts. The socially learned traditions are transformed, such as a shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered paradigm in education. It has impacted the teachers' and students' lives and identities differently. When there is a change in the learning environment, it

affects our learning too. So, the social factors that contribute or impede learning in an alternative mode of learning are very crucial to understand. The sociocultural perspective informs the conditions necessary for learning.

The literature review shows that there are mixed opinions on the role of ICTs in mitigating or widening inequalities in society. However, most of them agree that ICT has accelerated access to education and served learners of diverse backgrounds. ODL has become the global trend, need, and strategy of the higher education institutions to reach out to more people through the extension of their programs. The growing implementation of ODL has also helped in the shift of the teaching-learning approach towards more open, flexible, student-centered, and competency-based.

Online and distance education has become a very important means for massification. Its scope and use got enlarged after the global pandemic due to Covid-19 in specific to Nepal. Online learning was applied to support the face-to-face mode of learning. This is supported by the empirical studies which found that the online and distant learners were not satisfied, did not learn effectively as compared to face-to-face, and could not have good experiences despite serving their practical need to continue the study and positive attitudes towards online learning. The discourses are more focused on the developing countries as ODL had additional expectations, in the beginning, to address the social inequalities and contribute significantly to the access and participation to achieve desired educational outcomes. The reasons are unexplored in the context of Nepal. Students seeking connection and collaboration in the online community are not adequately observed by the teachers. The quality of education provided through ODL is still yet a great discourse. There seems a long way to go to achieve its goals by breaking all the stereotypes and challenges. When comparing with the face-to-face environment, the ODL is still at a slow pace with few

achievements. Online and distance education in universities has not addressed the learners' needs by providing training on digital skills. The comprehensive study on the learners' experiences is neglected even at present.

There is the recognition of the role of teachers in the retention and progression of online and distant learners. However, different barriers negatively impact the students' motivation and their identity (Baxter & Haycook, 2014), which need to be explored so that the various disparities can be addressed and disprove the different myths about ODL. And very little research is found on students' preparedness for such e-learning environments (Parkes et al., 2015). The most important doubt or challenge was found due to the learners' lack of social experience and personal interactions in the virtual platform. It could be even pathetic when the universities have unprepared systems, untrained teachers, and less informed learners. So in such a condition, it is very important to have a study to provide further inputs to improve online and distance learning in developing countries like Nepal.

Much of the study in online and distance education has been focused on the instructional design, technological features and cognitive aspects (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The social presence of the learners and the affective aspects in the online platform is less focused. If we want to study society, then people's behaviours are important. Likewise, the experiences and the behaviours of the learners can help us to understand the world of online learning. The study of human beings in the digital world is the present need. The study of social behaviours of the learners can be understood through the analysis of society (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). So there is a need to study the present society of the digital world through the experiences of the learners.

There have been numerous studies focusing on the learner-centered approach and integration of ICT in education, but they are mostly limited to real contexts in physical locations. There are many valid reasons why learners' social, economic, and cultural context in ODL have a huge impact but still are less researched. The students' motivation, identity, and various power relations are yet to be explored from the holistic perspective, which is highly relevant in the context of the digital divide and, most importantly, where the schools, colleges, and universities have shifted towards the online and distance mode of learning due to the global pandemic of Covid-19. So this study is an attempt to contribute to the scholarship of ODL.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

We are born into stories, including the stories of family, community, and nation.

(Leggo, 2008, p. ..)

The methodology is the philosophical understanding of the knowledge in research that connects research questions with the research method. The underlying philosophical assumptions consist of our stance towards the nature of reality (ontology), how we will gain knowledge (epistemology), a disciplined approach to generating that knowledge (methodology), and the role of values in our research (axiology). I wanted to make my research more holistic. Thus, this chapter includes my beliefs on reality, why I believe so, and how do I apply it in the study to understand that reality. I have presented my research paradigm, method of inquiry, participants selection, stories generated, the meaning of the stories, quality standards, and ethical considerations in my methodology chapter.

Philosophical Consideration

Our philosophical consideration guides us to shape our research journey. It is our thoughts, assumptions, and the basis of our research. My choice of following a holistic approach through the tales of participants and analyzing their experiences as online and distance learner is steered via my philosophical underpinnings. By holistic approach, I mean, looking into the different aspects of a story of the person instead of dissecting their stories into different parts. The holistic perspective is pertinent with interconnect between the participants' different events, turns and experiences. It helps to look at the bigger picture considering the social factors and trying to understand

their entire world. Doing so helped me understand the research method for information generation and interpretation of the information gathered. Through rigour and extensive fieldwork, I tried to understand their comprehensive stories through what, when, why and how the experiences happened. In the following section, I discussed my paradigmatic positionality, ontological assumption, epistemological assumptions, and axiological assumptions.

Interpretivism: My Paradigmatic Positionality

A research paradigm is the foundation of research on which the study is grounded and guided throughout the study. Paradigm refers to “a comprehensive belief system attached to a particular world view or framework that guides research and practice in a field” (Willis, 2007, p. 8). This belief system includes the philosophical assumptions that guide our actions. The multiple realities can be explored by being critical and questioning how they create the realities. The positivist paradigm cannot justify my study to bring in-depth research on the reflective and relative stand in the process of entering into new phenomena with a new role of online distance learners. I wanted to explore online distance learning by unpacking the learner’s whole story. Therefore, I follow the interpretive research paradigm. Within these paradigms, I have embraced an open-ended mode of inquiry for unfolding subjectivities.

I have reflected on my journey with ICT and ODL, which is guided by the interpretive research paradigm. In my study, I am interested in how learners interact in the ODL platform, so my purpose was to describe, understand and interpret these phenomena, interactions, and discourses from the learner’s perspective (Lichtman, 2013). This paradigm helps me to link the individual narratives with the global picture. In my study, it helps me to understand the construct of new meanings through

the participants' experiences in the field of online and distance education that is practised in Nepal. I can relate the stories with my own personal experiences which allow me to reflect on my own experiences. The blend of both experiences build knowledge and enable me to analyze in the global context.

Ontological Assumptions

For me, there is no central, absolute or universal truth but are instead socially constructed based on the relationships with the objects, time, place, events or situations. It should be free-floating with a dynamic space. I believe in relational realism, which speaks of constructed realities or socially situated knowledge. I assume that the realities are conceptualized in the relational existence and interaction of the people in the spatial frame, objects, and environments. This reality is the lived experiences of a whole person in the process of being and becoming. It is complex, unique, and subjective. I believe that there is no single meaning to our experiences, and we always strive to understand the different perspectives. Learning never happens in isolation. In this study, the reality for me is to explore the experiences of distant and online learners while dealing with ICT in their academic world. Each individual has his/her experiences, which are different from each other. It is within themselves, so the reality is very subjective and relational. To understand reality, I need to understand the holistic context of a person and concerning the multiple contexts. Their mental constructions of perceptions and actions are experientially based and socially constructed, which could be reformed, again and again, depending on the social context they are living. So for me, the reality is the social construct with multiple beliefs. When my participants were exposed to the completely different modes of learning irrespective of their varying social, cultural, and economic circumstances, their assumptions on the context of learning and performance have

transformed them in one way or another. So I believe there is no single truth as it is contextual and constructed through meanings with different interactions and interpretations. People have different experiences and perspectives which help to understand or make sense of the world. Therefore the context plays an important role.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemological assumptions focus on what and how one knows. I tried to understand the learners' experiences through their stories. The process of understanding the stories, observing the events, hearing the narratives, making sense of their feelings, and generating meanings were the routes that guided me to make assumptions in developing human knowledge. As a researcher, I believe that the online distance learners of graduate programs actively construct their understanding of reality through interaction with technology and people in the environment. So I have constructed the knowledge through my reflections while interacting, observing, discussing, and listening to their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). I trust my participants that they have sufficient experiences to articulate meanings that shape their beliefs (Brewer, 2000). For me, knowledge acquisition through narrating the research participants' stories and making interpretations is both phenomenon and method (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). I and my participants mutually constructed meanings through the discourse of their normative and critical incidents in their life.

Axiological Assumptions

It is neither possible nor desirable for researchers to keep their values from influencing the study (Lichtman, 2013). The researcher's subjectivities influence and inform the understandings constructed in this study. So I acknowledge that my own background of working in the ODL unit, personal experiences as a student and values of trusting peoples' stories have shaped my interpretation of the meanings my

participants have about their online learning experiences. The values are equally unfolded, along with the participants' narratives throughout the study. I acknowledge immersing in their social and cultural setting while engaging with them in dialectical discourse and constructing meaning. Their socially situated knowledge helped me in shaping or narrating their stories. I am guided by the reflexive approaches and democratic values. These social values in the study are depicted through the cooperation between me and my participants in different periods, places and social interaction in different settings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I tried to see the values the learners have or develop before and during their learning experiences in the new platform. I am also aware of the outcome of my study and how it would liberate me to develop a better experience through online and distance education

Strategy of Inquiry: Narrative Inquiry

I was interested in bringing light to the shadowed stories of distant online learners about how ICT knowledge enhanced their position or marginalized concerning their status in the physical and virtual community. For the purpose, I used narrative inquiry as I found it to be the most relevant and rich framework in which it is easy to explore the ways human experiences the world depicted through their stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It deals with the lived experiences of an individual. Narratives are the storied account of events and a symbolic representation of knowledge and experiences (Saldana, 2015). And these stories provide meanings of past events which are the context of knowledge production (Dwyer & Emerald, 2017). Therefore the experiences expressed through stories by the characters provide insights into understanding the world.

Narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon under a study and methods of a study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry explores an individual's experiences

and how social, cultural, and environmental facts shape the individual experiences (Haydon & Riet, 2017). In fact, it explores knowledge gained from experiences. To capture the holistic picture of the online and distance learner in my study, this is the compassionate methodology that has the potential to provide a relationship that could offer the participants the security needed to be truly open in their narrative (Haydon & Riet, 2017) and by that give a deeper understanding of their learning process and social-cultural context.

Inquiry implies open-endedness, pedagogies of liberation, ambiguity, and freedom (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 44). This inquiry helped me to apply prelude from open-angle as this inquiry prefers no center, rather with a free-floating innovative interdisciplinary orientation (Davis & Dwyer, 2017). The principal attraction of narrative as a method is its capacity to portray life experiences in meaningful ways (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This method is convincing for me over other methods as it embraces the narrative as both the method and phenomenon of the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). My purpose was to connect the events and stories in a meaningful way to get insights about the world from the people's experiences (Elliott, 2005, p. 3). It helped me to understand the multidimensional meaning of society, culture, human action, and life while listening to lived experiences in the process of storytelling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The use of narrative inquiry has progressively increased in recent decades (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narrative inquiry is both the telling of the story and then the inquiring into the story by asking ourselves and making connections to pull the threads and weave it into something more' (Davis & Dwyer, 2017). There are interactive storytelling and restorying, which is collaborative between the researcher and participant in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I tried to present

the stories and complex experiences of participants in their online distance learning in a comprehensive manner.

Approach for the Study

Here, I have explored the phenomenon of online and distance learners' experience with materialistic discourse in a completely new alternative mode of learning. I have applied an inductive approach to bring most of the data with broad questions and make sense of the meaning people bring with them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I visited the field with a broad question on their overall experiences. I began with how they came to know about the program and how they happened to enroll. As I had series of interviews, I probed for more in-depth experiences. The themes were generated later after the data was collected in the first and second year. The stories of struggle to access a computer and the internet helped me understand the value of materials in learners' lives and how it is being portrayed in modern society.

Humans are the only storytelling species, and that stories often inform, inspire, teach, and guide (Chase, 2018). For inquiring into the stories, narrative inquirer outlines their narratives, listens empathetically, and explores critical events through surveys, observations, interviews, documentation, and conversations that can enhance the time, scene, and plot structures of the critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Critical events are unique, illustrative, and confirmatory in nature. Such events have life-changing consequences, unplanned, may reveal patterns of well-defined stages, are only identified after the event, and are intensely personal with intense emotional involvement. Saldana (2015) helped me to think qualitatively and narratively while searching and writing stories. I am exploring lived experiences by focusing on personal narratives and revealing the aspects of life which previously hidden are the strengths of narrative inquiry (Chase, 2018). As a technique, I took an in-depth

interview and informal observation with my participant, which was an essential aspect of the study. During my field visit, I observe particularly the physical setting of their house and workplace. I observed how they spend their day and how their relationships with their family members or colleagues in the workplace through their communication, and I personally asked their opinion about my research participant's involvement in online and distance education. I observed their social and economic status in their locality. And during the interview process, when one of my participants got her eyes wet, I was able to observe the silence that had deep meaning.

Research Field and Participants

My study focused on the experiences of Nepali students enrolled in the online distance education of the master's degree program. Two universities of Nepal conduct the online-distant program. My participants belonged to the first batch of the program. Students were from different parts of Nepal. I got the students' list from the administration of the universities. I was surprised that in the first batch they had a very little number. There were only three in the first university as it had offered the online mode only in English Language Teaching (ELT) program in the quick notice and the other university had about 13 students in three master degree program where some regular students too shifted to online mode when they had time constraints. This number made me even more curious to explore my issues in the context of Nepal when it was introduced by the Nepali universities. I sent them an email writing about the purpose of my study. Out of sixteen, thirteen students replied to my email. Later I came to know that three had already dropped from the program. So the first theme that came to my mind was about their motivation which is my first analytical chapter. After that, I made a call for everyone to meet and introduce each other. Three of them were not reachable, and they did not receive my call. Then I started my meeting with

ten students. I had meetings with them in the first round. In the first round, I talked about the frequency of meetings and time they need to spend with me or allowing me to visit their house, observe them, and tell me their inner feelings, too. Some of the students thought that the interview would be done with the first meeting and would not have to give more time. They hesitated, and I sensed that they were not interested further as they were making excuses for being too busy and travelling out of the city often. Two of the girls got married, and one of them went abroad with her husband. Then finally, the remaining six became my final participants of the study.

I visited my participants multiple times. I also meet them at their house and workplace. I met their family members and colleagues. I had met through Skype with one of my participants as she was far away. Later I visited her place. One of the male participants was staying alone in a rented room so that I could not visit his house, but we had many sittings in the university canteen, my office cabin, his school, and café, too. The other male was a bit introvert and did not find my visiting his house comfortable. Here I introduce my six research participants.

Sandhya: A Devotee

Sandhya is in her late-20s and is a resident of Nuwakot district, which lies to the west-north of Kathmandu valley. She is the only one at her home to take care of her old and sick parents. She is the youngest among her eleven siblings. She was being loved in her childhood by her siblings as she was the youngest, but later, when they all got settled in their job and marriage, they were busy looking after their family problems. Then the sole responsibility lay upon Sandhya. Her time in the morning and evening is occupied with household activities. In the morning, she makes her bed, prepare tea and food for the three of them. She has two cows and about 11 goats, so

she feeds them too. During the daytime, she teaches in a nearby community school. She studies at night after cooking, eating, and cleaning for the day.

Marriage for her is the second priority after her parent's care and her education. She dedicated her time to study, which motivates her to continue her education despite the geographical and economic constraints. She is a strong lady who never gave up to continue her education and seek better job opportunities. Despite all the barriers, she managed to be a distant online learner of graduate programs. Her struggles are tireless in the stereotypical society, but she symbolizes hope. In a short period, she learned digital skills and had a zealous journey from basic mobile to a laptop user.

Maya: A Role Model

Maya is a local resident of Kirtipur in Kathmandu Valley. She got married in the same community, and the house was nearby within 15 minutes' walking distance. Maya belongs to an ethnic community of the valley, and they have the culture of getting married within their own caste and especially among their kinship. She followed the tradition by accepting her parent's proposal. Now she is a mother of two kids. Her husband is a businessman and runs a departmental store on the ground floor of their own building.

Maya is a mathematics teacher in a public school in her own locality. Maya's world revolves around her job, family, and community. Maya represents a typical married woman in Nepali society but being a mathematics teacher; she has learned to accept the challenge of women's less representation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) area. She was inspired by her father, who was an above-average student and had a particularly better performance in mathematics. He was a government employee in the curriculum development center. His involvement

in the education sector inspired Maya. Maya joined a graduate program in mathematics education, and now she has graduated. While her husband has only passed the secondary level, Maya has completed her graduate program. Her society is a bit conservative regarding women's roles and achievements, but now she has been a role model. Her dedication to the subject and digital competency has been much appreciated in her workplace, too.

Madan: An Introvert

Madan is in his mid-40s and lives in Kathmandu with his two young daughters and a wife. Madan is a typical teacher who sought job promotion and career growth as a book writer. He has been in the teaching profession for about 25 years. Previously he had to teach all subjects at the lower secondary level, and now after being a permanent teacher, he teaches science at the secondary level. Madan joined the graduate program in 2015 A.D only, and he had a break from his study for about ten years. Likewise, before joining the undergraduate program, too, he could not join regularly. He sees the economic constraint as his primary reason for the longer study gap. Madan is an introvert and hesitates to communicate openly with his young classmates. He wanted to keep an anonymous profile among his classmates, so he opted for online learning. He thinks that the traditional way of learning from a teacher is much better than learning via technology. He prefers to have face-to-face interaction with the teacher in the classroom for effective learning. Though he took through online mode, he has taken some courses in the face-to-face mode, too.

Madan is a spiritual man and follows his daily routine regularly. He loves his routine and wants to follow it that way throughout his life. He wakes up at 3 am and does yoga and meditation for about two hours. He spends some time writing for his books since he is a book writer too. He manages his study in the evening hour after he

is off from his teaching duty. Previously Madan had doubts about the quality of education that online and distance education provide as he was too much fed up by the various news that talked about the challenges and commercial purpose of the study. After he joined the graduate program online in one of Nepal's universities, his prior thoughts changed.

Saloni: Woman Power

Saloni lives in the westernmost part of Nepal, which was the farthest distance among the online students within the nation. I approached her through email on 7th June and a reminder on 14th June 2016. Then, I followed her up through the mobile. The first meeting was conducted through skype on 20th June 2016 for more than an hour, where we discussed her view on the online learning platform and how she chose it. But I felt a gap of being unknown about her social and cultural context. Then I visited her place on 13th February 2017 and stayed for a few days. She revealed her maternal family background in the second meeting.

Saloni has six siblings, and she is the fourth one. Saloni said that though she belongs to the feudal, high caste in the society, her family seemed too backward with conventional beliefs. In dire need of a son, her father made six daughters. Saloni's mother died too young as she gave a dozen births and was ailing heavily because of it. Her father remarried when Saloni was in grade eight. Her father was a well-educated person, but the women in the family had to follow the men. According to her, women in her family were socialized to be disciplined, fearful of males, cover their faces with *ghumto* (*cloth for hiding face*), and do not make any decisions. Saloni's marriage was also decided by her father. She got married at the age of 18 and became a mother a year later. When I visited for the second meeting, her son was 19 and was in the first year of his Bachelor's degree, while the daughter was ten years old and was studying

in grade 5. Saloni believes that since she got a supportive husband, her life actually started in a real sense as she started thinking and taking part in decisions about her study and career choices. Saloni owns a private boarding school, which is one of the reputed schools in her place. Saloni is quite happy with her family now as her husband helps her in the administrative work of the school, and the children, too, are obedient to her.

Saloni is a determined lady for achieving her dream. Her ambitious nature has brought many successes to her in her teaching profession and personal life. She is now a popular educational leader and a trainer who travels in and out of the country. Last time on November 16, 2019, she was interviewed on a local radio as a renowned educational leader. Saloni does not only believe in women's empowerment but is genuinely committed to it. She inspires teachers and students in her school for creativity, computing skills, and collaboration for innovative teaching-learning. She believes that learning never stops. Currently, she is pursuing her third master's degree, but being an online distance learner this time.

Rishi: An Ambitious Man

On 19th June 2016 afternoon, I met Rishi in my office cabin for the first time after he agreed to be a research participant in my study. Rishi was brought up in a rural environment by his parent, who never had formal education. He was a firstborn child in a farmer's family. He learned English only from fourth grade and is now a well-reputed English teacher in his location.

Though Rishi's childhood was spent shepherding the cattle and goats apart from the school hours, he was an above-average student. His untidy books with tips of every page folded never had colorful images; still, he had a keen interest in his study. He was able to score a good percentage in SLC (School Leaving Certificate). He was

fortunate enough to get admission to a public college in Kathmandu. While he was in Kathmandu, he had to make his own living, so he tried every possible job from a street vendor to a marketing person. But when he got a teaching job in a private school, he was also able to bear his younger brother's study expenses. In all these circumstances, he continued to study and completed his bachelor's degree.

After completing the bachelor's degree, Rishi focused on his professional career and postponed his higher study. Rishi said, 'I was always concentrated on how I can deliver the best for my school'. The private school gained popularity with good academic results under his leadership. Rishi, by then, was known as a dedicated teacher and an efficient educational leader. Rishi got a permanent government job as a teacher after he appeared on the civil service examination in 2013 and bagged the first position among the candidates. Then he was recruited to a remote school where he served for about two years. Later, he got transferred to another school near the highway, which made it easier for him to access the internet and transportation. As a teacher in a public school, too, he was able to have a better impact. Now when I met him recently in January 2020, he was promoted to the post of headteacher in his newly transferred public school.

Rishi is very clear about his goals and ways to reach his goal. There were many barriers in his life, but he was unstoppable. Wherever Rishi has been, he has been able to make an impact. Rishi is quite logical and gives his best to bring an excellent result. Being an online learner, he does not only know his weakness in the digital platform but also equally warns the institution to make it learner-friendly. He is very result-oriented and focused on achieving it.

Sugam: An Influential Leader

Sugam is a born leader. Right from his childhood, he was very innovative, strategic, intelligent, and proactive. He knows very well how to make the best use of technology and how to make a space in the physical and digital world. Though he came from a rural background, he was very hardworking and brilliant, which helped him bag the award of a district topper in a district level examination in grade eight. Though he could not study the subject (law) he wanted, he was exceptional in the teacher education program, too. When he studied the teacher education program, he was working at the same time. He even gained the experience of teaching in a very remote place of Nepal during the arm conflict period. He is skillful in exploring the benefits of the internet to maintain his status as a leading school principal and a bright online student in the master's degree. He trusts the authenticity, flexibility, and dominance of a virtual world that is pertinent in the digital era irrespective of age, space, gender, and nationality.

Sugam is very ambitious in his profession. He left no stones unturned to deliver his best in his professional life. His hard work and dedication were acknowledged by his friends, who trusted his capability and offered him to open a new school in joint ownership under his leadership. Sugam's passion for his professional excellence was accelerated with your interest in accessing information from the internet and making connections with scholars from different parts of the world. Though he enrolled in the graduate program late, he was confident with his course content and got through all the exams very well. He is a technology-friendly learner and an influential educational leader in his district.

Meaning Making and Interpretation

Qualitative research itself is more of a process that is a blend of theory, method and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I have treated the stories without rigidity, for which the listeners might find it incoherent. In fact, I was guided by Chase (2018) to bring narratives as a way of understanding one's own or other's actions and connect the consequences of actions, events, or feelings over time. I believe that stories can become the public life of testimonies that exposes the inequalities, reveal the local circumstances, and holds power to effect social change (Chase, 2018). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), a qualitative researcher does diverse tasks ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection. Qualitative research is viewed as iterative and nonlinear with multiple beginning points (Lichtman, 2013), so I have presented the stories in the nonlinear process. While interviewing the participants, I had only one objective of knowing their experiences of their new role in a new platform. As a narrative inquirer, I started with very broad questions such as, 'tell me about your experiences as an online and distant learner in the degree program?' In fact, these kinds of open questions are the strengths of narrative inquiry (Dwyer & Emerald, 2017). I had a series of interviews with the participants, and as they narrated their stories through different events, many insights were emerging for me (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 158). The home visits, communication with family members, and observations were very insightful to give me a clear picture of their social status and physical settings. Later those insights gave me the connection of the broader theme and connections to the theories.

An interpretive researcher or narrative inquirer, I have disclosed my own story in the study because I believe that my subjectivity is inseparable from the research phenomena. My experiences, values, and understanding influence my data

interpretation, which is also crucial in a qualitative study. The meaning-making is carried out through story constellations analysis where the learners' stories are brought to the fore to situate their experiences in their social and cultural contexts of where their experiences were formed (Ronksley-Pavia & Grootenboer, 2017). When the narratives from the field were blended with the theoretical literature of the three major themes, I was then only able to make a sense of the narratives. So blending is important in the process of meaning-making. Neither the narratives speak for themselves nor the literature. Both have to be relatable to the real world with the empirical narratives. This helped me to divide my participants into different chapters as the theme emerged out of blending. My chapters include the stories of two participants each in different themes. I do not see this as fragmentation in the study but rather a way of doing justice to the story. The story was never disintegrated, instead, the story was treated to the best theme it generated after listening to the whole story.

I applied various methods with all the participants where the interview was the major one. I used social media such as Skype, Facebook chat, and YouTube besides the face-to-face interview and home visits. I began the first round of interviews through Skype with one of my participants as she lived far away among the six participants. When one of my participants was too busy with his work and could not arrange a time to have a meeting with me in person, we communicated through chats. Later, towards the end of 2019, I asked the update on their study and work through Facebook chats. All the participants are accessible on Facebook and I frequently have communication with them and not necessarily always about the research. I am in their touch through Facebook and such social media has allowed me to easily communicate with them. I get updated about their activities through their Facebook status too. I

have gathered information from YouTube too, where one of my participants was interviewed. I have used mobile phones during other times, especially in the beginning, during the interviews for appointments and home visits.

For the interview, first, I took their consent and asked for the time to schedule meetings, had rapport building ranging from a few minutes to the first whole meeting. During the interview, I arranged the time as per their availability, and I made sure that they are comfortable sharing their stories. I was a careful, non-judgmental and perceptive listener (Lichtman, 2013). Two participants did not continue after the first meeting and the other two after the second meeting. Their tight schedule, far away residence and abroad emigration were the reasons for dropping out. I did not face any technical problems during the online interview too. The participants also felt comfortable with the technology and told her experiences without needing me to probe. My interview was both synchronous and asynchronous. It was dominantly face-to-face and included online interviews, too.

After my field visits, the audio records were transcribed in the Nepali language at first and translated to English before extracting them for the chapter writing. Since I followed the inductive process in my research, the themes emerged after I completed my field work for more than three years. I did another level of literature review to analyse the data from the theoretical perspective and turn the messy data into meaningful stories. This helped me in avoiding the interest to create narratives bounded by themes and fitting neatly into the pre fixed theoretical concept (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Keeping in mind the stories I brought helped me in finding relevant theories and explanations of those themes. In this regard, the literature used in my analytical chapter was not discussed previously in the literature review section which was mostly empirically based. I felt that as a researcher, I need to move back

and forth even after bringing the narratives of the participants. This process is very important in meaning-making as it enabled me to become a lifelong learner and reflect on my role by making an impact on my thinking and actions. This process is not linear, easily predictable and one-size-fits-all but multi-dimensional (Luitel & Taylor, 2019).

My gendered position and socio-economic background have helped me to approach the data in a simple way of knowing the reality, and analyze through mutual relationships. Being a female researcher from a marginalized community who have observed and experienced the social disparity in society, I was able to see the digital divide vividly. This divide exists in terms of gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, class, region and so on. I felt the need of its importance to include through my literature review besides my professional, personal and social experience. In every story, I found that gender distinctly emerged in their context which I could not overlook with the given fact of my gender and the literature review that highlighted it as a problem. When my participants shared their gendered experience, I acknowledged them as an important aspects that a learner go through in the learning process of ODL. So in this study where learner's experiences are the major focus, and the motivation, identity and power relations as the major emerged themes, I have integrated the gender analysis too. I have taken this gender concept as a crosscutting issue so rather than having a dedicated chapter or separate research questions on gender, analyzing the experiences from gender perspectives across different themes could be a better alternative. Further gender was inseparable from issues such as identity and power which is a vital ingredient in influencing their gendered subjectivities.

Quality Standards for Narrative Inquiry

I believe that the perspective towards quality standards of qualitative research should change from traditional notions to innovation and flexibility. So, the standards for quality in narrative research can also be explored with the emerging need for the research. The quality of my study was dignified with the learnings that the participants made than what I learned (Leggo, 2008). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight the three dimensions of narrative inquiry, which are temporality (when), sociality (who and why), and spatiality (where). The online learners are reflected via relational being, spatial being, temporal being, and relative being. I believe that the study has opened up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions, and insights. Therefore, I have tried to follow careful articulations of analytic methods (Chase, 2018). I have put the following aspects to portray the quality standard of my research study.

Temporality: Prolonged Engagement

The narratives are told from past and present experiences, which will allow for the social change that happens over time (Haydon & Riet, 2017). Such narratives are under temporal transition. As narrative inquirers, we need to understand the transitions or temporality of the participants' lives (Clandinin, & Huber, 2010) that will influence their experiences and their perception of the future. I was aware of this kind of temporalities so I was clear that the communications in a short period or a couple of interviews would not be able to capture the challenges of such transitions. Therefore I had prolonged engagement in the fieldwork. This rigor in the study can address the temporality issue. I had a good rapport with my participants. The rapport building ranged from a few hours to multiple informal conversations in multiple ways. After a good rapport building with my participants, I visited their home place

and workplace. During my home visit to different locations across the nation, I communicated with my participant's spouse, children, parents, colleagues, neighbors, and staff, too. It helped me to better understand their social context. I had met them in June 2016 for the first interview, and multiple interviews have been taken after that in different periods of the gap. The last interview was taken in July 2020, so my engagement with them to get research texts spanned four years. It shows the rich rigour I followed as a narrative inquirer. The narratives included their past and present experiences and their future plans, too. When my participants were telling their stories, I was able to relate them with my life too in many ways. I understand they create the meaning of their life with engagement and interaction with an online platform.

Sociality: Relationship between Researcher and Participants

For me, the worth of the research is connected with the deepening narrative inquiry, which is associated with many aspects and mainly the relationships between the researcher and research participants. The relationship is key to what the narrative inquirers do (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, the researcher and the participants learn from each other as they encounter (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). I was able to maintain a good relationship with the participant. We still meet, and they report to me their progress. They are my Facebook friends too. So I maintained an intimate relationship with my research participants while being professionally responsible (Josselson, 2007, p. 538). I was careful in understanding and interpreting their narratives about how their past experiences and present context shaped their beliefs. The relationship between the researcher and participants influence the epistemological stance and the level of depth to which the data can be interrogated (Dwyer & Emerald, 2017). The interpretation was on faith (Kim, 2016).

The good relationship gave me the confidence to believe that the stories told by my participants (co-researchers) were true and meaningful from their subjective experience.

There is an empowering relationship between the inquirer and the character. It involves the feelings of ‘connectedness developed from the situation of caring, sharing, treating with respect, finding a common goal and having good intention’ (Hogan, 1988). When Sandhya came to my cabin to meet me, I introduced her to the dean of our school, department head, and colleagues. She was able to read some books from our library and print her reading materials from my computer and printer. She was quite happy as she had to spend money on that which was very expensive. I motivated Rishi to attend the online examinations. The first paper was completed with a bit of hassle, but later, he became used to it. He thanked me for it. “The strength of narrative inquiry is to explore the lived experiences through different aspects of life that were previously hidden or suppressed, so I as a narrative inquirer have become reflective about the distinctiveness of narrative as a human activity” (Chase, 2018, p. 964).

Place: Wakefulness

Narrative Inquiry is engaging, which means it impacts our lives, and the changes are felt in who we are and are becoming (Clandinin et al., 2016). The first is about the narrative space which I address from listening to silence in the narratives while the second one is about the physical setting from where the narratives are taken.

We need to be wakeful of what is happening around and within them, as they listen, reflect, and tell stories. It is not an easy job earnestly and very important in living and telling their narrative inquiry (Craig & Huber, 2007, p. 256). The wakeful researcher is conscious of the cognitive and behavioural responses that the

participants demonstrate. This wakefulness occurs with active engagement during the field work. This is also a sort of sense to act as per the situations. During conversations, there were many moments where I had to keep quiet to give time and space to the participants in telling their stories. It applies while observing too. I was wakeful of my participant's expression, feelings, environment, and the people around them.

The physical setting for the interview is also equally important for a narrative inquirer. They listen to the participant's stories and live alongside them as they live their stories and take part in knowledge building process through their positive relationship and shared experiences (Charmaz, 2006). When Madan expressed his uneasiness in front of the recorder in our second meeting in a cafe, I did not record the session. While I dropped him back at his house on my scooter, he kept on sharing his views and experiences, which I later wrote in my diary after reaching my house. So, I always have respected the decisions and choices of the participants. Interviews were taken in different locations such as my office cabin, my participants' office cabin, cafe, a tea shop on the roadside, talking while walking and even driving, Facebook chat, Skype and phone calls. I attended the annual staff picnic of Sugam's school when I went for my field visit. The whole day, I did not talk to Sugam about the research, but I observed his relations with his staff and partners. I enjoyed the time when Sandhya was talking with me and doing her housework simultaneously. Each participant had a different level of openness in the research process. Some were quite open in the very beginning, while some started opening up only after few meetings. Good rapport building with my participants helped me to eloquent the most delicate and thoughtful areas of their lives.

Ethical Considerations

Every aspect of research is touched by the ethics of the research relationship (Josselson, 2007). It is embedded in narrative inquiry as the researcher who studies other's lives to generate knowledge has an ethical duty to maintain their confidentiality and dignity. Kara (2015) taught me that ethical considerations begin from the moment we get an idea of doing research, and we need to identify and consider all ethical issues throughout the process. In ethical issues, I built rapport and trust with my research participants and made them decide based on comprehensive and accurate information about the study so that they were free to withdraw at any time, and I ensured them to protect their privacy of stories (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I took care of various preferences such as informed consent with participants, 'no harm', consultation, confidentiality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and beneficence while narrating their stories with uncensored honesty (Saldana, 2015), putting up Vivo codes and giving space to the counter stories. There should be no fabrication or omission of data which in case make the study non-scientific as well as unethical. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

I looked for an empowering relationship for and with my co-researchers. It enabled me to open up my imagination, broaden and deepen my attention towards the research problem and participants (co-researchers). Also, ethical reporting was grounded in the original design and stages of the study (Lindsay, 2010). I was aware of the sense of being in the process and acknowledge the co-researchers. Ethics is also equally a matter of concern while setting locations (natural settings as per the comfortable to the participant) for an interview with the participants. I maintained ethical concerns respecting and valuing my participants (Lichtmen, 2013), their identity and dignity. I was careful and sensitive in the issues of personal revelation

and privacy. I am aware that ethics are not just a means to get the data from the participants but it rather comprises universal ethics of qualitative quality (Tracy, 2010). Ethics is also about securing all the personal data derived from interviews and observation. My ethical stance is more towards 'empathetic witnessing, which will hold myself accountable to the community of narrative researchers (Thomas, 2010, as cited in Chase, 2018).

Informed Consent

In essence, ethical practice lies basically on the code of taking participants' informed consent before participation and assure no harm because of their participation (Josselson, 2007). We have to ensure the anonymity that participants can freely trust and able to tell us what they want to. So safeguarding their privacy should be our major concern (Josselson, 2007). Taking consent from participants is a continuous process as the participants from the human rights perspective. If I had no trust, my research participants would not tell their secrets or the critical events, and I would not have been able to make a proper analysis.

For the informed consent, I approached my participants through email and telephone at first. I explained my research purpose and my background to them. Some replied through email and some gave verbal consent through telephone. When I asked them if they would like to sign the written consent form or agree on the verbal consent. All of them asked me to take their first response as their consent and expressed their interest in the oral consent.

Implicit Contract

When I approached my participant for the first time, I shared the purpose of the study and stated their voluntary participation, tape record, and confidentiality. It was very formal and essential. However, Josselson (2007) believes that there is an

implicit contract too, which the inquirer does with the participant and is easily not tangible. However, it is a continuous process until the report is finally disseminated. A narrative researcher involves honoring and protecting the participants' information and rights by being polite and connecting with their participants in many ways through ethical practice. So it has to be obtained with respect and compassion (Josselson, 2007). The extensive fieldwork and prolonged engagement with the participants create an environment of mutual understanding that there is an implicit contract of consent in every meeting or interview. I had made it clear to my participants at the start or first meeting itself about the series of interviews and meetings they will have to go through and every time asking the consent would not be practical.

Right to Withdraw

In any qualitative research, participants cannot be forced to answer the questions. If they are uncomfortable or not willing to participate, they have the right to withdraw before, in between, and after the interview. After the first round of interviews, two of my participants dropped as they were not available for the rest of the interviews. The other two withdrew after the second round of interviews as they got married and went abroad. I never forced my participants to tell their stories. I established non-coercive/on-manipulative/non-self-serving informal relationships.

Empathetic

I was an empathetic listener all the time and especially when I was listening to their painful experiences. There is always a challenge to maintain equilibrium, as sometimes participants share their emotional experiences and create silence which is hard to break. I think it is much more unethical to provide advice while the participants get emotional or cry while telling the sad moments of their life during the

interview. I respected my participants' identity and their originality. We must also protect the honesty of participants' open relationships (Josselson, 2007).

Chapter Summary

To understand the learner's complex world, highlight their perspectives and experiences in online and distance learning, I have been guided by the belief of multiple realities and interpret the phenomena from the learners' perspectives. Therefore I chose to bring their stories and reveal the aspects of ODL through narrative inquiry. This chapter is an extended form of the first chapter where I have shared my story which indicates the importance of the lived experiences and the personal narratives in exploring this phenomena. I treat my research participants' stories with respect, trust and being empathetic which keeps the good bond with them even after the research is completed. In this chapter, I explained about the research process I have applied on how I generated themes and meanings from the field data. I have also ensured the rigour that I maintained and ethical considerations followed as a narrative inquirer.

After the methodological elucidation in this chapter, the analytical chapter follows with three different themes including two stories in each. These three chapters serves the three research questions in sequence.

CHAPTER IV
LEARNERS' MOTIVATION FROM ENTRY TO EXIT IN ONLINE AND
DISTANCE PROGRAM

When you teach the right things the right way, motivation takes care of itself.

Jere Brophy

The online distance mode of education has different features than the conventional mode. Its flexibility is instrumental in attracting adult students. Motivations of adult learners in online platforms are diverse from the younger students and children, so it is more interesting to explore (Vanslambrouck et al., 2015). Likewise, regular learners' motivation differs from online learners. Motivation is primarily based on the learners thinking and behavior, as Brophy (2010) defines motivation as “a theoretical construct to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior” (p. 3). As said in the above statement, to let the motivation happen, the rights things have to be taught in the right way. It is a matter of both internal and external factors. Motivation guides for purposeful action through the intended direction. This chapter has explored the motivational aspects of adult learners in choosing the online distance mode of learning and going through the courses. Here, I narrate the subjective experiences of Maya and Madan about how they got motivated to join the program and to participate in the virtual platform for the first time. Maya, who is from the first cohort of the pilot projects. She has been teaching at a community school for more than a decade and, from 2016 AD onwards simultaneously playing the role of the online learners for the first time. Despite the gendered roles, Maya's hard work, persistence, and effort made her capable and motivated her to use her skills. Madan, is in mid forty's and pursuing

his education after a long study gap. His motivation in taking the class - learning and experience narrated in the chapter. This chapter addresses my first research question ‘How do learners get motivated towards online and distance education throughout the program?’.

Vignette 1: Maya’s Third Attempt Was Successful

Maya got enrolled in Tribhuvan University for a master's degree program, but long-distance from her house. She lived in Bhaktapur, and the university was located at Kritipur, which was quite far from her. She needed to change two public buses every day to reach the university. Maya reported, *“To reach the university from Kamal Binayak I had to change two vehicles and most of the time I was held up by traffic jam. I never reached the university on time. I had to reach by 10 am but always reached by 2 pm. By then, it was time for the university to get over. I continued going for a month after that, I gave up.”* Maya did not give up as she was always looking for opportunities and ways to learn. She joined another college, which was comparatively closer to her house at Suryabinayek, Bhaktapur. Unfortunately, this also did not work out for her. She said, *“I had morning classes in that college. I used to get up very early, prepare food for all and then leave the house for college at 6 am. However, I would always miss classes, sometimes the first period and sometimes even two classes. I tried my best to reach on time, but I could never. So, after a month there, too, I left.”* This second effort of Maya was also in vain. She decided to quit after a month of joining the program. Even though the college was not that far as the previous one, her household work and job engagement was not favorable as expected. She did not find it useful after missing two morning periods every day. For her, it was not only about passing and appearing in the examination but about learning. She felt that listening to the teacher's lecturers face to face would help her understand the

topics better and, in the absence of such a mode of learning, would not be that effective.

However, Maya came to know about online and distance mode of learning. She was quite hesitant at first as she loved learning from a face-to-face mode with teachers. She felt it was more productive for her. Nevertheless, given the circumstances and her motivation to continue her study despite the hurdle, Maya concluded to join the online mode of learning. Maya finally applied for the online and distance mode of the teacher education program at Kathmandu University, School of Education. Since her earlier attempts to attend the on-campus courses failed and could not go as expected, she sensed online mode would be an appropriate mode of learning. Her third attempt to continue her education did not go in vain. She was very passionate about her education as she felt that being a teacher in a community school, she needs to upgrade her knowledge by pursuing a graduate program.

Trusting Gurus is a Culture

In Nepal, the culture of treating teachers as *gurus* or incarnations of God is a synonym, who imparts knowledge to the people. The respect is deep and immense that sometimes we take their words as the words of gods. In exploring the colleges for a master's degree, Maya attended the orientation program at a teacher education college which was for the teachers. In the orientation, a young professor talked about the scope of mathematics education in the present context. Maya was quite impressed by his speech and wanted to talk to him about his passion for mathematics education. Maya, a mathematics teacher for a decade and loved mathematics. She thought that talking to him would be fruitful.

We meet people in our life for a reason, as the saying goes. The typical introduction of herself with the professor enlightened her about the new practices in

education. The young and talented professor informed her about the possibility of doing a master's degree program without attending the lectures on the campus premises. Maya was quite amazed to know that it was possible and happening in Nepal. It was like "*dhunga khojda deuta milyo*" [*finding God while searching for the stone*]. The professor asked Maya to visit Kathmandu University and meet her for detailed information and admission for the online program. Maya visited the university, got the detailed information from the front desk and got enrolled. She was excited that she could study her subjects without coming to the campus. She thought that attending the physical lecture mode was the only method of studying formal education at institutions. She never heard of the online distance mode of education in university programs.

Nevertheless, later she came to know the alternative method of studying for a master's degree. She described, "*The professor enlightened me about the master's degree program which can be pursued even by staying at home.*" She got awakened with this completely new information and perspective about learning and continuing her education. She could not believe she was still able to continue her education staying at home. It was the turning point for her, the alternative mode of study, so got enrolled for the dream to come true. According to Yukselturk and Bulut (2009), distance education is more democratic than the traditional approach for breaking barriers, especially for female students trying to balance multiple roles and demands of their personal life. For Maya, who was motivated to continue her education, although it did not solve all her problems, the opportunity to continue education was indeed breaking the most significant barrier. The culture of trusting in teacher's information influences our decision on joining the program.

Instrumental Scholarship

The online and distance mode was the best option for Maya to live her dream. It would save her time, and she would not be missing any of the topics of the subjects. Maya went to meet the professor and learn about the administrative procedures. She could have inquired online or through telephone communication, but she wanted to visit the university premises and get detailed information.

One of her friends got graduated from KU. A few years back so Maya too wanted to study at Kathmandu University before admitting herself to the other colleges. However, she was not able to afford the comparatively higher fees. She thought that it would be a significant loss if I pay fees and do not attend the classes, and she was quite doubtful that she would be able to manage time to take classes daily. When there was an online mode of learning, Maya still had economic constraint as the fees were still not affordable for her. Her earnings were not enough to pay her fees at the university. She talked to the professor about her economic status that would stop her from enrolling in the graduate program.

Kathmandu University, School of Education, was running the pilot projects for delivering its degree programs through online mode as well. The project had provisions of granting scholarships to the female students. The professor communicated with the coordinator of the project. Luckily, Maya got the scholarship and was the only female student of the first batch of the pilot project. The scholarship opportunity opens her door to dreams. Maya's happiness had no boundary. She was thrilled like never before. Maya had assumptions that only students from elite families get admission at Kathmandu University. It was quite right to some extent in some programs, but in the school of education, the students were mostly teachers, and many of them were from middle-class families. The opportunity made her realize that the

programs were also serving aspiring students who did not belong to elite and affluent families. Maya's scholarship opportunity echoes with, 'Where there is a will, there is a way.' Maya never stopped trying, and finally, she got the opportunity to study in a well-renowned university in the program of her interest. The scholarship made her dreams come true. If there had been no scholarship for her, she would not have been able to enroll herself in university.

Feedback, Support and Appreciation Matters

Maya was sixteen when she touched a computer for the first time. It was after she gave her school-leaving examination and waiting for the result to enroll in higher education, she took computer courses for three months. After a few months, her elder brother went abroad for a better income. He asked Maya to visit a cyber cafe and connect with him. In those days, people rarely used to have computers and the internet at home. So cyber cafe was blooming many serving wanderers like Maya. She remembers, *"I used to go to cyber and asked the staff there to teach me how to chat online. I was quite uncomfortable in the initial days as I did not know much except typing. People around me were browsing many websites, but I had to call the staff for help frequently"*. Maya learned to use the internet from cyber, even though it was not cosy in the beginning. She said she enjoyed sending mail to my brother and the most remarkable thing was the video calls where she could see herself and her brother on the monitor through a web camera. Now Maya can easily communicate with him through her mobile using social media.

Before enrolling at Kathmandu University, she did not know about the online mode. Furthermore, the Moodle learning platform was even newer to her. It was not easy to get accustomed to it. Maya reported, *"In the first semester, I faced many problems, especially with Moodle as I had no idea about how to use it and preferred*

to send my assignments through email. I did not use the Moodle platform much in the first semester". In the second meeting, on 14th June 2016, I told her about the features of Moodle in online education, and she was amazed to learn about it. Maya has now learned to overcome her discomforts by seeking supports and asking questions whether through online inquiry or meeting people face to face.

Maya started enjoying mathematics when she got good marks in grade 9 after repeating the same grade due to her father's suggestions for better results. Her interest in the subject turned her to be a competent mathematics teacher. When I visited her school on Tuesday afternoon, last week of September 2017, the school principal appreciated her effective teaching and said that all the students liked her. Maya said that such appreciation encouraged her to apply innovative pedagogy and integrate ICT in the classroom to make the learning for her students enjoyable. With the same enthusiasm, Maya did her assignments and submitted them timely to the university. Maya is very inquisitive and tries to learn every lesson from a hands-on point of view. She shared, *"Once I downloaded factorization from Google, and I wrote my assignment based on its instruction. However, to my surprise, I received a comment from my tutor that it was completely a different method"*. Maya then realized that every piece of information on the internet is not reliable and needs to cross-check with various methods. She got worried about which method would be the correct one to follow for the examination. When she did not get any response or comments from her tutor, she gets anxious; made her feel that teacher's feedback is very important and should interact with them frequently to seek suggestions.

It was 30th June, my third meeting with Maya. While having snacks together and talking informally in the canteen, she unveiled how she could make the best presentation among his peers. In a cheerful voice, Maya said, *"Some days back, I had*

to prepare the number theory presentation, and this time I collected adequate related materials from Google, I studied and prepared my PowerPoint slides." She was excited when she got the feedback from her tutor, stating that she had excellent and relevant content and was the best among her peers. According to Maya, her teacher was delighted to see the growth and efforts she was making to learn new things every time. Maya, who used to seek help once even while sending emails, is now a confident and technology-friendly lady. She knows in accessing reading materials and how to link them with her learning and teaching activity. She even offers guidance among her colleagues in the workplace.

Contextualizing Learning in the Workplace

Maya needed to do an assignment in a course 'Ethnomathematics' where she had to bring the context of her community or indigenous practices. She narrated, "*When I was a child, I remember, my mother used to plant crops in the square-shaped paddy field. With the help of a stick, used to measure the field and make mathematical symbols such as triangle and rectangle*". She reflected by observing her mother in the field was highly relatable. Maya enjoyed doing the assignment as she was able to reflect on her childhood experiences. Even her mother, who had no formal education, surprised her with her unknowingly embedded mathematical concepts. According to Maya, the course helped her relate the concepts with the daily activities in her locality. She again narrated, "*Now I can see the relation with mathematics whenever there is a feast in the Newari community, and they proportionately distribute buffalo's meat, the geometrical shapes of the roofs of temples and even when a tailor sews and prepare the Newari dresses.*" Thus, learning becomes always interesting if we can seek the knowledge around us and bring the content into our formal education.

Maya took the course "ICT in Mathematics" where she learned to use a few software applications like GeoGebra that were essential in mathematics. Maya found it very interesting and useful to practice it often. She applied GeoGebra not only for her assignment submission but also in her school while teaching Geometry to children. Maya's class was very beneficial to her student and loved the way she used GeoGebra for teaching. The principal of the school was also pleased to see Maya integrating technology into her classroom. Later Maya was efficient enough to teach through a smart board too. Her school had a smartboard, and Maya was making its optimum use in classroom teaching. The principal gave her the additional responsibility of an exam coordinator as he trusted her capabilities and professionalism. The principal said, *"I am happy to see that she is doing well in her teaching profession. She uses a smart board, brings audio, video clip in the classroom and also helps other teachers to use the same."* Maya is now confident in her teaching content and says that she can teach mathematics easily to any school and in any context.

Maya is a keen learner. She is interested to learn technology. She shared an event with me in our third meeting,

"My brother-in-law and his son keep changing the password of Wi-Fi for security reasons. We stay in the same house. Once I was not able to connect to the Wi-Fi network. This time I could not remember the password, I tried it eight times but could not connect at all. Then I called my friend Hari; He gave me the instructions. I followed it and got connected successfully. I was able to resolve my problem. Now I can easily do such setting myself."

So, Maya never hesitated to ask for help whenever she was in confusion. This attitude helped her to learn better and remember things. Now she is digitally

competent and confident in using the internet. Although she did not grow up in such a techno-friendly environment, her inquiring nature and interest in learning new things made her acquainted with the technology. Usage of Moodle platform, mathematics software, smartboard, laptops, and the internet became a routine and tools of her daily life. Though being a digital immigrant, she became a techno-friendly online and distant learner. She graduated from the course in 2019 AD.

Before writing a thesis for her master degree completion, Maya went through the traumatic experience of the sudden death of her 12-year-old daughter. This pushed her back and she was unable to write her research papers. After a year she visited the university to meet the professors and explain the situation why she was unable to complete her papers. The teachers requested her to complete her thesis as soon as possible. In case of failing to submit her papers, she would not be able to get the degree certificate. Maya visited me. As she was explaining her problems to me, tears ran down her cheeks. I didn't stop her. After some time, we discussed how she can complete within the timeframe. She showed me her work on her laptop. I provided some suggestions and tried to encourage her for an early submission. I even assured her to help in accessing the literature or providing any kind of inputs if necessary. Maya was felt positive after that. After few months she was able to submit her work. She graduated in 2019 A.D. There are times when certain events in our lives push us back like Maya's tragic events. However, this didn't stop her and finally, she was able to get through the requirements and attend the convocation for receiving her degree certificate.

Vignette 2: Madan Verifies Information

Madan had heard about online learning before he joined Kathmandu University, School of Education, for a master's degree program in Sustainable

Development. He reads the newspaper every morning and thus got some information about online and distance learning programs. He said, *“I already had read much news and heard from people that online programs that run in our country, especially from different universities of India, is not reliable.”* Such kind of news and information made him perceive that such programs were not trustworthy. Madan had two reasons for having such a perception. Firstly, the people were acquiring certificates by just paying the required fees and such a mild process raises the questions on the quality of the education and the dignity of the certificate they got. Secondly, people get those degrees at the expense of half to one million rupees and some even bargain for a cheaper price. This influenced his perception that degree programs conducted through online and distance mode actually do not have the assurance of quality and it is always questionable due to such rumors.

Madan thought that such online programs operated in Nepal by various organizations are more commercialized and people nowadays are opting for it. Madan believed these rumors to be true as there was much news in the media frequently triggering his thoughts. But when he read the admission announcements of Kathmandu University, he was happy. Madan expressed, *“Kathmandu University is the reputed university of Nepal, and we have seen its infrastructure, products in the market and its quality standard. So, I got enrolled in the master degree program”*. Though the program was in the online distance mode, the reputation of the university was able to break his previous assumptions. He had been hearing good remarks from the graduates of the university, positive news making impacts on the policy level, and the luring physical infrastructure the university had. Whatever perceptions Madan had, in the beginning, was shaped by the information he got and later, when he changed his perceptions about online distance programs, it was based on the evidence

he had. Madan found it difficult to trust the existence of the programs and was especially more concerned about the quality it provided when the administrative procedure too was all online. The completion of the degree was more dependent on the students' capacity to pay the full fees of the program than their capability to understand, learn, and contextualize the program. He believed in those assumptions and could only verify through the news and social media. For him, the reputation of the institution is pertinent to trust its program delivery and maintain its quality standard.

Necessity: A Push for Job Promotion

Madan had study gaps between proficiency level to bachelor level and from bachelor level to master's degree. He completed his Bachelor's degree after 14 years of his school graduation. Then again, due to the death of his parent, he immediately could not join the Master's degree. After five years only, he joined a Master degree through online and distance mode in 2015, August. Since Madan was the bread earner of the family, he had to do a job and was unable to continue his studies regularly. He wanted to join a master's degree, but the role of a breadwinner was prominent than being a student and upgrading qualifications. He had two daughters. One was three years and another was five years old. Besides his regular teaching job, Madan would write storybooks for children. It provided him with some additional income. Madan often practised meditation and wrote books in the morning.

Madan's most of the colleagues got promoted, and it became necessary for him to own a master's degree if he wanted promotion in the job. He said, "*Without a master's degree, I will not be eligible to get selected for Section Officer. I am the only one left among my colleagues for the promotion.*" So, he then decided to join the

master's degree program at Kathmandu University. After the promotion, his salary would increase.

Madan was a writer too. His storybooks for children had an average sale in the market. The publisher of the book advised him to upgrade his qualification for a better profile that will have an impact on the sales of his books. He said, "*My degree would add to the value as an author.*" Since writing and teaching were his jobs for regular income, his employers insisted Madan on getting a master's degree certificate. He felt that he had no other options except enrolling in the graduate program. It was still not easy for him to take out time for his college lectures, so he opted for the online and distance mode.

Anonymity against Odds

Madan is in his mid-40s, and according to him, it was not the typical age forgoing college and attending classes. Due to many years of study gap and the responsibility of earning money, Madan was not able to materialize his desire to continue his higher education. The online and distance mode made it possible for him. Madan has his demarcation of student's age at different levels of study. I asked him what those age criteria, according to him, are. He, in his fine tone, said: "Degree after master's such as MPhil and PhD could be better if we do after the 40s, but it is better if the master's degree completed before mid-20s". Madan is hesitant that he has to enroll in a master's degree in his mid-40s when he should be studying PhD by that age.

Madan was not comfortable at all attending the physical classroom with his classmates, who were mostly in their mid-20s. He expressed, "*I wanted to keep myself at ease by being away from my classmates who are much younger than me.*" In online and distance mode, he was comfortable hiding his profile, especially his age. Once

Madan was not confident about passing the exam of GIS course, which was more dependent on the practice, so he decided to attend it in the face-to-face mode for better following the tutor's instruction despite all his hesitation and willingness to remain anonymous. This time he had to practice together with his classmates. He expressed his anxiety, "*Yes, I had to digest my shame and attend the classes because if I do not do that, I will fail my subject, and I would never learn anything in life, honestly speaking, getting a promotion in my job will never happen.*" So, Madan was much comfortable maintaining anonymity in the student profile except the name and class group. Garcia and Qin (2007) investigated the difference between older students and younger students in terms of key attributes of the online learner: technological abilities, learning beliefs, and learner responsibility beliefs. The study found significant differences in technological abilities and ascribed to traditional beliefs about effective pedagogical practices. For Madan, the online platform was a way of keeping animosity as well as enabling him to continue his education. He had to attend the class for better learning, which is due to the learning difficulty of technology. It adds to his anxiety in assignments and learning from the online class.

Freaks in the Eleventh Hour

Madan remained quite busy with his teaching job in the daytime. He spent his morning hour in meditation and writing books. In the evening, he spent his time either with the family or for his study. So, he had less time to study, and sometimes he would forget to check his assignments. Once, Madan found that he had to submit his assignment within three days. According to him, that was one of his bitter experiences as an online learner. Madan had to write a few assignments with approximately 10000 words each and submit them before the uploading systems gets disabled for submission. He said, "*When I looked at the date, I panicked and started searching for*

help from some agencies who could write those assignments for me, but they rejected as there was a short time." He had no idea of whether they would help him or not, but he thought that was the best option for the problem. Madan approached a few more people to help him, but it was all in vain. So, he did it all by himself by burning the midnight candle. Madan stated, *"I took energy drinks and sometimes coffee to spend the whole night and write. I sat in one place worked continuously without any break and finally submitted the paper at the last minute"*. It was a nightmare for him to work at the eleventh hour. Due to his busy daily routine, Madan was not able to prepare the assignment beforehand. If Madan had not submitted his assignment timely, he would not have been eligible to give his final examination.

Madan hardly uses to communicate with his peers, mostly due to his anxiety about his age. He was not active in the online discussion too. Thus, he was not in the loop of group chat and used to miss the updates. In the group, there used to be information sharing about the assignments and reading materials. Madan had a hard time working in the last hour due to his negligence in marking the deadlines of assignment submission and seeking support from his peers. Kizilcec and Halawa (2015) found that the primary obstacle for learners was time allocated for learning. Everybody needs to engage in work for survival, and ODL is an alternative platform for learning at a convenient time.

Additionally, physical presence at the university is not required. However, the deadlines of the assignments are hard to meet for Madan due to his profession and also because he was less smart at using technology. Madan's lack of being part of online discussion and making friends through an online platform.

ICT Is for Younger Generation

Madan and Maya started late to learn a computer or use the internet. Maya started using mobile-only in 2007 and was able to buy the smartphone after a few years. In Madan's case, as he had no smartphone, he was not in Facebook and Viber group, so he was not included in the class group, and thus he mostly used to miss the updates. Madan always felt that the IT thing is only meant for the younger generation as they can handle it easily. He was not interested much in exploring opportunities through the internet. However, the digital world provides its benefits and prospects to everyone irrespective of their gender and age. Madan lived in the city, owned a laptop and had an internet facility at home, but still, he was not able to utilize it as much he could have. He expressed,

Even though I am from the city, I am not perfect in IT as the younger generation. I have the basic knowledge of accessing materials, preparing and submitting assignments using Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, but my younger classmates are even more smart and advanced. I am amazed to see the impressive effects during their PowerPoint presentation. Since I have other commitments, I have not been able to give time to learn more from the internet necessary for my coursework.

In Madan's family, his six years old daughter was very good at using tablets and mobile without any instruction. Whereas Madan reported that his wife rarely used ICT though she had received basic computer training in the past. She did not have an email account as she did not need to use it. However, she used Facebook the most on her mobile. According to Madan, though she had completed her undergraduate program, she was never interested in continuing her study through online and distance mode. Madan himself had the basic knowledge of computer and the internet, such as

Google and Microsoft program. After being enrolled in the graduate program as an online learner, he had the required necessary digital skills, but he felt the need to acquire more. He reflects,

I am confident that I can do systematically well but I more training so I am thinking of joining a computer institute for an advanced course. I found that my young peers are quite quick in adopting apps, downloading videos and making impressive PowerPoint presentations with effects and animation. I too liked to do the same, but I feel hesitant in asking them about it and teaching me as well. There are always a laptop and the internet, but I have many other commitments in my job as a teacher and a breadwinner of the family.

Madan learned many new things after taking the role of an online learner.

However, he believed that access was crucial, which was contingent on financial status. He possessed a laptop but had no smartphone. Later he bought it as he felt the need for it. He also added the capacity of the internet at his home to upload assignments smoothly in Moodle.

Madan believed that since online platforms demand competitive digital skills, it was tough for busy people like him, rather suited only for the incredibly talented people who could appear exams based on self-study and without any technological barrier. He said that the students had to spend more time online to read the materials and do the assignment. Madan preferred to attend face-to-face classes rather than online if he had time. He stated that there were challenges of practical-based classes online, which would hamper their grade, and thus, interaction with tutors and peers was very important to get through the exam. Digital competence is required for the learners of today. The competence includes skills for the use of basic tools and higher-order skills required for efficient, critical and innovative applications (Punie &

Ala-Mutka, 2007). They further add the involvement of other participants in the learning process, which would be support building and improving the competence with the help from peers and experts. Madan's perception of ODL tells us the need for the context of digital competency for learning and the struggles that learners go through.

Motivation That Serves Purpose

Madan wanted to pursue his education just for promotion in the job, and he found the online distance mode the most appropriate for avoiding face to face interaction with classmates who were younger than him. Later, when I interviewed him in January 2020 through Facebook, he had quit his master's degree program, and he had got the promotion too without the degree. In the government job of Nepal, after completing specific years in the service, the employee gets the promotion spontaneously. Likewise, Madan got promoted without his qualification being upgraded. Instead, he wrote ten more books in between. This was an additional source for him to make money, and he loved writing books on moral stories and the Hindu religion. According to him, he was motivated more towards writing books and learning formal higher education. When he got promoted with the degree, he did not feel the need to complete the study, so he quit. When I asked him why he did not complete the degree, he said, "*madam, we should do historical work which will remain forever just like our poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota*". He seemed very happy with his achievement as a writer. He did not seem to be upset about not being able to complete his university degree. At first, when he joined the master's degree, he was driven by controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2008) that gave him pressure, and he was not able to link it with his profession and so on. He is now a dropout. Likewise,

learner's dropout rates in the ODL program is a growing concern, and Kim (2009) says that lack of time and lack of motivation are the major causes of it.

Maya got the scholarship when she applied for the program. Relief from the economic burden to pay the fees motivated her to complete her degree. Though it was self-directed learning, she did reflective assignments and linked the classroom learning with her teaching practice as far as applicable. She enjoyed the relatedness. Throughout the four semesters, she got confidence in her capability, competence in the profession, and respect from society. Consequently, she gained autonomy in her life to decide and act out through her learning experience. Online learning requires being critical and realistic to invest energy in accomplishing the task. Maya, before and after marriage, was a keen learner and always tried to improve herself and continue her education. She has time and again shown her enthusiasm in learning than taking it as a burden. However, this autonomy is not only contingent on our personal choice or psychological feeling; it is more of the social contextual things or events that influence our choices (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Through her narratives, we can know that her family had a pleasant environment for education. Her father was a prominent figure who encourages her to strive for education. Even after her marriage, there seems nothing limiting her to pursue her dreams. However, she shared,

I get up early at 4 am. I do my assignment for 2 hours and prepare a meal for my family. We are four members, my husband and my children. My school starts at 9:50. I prepare for my teaching classes while I am in school. It is too hard for me as I am a mother, housewife, teacher, daughter and wife. I do not have a joint family, but we stay in the same house. I sometimes wash their clothes. I do assignments on Saturday when I have a holiday in college and

school. I do in the morning times too. I take leave in school when there is an exam at KU. My headteacher allows me to take leave.

She had to complete her home chores to do what she wanted to do. In her workplace also, she had an encouraging and helpful environment. When people are motivated, they accomplish the task independently and their actions are goal-oriented (Brophy, 2010). Maya was determined to make out the best of the situation she has.

Wighting et al. (2008) carried out a study to determine if distinctions between students enrolled in e-learning and face-to-face university can determine their sense of community and motivation. They found that the online group had stronger intrinsic motivation, which was the vital interpreter between the online and traditional students. Those students prefer a free online learning environment, which is less controlling and fosters their intrinsic motivation. Maya, through an online class, learned at her own pace and gained the professionalism required in the job. A recent study carried out in Nepal found out that online students of mathematics education had a positive perception towards the use of LMS, specifically Moodle, and were happy to learn mathematics from the online mode rather than face-to-face mode (Neupane, 2019). These studies show that all online students necessarily have negative perceptions towards online and distance education.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Learner performances are contingent on various factors such as learning environment, pedagogy, motivation, rewards, and cognitive intelligence. The internalized motive will guide the learners to study best (Lamb, 2011). Maya mentioned that her headteacher allows her to take leave during exam time. She was encouraged by him also to join the online program. She shares:

We have the internet and smartboard too in the hall of our school. We have many laptops. The teacher is allowed to use the laptops and have a routine schedule. I have four classes in a week to use a projector. Sometimes I use YouTube videos, sometimes songs and sometimes smartboard. Now I teach geometry using a smartboard. I use technology in my classroom. Our principal is also glad when he sees us using the smartboard. He wants us to use ICT in the classroom.

Her school is a public school. They cannot afford the computer labs and Wi-Fi. However, her school's principal asked for a donation and arranged a sound library and computer lab. The parents of the school were happy, but thirteen years ago, the school was in the worst situation. The new principal got appointed and brought all the changes and encourages them to use ICT in the classroom. So, the motivational dimension is a vital component of learning. Many studies have focused on learning the complexities of learners' motivation, addressing motivational challenges, and applying new technologies to stimulate motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a prominent factor of concern in learner's motivation in online and distance education programs.

Deci and Ryan (2012) have proposed Self-determination theory (SDT) for explaining the different forms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The theory posits that intrinsic motivation is achieved when students feel competent and able to relate. If we can relate our study with a career, it helps us in developing competency and efficiency. Maya felt that online mode was beneficial as she could learn at her pace and time. She is additionally allowed in the skill development of her teaching pedagogy and impact in her career. Madan also felt he could be anonymous and continue his education. This kind of intrinsic motivation is quintessential for growth;

however, it is affected by social-contextual conditions. Ryan and Deci (2012) stated, 'when intrinsically motivated individuals move autonomously toward new challenges and enact behaviors that interest them, seek stimulation and test limits'. The self-determination theory defines intrinsic motivation as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions while extrinsic motivation is mostly the response to an outside stimulus with a desirable benefit (Wighting et al., 2008).

According to Ryan and Deci (2012), the intrinsically motivated learner intends to expand their competencies and capacities, which affects their cognitive and emotional development, whereas Brophy (2010) prefers the term 'motivation to learn' rather than intrinsic motivation. Brophy mentions that there is a difference between intrinsic motivation and motivation to learn which is similar to the difference between affective and cognitive engagement experiences. He elaborates that intrinsic motivation is more about the affective experience while motivation to learn is primarily a cognitive experience to figure out the meaning from the accessed information.

Adults Practicing Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning is embedded with student's performance, learning and outcome. The success of a student is guided by self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is significant in terms of distance and online learning as education takes place at the student's own pace and time. According to Long (2000), an individual needs to have a sense of motivation, metacognition and self-regulation from within the self, which takes the individual on the path of self-directed learning.

Self-directed learning is a valuable asset for online and distance learning. Self-directed learning in the 21st century is a crucial skill when supported by the pedagogical approach of connectivism and personal learning environments (Conradie,

2014). Online and distance learning is still a relatively new domain for adult learners in education practice. The advanced use and unique features of technology require adult learners to acquire some skills, use and technical aspects of an online platform and be familiar with ICT beforehand, when the adult learners possess self-directed learning habits; it is beneficial for their own success.

It is not always necessary that we are motivated internally, but it could also be some external factors that we internalize and regulate our behaviors accordingly. Ryan and Deci (2012) define internalization as the process of transforming one's own life from external sources in beliefs and actions which could be both positive and negative. If we positively take it, it could be fully autonomous and requires self-reflection, and one can experience a more wholeheartedly endorsement of the behavior or value. Autonomy is quite a relative term, and the continuum of autonomy is contingent on a different level of motivation ranging from controlled regulation to self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2012). Maya shared one of her experiences when she got everything wrong and how she learned from the mistake and how she got the confidence and motivation. Maya said:

It is easy now because I can use GeoGebra for geometry and prepare slides in PowerPoint. Now I can do it and show it without being told. I am much confident. Coming here, I tell you I can confidently teach anywhere, no matter it is a boarding school. I have that inner power developed now. Some days back, I had to prepare a number theory presentation, and I searched all the materials on Google. I downloaded 3 to 4 materials on the topic history of number theory, and I studied that. I got the best-matched one for me, and I showed my teacher. He was so happy because my material was the best one as it matched well with the topic given, unlike others.

Maya shared how she learned to search for the right materials. It made her capable of using her skills learned. Her teacher praise also helps her in building confidence. Her attitude to learning is vital. Learning happens along with experiences, and there is a better experience when there is better interaction with the people. If students feel well related to their experiences of daily life, work, and plans, their motivation factor is influenced. The asynchronous communications might make the students feel lonely and get deprived of the learning through peer and group discussions, engaging activities, knowing each other and collaborative projects. A study conducted on the guidance of a mobile communication tool framework found that mobile communication effectively promotes learner motivation and encourages interaction between learners and instructors as well as among learner peers in online learning environments (Chaiprasurt & Esichaikul, 2014). The study further claims that online learning increases learners' ability to learn at their convenience. The physical separation may lack a sense of being a part of the classroom community from their peers and instructors that online learning involves may result in a lack of communication and interaction and a weaker sense of belonging to a classroom community.

Poupore (2013) believes that when learners are involved at a cognitive level, they link them with their profession. Maya was able to relate her task and study activities to her teaching practice. A study has shown that students do not join degree programs for their advancement only but also for practising their profession (Nolot, 2011). Maya, as an adult student, are already in their teaching profession, their education interests also lie in addressing real-life situations and problems (Nolot, 2011). While addressing real-life situations, Maya was self-motivated. Therefore, she

was able to relate her study and work, and consequently, she was enjoying the learning in the online platform.

Relatedness and Skills for Success

Ryan and Deci (2000) articulate that relatedness is linked with social networking, for social interaction with peers and instructors. As proposed by SDT, the relatedness enables learners to develop social networking and have social interaction with their peers and instructor. Madan and Maya studied their degree program under an initial phase of a pilot project under the university. Since it was newly adopted, the instructors and the institutions had no clear idea of operating ODL. Both tutors and students less practised the interactive features of Moodle. It deprived them of interacting with her peers through Moodle. So, the lack of interaction was very less. However, while doing a task, it is necessary to identify and understand the relevancy and value of the task. If the learners can realize the objectives and correspond or relate to their work, interest, and daily life, amidst the less interaction, their self-motivation becomes high to allow them to enjoy, get satisfaction and complete the task timely. Maya, whenever she learned about a new method of teaching mathematics, would practice and experiment in her classroom, whether it is about applying new software or preparing her teaching materials. So I learn that motivation is more or related to the task. People get motivated to do the task if they can see the relevance and connectivity with their practical life or profession.

Van Dijk and Van Dueursen (2014) explain that if we want to learn digital skills, have better participation in the digital world, and access the devices; motivation is the gateway for such appropriation of technology. He believes that the digital divide and anxieties towards technology can be mitigated only by developing motivation. The narratives presented in this chapter have shown that student's personal attributes,

which are guided by self-motivation, help to break through all types of stereotypes that exist in society.

Motivation is the essential requirement for access, success, and empowerment. Dijk and Dueursen (2014) explain that to close the digital divide, it should begin with developing motivation and unclogging our anxieties towards computers, the internet, and digital media. According to Dijk and Dueursen (2014), the first stage in appropriating new technology is the motivation to use ICT tools. Motivation helps to hawk our technophobia and related anxieties. Regardless of personal and positional categorical inequalities, one should be motivated to access and use digital tools. It will help in acquiring physical access to such tools. Access to material resources such as peripheral equipment, software, and services enhance our various digital skills. The more digital skills we develop, the more we are likely to have several applications.

Gender Perspective on Motivation in ODL

Madan and Maya had a similar level of interest guided by different factors, but later Madan could not retain whereas Maya successfully completed it. The perception changes concerning their engagement while the motivation might not remain the same during the admission and while completing the courses. The less engaging activities, the less interactive tools will hamper the motivation of both learners. Previously Madan thought that online classes would be easy to take than face-to-face, but later, he found the opposite. It demanded both technical and academic skills with more effort and time. Madan said, *“I was almost about to fail the subject, it is not the same as listening to the lecture and attending the classes in person”*. He even decided to take some courses by attending physically and daily on campus. His perception of his digital skills was not very positive as he always felt that technology is only for the younger generation. Further, he added, *“my wife too had basic computer skills but she*

hasn't utilized it. She is a housewife and her digital skills are only limited to using Facebook on mobile. And I don't think that training was useful to her. Digital skills are not necessary for her". Madan himself is not a very tech-friendly person, and neither did he encourage his better half to learn the computer. Likewise, Maya's husband too was not technology friendly person. Therefore relation with technology is not innate with gender roles but rather learned with exposure to the environment.

Madan and Maya had different perceptions and were utilizing the ICT tools accordingly. Maya was always eager to learn digital skills, and she used to ask someone who could teach her. When she visited cyber in the initial days, she learned to use the internet from the staff of the cyber. When she has internet issues sometimes at home, she learned how to fix them from the son of her brother-in-law. She was able to show her digital competency by using the smartboard and preparing teaching materials with the use of ICT knowledge in her daily classroom teaching. Madan used only chalk and duster in the classroom. Technophobia is no more associated with women as it is more of the personal motivation that related them to the use of technology.

My research participants interacted online in the formal education platform for the first time after they got enrolled. Maya learned GeoGebra, which she was able to apply in her teaching practice. Madan realized that digital skills are very important to cope with the learning purposes of the courses. He planned to take advanced computer courses after his study while Maya perceived online and distance learning as the best platform for her to learn digital skills along with their content.

Maya was the only female student in her batch in Mathematics Education. According to Maya, if there was no ODL platform and scholarship, she would not have been able to join and complete the degree successfully. Likewise, when I

inquired, I found similar conditions in the other batches too. However, there were equal numbers of students in ELT and MSD programs. Gender differences exist in STEM disciplines, with the lowest female enrolment observed in ICT; engineering, manufacturing and construction, and natural science, mathematics and statistics (UNESCO, 2017). The exclusion of women from getting into such education is a tremendous loss of human resources. Underrepresentation of women in STEM exists in almost all countries and the differences are only in volume.

In the case of Nepal, Sing (2015) presented the enrollment of girls' education: the highest rate in medical faculty is 56.8%, education 56.8%, humanities 46.2%, management 43.4%, and engineering 11.2%. Interestingly she has shown high enrollment in medical faculty because of the gender specified education that Nursing education has been only for female students. It is because of the low participation of women in STEM, which affected participation in human resources. However, the enrollment of females in STEM has been increasing over the years. Supporting this data of Nepal, UNESCO (2015) showed the proportion of male and female researchers in science and technology as 92.2 % male and 7. % female.

The other aspect I need to discuss here is the discomfort that Maya felt during the initial days when she had no computer and internet at home. Madan never had to go to cyber as he had a laptop with him. However, Maya said that the cyber staff was helpful to her and taught her to use the computer or internet to communicate with his brother, who lived in Japan. According to Maya, in cyber, there were mostly either children playing games or males using the computer. Sometimes she felt the environment quite uncomfortable. So, it is also an important issue that many female online learners who do not have a computer and internet at home are compelled to go to cyber to download their reading materials and upload the assignments.

In nutshell, the gender position of a learner has less influence on their motivation towards technology. The relationship of gender and technology is, therefore, have changed. Technophobia is no more a gender issue but is more concerned with accessibility and a supportive environment.

Necessity From Start to End

Motivation is very important for learners to accomplish their tasks or complete the program. It can help to develop a positive attitude towards learning. Though Maya got a scholarship she could have lost her interest and consequently quit the program if she had no positive attitude towards the learning and the online platform. Though Madan had a purpose behind joining the program, he was not satisfied and engaged throughout the program, neither with the content nor with his peers. So, a positive attitude, particularly the attitude to learn, is more important. When Madan achieved his goal, he did not find it worthy of completing the degree. Social constructs such as age can hamper the learning process if the positive attitude does not replace it. Huss and Eastep (2013) have put forward that students have a definite perception of online education, and it is a necessary component for their success. They further add to develop courses flexibility student desires while maintaining necessary “connectedness” with the institution and faculty. The online courses should be flexible enough with a lot of engagement and connectedness among students, faculty, and institution for the success and completion of education. Papastergiou (2006) stated that the flexibility to enhance learning push students to show a positive attitude towards ODL. Madan and Maya got motivated towards this ODL due to its flexibility, without which it would not have been possible for them to pursue their education.

According to Van Dijk and Van Deursen (2014), motivation is the first stage in appropriating new technology and developing necessary skills, continuous efforts

and motivation are required. So, motivation is even more crucial in online and distance learning because it is not only about learning but also about accessing materials, acquiring skills, and using them frequently.

Motivation is complex, multifaceted, and influenced by both person and context (Hartnett et al., 2011). And it keeps on changing. The motivation that appeared while joining the program may not remain the same as they go through the courses and exams. When Madan had to submit assignments of his subjects in very little time, he felt that the flexibility in ODL is very limited, and later, he believed that ODL serves only the talented people who can manage the stress level and balance the workload and the assignments required. So towards the end, he was less motivated. So in between the interaction and feedback is very important. Maya was in frequent contact with her faculties and received their timely feedback, an appreciation that was instrumental in keeping her going. She was thankful for flexible online interaction with faculty and peers (Papastergiou, 2006). If there is frequent communication with tutors throughout the program, learners are less anxious and feel less isolated. Learners feel as members of that community and find meaning (Adams, 2007). Adams (2007) emphasized that motivation is not a simple feeling of intrinsic worth but a desire for intellectual engagement. Therefore, relatedness is very important in self-regulated learning. Learners gain the ability to learn and control techniques towards purposeful learning (Huang, 2002). The adult learners bring with them some kinds of experiences that help them relate the classroom learning with their work. Madan had a pre-determined purpose of joining ODL, but he dropped the program towards the end as he achieved his goal of completing the degree. He had prior biasedness towards technology that it suited mostly for the young people and his perception of the age differences too influenced his interaction with his peers. In such

cases, online collaboration is essential to stimulate the intuitiveness of face-to-face learning.

Motivation, in general, is a reason that encourages us to act or behave in a certain way. The children or young learners had less strong reasons to study than the adult learners. For them, going to school and studying could be because their parents send them, they don't have other jobs to do, or most probably that they take it as the norms. The adults on the other hand have their prior experiences and knowledge in education and their professional work. This requires them a stronger reason to pursue their education which is mostly guided by necessity. In the case of ODL, the delivery mode backs the reason. Both of these are a kind of extrinsic motivation for them. Intrinsic motivation is free from such attraction and need. It is associated with a passion to learn and which is linked to broader life goals rather than limited to short term goals. Motivation may either remain the same or change. Intrinsic motivation can lead to success while extrinsic motivation might result in quitting the program. So, this chapter was an effort to understand the motivation level of learners from the beginning to the completion of their program. And I argue that intrinsic motivation should be maintained from the beginning to the end of the program.

Insights From the Chapter

Pondering on the narratives of Maya about her motivation in ODL, we can better understand the adult learner's perspectives on her involvement in the master's program. Students develop their motivation from different societal contexts. The intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are highly sensitive to situational influences (Hartnett et al., 2011). Maya's had intrinsic motivation for learning rather than just completing the degree. She gets excited whenever she gets opportunities to learn, practice new things, and receive positive feedback. According to Maya, leaving aside

the initial remarks of her husband, he was very supportive of her and encouraged her to pursue her studies. Maya's father being an educated person and a job holder in the education sector of government, inspired her to step into mathematics and develop her career in it. This social context showed the role of family members is very important in motivating learners for a positive learning experience. Likewise, Madan had extrinsic motivation at the beginning of the program. He wanted to join the graduate program through ODL just because he wanted to get a job promotion and avoid facing his classmates who were quite younger than him. When he was able to get the promotion without a degree, it didn't become his priority. If he hadn't been promoted, he would have definitely prioritized it and complete it as early as possible.

About my participants' motivation, I learned that motivation does not exist in a vacuum, but it is mostly realized when we can relate it to our professional work, daily life for life goals. The online and distance learners are self-motivated to engage in activities, but if the program does not serve their interests, they have no connection with their profession and lack interaction with peers and tutors, which may ultimately diminish the motivation level of the learners. However, the Moodle learning management system in ODL has continually updated its features to make it more interactive and engaging to the learners. If the adult learners are not digitally competent to navigate the digital resources, communicate and make scholarly activities, it might reduce their motivation towards online learning. It is more of an administrative orientation to the students, especially in developing countries like Nepal.

Competence gained through continuous usages of the digital platform and skills. Motivation in adult education in online learning is guided by one or the other incentives (job, scholarship, a better image in society, professional development,

acquiring skills, be a part of the new community, hide their weakness, ease their works, they hardly enjoy). When an adult learner pushes himself/herself to a new learning platform, they are motivated to bring benefits to their work-related experiences. So, to pursue their education is not just for fun for innate motivation to study, but it is always related to their societal and professional growth. So, I argue that learners successfully complete their degree even in a new situation if they have intrinsic motivation. And this intrinsic motivation works if the learner can find relevancy to his/her professional and daily life. Relatedness is the key to intrinsic motivation, which will bring success in completing the program. It allows the learner to be open to learning, and even if there was anxiety in the beginning, it can gradually be overpowered. It also brings significant changes from a technophobic to a techno-friendly person. Maya's story conveys this message very well. Intrinsic motivation goes parallel to determination, and continuous efforts are required. Though the motivation, in the beginning, might have been influenced by external factors such as rewards, it can sustain only by relating the learnings with everyday life, may it be with professional work. Self-motivated learners can achieve success and challenge the myths and stereotypes in society related either to gender or to ODL. Self-directed learning in ODL supports the autonomy of the learner and by gaining digital skills. In the absence of relatedness, the learner is not able to develop competency and, consequently, it leads to failure. Relatedness for adult learners in ODL is crucial as they have prior experiences, are engaged in some professions and look for connection in spite of the physical distance in their learning. So relatedness is the only key that can retain them throughout the program and feel the worth of undergoing it.

CHAPTER V

POWER RELATIONS EXPERIENCED BY ONLINE DISTANT LEARNERS

Technology gives us power but it does not and cannot tell us how to use that power.

Jonathan Sacks

In the earlier chapter, I have discussed that the motivational aspects matter from their enrollment to the retainment in the online platform. When I travelled to cities and rural areas to meet the research participants, I found totally different and contrasting contexts of learners where their struggles shaped their relationship with the digital learning platform. Their access to ICT before and after joining online and distance education program has a pertinent role in their performance. During the conception of my PhD proposal and my preliminary visits to different parts of Nepal, I observed that the digital divide was quite tangible and deepened with the intersection of sex, class, age and places. The accessibility of digital tools and usage of digital skills enabled the learners to feel either empowered or insignificant. The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individuals or collective but rather a way in which some act on others (Foucault, 1980). If I had to understand the characters of my participants and how they accept the new phenomena, induce themselves, confront the stereotypes or follow the conduct, I need to understand their relationship with ICT, online education and its societal value in their life. These are all about maintaining the power relationships in society as a social being. So power relations emerged as my next theme of the research after motivation.

In this chapter, I present the story of my two participants to know ‘How do online distant learners experience power relations in their learning context? How do they become powerful or powerless when associated with technology in their learning experience? It is about understanding their subjectivities as they venture into the online and learning platform for the first time. First, I begin with the story of a rural girl and a teacher in the public school of her village, Sandhya, and later about Sugam, who ran a private boarding school and had much fame as an educational leader in his locality. I do not intend to make a comparison of their stories. Still, their different conditions, access, and experiences provide us with insights into how power plays within online education from the learner’s perspective in their local context. Then I have discussed through the theoretical lens to highlight the multiple perspectives about ICT in the ODL platform.

Vignette 1: Sandhya’s Economic and Social Endeavor

I met Sandhya for the first time on June 2, 2016, in Kathmandu. Later I had several meetings with her in different places. Then finally, I visited her house on February 7, 2017, and stayed at her house for two days. And this engagement allowed me to observe her personal life as a teacher in a school, an online and distant learner and a nurturer of her parents.

Sandhya lived in a rural area. There were not many job opportunities available. The community was mostly dependent on agriculture, and Sandhya’s parents are also farmers. They did animal husbandry too. These agricultural activities were enough for them to have food daily. But it was not enough to get more cash for other purposes, such as spending on Sandhya’s study and buying laptops, and, most importantly, to build their house, which had collapsed during the devastating earthquake of April 25, 2015. When I visited her house, Sandhya and her family were

living in a temporary shed. I, too, spent two nights in the same shed. During the monsoon, the rusted roof would leak, and they would get busy cleaning the wet floor. Sandhya said that there were many relief packages from the government and non-government organizations but she did not receive any. I saw Sandhya's old father carrying the stones, wood, and trying to help in the house construction. They were slowly constructing the house with their neighbours' help and cheap labor available in the village. Sandhya's elder brother who was a teacher in a community school in a mountainous region of Nepal had sent some money from his savings, but it was very insignificant. When her house collapsed, it made her family even more vulnerable. The government had provided the reconstruction cash grants, but it couldn't reach everyone and most probably the needy ones as Sandhya's family.

Sandhya studied in a government school, Janata secondary school (name changed), in her village. She was a good student, although she had to divide her time between studying and herding during her childhood. However, it did not hamper her performance. After her tenth grade, she joined the Education stream at the +2 level from a college near her village. She could not join the college in the city due to her poor economic background. In the first year, it was difficult for her to understand the language and lessons taught by the teacher, but later she worked hard and enjoyed an English subject. Though she worried about failing the subject, she was able to get a passing score. After that, though she joined for a Bachelor degree, she was unable to attend the classes regularly due to her household responsibility. Sandhya, with a heavy heart, said, "*I wish my parent were educated and had better economic conditions then I would get an opportunity to study with no tensions and hassle*". She laments, "*My parents don't recognize letters. If they had studied, they would have prioritized my higher education like my brothers*". She is very attached to her family,

which made her feel her obligations to fulfill the duty. She said, "*It was not difficult for her brother to leave the house for the job but being a girl, she has a restriction in such mobility even if it is for study purpose*".

Sandhya was dependent on the guidebook for her examination. Sandhya could not pass all the subjects, and she attempted it again the next year. Her classmates passed the degree and were already into new jobs. Sandhya was worried as she lost a few job opportunities because she did not clear all her exam papers. Sandhya got determined that she would continue her master's degree despite all the unfavorable conditions and would study hard than before. Though it took a year more, she was able to complete her undergraduate degree finally.

Rural girls in Nepal generally marry in their 20s, and Sandhya was in her late 20s. She was frequently taunted by her neighbors and relatives for not marrying till that time. Sandhya was quite bothered initially and used to get annoyed, but later, she and her parents stopped caring about their comments. She said,

People in my villages most often talk about my marriage. They often visit my parents with proposals from different families. When I didn't show interest, they would ask me why I was not interested. I simply ignore them and sometimes say that I still have time to get married. But again, they tell me that I am getting older for marriage while most of the girls of my age have already become the mother of two kids. Sometimes I explain to them it is not necessary to marry as I am on the right path. I have seen in my community that many couples are not happy after their marriage. And I think once we get married, our freedom is limited. There is a huge difference in the mobility between a daughter and a daughter in law in our community. I am not married because I love my parent and they need me. My younger brother would have

taken care of the parent but he is far away. There is no one at home except me to look after my sick parent. So, I have the sole responsibilities.

Sandhya earns only Rs 8000 per month as a teacher in the community school, which is very minimum and insufficient to meet her monthly household expenses. Her economic constraint did not allow her to quit the job and migrate to a city for higher study. Sandhya said,

I have very little salary. It is just eight thousand rupees, and it's the minimum salary I am paid. It's not enough. I hope the school administration will increase it in the coming year. There are permanent teachers in this school and they are paid well, almost three times more than mine but they are not dedicated to their job. They don't stay the whole day in school. They teach about 10 minutes in 45 minutes. You know, who would dare to say they are wrong, after all, they are permanent teachers. For me, school is near to my home, and I can take care of my parents too. In addition, I am an unmarried girl, and it's not easy for me to take up a job in new places. So, despite these inequalities, I have no other options at present.

Sandhya's school was just two minutes' walk from her house, so it was very convenient for her. She was still not a permanent teacher, so in such a case, the school administration would decide her amount. Sandhya had requested the headteacher to increase her salary, but instead, she was told that she could leave the job if she was not satisfied. She said, *"If I would complain and request for salary increment, then the headteacher would reply every time there are other ladies of his kinship looking for the opportunity. If I quit the job, he would hire another person immediately"*. She did not have job security, and she had no other options except to accept the conditions and continue with the same job. Sandhya shared that she was quite upset as her colleagues

used to get a better salary and were still not dedicated to their job. She was caught up in power relations with her colleagues and neighbours.

Online Mode: Arduous for a Rural Girl

When she visited Kathmandu to get information about admission, one of her previous teachers informed her about the newly opened online and distance education program. She took no time to take the decision and got the admission. She was on cloud nine when she got the scholarship available for females. But she had no idea how she will study from an online platform. She had an old smartphone only. There was a mobile network problem in her village. She had no internet too.

Sandhya was determined to continue her education. After being enrolled as a student in an online and distance education program, the hindrances were not less for her. Her village was a small valley surrounded by big hills; the mobile networks were not easily reachable. It was difficult for her to use mobile data to open the university e-learning website. There were no cybercafés in the village, so Sandhya had to walk for more than one hour to reach a cyber café near the highway. On top of it, the internet speed was languid that she had to wait for a long time to complete her browsing and downloading materials. Again, if she has to do the printout, it was very costly. As an online learner, Sandhya had only a mobile through which she had to submit her assignment. I was utterly astonished when she showed me in our first meeting as I thought about how one can type her assignment through the simple android mobile and do her learning. She had no computer, laptop, tablet, and internet, which was the essential requirement of an online and distant learner. I realized that the inaccessibility of these assets was the adversity she faced in the process of learning online. I was quite worried about how she would continue her study amidst the challenges and limited sources.

Sandhya was using Moodle for the first time. She downloaded Moodle on her mobile to see if there are any new notifications from the teachers. When I asked Sandhya about the types of reading materials that teachers upload on Moodle, she replied that “*Some teachers send me many reading materials, but some will upload the whole textbooks. Once a teacher wrote the name of the textbook and asked us to buy from the bookshop*”. Listening to her, I felt that the traditional practice of learning, which is quite dependent on a textbook of the subject, seemed prevalent in the ODL too. Sandhya agrees that the different teachers used Moodle at different levels but she thinks that even though the teacher asked them to buy the textbooks from the bookshop, there was no harm, and it was only for the good of the students. She believes that as a student, we don’t question the competence of a teacher as her culture taught her to respect teachers as gods. This is also the manifestation of a power hierarchy embedded in cultural values. Sandhya’s socio-cultural background did not allow her to question the practice and demand from the learner’s rights’ perspective. In our culture, we trust teachers as gods and never question their competency.

With time and as the semester progressed, she found it very hard to cope with the regular lessons of five different subjects. Sandhya started seeking administrative support by visiting the university. Sandhya started travelling to Kathmandu at least once in two weeks, to go to the contact center of the university to access the reading materials, buy books, get photocopies of the books from the library. While Sandhya was in Kathmandu, she visited my office once on September 5 2016. I took her to the library where she got to scan a book of her course and even had her book chapters printed out. I was happy to help her in saving her money through the tiniest drop. Sandhya's passion for learning was regularly attracting her towards the city. She

would prefer to talk to her tutor either in person or by telephone. She learned about the computer by visiting a cyber cafe near her village. Gradually she learned to navigate her courses and learning materials through a search engine.

University Support is Instrumental for Accessibility

When I met Sandhya in the next meeting on the third Tuesday afternoon in November 2016, by that time, she had a tablet given by the university to ease her study process. She carries the tablet in her bag all the time and uses it in the workplace too. She was using the tablet since her second semester. I observed her happy face when she showed me her tablet. The situation improved as the tablet had a comparatively larger screen than her mobile. With the support of the university, it was getting easier for her, but there were still problems to be sorted out. She had no internet at home, but fortunately, she could access free Wi-Fi in her workplace. It had been two months since she was able to access Wi-Fi by that time. I visited her school and her head teacher's office too, which was a big hall where teachers used to stay during their leisure periods. She expressed her happiness as she was able to focus well on her study. The internet connection in the school has made her study much more accessible. She said, *"I get two leisure periods of about one and a half-hour every day and during day time. I completely utilize it by checking my emails, browsing my learning sites of the university, downloading my reading materials on my tablet so that I can read them at night. It has saved my money"*. She now does not have to travel to Kathmandu, meet her tutors, visit cyber cafes or spend money on her mobile data.

When I reached her house, I felt a bit heartbroken. It was a temporary shed, and I stayed with them in the shed for two nights. I was happy to see Sandhya's enjoying her study. She did not only have a tablet, but she had a laptop too. Her

brother helped to bear half the cost while buying the laptop for her study. She bought at Nepalese rupees 38 thousand with basic processing. She shared, "*Now it is much easier for me to follow my classes, especially the reading materials*". Though Sandhya failed in a few subjects, she was able to pass in the second attempt. It was not that easy in the first semester as she had only the prescribed few printed textbooks. Though it was an online and distance mode of learning, she had not attended the online live classes. Instead, she had to download the lecture notes, videos, and reading materials to read and understand on her own. It was more of distance learning with a less online presence. Sandhya got a scholarship for her study from the university. The NORHED project under the university had granted her a scholarship with a fee waiver. This was also a great economic relief to Sandhya. Sandhya always appreciated the faculty of the university who were always supportive and available to her queries anytime. This support helped her in accessing the program and get through the courses.

People Doubted the Authenticity of ODL

When Sandhya's colleagues in school came to know about her enrollment in an online and distance education program, they did not cheer up for her. It was not because they were unknown about it. Sandhya, being a girl and junior employee, was engaged in the latest alternative mode of learning was not easily acceptable for them. Sandhya's said, "*The teachers have distrust on my enrollment; they have challenged me to show the authentic degree certificate after I complete it. I came to know that one male teacher's wife had taken some online courses from another university in the management stream, but she could not accomplish it. He thought it was not easy, and it would be an impossible task for me*". According to her, the lady was quite smart. She was working in one of the ministries of the government, and the male teacher

thought that if his wife had to quit due to technological difficulties, it would be impossible to pursue and complete the degree from such a rural place. Sandhya replied to that male colleague saying that she would complete the master's degree at any cost. When I visited her school, her male colleagues had a different kind of gaze at me too. There was an unpleasing expression on their face. As Sandhya introduced me to them, they had no smile. I could easily sense that they did not enjoy my association with Sandhya.

Sandhya clarified that since she was pursuing English Language Teaching, she can complete the degree through the self-study of the provided reading materials. One thing that was most important for her to complete the degree was the hard work that she would do it. She, with a serious note, said that though she replied that she would complete the degree, it was tough in reality as there was hardly communication with the teacher, and had to limit to the given texts. She was worried as she thought she could have learned new things better if she had been able to attend the lecture in person and have peer discussion on different topics. She felt that it is not the same as we study in conventional classes. She felt the problem as she did not find appropriate ways to place her queries. She said, '*I am turning more like a bookworm.*'

The online and distance education program for a master degree is a newly formalized practice of government in Nepal, though some of the students had been taking online courses at other institutions outside Nepal. Many people have not heard of it, especially in rural society. So when Sandhya joined the program, the people of her community could not believe her. As the conventional practice, if the students are regularly attending college, they are only studying. She was not physically attending any college either in the morning or daytime for study. People in her community did not believe that she is actually enrolled in a graduate program. Sandhya's parents did

not have formal education, so online and distance education for them is something abstract. When I stayed in Sandhya's house during the field visit, her old father narrated his story, "*When I heard about radio, I was completely amazed and wondered how it looked like and how the voice comes from such bhado (utensil). I finally bought it after 25 years in one thousand rupees*". In this rural context, with people of the older generation and illiteracy, achieving a master's degree from online mode is still a wonder. I asked him about how he thinks when he sees Sandhya using a laptop and studying. He replied that he does not know whether she is playing games or studying. He had never seen a laptop in his life until she brought it home.

Sandhya was telling her stories but held back from time to time; she was going through many problems as an unmarried woman from a low-income family in a rural society. The less paid job and facing technological difficulties to smoothly go through the courses of online and distance education programs. Even though she got threatened by her headteacher for firing from a job, challenged by her male colleagues to demotivate her in her study, and taunted by her neighbors upon her marital status, she hardly resisted them. She was quiet most of the time. She believed that problems do occur in everyone's life, and it is an important part, especially for poor and rural people. Sandhya said, "*hami garib lai yestai ho (it is usual for poor people like us)*". She has learned that speaking the truth and resisting would make her situation even worst. There are hardly any ways to escape from poverty and its impacts. This is how she disciplined herself in society and applied the knowledge constructed in relation to others and practices in society. She was forced to engage in such practices where she couldn't resist and present herself as an obedient employee, student and daughter. Therefore as Foucault says, power is perpetual, reciprocal and responsive ways of

behaving that become possible with other relations or situations of power or knowledge (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

ODL Is Beneficial Under a Few Conditions

When I had informal communication with Sandhya on January 11, 2020, she had passed the exam of civil service commission and was already deployed in another community school. So this time, she was paid as per the government rule. I congratulated her on her new job. And by this time, she had built her new house and shifted from the temporary shed. Her siblings financially contributed to building the house. I asked her about the completion of her program. She told me that her thesis was yet to be submitted. Her other classmates, too, had the same status. She said, '*I will submit soon.*' Sandhya is planning to study MPhil program after she completes her master's degree.

I asked Sandhya for her overall learning experience through online and distance mode. She said, "*It was very difficult and completely different from the regular studies. It was good, though. I got a scholarship and tablet to get through the study*". She is benefitted from the ODL program despite the various challenges she faced throughout. Later I made a phone call to Sandhya in the last week of August 2020, and it was during the lockdown due to the global pandemic. Sandhya was using zoom then to teach her students. She expressed, "*I had no idea about zoom until this new shift due to pandemic. We never used these kinds of features during my master's degree course as an online and distant learner. I and my teachers were accustomed only to email and Moodle. Had it been used, I would have an even better learning experience*". Then she realized that she had internet network problems, which were quite challenging. According to her, the technology posed more challenges to her than the adequacy and competency of learning materials. Sandhya was a bit unsatisfied in

the later period as the university had not communicated with them. She said, *“ajabholi ta khoi contact pani chaina pahila jasto, sayad hami purano po bhayera ho ki (we don't have contact these days as before, maybe because we are not an older batch)”*. Since she and her friends had not submitted their thesis and thus not completed their master's degree program, so they were not graduates and still in the status of students. I felt that maybe the university is more concerned about increasing the number of ODL students than their educational outcome with better pass-out rates. This is yet another challenge that had to be addressed from the university level.

I asked Sandhya if she would recommend others to join the ODL program. She replied, *“Yes, it is beneficial to join ODL under few conditions if the students have digital skills, technology access, proper time management and frequent communication with the teachers”*. From her lived experience, she thinks that if those conditions are met then it is beneficial for the learners like her who have difficulties in leaving their home and stay in the city area for studies. Sandhya shared that because of her ODL experience, it was helpful for her to prepare for her examination of the civil service commission. However, she thinks that to be an online and distant learner requires more effort and facilities than regular studies. She got benefits but had to go through many challenges during the course which she had not thought of before.

Vignette 2: Sugam's Childhood and Adolescence: Morning Shows the Day

It was around 4 pm on Thursday in June 2016, I met Sugam for the first time in the contact office of the online and education department of one of the universities in Nepal. He had come to Kathmandu for his first orientation class. He stays about 517 km away from Kathmandu.

Sugam, though, did not belong to a well-off family, his father always took care of his all needs during his childhood. He was the third among his five siblings. He

lived in a remote village in the western part of Nepal when he was a child and later shifted to the city. His father had a water mill and Sugam used to assist him which was at a distance of five hours from the house. He taught him to cook food. Sugam was very close to his father. When he topped the district level examination, his father felt that he should be given better opportunities according to his capabilities. In school, he always stood second. The first student used to be the relative of the headmaster. Sugam's father admitted him to another school where children from different places of the district used to come for better academic results. Sugam had to stay in his aunt's house, and he had to walk one and a half-hour daily to reach school in the morning and the same in the evening. There, also he became a topper. Then upon his uncle's suggestion, Sugam's father decided to take him to Kathmandu to a boarding school for the best education.

Now the rural boy who had studied in a government school through Nepali medium was admitted to a boarding/private school where all subjects were taught in English except Nepali. So, he had to repeat grade eight. But again, Sugam was quite confident that he could easily go through the English medium school too. In the beginning, Sugam used to memorize every note and textbooks lessons so that he can learn quickly, and he was comfortable later with the English medium too, and he was able to become one of them.

Sugam used to stay in a rented room when he was studying in Kathmandu. For the first time, Sugam saw television in his house owner's house. The first encounter with technology made him wonder how he can also access it. He made a toy television of paper and hung it against the wall. This was how he started having an interest in using technology. Whenever he used to go to the house owner's room to watch television, he used to watch football. Sugam said that he was not interested in

any movies or other entertainment programs. Later, when he returned to his place, his father bought him the television after a few years.

Choosing a Subject Was More of Compulsion Than Choice

After completing secondary education (grade 10) in Kathmandu, Sugam returned to his place and enrolled in a college with a law subject. Sugam was interested to learn the law, and he was happy to get admission. This time Sugam's family was shifted to a small town, which made it easy to attend the classes. Sugam started teaching in a private school to help himself financially. So he was studying in the college in the morning hour and teaching in a school in the daytime. After two years, Sugam completed his intermediate level (+2 courses) in law subject. He wanted to pursue his Bachelor's degree in law, but unfortunately, there was no law subject in that small town. This time due to his financial constraint, he could not move to a big city like Kathmandu for his study. Though he had a great interest in law, he had to look for other available subjects. Since he was teaching in a private school, he then decided to join the education stream. After that, he got an opportunity to work in a government school in a very remote place for three years. Sugam was paid well with extra allowances. He used to receive 60 percent more than his salary as a bonus to work in a remote place. He got a promotion too, but he could not continue his study further. The place had difficult access to basic facilities of development. In addition, he did not feel safe due to the armed conflict in Nepal that was spreading rapidly nationwide, and he could lose his life anytime. So Sugam came back, quit the government job, and started teaching in a private school in another town.

After the completion of a bachelor degree, Sugam's higher study could not continue. Sugam had a keen interest in joining a master's degree from a reputed university, but due to his job responsibility, he could not. He was completely focused

on his teaching career. He taught in the school for ten years as a vice principal. When he joined the school as a teacher, it had very few students. Sugam was very dedicated to his work, and he was able to raise the quality and economic standard of the school. The school now had more number of students and was one of the reputed schools with better academic performance. Sugam expressed, *'I made a drastic change in the school, but my study was completely disturbed.'* Sugam had a good experience in the teaching field as a teacher and a leader, which earned him prestige in society.

After a long break from his career, Sugam wanted to continue his higher study. When he heard about the online and distance education program in PGDE, he got interested in joining. He thought that would facilitate him in his professional growth as well as bridge the gap for his academic study. He planned to join a master's degree after completing the one-year PGDE program. He applied, but his application was rejected because he was not able to meet the requirements of the university. He had two years bachelor's degree, and the minimum requirement was three years' bachelor degree. Other universities too had a similar requirement. Many colleges and universities at that period had already implemented four-year bachelor's degree. Now the only option for Sugam was to get admission from the same university from where he passed his bachelor's degree. Another reason was Sugam's grade did not meet the required criteria. Sugam's efforts to join the reputed university's program went in vain. However, Sugam started looking for online short term courses for his knowledge. Due to his job responsibilities, he could not enroll in the regular master's degree program at his previous university. Sugam had a deep interest in pursuing his studies, but he had many limitations. So when the same university announced the master's degree program in education stream through online and distance mode, Sugam immediately applied for it and got admission.

I Was Passionate About Internet Use

When Sugam was serving in that rural school, he had got an opportunity to get computer training for 15 months. He got excited to acquire new knowledge and skills. At the moment, he had no plan for his future about how to utilize the new skill, but he was sure that it would help him for a better job. He developed a keen interest in learning computers, and he used to practice typing and other programs even after the training session was over. Whenever there was a computer vacant, he used to practice more. Later he was able to type fast even without looking at the keyboard.

Sugam is an ambitious man. In his workplace, he had access to the internet and computer, and whenever he used to get free time, he was always with the computer. He enjoyed it the most whenever he used to stay browsing information from the computer. Sugam used to keep his laptop open in school while downloading big files. Then he used to return late to take the laptop after the files being downloaded. Sugam said, *“I used to enter into different websites and download materials. I was even able to download Britannia books, which were very costly and easily not accessible. I used to continuously search such things on the internet”*. He used to stay late at night and even at weekends. According to him, the investors of the school objected to his activity and might have thought of his behavior as an obsession with his internet. They tried to keep him away from the internet, just like parents who try to keep children away from excessive internet use. They felt threatened and did not give him access to the internet then after. Sugam was not happy with their decisions. But he did not stop and installed the internet in his house for his personal expenses.

The incident wobbled his sincerity and dedication towards the job. The excessive use of the internet created misunderstandings that he was misusing the

facility. Sugam realized that he was just an employee and had no right to oppose their decisions. He thought about what he gained after investing his efforts for many years to make the school one of the city's prestigious schools. He was respected, but he had no future security without investing by himself. So, he formed a new group and commenced his own school. When I met Sugam in his city, he took me to his new school and gave me a tour of the premises and classrooms and introduced it to the teachers and staff. The next day Sugam invited me to a school picnic, and I joined them. When I interacted with one of the investors, he said, *“Sugam is the most appropriate person to lead our school and we have complete trust in his capability”*. The new investors felt secured to get Sugam as the leader of their school. They were quite hopeful of the new height the school would reach with his leadership. Sugam said, *“Some of my friends believed in my capability, so we have jointly opened the school and I was given the post of principal”*.

Being in the leadership position, Sugam could easily manage his time for his study. Now his life was highly contingent on the use of the internet and computer. He has all the time access to the internet at school or home. He carries his laptop all the time with him. Sugam reports, *“In the office, whenever I have free time, I download videos, search teaching materials and read my course materials and do my assignment”*. He showed me two videos he had downloaded for students of grade 8 to teach about the geography of Nepal. Then after he showed me his mobile, the various apps that he uses daily. Pointing towards the apps, he said, *“In the morning I go through various news portals and know the news of the day, then I check my Facebook and Twitter account to get updated.”* When I visited his place on 4th February 2017, he had passed all the subjects. He again showed me his Facebook account, where his friends had congratulated him for his achievement. His laptop was

in front of him, and he said that he takes the laptop with him wherever he goes. His knowledge gained through the use of a computer always amazed his daughter. When I asked her about her father, she told me, *“My father is my role model”*. Sugam motivated the students and teachers in his school to use the internet for their educational learning rather than hanging around social media apps. As Sugam used to claim for the authentic resources he searched from the internet, he was proud of it and took it as his assets and power. Being an educational leader, he used that power for the quality upliftment of school, sharing new ideas, and making teaching effective. He said that his students, teachers, and parents respect him for his efforts and efficiency, which I gained from the digital skills.

ICT Is My Weapon

Sugam was a very inquisitive person and had been exploring opportunities by himself. He had completed some short online courses, so he had earlier experience with online education. He registered online for some training in India and attended it. Sugam visited different parts of India for training and seminars. And lately, he thought that if he happened to visit any country in the future, he would not get lost in the city and would easily walk through the lanes. Sugam said, *“I can collect all the information from the internet and easily figure out the new places, so I can reach any place with the help of technology”*. Likewise, he was also confident that he would accomplish the degree from online and distance mode as he was quite comfortable with the mode of teaching and the reading materials, which he was familiar with beforehand through the internet. He was practising his teaching and school management, but he had qualifications only up to the undergraduate level. Sugam said, *“I used to be a speaker in the panels along with other intellectuals in many programs but when their name badges had the highest qualification and mine only*

with Mister, I felt that I too need to get a higher degree. While those participants used to write a PhD after their name, I had to write my designation as Vice-Principal.”

When Sugam attended such events, he wished to write his name badge along with a PhD and realized that he has to upgrade his qualifications. Sugam was smart enough to explore the opportunities, but he often used to get back because of his less qualification. He said, *“I had all the practical knowledge and enough experiences, but I lacked only the higher academic qualification. I thought that I shouldn't let any opportunities go in vain from then onwards”*. Sugam was then determined to complete this chasm and got enrolled in the ODL mode when it was announced for the first time. Sugam believed himself as an IT-friendly man. With these digital skills, he could access the information and use them for his professional growth and widen his knowledge. He believed that with the help of the internet, we have to be able to connect the local community with the global one. Sugam's aspirations were higher. He used ICT as a tool to reach his aspiration. He said that people, especially the younger generation, were wasting their time with games and social media such as Facebook and Instagram but he was very concentrated on his knowledge growth. Sugam believed that we need to make better use of technology to increase our horizon of understanding. He said if he studied in his mid-40s, his children would still get motivated for learning. For that, technology has helped him to gain prestigious designation and become a role model even for the younger generation. Sugam said, *“ICT is my weapon and I can spend my life with it. Because of my skill and knowledge in IT, I have got confidence and feel secure wherever I go”*. Sugam tried to establish the rationale for the use of ICT in his daily life and made it his comfort zone from which he did not want to stray outside. With the help of digital skills, he was able to

earn dignity and designation in his professional life. He used ICT as a tool to gain knowledge and remain powerful.

Teaching Learning Cycle is Not Complete in ODL

After the first meeting, Sugam and I became Facebook friends. I have been seeing him attending various conferences and seminars through the pictures that he posted on Facebook. As per the recent communication, I made a phone call to him on September 9, 2020, to know if he had completed his degree. During that last interview, he informed me that he had not submitted his thesis just as Sandhya. Then I inquired him further about the reason for delaying his thesis work despite him being a talented and active online learner. He expressed his dissatisfaction,

We had only about 5 days of class on research methodology throughout the master's degree course. If it was a theory subject, I could have studied myself, but this is quite different, and based on those five days lectures, it was not possible to produce a thesis. Thus, I couldn't, and when I asked for help, the teacher replied to me that I just need to keep on writing. I was annoyed because neither I was a writer nor a teacher of the research subject. This was difficult, and I am still struggling.

Sugam had passed all the subjects in the first attempt with a good grade, but it was unexpected for me too when he said that he could not write the thesis and therefore have not submitted it yet. But I knew that Sugam was a self-explorer and must have found some ways to manage it. And this time too, he used his weapon, ICT. With the help of the information on the internet, he became a member of different groups and attended virtual sessions on research methodology. Sugam reported,

I took six days of workshops on research organized by Author's café of India. From the workshop, I came to know about various tools such as Mendeley,

Grammarly and many others that are helpful in research work. Besides that, I participated in many fellowship programs that supported writing articles.

Recently I took an online course for a semester on Social Research from July to December 2019, which was facilitated by retired and renowned professors and researchers of India. There were altogether 300 participants. It had 15 interactive sessions every Saturday. Now I have a better idea about research and I am confident that I can write a thesis now.

This is really important, and that's why the learner's perspective really makes sense while implementing the ODL in any academic program.

Sugam proved every time that he was not only a dedicated and hardworking person but also techno-friendly. He was focused on his work and able to get the relevant information for his study. Similar to Sandhya, Sugam too accepted that the ODL program helped him to pursue his higher education. However, he was quite concerned about the quality of the education that ODL was providing to the learners. Sugam claimed, *“Some aspects of ODL are weak. I think the teaching-learning cycle is not as complete in ODL as in face-to-face. There is very little interaction, individual feedback, no group work and no continuous evaluation. We are being told to read subject related different articles but we are not taught how to find articles. I had to go the extra mile to find those bits of knowledge myself from the internet”*. He even highlights the role of a teacher in a virtual platform, which was limited only to knowledge transfer. According to Sugam, if learners are self-dependent and capable enough to carry out self-directed learning, then only ODL is effective. Sugam suggested, *“Online and distant learners need remedial class particularly for writing and research work”*. Simultaneously, Sugam claimed that he was not a weak student

and his delay in completing the program is not due to his weakness or less competency but rather due to the less supportive system.

Hierarchy and Association of Power in ICT

In the modern world, ICT is embedded in our lives, and Sugam's story clearly depicts that. We even think that access to the internet and gathering information is the only way of gaining knowledge in society. Online and distance education has helped the learners to get digital skills, make their educational attainment possible despite the hurdles, and make them feel empowered when they use the computer and the internet. Sugam had the feeling of being powerful as he got the computer training. The skills helped him to access resources that facilitated to accelerate his professional career. He believed that if he had no digital skills, he would not have gained the confidence to fight against the behavior he faced in the past. His intellectual growth and professional development gained with the help of the internet were instrumental in bringing him power, designation, and prestige.

Sugam deployed his greater power and knowledge as a weapon using information obtained from the internet. He said he wanted to live with the internet for the whole of his life. It became like the breath for him. He embraced it because it let him enjoy the power. And this is how the power through ICT access is practised by an individual. Here Sugam identified himself as a capable online learner, and he is confident about getting authentic sources of his knowledge from the internet. Later, when he joined the new school, he turned out as a dominating individual who did not even imagine living without ICT access. Sarad became empowered in his online learning (Tomei et al., 2008), which made him feel challenging the instructors when he said, *"I have stored more information than my tutors and I can learn independently through various sources available on the internet"*.

Sugam's learning of computer knowledge and skills was non-formal learning of culture that took place in a particular context through which he internalized and adapted the new learning culture (Jarvis, 2012). The computer knowledge and skills that Sugam learned in the training, workshop, MOOC courses and webinar supported him to be an influential educational leader. This was the knowledge-power that helped him to construct the identity of technology expert teacher cum administrator. As discussed in the previous chapter about an ideal self, here too the ideal self exercises the powerful self.

Sandhya was a typical Nepali girl and had encountered taunts of being an unmarried girl even in her late 20s. She was the sole caretaker of her parent and also a breadwinner. This position allowed her to make some decisions at her house, but there were some limitations too. She wanted to go to cities for her higher studies or job opportunities, but she could not leave her parent behind alone. She was a teacher but could not challenge the system for the discrimination she had with low payment. She joined a master's degree but had no required tools and facilities to do her study. She had the freedom to some extent, but she was unable to fight against the stereotypes imposed by her neighbors and colleagues taunt for her unmarried marital status in her late 20s. These experiences made her feel powerless.

There are inequalities and stereotypes in society that are observed through the hierarchal structure in conservative societies. This has different impacts based on marital status, class, economy, social network and geographical areas. This structure puts some people in privileged positions and some in deprived positions. Some people experience transformation through a shift from deprived to privileged positions such as Sugam while some still struggle to break the stereotypes and challenges. Subordinate groups are in the trap of poverty, which confines them through any

stigmatized assumptions (Alzouma, 2018). Sandhya's version of "*hami garib lai yestai ho*" tells us that they encounter problems and challenges in every step of their life. Power relations exist everywhere.

Sugam and Sandhya are a part of modern social norms, and many social forces have influenced their belief and practices. Such complex social forces have modified them in one or the other way with the consequences of normalizing them as the basic need of the digital era. They have modified themselves to the complex social forces and accepted that access to ICTs and their use is the most important power in the digital era.

Encountering Patriarchal Power in Digital Era

A society without power relations can only be an abstraction (Foucault, 1980) and with the infusion of technology in learning, the power relations are even distinct. The power relations at the microlevel of the society makes the certain global effects of domination such as patriarchy possible (Sawiki, 1991). The power relations in the society is therefore not isolated from gender relations. The disciplinary power treats individuals hierarchically rather than universally. In the same manner, gender relations are maintained in society through the learners in the ODL. When power and subjectivity are at the center of Foucault analysis, gender is an important dimension.

Though the ICT artifacts do not discriminate based on the gender of the online learner, the social and cultural contexts where those learners come from do. There are multiple axes of power that oppress the subordinates in various forms. This patriarchal power creates boundaries and sees resistance as a threat. There is a monolithic power structure in modern technology or especially ICT use, where every child, teenager and adult is being dragged into it. When it becomes the normal standard, the legacy of patriarchal norms is maintained. People of a low class having

no access to the digital world and lacking digital skills are marginalized. Some post-colonial theorists resist the adoption of ICT for development; however, they too have realized the situation of exclusion without it. Being isolated from human interaction is getting normal, while at the same time, connecting globally in the virtual world is also equally getting important.

The patriarchal power can be seen in operation through the gender of a student in ODL. Being the online distance students of the same program, the society challenged Sandhya for admission to higher education through ODL mode whereas it did not for Sugam. Why was Sandhya not able to resist the stereotypical threats in her rural community, whereas Sugam took every hurdle as an opportunity to be independent and gave them a counter contest? Why owning digital skills and exploring information were the priorities for Sugam but why Sandhya's worries about her old parents and job insecurity got precedence over her assignment submission and reading textbooks.

ICTs have the potential to improve the lives of women in developing countries. Maya and Saloni are an example who feel themselves being empowered with the use of ICT in their learning and professional life. Both of them lived in a city, had comparatively lesser economic problems and got emotional and physical support from their husband and children. But in the case of Sandhya, it was different. She had no back support and therefore had an extra burden to support herself financially and emotionally. It seemed the battle was owned solely by her. So, from the gender analysis perspective, it is important to know how males and females use different tools of ICT and exercise power by its use. This virtual platform has empowered women by breaking down the traditional power imbalance, and at the same time, new forms of victimization and exclusion are observed across genders. Under conditions

of subordination, women barely have a learning environment at home due to the unequal power relationship. The unequal distribution creates a power hierarchy putting women at a lower level to access higher education and use digital platforms.

The social structure favours men and thus they have access to resources which further privileges them. Sugam was able to migrate for his study and job opportunities leaving his family behind. But Sandhya had no such choice because she was an unmarried woman from a rural community. Sugam was able to get grab the job opportunities, develop his ICT skills, invest money in his school, and able to establish himself as a dignified personality. On the other hand, Sandhya's economic condition didn't allow her to shift for a better job and invest in training despite her keen wishes. There were many reasons for her to step back such as insecurities as a girl, care work at home, emotional attachment with the parents, household chores, no supportive hand and no conducive environment. In the patriarchal society, Sugam used ICT as his weapon to create his own space and get recognized in society. While the same society put Sandhya in a situation where ICT helped her in accessing education but she never thought of using it as a weapon. This metaphor used by Sugam depicts the gendered perspective of men and women from their position. Thus she was further marginalized and felt powerless even after being able to access online and distance education programs through scholarship.

Since Sandhya is a Hindu girl, let me discuss the role of Hinduism in the construction of a gendered society. In Hinduism, there are religious texts such as Manusmriti and Swasthani which reinforces the patriarchal norms. According to Dhunagana (2014), Nepalese Hindu women have been able to occupy some space with an improved condition in education, wealth and political arena but they have travelled a thorny path and still have a long way to go for their liberation. Sandhya

has been able to get a job but she faced gender-based discrimination in her income. She got an opportunity to study graduate program through ODL but she had could not have a conducive environment for learning due to no access to the internet, no gadgets and her digital incompetency. Rai and Joshi (2020) conducted a qualitative study in Nepal which highlighted the issue of women's capability being devalued in the context of patriarchal power domination. They argued that there is self-power within women which facilitates resisting the structural domination of power held by men. This agency can transform their life. However, in the case of Sandhya, she was not able to identify or use her self-power to resist the stereotypes and patriarchal power which were not supportive to her. Therefore, ICT has not helped all women with their self-transformation. Though Maya and Saloni could experience this self-power, Sandhya due to her socio-economic condition did not have a similar experience.

Experiencing Power Differences by an Online Learner

Sugam and Sandhya, though, were classmates who differed in their economic, social, and political status in society. They studied the same course in the same university, but they differed in their perception of themselves. They both used the ICT for the learning purpose but varied in the frequency of its use and sharing its benefits. Sugam had easy access to internet facilities and control their use among his employees. In contrast, Sandhya had to wait for a leisure period of one and a half hour to utilize the internet facility at her workplace. Sugam had no scholarship and bought his laptop himself. He was able to pass the subjects regularly. In contrast, Sandhya was given a scholarship in her program, received a tablet from the university but still could not go through all the subjects. Sugam has mastered the required digital skills, and Sandhya was learning the basic skills as she was doing her study online. Both had

their first experience with the Moodle platform and participating in the country's pilot project in the same year through the same program and university.

Power is understood and observed when it is exercised in our lives in everyday actions. People project themselves in society in different ways, and the reflection they get from their situation makes them conscious of their powerful/powerless situation. Sandhya ignored society's pressure on her marriage and decided to pursue her study. Sandhya, a daughter in our conventional society, played the role that usually a son would do, which was taking care of the parent. Sandhya could have explored more opportunities if she had decided to come to the capital city, get training and find a good job, but she did not do so. When her colleague challenged her ability to pass the master's degree through online distance learning, she still did not resist them. Instead, she thinks for poor unmarried women of the rural areas facing such a problem is very normal. She digested the taunts and stereotypical threats in society. She thought women in our society do not fight back, and even if she does, she will not be able to win the battle as it is about people's thoughts which she thinks she cannot change.

Sugam, a tall man, could impress people with his first sitting as he had updated information about the nation and world. He always tried to demonstrate his intellectual level with facts, figures, and issues of contemporary time. Being a skilled and educated person, he did not want himself to stay submissive and look for his comfort zone, which was always leading or exercising power rather than just following the boss' instructions. Sugam is well dressed during office hours and wants to maintain his hierarchy and presence in society. As he got very much inclined to technology and eager to learn new things daily through the internet, his learning did not limit only to the courses of his graduate program; it was even reflected by this

attendance in national and international conferences, affiliation in professional associations and his orientation to his employees. He made a continuous reflection of his own activities and made him conscious of fulfilling his purpose.

In the digital era, almost all people are using technology and being benefitted from it. Society has developed a kind of common sense to get the news updated from the use of technology and the skills to use as the basic skills. Sandhya and Sugam have modified themselves to be a part of this digital world through online and distance education. ICTs have enormous potential to enrich the lives of people without any physical boundary. These new forms of learning in a conventional society have brought a shift in the approaches of education.

The society we live in has a hierarchal structure created by ourselves. Due to those systems or structures, some are in a privileged position, and some are not. The unequal positions in the relationships bring exclusion, marginalization and subordination. Sugam and Sandhya were the part of social relation hierarchy where Sugam seemed to be in the higher level due to his position and designation and Sandhya to the lower level of the hierarchy facing various challenges and stereotypes. The differences create unequal power relations in society. The power relations can be grasped in such disparity or the diversity of their linkages to the capacities and associated relations (Foucault, 1980) The digital divide exists between haves and haves not. ODL can reach students despite the geographical boundary, but the learners are facing problems of internet connection because of weaker infrastructures in remote places. For Sandhya, though staying in a rural place had the opportunity to pursue her higher studies, but since her village was surrounded by hills, she often faced the problem with mobile networks. The mobile data, too, had slow functioning. ICT is embedded in life, but not everyone gets an equal benefit. Sandhya and Sugam

had equal opportunities, but Sandhya's social background put her in a place where she had to struggle a lot. Consequently, there was a gap between the digital competency and benefit-sharing of Sugam and Sandhya. Sandhya was in the lower hierarchy of power relations in her society while Sugam holds a higher position. Sugam was an educational leader and was economically better. Because of his position, he had internet facilities in his workplace and home all day and night. He was able to control his learning and exercise his power as a leader.

Our life is full of experiences. These experiences shape our beliefs in society and our life. Some incidents or experiences are the turning point, some shakes and reshape our beliefs. Being powerless and powerful is also based on the belief that we follow, which is basically guided by different incidents in life and generated by different and continuous efforts or innumerable initiatives. Here the people are aware of their status, aspire to bring changes, and confronts challenges that further give different experience leading to self-consciousness. The sociocultural realities of society are clearly depicted in online and distance education while analyzing the power relations from the learners' experiences. Things occurring behind the scenes of online and distance education is also very important. The sociocultural settings of a learner expose them to different power structures, which are extended in their online learning. It influences their academic performances giving them different feelings of being an active member of the digital community or struggling with a fear to be missed out. Phirangee and Malec (2017) discuss 'othering' within learning communities that arrives from the feelings of isolation and disconnection. They suggest that the teachers who care about the social aspects of the learning process encourage interaction in the online community. Sugam did not feel that the learning cycle was completed without proper support and evaluation. Similarly, Sandhya, in

the later phase, felt very disconnected when they did not get any attention from the university as in the beginning. These feelings are the sense of othering that emerges in both the state of power and powerlessness.

Foucault's Perspective on Power Relations

Foucault has a remarkable contribution to the study of power relations. Power is the instrument, the conceptual tool employed by Foucault to make sense of the world we live in (Fuggle, 2013). Foucault says power is omnipresent (Daldal, 2014). From the two narratives, I observed that social relations and systems in ODL are not free of power relations. Power relations are exercised to an exceedingly important extent through the exchange of objects and platforms and they are hardly separable from goal-directed activities (Foucault, 1980). Foucault conceives power in terms of a 'structure of actions,' and the power relations are unstable and reversible. According to him, power relations are local, capillary and reaches every individuals' everyday life, body, actions, attitudes, discourses and learning processes (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). I chose Foucault to explain the power relations in my study, particularly in this chapter, to understand how power is manifested in the tools, techniques, and procedures in ODL having different social backgrounds of a learner. Further, Foucault keeps power and subjectivity are at the center of his analysis (Sawicki, 1991). I adhere to the claims of Foucault regarding power as the ubiquitous feature of human interaction. I understand human beings as relation being and their subjectivities as the effects of power. So as Foucault said, power is the cluster of relations. Hindess (1996) explains that power may be remarkably heterogeneous, and some will be hierarchically organized while others will be socially dispersed. For Foucault, there is no clear distinction between power relationships, but domination in general, stable, and hierarchal in those power relations (Hindess, 1996).

Foucault is highly relevant to discuss here because the Foucauldian view insists that when learners or teachers exercise power, it includes some degree of freedom (Hindess, 1996). Power relations are made of various points of instability that produce multiple sites and modes of resistance (Jackson & Mazzei). So the two stories in this chapter tell us their struggle during online learning experiences in the ODL platform and their social setting. When we ignore the problems of power, the different forms of struggles are not comprehensible (Foucault & Deluze, 1977). Though Foucault talks about three types of struggle, which include the struggle against exploitation, domination and subjection (Foucault, 1980), from the two stories I learned that there are two types of struggles. The first one is the struggle against power, and the second one is about the power struggle. Sandhya's story tells us how she faced the challenges and stereotypes and how she struggled to save herself from this hierarchal power while Sugam's struggle was for power. He wanted to exercise power in a way that maintains capitalistic exploitation. When Sugam became a leader, he, too, showed dictating behaviors by imposing the necessity of digital skills and technology in school. In his learning process, he had that confidence that he had enough access to information than his instructors, or arrived at the new disposition of the same power with ICT as the instructors (Foucault & Deluze, 1977). Here, the Sugam and Sandhya were caught up in multiple power relations within the ODL platform, between them and their colleagues and between their gender role and the societal norms. This power relation has offered a new way to look into ODL (Luke, 1995) about the Nepali context. So this helped in understanding how learners get engaged in online learning, transform themselves concerning others through the knowledge produced within power relations and practices.

Disciplinary Power in ODL

Foucault distinguished between the visible power of the old regime and the invisible power of the modern system. Though he discussed this in *Discipline and Punish*, this is relevant in the ODL, too. Foucault focused on disciplinary power and believed that power is produced from within systems and subsystems of social relations (Pringle, 2005). In online and distance education, learners are being kept under the lower hierarchy where instructions are mostly top-down. From the inception of this study, I have felt the gap where the systems were responsible for bringing more students to ODL. Yet, the students were in the lower hierarchy of power relations where they were just following the instructions and not questioning the system that was deprived of the meaningful learning environment. Sugam had mentioned the incomplete learning cycle and Sandhya felt that it is applicable only on certain conditions. Both of them tried to maintain the discipline as a student and according to their gender role in their local context which influenced their learning. So power was exercised through disciplinary means via ODL.

Power operates on and through individuals, so human beings cannot escape from the complex relations of power that make up society (Foucault, 1980). Power struggle arises from the conflict in the society that an individual faces. So power is precisely in the conflict. Power both liberates and enslaves. Power gained from the use of ICT in the ODL experience empowered Sugam. Sandhya observed some changes in her life, yet it was subjugated due to the other intersecting factors of her socioeconomic background. Her role as an unmarried girl in a poor family made her more obedient and accepted to not resist discrimination and stereotypical practices. Their experience helped me understand how the social structure and our practices,

distinctions among the people in society construct their knowledge and guide their actions.

In a patriarchal society, discipline is maintained by keeping the gender differences. Generally, males are in the upper hierarchy and females are in the lower hierarchy. Society becomes a disciplinary society where the Self is constantly disciplined (Rajagopal, 2014). Sandhya wanted to remain a disciplined woman, caring daughter and obedient student as society prescribes the role. This discipline does not encourage an individual to resist any kind of power. We are being continuously watched and monitored. We normalize that belief and control our actions accordingly. Sugam being a man has normalized that he needs to achieve dignity in society and society keeps men in a leading position. Sugam is very courageous, focused, and result oriented. Sandhya is guided by her emotions most of the time. She wanted to go for training in Kathmandu for gaining skills but could not leave her sick and old parent alone at home. She had limited mobility as an unmarried girl in the patriarchal society. These descriptions are ways of making the person accountable toward their own gender which is usually lived up to the normative expectations of the society. There is 'doing gender' (Zimmerman, 1987) in power relations too which consists of managing behaviours that produce recognizable enactment according to their prescribed gender roles. According to Zimmerman (1987), the new members of the society get involved in a self-regulative process as they begin to monitor their own and other's conduct concerning its gender implications. The new learners in the new learning platform come up with the same conduct they have followed in the past and continues in the present too.

The power relations in ODL functions through this disciplinary power where students' performance can be monitored anytime from the information they had

provided. Students as a social body inscribe themselves in such power relations which are guided by disciplinary power. The disciplinary power operates in the forms of technology domination (To, 2006). We normalize digital skills as a need of modern discipline. The ODL has also been a way of social control to impose the need for digital skills for learning. Thus in modern society, disciplinary power has spread through the production of certain forms of knowledge, and disciplinary techniques such as techniques of surveillance, examination and discipline (Sawicki, 1991). The learners' are in effect of the disciplinary power through hierarchial observation, normalizing judgement and the assessment (Foucault, 1995). This disciplinary power facilitates or impedes the process of obtaining knowledge about individuals. The disciplinary power observed among the online and distant learners depicts the divide affected by their gendered position in the society, the rural/urban setting and their economic class.

Insights From the Chapter

The online learning environments are based on digital materials such as computers, laptops, mobile, the internet, printer, etc. To operate these devices, it requires a higher level of skills than what was needed in regular face-to-face and distance learning in the past. It is much easier to learn from radio, television, DVD, YouTube videos than from advanced digital platforms such as Moodle, PowerPoint presentation, Microsoft word, Twitter and so on. These interactive social media and ODL platforms assume that learners have the basic skills to navigate and access information in their learning process. These kinds of online learning environments can foster learning if only the conditions are met by accessing those physical materials and learning resources. A range of material components mediates these environments. The divide remains or widens when online learners are not able to access these

materials. So, the social and economic aspect is very important in the online learning environment. Though its establishment was intended to reach the mass learners, unfortunately, it does not reach most marginalized people who have multiple positions that deprive them of this benefit. The stories portray the fact that whoever is associated with digital materials have the power. The powerless are always in struggle and deprivation in the digital era. This sense of powerlessness is the consequence of hierarchy perpetuated from the patriarchal, capitalistic society. It is how disciplinary power functions in society. It is ambiguous because the scope of ODL creates a need and strives for the deprived and economically constrained group, especially for the youth and new generation. There is a fear of exclusion from modern life. Sandhya realized her limitations after taking up the role of an online learner than she had before. Sugam enjoys the immense joy of being a powerful personality in his workplace and locality. The social aspects associated with materials perpetuate the power relations in society through the online learning environment. The power is deployed through the systems of ideas about the self that is intertwined with performance, perception and skills. The feelings of incompleteness by the online and distance learner is also decentering the learners in the learning process. Foucault helped in understanding how power works through individual actions and vision or revision of selves as acting, thinking and feeling persons (Popkewitz, 1998). When the learners reflect on selves in a new context, it is associated with their identity. The situational differences and the functioning of power relationships constitute their identity differently. So I developed my next research questions to understand how the learners construct their identity. The identity of the learners cannot be overlooked as learning is not about performance but also the revisioning of the 'self'.

CHAPTER VI

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNERS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Our image of ourselves tends to be the first thing we offer to others as it is largely conscious and observable.

(Cook, 2020, p. ...)

When the learning mode is no more conventional, it changes our perception and strives to be a part of this virtual community. The efforts for adult learners and digital immigrants are not the same as the tech-savvy generation. In online and distance learning, there is a lot much focus on the student's motivation, which I have discussed in the fourth chapter. There are various disparities and power relationships that learners experience differently as deliberated in the fifth analytical chapter. In this chapter, I have discussed how learners interact with the social and digital world simultaneously and construct meaning. I focused on learners' understanding of the situation in finding a space and analysing their positional self in the new context of learning. Here I have explored 'how do the distant online learners construct their identity?' To explore the issue more, I have brought forward the story of Rishi and Saloni. They are classmates but have never met each other, and they have communicated only a couple of times. Their social and economic context of the emotional aspect of Saloni as a female learner gave me a different insight while I was trying to understand various dimensions that contributed to shaping their identity. Both Rishi and Saloni are educational leaders. Saloni owns her school while Rishi is associated with public school. Here, I am presenting Rishi first and then Saloni. The discussion follows after the two anecdotes.

Vignette 1: Rishi's Commitment for best Result

Though Rishi started to learn the English language only in grade four, he has now become an efficient English teacher. While many students in public school used to fail in English, he delivered the subject by making it enjoyable by using audio-video teaching materials and motivating students to make regular attendance in school. Rishi said, *"I used to teach through group discussions, case studies, research and participatory methods to make my class interesting"*. He always gave his best to make them understandable. The result was visible in the next year. For the first time, all the students of that remote school passed in English and made a record. He was popular among students as the best teacher. Also, he gets appreciated as being a technology-friendly teacher. Rishi's hard work was able to bring change in the school's result, but he could not continue his further study due to his job commitments despite his interest. On a Sunday morning, his younger brother called him on his mobile and informed him about the admission announcement through online and distance mode in a daily national newspaper. Without any delay, the prompting decided to fill up the admission form and got enrolled in August 2015. He was now able to continue his study along with the job. His dream came true with the hope of experiencing the online platform with better academic performance.

In the online learning platform, the students identified with their profile ID, username, and code to access their courses. The specific information such as name, sex, address, email address, in/active status, and images hardly allow knowing their social context from where they are located, and which can either contribute or hamper their studies in online and distance education mode. There are many aspiring students like Rishi who are ready to continue their higher studies against all the odds. So, when the online and distance education mode got introduced as an alternative mode, it made

them easier to continue without migrating to the major cities for education. When I migrated to Kathmandu in 2011 for studying MPhil degree in Development studies, it was not easy for me to leave my job and start again from scratch in a new place. I used to wonder if there existed online and distance mode in MPhil degree, I would have stayed back in my hometown. In the beginning, I used to stay in Kathmandu for two weeks and the other two weeks in Pokhara when I had my children at home and was trying to quit my job as well. It was challenging for me to concentrate on my study with all the tough contents in the first semester.

Rishi is a hardworking person right from his childhood. Even when he had to walk for hours to reach school during childhood, he never thought of skipping school days. He was always sincere in the work given to him. Rishi used to carry a straw mat from home to sit in his classroom and had to walk a long distance to reach school while studying, but now he reaches his school by motorbike to teach students and instill them hope with the light of education for a better future. After spending so many years in the teaching job and earning a tag of an efficient and dedicated teacher, he had to pursue his master's degree for his professional development and further progress in his career.

Moreover, since Rishi was always a brilliant student in his school and college days, he always enjoyed learning. After his bachelor's degree, he did not join a master's degree immediately as he wanted to learn well in his career with full dedication. Furthermore, now almost after a decade, he wanted to continue his higher studies. His attributes of a hardworking person made him decide to enroll in online and distance education even though he was working in remote villages and he was aware that he might have to face challenges in the new situation. If Rishi was not clear about his goals and the ways to reach his goals, he would not have been enrolled

in the online and distance mode of the graduate program and tirelessly made efforts to adjust for his learning needs. His family responsibility experienced from his early childhood contributed him to be responsible for whatever goals he aims to achieve.

Rishi Feared His Conflicting Image

When Rishi was teaching in a very remote school, he faced bad mobile networks, and there was no internet access. Rishi owned a basic phone as there was no use of the smartphone. During the rainy season, the roads used to get too bad, stopping him from driving his motorbikes. It would take a whole day to walk and reach the school. Thus, Rishi's job location turned quite unfavorable for his online studies. So, Rishi had to stay in the village, leaving his wife and children behind in his home.

Rishi was anxious to have not been able to follow up with his regular courses. His assignments were pending, and he was not able to communicate with the teachers too. Since there was a very weak mobile network, he used a basic phone. He said, *“There is no use of using a smart phone here, there is a problem even with normal mobile conversation due to weak network”*. He was unable to access Moodle and download his reading materials. He had to reach the market to access the internet, get emails, download, and print his reading materials and come back to his job station. He used to go down to the market once a week only for that purpose. He used to read the printed materials during the weekdays in the evening. As the studies progressed, Rishi found it getting tough to manage his assignments and get along with the pace of the university. He could not even attend all his examinations in the first semester. He explained, *“I felt like I am failing despite my efforts. I may look like I am very active among other online students, but I am not able to take forward my studies in the same manner”*.

Rishi was an above-average student in his school and college period.

However, this time, it was not the same. It was difficult for him to accept the situation as he had an excellent academic record in the past, and the situation was not under his control. He states, "*In order to write an article, we need to take reference from at least ten articles, but I was unable to find articles and consequently I was not able to complete my assignment*". Rishi was inquisitive to learn new things, but less preparation and insufficient reading materials, it made him self-doubt his capabilities sometimes. He was getting restless as he sincerely wanted to get through the exams successfully. It happened to him for the first time, and he was overwhelmed by it.

Before taking up the role of a student, Rishi was a well-known teacher in his locality. His community had trusted him that whatever he does should be a good thing. Rishi also has perceived himself as an outstanding student. He seemed to be quite confident that came from his prior experience when he was enrolled in a master's degree. However, this time the situation was different, and most importantly, the mode of learning was quite challenging. The experiences are socially constructed, and if they have good experiences, it helps create a positive image of themselves. Jensen and Jetten (2016) have said that a student's sense of identity is positively related to learning outcomes and negative experiences affect their success in forming identities accordingly. So, since Rishi could not submit assignments timely and attend the regular exams, he could not get the expected learning outcomes. Consequently, he felt that he was not an active student in the online learning platform.

Rishi's different situation reminded me of my performances in college days. When I joined my master's degree in a public college, my attendance was irregular due to my pregnancy and childcare after I gave birth to my daughter. I could not pass the subjects in the first attempts. I felt so low and started doubting myself. Then I

decided to join another master's degree program in another college, which had introduced a semester-based system. I did not give up on the earlier program, too, and attempted the exams again and again. Till then, I had changed the image of myself to a frail student who was trying hard to pass the exam. In public colleges, students used to depend on the guess book before their exams. They used to be busy, mug up all, and write them during the final exam. I found it too hard as I was awful at the rote learning process. In the semester-based system, the regular attendance of the students was essential, so we had to attend the classes regularly. Also, I found it quite interesting as it was very interactive due to group discussions, collaborative work, and PowerPoint presentations. When the exam result was announced for the first semester, I got the second rank in the class. This performance helped me to change my image of a weak student to a good student. I realized that the learning style and the assessment for the learning could make a difference. So, I found that I was not a weak student, but it was more of my learning style, which was compatible with a semester-based system and teacher's pedagogy, which was more student-centered. So, self-image or identity construction is not only about the facts, but it is more of the process: a process that incorporates self-identification and recognition by others (Andreouli 2010), self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009), and self-authorizing consciousness (Mezirow, 2000)

When the learning situation changes, it impacts the performances as well. The change in the mode of learning can destabilize students (Develotte, 2009). Rishi had a different experience of his image in the process while taking up an online and distance learner. Mead (1934) said that the self emerges from social experiences as we incorporate others' expectations, and, consequently, it influences our performances. Mead gave an example of a child who has a different perception of himself as a

learner when he is falling in the low level of the group in Mathematics and developing disinterest in the subject with a negative conception of himself as a mathematician.

Moreover, while he is among his friends, he develops a positive perception of himself by telling jokes and enjoy as his friends seek his company. Rishi had to skip his exams due to insufficient time for less preparation, and he feared failure as he has not experienced such in any subjects till then. He feared losing his self-image as a good student. He was a technology-friendly person and used technology during his teaching. He believed that he was a very competent teacher. The individuals are motivated to verify their sense of self in others' eyes along with themselves (Turner, 2013). Rishi did not want to take any risk of ruining his good image as a teacher and an online learner. When Rishi appeared for the online examination for the first time, he felt that though he was good in technology, he could not type as fast as expected in the examination.

Compromising Image Over Circumstance Was Not Acceptable

Rishi tried to motivate himself by visiting the university premises at least once in two months and talk with the tutors. The personal meeting would energize him a lot. He would then collect the reading materials in his pen drive from the tutor and return happily. Sometimes when he used to get an email from the tutor that would too motivate him to study. These were the two ways that helped Rishi in reviving the feeling of a university student.

Rishi admitted that being a student of ODL, he got inspired to learn more and explore himself. He said, "*Online education is a useful means for me to learn. It is not only about completing my degree, but in the process, I have learned many things as life lessons*". Once Rishi submitted his assignment, his tutor told him that if he improves the method of writing and submits again, then his marks will be added, and

he might get nine marks out of ten instead of six points five. This incident made him feel that the proper feedback from teachers and openness to improve will allow him to experience learners' autonomy in online education. It inspired Rishi and helped in developing a positive feeling to boost his capabilities. He said, *"Whenever I get a call from my program coordinator about my progress, it helped me remained in tune."*

Rishi expected such follow-ups, but a few emails and calls were not enough.

Rishi felt that being an online student, he needs to get self-motivated for his study. However, at the same time, he expected the university to be responsible for taking care of their online and distant students through regular follow-up, supporting them in technological issues, and connecting with their peers. Rishi was not satisfied that the university was charging them an equal fee as face to face students. He thought that though it was the pilot phase, the university should carefully assign teachers to guide and counsel the online students. He reported, *"The Moodle platform as Learning Management System (LMS) was in function, but since we were using it for the first time, there was much confusion. The orientation given to us was not enough"*. Rishi was thus not much familiar with using Moodle for his learning activity. He used to frequently call his tutors and ask them to provide him with the reading materials through email. Rishi admitted, *"I used to send my assignments through emails. However, in the second year, it seemed that the university faculties got trained and the use of Moodle improved, and we were encouraged to use Moodle"*.

Even though Rishi started to use Moodle later, he rarely had interaction with his peers through any means of communication. Rishi reported, *"I have talked with one of my female classmates only a few times, and with others, it is even very less"*. Rishi remembered, *"Once a teacher gave me the pair assignment. I wrote something on the topic and send it to my friend through email and then she added on it"*. He said

that he wanted to communicate more with his peers and do more of the collaborative learning assignments, but it happened only once. When the assignment was uploaded, the other classmates gave feedbacks. Rishi said again, "*Since most of the students work full-time, they do not get much time to provide feedback on other's assignments. They are rather busy doing theirs*". For him, being available all the time on the internet was the major problem. He used to walk hours from the village to go cyber in the market; consequently, he had not enough time to do more interaction by exchanging feedback on each other's assignments.

Rishi did not feel the need to change his job station until he was enrolled in an online and distance education program and had an unsatisfactory academic performance. He started looking for alternatives and applied for his job transfer to a semi-urban place where he could access the internet easily. However, he was a dedicated teacher and was trying his best to uplift the academic standard of the school. He integrated technology into his teaching despite all the impediments. He was quite hopeful that his contribution will be paid well with appreciation and allow him to easily transfer to the place he wanted. However, to his misfortune and surprise, it did not go as expected.

Nevertheless, Rishi was desperate and determined to get the transfer anyhow. When I met Rishi for the third time on March 1, 2017, he had got transferred to his new school just 100 meters away from the highway. In this meeting, he described his struggle for about 3 to 4 months to get the transfer. The school management committee (SMC) members did not support his decision. Out of disappointment, Rishi first did not take a month's salary and later resigned too. With a heavy heart, he expressed, "*They did not understand how important it was for me to continue my study and have career growth*". He described that most SMC members were less

educated, but they were in the decision-making position to decide about the transfer of teachers and regulate the school's rules. Rishi complained that in the process of this struggle, he missed the chance to attend a national conference organized by the Nepalese English Language Teaching Association (NELTA). He was determined to get the school transfer at any cost. So, he even started to teach three days in the new school and the other three days in the previous school. He said, "*I did not want to take any risk, and it was the most difficult period for me*".

Rishi was bothered as his decision was not supported. He got praised for his dedication and hard work in the school, but when he chose to change the school so that he can access the internet for his online education, he did not get a tough time. During this time, he felt that public school teachers have no power to make their choices; they are at the lowest level regarding the decision making of their own workplace choice. If he had not joined ODL, he would not have experienced the difficulties he faced as a learner and fight for a teacher's rights. Rishi believed that though he was a technology-friendly person, his placement in a remote place made him set back. He was unable to submit his assignments timely due to the inaccessibility of the internet.

When the school management committee was not supportive of Rishi is giving the transfer to the school nearby the highway, Rishi realized that they did not take concern for his learning need and the urgency to get through his university examinations. His conflict with them gave him his consciousness that he should be capable of fighting for his rights. The trust he gained from his community was constructive to bring this consciousness to him during those moments. So we move consciously to construct knowledge and make choices after we can delve into the

roots of our beliefs. Students will look for ways of adapting to this change and make adjustments to their learning strategies (Develotte, 2009).

Rishi's behaviors were demonstrating a constructive educational environment (Savery & Duffy, 1996, as cited in Aydin, 2013). He preferred email as he was comfortable and just enjoyed the simple conversation. The email responses from tutors did not only make Rishi happy, but he also felt the online relationship getting reliable, and both parties had no pressure to answer immediately (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009). Rishi was active in the educational environment; he assumed his responsibility in the learning process, sought possibilities, wanted to benefit from the opportunities, evaluated himself, accepted the feedback, used the knowledge resources and applied his learning in the new environment (Aydin, 2013). This category of a good student was demonstrated by Rishi which helped me to consider him as a good student. This was also important to relate to his identity construction process. Though Rishi felt isolated as an online learner, his social interaction with the tutors and the community people helped in the process of his identity construction. In the process, he strengthened his belief about a good student and tried to maintain his identity despite all the intricacies.

Rishi was not only an online student at a graduate program but also a teacher for many years. His identity as a teacher was more prominent, explaining themselves in various contexts with their experiences of teaching. This professional background influenced his role as a student to experience self-directed learning and bring self-consciousness about his ability when he decided to ask for the school transfer and do his studies regularly. The roles are negotiated continuously and struggle to build a learner's new identity within the virtual classrooms and university (Jenlink, 2014). Now I would like to present another vignette, Saloni.

Vignette 2: Saloni Was Anxious at the Beginning of the Course

Saloni always wanted to keep herself updated and competent in academia. She said, *"I am over-ambitious and dream high. I write my plans in my diary. I have not abandoned my study. I keep on reading books. I do not want to lag "*. Saloni enjoys learning and is interested in following new ideas and practices in the education sector. Whenever she gets spare time, she studies amidst her work in the office. She said that she does not want to possess immense wealth, power, and capacity, but her conviction is to reach the highest point of academic excellence. She aims to get a PhD degree in the future.

Saloni had many questions when she joined an online graduate program from the university. She had queries to the course facilitator regarding course contents but more than that, in the initial stage, she had all the nitty-gritty inquiries to the IT support staff. After joining the ODL program, she even wondered how the online education program operates and what would be the color of the certificate she would be getting after the degree completion. Saloni expressed, *"Now whenever I remember those stupid questions asked, I always find it funny"*. However, she seriously wanted this degree and was doing her best to go through it successfully. She used to call the IT support staff of the university frequently and ask for support whenever she had a problem with Moodle. She remembered, *"I used to call so many times that I think I bothered our IT (technician) Sir a lot, but he was a very humble person and always listened to my problems about Moodle functioning"*.

Saloni's inquiry about the online mode of learning was quite evident since she was using the moodle platform for the first time. Saloni sometimes used to be annoyed when there were not enough reading materials uploaded on Moodle by the teachers. Moreover, sometimes it used to be late. Once a teacher uploaded a book just

two weeks before the exam date, and she was indeed overwhelmed. Saloni had a classmate who was from Sri Lanka (country name changed) but married a Nepali boy and got settled in Nepal. She had an earlier experience of online education, so she complained a lot about the negligence of the tutors. Saloni never had to make such complaints as her friends used to on behalf of the students.

Since Saloni always wants to try new things, she is quite inquisitive and does not hesitate to clear her doubts. Saloni shares an incident where she learned that the problem is not only with her, but other people, too, have similar problems.

Saloni did not have any international exposure till in her late 20s. She saw some foreigners for the first time when she participated in a seminar on English Language Teachers at Little Angels School, Lalitpur. She met the delegates from Bangladesh, Japan, and Thailand. She was amazed at meeting people from different nationalities. In the seminar, they were presenting papers, and she heard them speaking at the conference and found that they too did not have good English. Most of them were mumbling and stumbling, just like our Nepalese. Due to this, her mental fear of speaking English withered away to the confirmed belief that it is difficult for non-native learners regardless of their nationalities. Then she builds up the confidence that even the people outside Nepal have problems in speaking the English language. Saloni started speaking in English publicly and participating in many other programs too. The first event boosted her confidence in the area of English Language Teaching. She hosted programs as a member of the Nepal English Language Teaching Association (NELTA) in her place. Now Saloni is not hesitant to ask if she is not clear about anything. She frequently communicates with foreigners through video chats for some collaborative projects for her school.

Facing the Online Examination was Quite a Nerve-Racking

Whenever it is about appearing in the final examination, most of the students panic due to many reasons. Saloni had appeared in many examinations in the past, but it was all about writing with a pen on paper. Saloni was habituated with such a conventional method, and she never had a problem with such examination. However, this time it was about the online examination. Furthermore, it had special requirements to follow, such as sharing desktop and video from the webcam. The IT staff would be watching her activity closely during the exam period, so it appeared like going through surveillance.

The date and time were fixed for the examination, and Saloni had to ensure that the internet is not disturbed throughout the examination. The examiner could easily see her typing answers on the computer. Saloni said that she had only basic computer knowledge and was not a technology savvy person. When she used to write her answers in the examination, she always struggled more with the technical problem than with the subject matter. Saloni described, *"Writing on a paper is much easier than typing because in the online examination, my attention is much on the spelling correction and I get distracted when the cursor keeps on moving here and there"*. According to Saloni, when she writes on a paper, she has a good flow of the answers, but she often encounters breaks due to typing errors. She said that in all the online examinations she had taken so far, she could not complete all the given questions within the time limit. She had to quit some questions, sometimes even one-third of the question paper every time. This kind of hassles made her dissatisfied with her performance and even angry with herself.

Further, she feels that she needs to be conscious as well as watched whatever she types. Saloni revealed that seeing her struggle, the IT staff extended the exam

period for half an hour, and yet she could not attempt all the questions. Saloni always found the IT person supportive of her in solving the technical issues either in the Moodle platform or during the examination.

Saloni's anxiety was not limited to the online examination but also before the examination when she had to submit her assignments of five subjects each semester. There were essays, articles or book reviews, and reflective notes to submit before attending the examination. Those assignments were equally essential to pass the subjects as those weighed fifty percentage of the assessment. Since Saloni remained quite busy with her teaching and managerial work in her school as a school principal, it was not easy for her to manage time beforehand for doing assignments. Saloni said that when the deadlines were approaching closer, she took leave from her office duties, gave strict instructions to her staff not to disturb her, and locked herself in her room to complete her assignments. Saloni had less time to prepare for her exam. Saloni described the situation, *"I sat on my bed with the laptop on my lap. I kept a printer, charger, and book rack next to my bed in reachable distance. Then I worked continuously for about twenty hours without taking a break"*. Saloni had severe back pain later due to it. Saloni was worried that she was not able to prepare well before her exams in some subjects. She used to get angry when those few teachers would upload the reading materials only two weeks for the exam date. She didn't enjoy the way teacher provided the materials towards the end of the semester. This hampered her performance. Thus she used to get overwhelmed by such practice. However, few teachers were very regular with their courses and upload the reading materials timely. The computer anxiety and the lack of early access to the reading materials made Saloni feel distressed and consequently, her exams were not as per her own expectations.

A Mother's Guilt Endured to Overcome Bullies

Saloni is amazingly a beautiful lady with a fair look and big attractive eyes. When I met her personally, I too was highly impressed by her stunning look yet so simple and charming even in her early 40s. I could imagine how gorgeous she had been in her 20s. However, the lovely lady was on the march for her professional career. She was the only female principal in her community. On top of it, she was the youngest most probably. As a school principal, she often had to attend many meetings in different places.

Meanwhile, she had to protect herself from the male's lecherous gaze and often had to listen to their lewd remarks, which annoyed her a lot. At a very early age, she got a lot many responsibilities as a school principal and a trainer for early childhood development. It seemed that the conservative society she was living in found it a hard nut to crack. She got often mocked publicly. Whenever she used to take a lift on a motorbike to reach some places for meeting, people would often question her character. It made her hesitant and uncomfortable even to ask for any kind of help from the male colleagues. To appear herself as a mature lady in front of the trainees and other people, she used to wear a *saree*, big *bindiyas* and speak like a grown-up and experienced person. Still, her early journey in the profession went under the scrutiny of the fundamentalists' minds. She got fed up with the overlooks of her efforts.

Saloni recalls an incident that took her to a turning point as she was obsessed with unpleasant intrusions in her profession. She said,

Once, I had to attend a meeting at the District Education Office organized for school principals. I reached early on that day. I was alone waiting in the hall for the latecomers. Then the district education officer approached me and

started 'bullying' me. He said, 'What are you doing here? I heard your school would be closed soon as other good schools get established nearby, and the community people have not felt the need of your school and so on'. I was desolate and intimidated but did not lose my temper at that moment. I was well-dressed up and presented myself in tiptop attire. I wanted to answer but did not dare to do so immediately. I was confined there for two hours until the meeting ended. I felt suffocated and desperately wanted to know the reason why he said so. I was annoyed as I felt being underestimated, mistreated and harassed. How could he speak so about my school? I decided that I need to find the answer and speak up. If not, I have to face harassment every time I meet them. If, as always, I am treated like this, my personality will be at risk. Lastly, my confidence built up, and I stood at the door. I stopped all-male counterparts and boldly told about their discriminatory words, especially from the District Education Officer that derogatory address must never be used against a lone female headteacher. I expressed my embarrassment about the bully and was strictly told that it is not accepted that anything could be commented about my school and my effort but instead should have encouraged promoting gender equality rather than male chauvinism. The officer defended himself, 'Oh, I was just kidding you as a sister, and I do not mean it.' The other fellows asked me to let the matter go as it was not a big issue. I felt humiliated as nobody bothered about me. I was appalled by the so-called educated men's thoughts.

Finally, Saloni raised a voice against discrimination and bully. Saloni was quite frustrated with those kinds of behaviors from people towards her. This incident was a turning point for Saloni. Her family background in childhood did not allow her

to speak in public against men, but when she could not tolerate the bully against her, she had to speak. Then, she felt that speaking against discrimination and any kind of violence is necessary for women if she wants to earn the credit and get her space genuinely. She said, *"I will not tolerate such. I am determined to achieve social status through education where no one would be able ever to question her credibility in her career"*.

Saloni is not only a woman but a mother too. While talking with Saloni, she shared her guilt, feeling about her role performance as a mother. She explained that she had a busy life for building her career and business, and due to it, she was not able to spend enough time caring for her children when they were too young. She even blames herself for her son's physically weak, lean and thin body at a very early age. Saloni expressed, *"I think I did injustice to my son, I had to depend on the caretaker while I was out of the house and I always regret that was unable to stay with my son for most of the time"*. Saloni said that her children were quiet and disciplined from a very young age. If she were going out, then they would understand that she was going to attend a meeting. Saloni used to read books of her colleges, novels, and some reference books for her professional development. Saloni narrated, *"My children never disturbed me when they saw me reading books. They would slightly from the door, peep and check if I was reading and if they saw me on the phone, then only they would enter the room"*. Now her son is pursuing his bachelor's degree while her daughter is in grade five. Once when Saloni was reading some literature from her course, her son suggested watching the movie of the same drama on Youtube. She watched it and found it easy to understand the drama. She realized that the audio-video version of her textbook could make her learning pleasurable.

Saloni has a very supportive husband who looks after the administrative duties of the school in her absence. He encouraged her to get training from India in the Montessori teaching method, which helped her to establish her school later in Nepal and became a trainer in the child educational development sector. When Saloni had to travel to different places for her work, she was often taunted by her relatives, friends, and neighbors and even raised questions about her character. Her relatives would every time taunt her for being an irresponsible mother and a wife. Many times, Saloni felt down. Instead of giving up, she thought that she needs to do better to achieve a better position in her professional life so that not a single person in her community would be able to say anything negative about her. The conservative society did not readily accept female leadership in the education sector. Saloni commented, "*If I were a male, it would have been different*". It was always difficult for her to hear such stereotypical comments and accusations. Nevertheless, Saloni was committed to her job and profession.

Stets and Trettevik (2014) highlighted that when women experience a threat to their role as mothers, they are likely to reaffirm their role as caretakers. So when I asked Saloni about her future plans, she replied to me, "*After I complete this degree, I just want to spend plentiful time with my children*".

Social Construction of Learner's Identity

Norton (2013) defines "identity as a social construct to perceive at how an individual comprehends the relationship with the world and the way they are constructed across time and space. So identity is not stable. It is a dynamic process and socially situated. Identity is about being as well as becoming. From the social constructive viewpoint, identities are constructed through interaction and experiences. The ODL is thus a base for learners to construct their identity of becoming. I mainly

employ the concept of identity construction in regard to the learner's interaction with other identities that they hold. Rishi's identity construction of a learner interacts with his professional identity while Saloni's is both in professional and personal. Identity construction of a learner in this study is therefore understood and analyzed from the interplay of the learner identity with other identities that had a dominant space otherwise outside the virtual platform. During this interplay 'the self' is viewed in an organized structure or in a hierarchy of salience which is invoked in a variety of situations (Stryker, 1968). Rishi and Saloni were exposed to different situations as a learner which incited them to reflect on their being influencing their construction of self.

Clear values and a clear sense of identity have considerable influence on career and academic success (Wilson et al., 2016). If there is healthy career development, then it helps in navigating the rocky terrain of student affairs (Wilson et al., 2016). Rishi was well established in his teaching career with earned dignity, and he was clear that he needed the degree for his career development. This made him determined to go through all the complicated processes and striving to manage his learning all by himself with very little guidance. Rishi was committed to whatever role he played, whether as a student or as a teacher.

The online platform has become very pertinent in identity construction for young and adult learners (Alzouma, 2018, p. 204). The platform is instrumental in shaping their beliefs, and identity construction takes place through their experiences, interaction, and perception. Identity helps us in explaining and describing self to position ourselves concerning others (Morrison, 2013). Here, Rishi was in a different learning platform, which was unexpected for him, and he was unable to control the situation. Things were happening opposite. The online learner was no more able to

perform well as in the previous record from face-to-face mode. Online students tend to develop identity traits that are different from those they had as on-site students. The new platform can heighten the awareness level of the self as there is transition. Rishi made self-reflection and created his learning strategies to study at his own pace.

Taylor and Elias (2012) have highlighted that learners always make the connection of themselves through reflection, deeper understanding of their learning and thinking critically and dialogically about their participation in their social context.

Social interaction allows people to create social meanings they give to themselves for their identity construction (Mead, 1934). It should neither be fixed nor imposed but negotiated through experience (Sachs, 2005) and interaction. After having an interaction with the tutors, Rishi got an idea to improve his performance. He learned the approach to control his learning for improvement. Identity makes sense as long as they receive feedback from the community (Lizenberg, 2013). Online learners always want social interaction as an integral part of their learning as in the face-to-face (Philip, 2018). Rishi had less interaction with his peers in the online community, so he was hardly able to engage and recognize his classmates. However, he got always energized from the communication with tutors, and he expected the similar with his classmates. Such frequent social interactions help in building their identity as good learners. Identity is collectively created (Brookfield, 2012), so social interaction is pertinent to align one's interest with the community's interest in a qualitative change. The continuous social interaction in daily situations constructs an individual's identity (Van Oers et al., 2008). Such social interaction makes the individual learn the social norms, roles, and culture of the social context, which helps them in understanding the self. According to Mead (1934), people create meaning of

realities through social interaction. For him, it is grounded on symbolic communication and negotiated through daily social interaction.

Identity construction is becoming a very complicated, switching, multifaceted, nonlinear process of interaction with other humans and the dominant influence of their social and professional environments (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). The social and professional influence on the student identity of the Rishi and Saloni was very stimulating in their identity construction. Identity is never a static construct, as it evolves and continuously develops through our social practices (Park, 2015). The changes that Rishi and Saloni went through during the learning activities indicates that when we face a different situation, it can affect our identity. This is how identity can be constructed through interaction in a different environment.

Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) claim that online situation allows people to experience the real world in a new way which would not have possible in the conventional learning. Macfadyen (2009) says that in a newly established learning environment, the idealized expectation is to engage intellectually and during the engagement, they can argue, critic ideas and demonstrate intellectual performances.

Ideal Self of an Online Learner in Salience Hierarchy

My research participants had the belief in an ideal self before their enrollment. I look into their struggle through the lens of the Salience Hierarchy established by Sheldon Stryker. According to Stryker (1980), the hierarchy in which identities are organized is based on identity salience. He defined it as a readiness to act out an identity as a consequence of the cognitive structure & social construct. McCall and Simmons (1978) named this ideal self as the situational self, which is a hierarchy of salience. For them, the location of identity in this hierarchy is a consequence of the support, commitment and investment in one's own identity.

Stryker views identity salience as trans-situational which varies according to personal traits and move across different situations. Particularly about Rishi, he moved from a conventional to a new mode of learning was a transition to a different situation that made him reflect on his self and identity. Stryker's conception of identity salience predicts the choices people would make is associated with alternative social roles (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Stryker's identity salience is integrated into a theoretical argument designed to provide an answer to the question 'why is one behavioral option selected over another in situations in which both are available to the person?' The social context is crucial to understand why a person chooses an option over the other. It influences an individuals' choices on deciding how to interact with others and how to negotiate their positions.

Stryker (1968) states in his theory that the greater the commitment premised on identity, the more that identity will be perceived as instrumental to the 'wants' of the persons. Rishi and Saloni were both committed to their study goals in spite of the various negative experiences they had in few courses and due to the less support. Rishi feared ruining his image of a good student but moving from a good student to a weak student was not acceptable to him at any cost. Likewise, Saloni too feared that she might fail the exam. However, she didn't give up. Some experiences that do not fit within the dominant narratives envoke to see self as something that is always becoming (Zembylas & Vradias, 2005). This conflict of the perceived image or living up to the expectation forced Rishi to seek support, control his learning, and take actions for making the environment conducive for learning. Rishi does not want to ruin the trust he had gained as a dedicated teacher and belief that whatever he does, he does it well and gives his best. Sometimes the different contexts for learning are also the opportunities for negotiating our way of being. Rishi's professional image was

pushing him towards maintaining the ideal self in the online platform too because he had invested a lot of time to build the image of a good teacher in his locality. So, identity salience is about the time spent in behavior related to particular roles. Rishi's commitment to the teaching profession was high. Likewise, Saloni too was committed to achieving her goal to deal with the bullies she faced in her life. Though she had less time to spend with her children and faced computer anxiety, she still was committed to completing her degree for which she found instrumental in creating her identity. The identity salience theory of Stryker has established norms that if students have high commitment, they can achieve identity salience and their behavior correspond accordingly (Stryker, 1980). It relates to the earlier chapter of this study and can be linked that commitment is equally important in identity construction just as relatedness in the motivation.

When individuals reflected upon how others evaluate them, it is linked with two aspects; pride and shame which is associated with their performance too (Cooley, 1964 as cited in Stets & Trettevik, 2014). Rishi's online learner identity put him into situations where it contradicted with own prior experienced or self-believed images. The fear of diminishing a good learner's identity with better academic performance or fear of failing to perform a good act challenged him to take action against the bureaucratic system. The general tendency of a learner's identity is what others would respond to the behaviors that contradicted with the identity they were claiming. Whenever we encounter situations, we tend to link with identity standards which guides our behavior within and across situations (Stetes & Trettevik, 2014).

Learners' Emotion in Their Experience of Online Learning

Emotions in an academic setting are often neglected because people believe that emotions are opposite to rational thinking and can often hinder effective teaching

and learning (Dirkx, 2008). Emotions within human beings are very natural and various emotions are associated with different experiences. In fact, these emotions keep us alive and distinct from other species. Humans are intellectuals who identify, express and communicate their emotions. Thus, emotions cannot be ignored. Learning are fostered with emotional experiences (Lehman, 2006). Emotions are crucial in managing relationships in our life too. Generally, we have negative and positive emotions depending on our experiences. You and Kang (2014) talk about academic emotion where students learn and use strategies and self-regulate to improve their performances. I am highlighting the role of emotions in online and distance learning because when I had listened to and observed the participants' stories, there were frequent moments when they expressed their strong emotions in their online learning experience. And I felt that in the identity construction of a learner, emotion has a crucial role, and yet it is a neglected issue in the research as well as in our daily life. It is almost forbidden for adult learners like Rishi and Saloni, who are well-established educational leaders in their community. The series of interviews with them made me clear that emotions are interconnected in identity construction.

I was yet in my thesis writing, and once again, I followed up Saloni on December 5, 2019, on Facebook. I often follow her on Facebook as we are friends. I like and comment on her status, and I get to know about her social world activities through Facebook. Saloni is now one of the famous educationists in her city. She is a renowned female academic leader. Saloni was recently interviewed on November 29, 2019, on a local radio, which was presenting her as a role model to the people beyond the education sector. Her opinions were highly valued by radio presenters. In the interview, Saloni talks about how a woman sees everything around her from the heart, not only from the mind. So, she gave the message that women observe small things

minutely, and they are very dedicated to their work, which makes their work more valid than men. Saloni expressed that now she is a mature professional educationist, so she does not have to go through much scrutiny as she frequently faced at the beginning of her career. Saloni said that she always tried to bring innovative ideas to education, which helped her earn respect in her profession. Saloni expressed that she is quite satisfied with what she has achieved and the difference she could create in society for a better chance in education and as a woman.

This interview clearly depicts that Saloni has achieved a status. She mentioned that she always writes in her diary about her learning plan either from a physical or virtual platform. Her master's degree from online mode contributed to her status and plans. Our society looks at women leaders from stereotypical expectations and false judgments (Ramos et al., 2015). Saloni was able to set a good example in society. However, she faced harassment, bullying and discrimination as being woman in the past. Now she is an empowered lady and has encounter less of such. It is alarming that these women leaders experience a lower degree of social acceptance, and those who encounter benevolent sexism had to struggle with confusing thoughts about their competence (Horwarth et al., 2014). So, it is imperative to understand how such stereotypes doubt and challenge women's competence in their daily lives.

It was never easy for Saloni to break through the gender stereotypes and Rishi to choose the place he wanted to ease his journey for fulfilling his dream. Brought up in a family where women's freedom was covered under *ghumto*, Saloni now travels worldwide and meets people of all color, religion, race, and nation. Though Saloni is a bit slow in typing and feels comfortable reading her course materials in printed form, she promotes the use of ICT in her teaching-learning practices along with the administrative management of her school. She has motivated the teachers in her

school to use an ICT tool for effective teaching in the classroom. She thinks that if she does not check her email even for two days, then she is left behind.

Saloni, as a female learner with a mother's role being more salient to fear the rejections in the identity verification process, gave an important insight into how emotions emerge within the self. The narratives of Saloni bring her emotional side, which produced distress in the beginning, but later it enhanced her feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Burke, 2004). Emotions influence our perception of particular aspects of a situation and are fundamental to our ability to function (Lehman, 2006). So emotional competencies are necessary for learning to take place by controlling our negative emotions and increasing positive emotions (Berenson, et al., 2008).

Rishi and Saloni used their negative emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, and anxiety to positively impact their efforts to maintain the standard of the learner's identity. Rishi and Saloni felt the level of anxiety in the online and distance education at the beginning of the course due to less clarity and adverse situations from where they were responding, but gradually it decreased as they learned to control their learning, seek interaction, guide their emotions and getting familiar with the online and distance mode of learning. So it is important to deny the emotion that develops a negative identity. I have learned that emotions are interwoven in our learning experiences, so seeing emotion as separate from cognition is a problematic perspective. Emotion allows people to attend to situations and make thoughtful decisions. Rishi and Saloni took a decision when they faced challenges in their learning processes, so it helped them to be determined with their decision and their thoughtful decisions were instrumental in verifying their identity. Rishi and Saloni did not express intense emotions with their online tutors because they did not frequently

interact with them. The interaction with peers was almost absent, so they could not share any emotional experience with their peers. However, both of them had ups and downs when they took up an online learner's role. Their interactions with their family members, colleagues, neighbors, and other people were instrumental in their journey of understanding them better.

The impact of emotion in online learning is not broadly discussed (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). These stories present the evidence of emotions present in online learning experiences and are an essential aspect to comprehend in an online community of inquiry. The role of emotions in adult learning is closely linked with the construction of meaning and knowledge.

Gender Identity

The identity construction of a learner is influenced by the choices an individual makes and role performance attached to the identity (Stryker, 1968). Therefore, it is very important to understand the gender of a learner's identity can also influence their online learning experience in many situations. By the virtue of their gender identity, their behaviours are consistent with the role expectations and ODL is not untouched in the Nepali context. The importance is also due to the constantly changing relationship of gender and technology (Lie, 2003) in the global discourse. So gender is an important dimension in the discussion of online and distance learner's identity construction from both global and local premises. The female learners can challenge the socially structured identities (Rind, 2015) as Saloni did. When she was bullied, she was determined to challenge the gendered stereotypes and practices by constructing her strong and dignified identity so that people would not dare to humiliate her. The study by Rind (2015) in a Pakistani university found that female students participate actively in all educational activities and perceive participation in

higher education to contest the identities imposed upon them by society. Saloni had faced so many such incidents when she was taunted for not limiting herself within the role of a wife and a mother. At the same time, Rishi too had a gendered performance. He left his family in the village and had to reside alone for his job and still the society had not much problem. It was accepted to be normal while it was just the opposite in the case of Saloni if she had to leave her children just for a few days to attend some conferences or meetings. Saloni was guilty of not being able to fit into the definition of a mother assigned by society. Rishi never expressed his guilt of leaving his family behind and the compulsion to leave alone near his workplace. Individuals have many social identities and they may be either muted or kept salient depending on the situation (Zimmerman, 1987). For Saloni, there were difficult times when she had to keep her learner's identity at salient and her mother's identity muted during her learning. Thus, the assumptions and practices of gender roles shape female learner's needs, ventures and actions (Rind, 2015) in terms of online learning. Though Rishi and Saloni said that they never felt any sort of discrimination in online platforms based on their gender, they could have experienced in their peer-group and classroom interaction (Davies, 2014) if they had been doing it throughout their learning process. This study couldn't capture those aspects as the research participants did not experience classroom interaction with their peers, as they experience a sense of isolation.

Social Presence: Space for Learners

A student's identity is formed by the everyday experiences of physical and social space. The social and physical space provided in the online and distance learning platform shapes the students' identity. In fact, when a student interacts every day in this (virtual) place, a sense of identity is derived through multiple ways such as

behaviours, knowledge and attitudes (Proshansky et al., 2014). Due to the absence of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students, the virtual space has very limited exposure to the learner's identity. Rishi and Saloni arrived at a new place and needed time to learn about the place. They had many queries when they joined online and distance education. They had little idea of how they would be attending classes and exams. They had lots of questions in their mind at the beginning. Later when they went through the courses, they faced many challenges. It hampered their performance which made them think of their own presence and capability. Rishi and Saloni were trying to find a space as an online and distance learner in the virtual platform, within the university system and in the location. Space was in the context of Nepali society which shows how the online and distance learners are perceived and what kind of support/hurdles they face.

The relationship between place and space for online and distance learners is very important. If the students feel welcomed, valued, supported and accepted, then they have a better experience in the given space. The stories of Rishi and Saloni were the stories of a unique struggle for space. Rishi questioned 'are we not the student of this university?' They had less guidance and support in comparison to the regular student due to their remoteness, and because they had less interaction with their peers, teachers and administrative staff. Even the little support they got energized them. Saloni received emotional support when the technician provided her an extra few minutes to compensate for the technical difficulties she faced in the examinations. When she did not find the resources uploaded in the Moodle by the teacher, she would write an email and ask for it. Once she was bombarded with the reading materials two weeks early of the examination. This made her angry.

Rishi rides his motorbike to Kathmandu whenever he has spare time and wanted to meet the teachers personally. He felt that if there was a personal meeting, it would help the teachers to recognize the student and the bonding would be good. There were different ways of negotiating and constructing meanings by both. Both of them wanted their space in ODL. It was different from their professional background in their locality where they had respect and recognition. Though they got their student profile after the enrollment, they created space for themselves. The interaction, reflections, negotiations, behaviours contributed to their identity formation. Within the context of online and distant learning, the student identity was created rather than ascribed. This experience of identity construction influences social practices and institutional policies.

Social presence in online and distance learning is a major concern in the discourse where space matters. When there is a lack of social interaction and the physical absence of the teacher and learner in the learning space, the learners have to go the extra mile to prove their real presence. It is the perception a 'real' person. The lack of social presence may lead to a high level of frustration, a negative attitude toward the teacher's effectiveness and a lower level of affective learning (Hill & Koh, 2004; Vonderwell, 2003, as cited in Sung & Mayer, 2012). A study focused on understanding online learning experiences found that social interaction is important to foster online social presence which can lead to greater online learning (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The study found that affective features of online social presence like social respect, social sharing, open mind, social identity and intimacy can facilitate cognitive interaction over time and encourage learners in meaningful online learning by getting over feelings of isolation and loneliness. The story of Rishi and Saloni too

depicts a similar understanding that social presence is a key component in online and distance learning.

Insights From the Chapter

The stories of Rishi and Saloni have enlightened me personally on the struggle behind their empowerment. Identity construction is intimately connected with learner's emotional self and significantly formed by their social identity. The constantly developing ICT in our daily life and the ODL setting has provided new means for gaining knowledge, which gives us the feeling of global connection and isolation at the different events and periods. Interaction with tutors and peers is very vital in shaping a learner's identity. We social beings always seek connection and collaboration and expect the same in online learning. Learning is socially and culturally situated which occurs continuously through interaction and collaboration (Park, 2015). Rishi and Saloni, unfortunately, did not have rich experience of connecting frequently and synchronously to communicate with their peers. However, they enjoyed the few conversations through telephone or phone calls and emails response they got from their tutors. I learned that interaction is very important for a positive learning experience for online learners. They practised self-directed and controlled learning to maintain their positive images. When there is a lack of interaction, it hampers their performance, which subsequently challenges their assumptions of the ideal self. However, their experiences are insightful for creating a space for online and distance learners.

Interaction is an essential ingredient in any learning process. The interaction is meaningful when directly influences the learners' intellectual growth (Woo & Reeves, 2007), so the frequent interaction with the teacher is a fundamental process of knowing self and growing academically. McKinley (2015) argues that social

interaction is the basis for people's understanding of their position concerning others within the same cultural community. So the learners' identity is dependent on the social and cultural factors during their learning experience. From a social constructivist perspective, the identity construction process implies the meaning-making and dialogic processes of understanding the self (Hung et al., 2011). This chapter highlights how the sociocultural context should be focused on to acknowledge the learner's self. Obviously, identity construction cannot be studied in isolation; rather, it demands the sociocultural context in the online community to learn how learners understand, negotiate, and sustain the ideal self.

I have learned that adult learners go through different emotions when they are in a new role, especially when they face a completely new learning platform. Sometimes they are caught in social situations where these roles challenge their assumptions about self-understanding. It makes them feel either strong or weak. Those who can cope with the difficult situation and turn their emotions rightly to change the situation get success. Their identity is more of a social construct that is dependent on their social and political relations. The learners were challenged to maintain and negotiate their identity as a student along with their professional and personal identity. The identity that learners possess embeds the power relations at the individual, societal and institutional levels.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

I defended my PhD proposal in July 2015, and now it has been almost five years that I spent producing this thesis. I have learned that a PhD journey is a long journey where I encountered highs and lows like never before. The scholarship provided by NORHED QUANTICT Project made it possible to make my dream come true. I belong to one of Nepal's marginalized communities, where men are sent abroad to earn money, and women are confined mostly to household chores. Though there are a few renowned names from my community in the development, political, and education sector, it is very insignificant. People in a rural community are less educated, and the rural communities of Gurungs are even very background in terms of access and achievement in education. I acknowledge the privileged position as I reside in the city with easy access to resources and materials. This privileged position is instrumental for studying PhD program in one of the reputed universities of Nepal. From the inception period of my PhD thesis, I was aware of my position, and I felt accountable to my community in the university and the ethnic group I belong to. My experiences in the workplace interact with people in different parts of the country as part of my duty. Besides, my own inquisitive trait to be a techno-friendly person has shaped my understanding of the research issue. I was able to reflect on the differences, their root causes, and things that were taken for granted. I have learned that perspective is very important to explore the depth of the research issue. When I wanted to start writing my thesis was like sailing in an ocean without a compass. The role of the supervisor is very important, at least in my journey who was like a lifesaver for me, and it would not have been possible only with my own effort.

The PhD journey has given me a new vision to intervene and improve the existing online and distance education program through the learners' perspective. I am always keen to listen to the students' understanding of their social, economic, and cultural backgrounds that can influence their learning. This journey is a milestone for my academic career, professional, and personal life.

My personal experiences with ICT in my daily life, work in the online and distance education unit within the university, interaction with enrolled and potential students and involvement in the NORHED QUANTICT project helped me to find the purpose of the study and craft my research questions. The focus of my study was to inquire into the experiences of learners in online and distance education and their social context. The following were my research questions.

- a) How do learners get motivated towards online and distance education throughout the program?
- b) How do online and distance learners experience power relations in their learning?
- c) How do online and distance learners construct their identity?

I have three analysis chapters based on my research questions. Gender dimension has been discussed as an important theme that emerged while finding answers to my research questions. Though there has not been a separate chapter to discuss more on gender, I have analysed the gender aspects in every analysis chapter and this conclusion chapter. So here, I put my conclusion from every analysis chapter followed by the research implications.

Motivation Persists Through Relatedness

Learning is a complex process and there is no straight one-way path for learning. Humans, over the centuries, have been learning through different methods and approaches. At present, the way humans learn and teach has reached a digital

level where one does not need the physical presence of a teacher. It is important that individuals track self-learning, improvement, and assessment. In such a case, self-directed learning is a significant and primary aim of education for an individual to be a self-learner. An online distant learning environment demands a higher level of motivation from adult learners as it is based on self-directed learning. Since adult learners are already into their jobs and resuming their studies after many years of gap, they are motivated to study for their professional upward mobility rather than gaining new knowledge. The students consider and choose online education because of convenience, flexibility, and affordability (Oguz et al., 2015). In addition to this, they are motivated for their job promotion, professional development or provided scholarship.

All learners are capable of self-directed learning, but their progress and management vary as per individual differences (Cazan & Schiopca, 2014). Learners' motivation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, conscientiousness, openness to experience and intelligence makes the difference (Cazan & Schiopca, 2014). We need to acknowledge the diverse nature of learning and emphasize the individual self-learning process. The online and distance learners' need for self-directed learning is even more significant.

Self-direct learning impacts different aspects of individual life, circumstances, and the environment. According to Kop and Fournier (2011), there are new challenges and opportunities for self-direct learners who depend on text information and informal communication through the social media platform. The new educational landscape of online and distant learning for many could be a challenge as well as an opportunity. The self-directed learners could participate informally and formally in different online and distant learning platforms. This guides the learning in orienting them towards

their career and life goals. Goal orientation is another motivating factor in online learning. Learners can be also motivated with different projects and activities, so it is also largely dependent on the ability of the university and its course structure (Fisher & Baird, 2005). Adult learners are independent learners who have adequate professional experience. They enjoy self-directed learning as they desire to stay in an autonomous learning environment. Their interest in technology use is also linked with their autonomy. These adult learners, who are also online learners, need to realize the importance and value of learning digital skills. It helps them to be resourceful in learning and teaching both. Madan expressed his desire to join a computer institute to be a digitally competent person. There were many hurdles for the adult learners in navigating basic systems, explore more learning platforms, accessing reading materials, and so on, but the continuous participation in the interactive digital platform enhances their skills. Sometimes they learn the medium rather than the content.

Adult learners prefer to maintain anonymity with their profile due to the age gap, so ODL has been the best option. These adult learners who are into the new system of ODL, though prefer anonymity it is only in the case of their peers. In fact, they desire to have face to face interaction with their tutors. Madan reported that he almost failed in one subject when he completely relied on it. Maya, too, found a course ‘ICT in Mathematics Education’ very effective when taken on-campus. That helped her be familiar with the Moodle system and explore software related to her course. So even though they were online distance learners, they preferred the conventional method of learning having interaction with the teacher. A positive perception is necessary, which is built on goal orientation, incentives for purposeful action, and engaging activities. Motivation is more of a process than a result.

Madan did not complete his degree even in four years while Maya completed her degree despite all the ups and downs in between, especially the untimely death of her 11-year old daughter, which was devastating for her. But again, she communicated with tutors and completed her research work, and got the degree. She attended her convocation in November 2019. Whereas, Madan argued that he was stuck with his job responsibilities and economic constraint. He got a promotion in the job, and now he is a dropout of the master's degree program. So, intrinsic motivation is the source of successful completion of the degree for adult learners. Social factors such as age, economic status, family support, scholarship, positive feedback reinforce the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation in the student. The external motivation seemed to help enter the program, but the intrinsic motivation was a must for retaining it. Motivated action may be either self-determined or controlled (Brophy, 2010). The extrinsic motivation brings a compelling situation for learning in the beginning to many and till its completion to some. As a result, this controlled motivation in expectation of rewards is worsened with fewer engagement experiences, technological anxiety, less follow up and support from the administration, and less interaction with peers and tutors. Thus, these challenges further influence the students to strive for face-to-face classes, and most students still opt for a traditional mode of learning.

Brophy (2010) emphasizes that intrinsically motivated actions require experiences of interest and enjoyment. From the stories I presented in this thesis, I have understood that only interest and enjoyment are not enough to define intrinsic motivation or to get an outcome. For me, in the context of ODL for adult learners, it seems like an abstract thing or existence of vacuum as these adult learners do not join the master's degree program just with interest or enjoyment. They have some goals, and they are pretty much guided by the benefits or rewards associated with extrinsic

motivation. I argue that interest and enjoyment may not last long, and as a result, we are discussing the dropout issue in ODL.

The intrinsic motivation is contingent on the relatedness of the task/assignments/readings with the professional task. The alignment of the career practice and the course enrolled is very important for success/failure. Madan was studying development studies, teaching science in school, and thus, he was not able to complete his assignment, relate the learning to his teaching practice, and consequently, he could not complete the degree. The relatedness is very pertinent for adult online learners. Being a digital immigrant can help them to explore a more exciting avenue to gain digital skills. Learners understand the material better when they can link what they are learning with what they are doing (Fisher & Baird, 2005). The online distant learning environment does not only teach them formal educational courses but also prepares them for the present digital era as skilled learners. Previously these adult learners had a lack of resources due to their inadequate digital skills, but now the program has enabled them to have effective learning through technology as a medium.

Power Relations Operates in Digital Era Through Online Learning

As Prensky (2001) said, all digital natives may not be technology-friendly, and all digital immigrants may not be technology naïve. Sugam though in his late 40s, was a confident man using his laptop and internet all the time while Sandhya, an unmarried girl of late 20s, was struggling with the everyday task and basic systems of the online learning system. Both though being classmates vary in their confidence, access, and usage of digital skills. However, this status is more dependent on their social, economic, and cultural status. The better the digital skills, the better the opportunities to grab. Sandhya from a rural background was struggling even with the

basic needs of life. The university's online education program tried to address it by giving scholarships and tablets but they could not address the other problems of internet inaccessibility, job insecurity, caring problem of old and sick parents, collapsed house, which was also equally important for her, and those hampered her active participation in the online platform. The lack of resources for digital learning and the stereotypical society demotivates a person to complete her degree. This condition reinforces the societal hierarchy of class and gender. The digital era has instilled the importance of digital knowledge so that we all feel excluded, marginalized from the economic and social prosperity of life. And we think the people who are untouched by this digital world have fewer opportunities for living a better life. In fact, some people transform their lives while becoming digitally sound people and enjoy the powerful status of being techno-savvy. An online and distance education program is a medium mostly taken to reach the mass in both developed and less developed societies.

Sandhya and Sugam's struggle to access the internet to be fitted in the online community has given them unique experiences, which changed their status and knowledge level, but at the same time, there remains a doubt or possibility that the other way of learning could have fetched them with better understanding. The use of ICT has introduced favorable changes in learning since the learner gets acquainted with new tools and skills (Tomé, 2020). All the learners do not have the same relationship with technology. The social, economic, and cultural contexts surrounding the learner intersect and the relationship could be disruptive and conducive and impact their performance in academia and professional life.

While analyzing the learner's relationships with technology through the stories, power dynamics emerged distinctively to explain the connections. As

Foucault says, 'power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere.' This power is depicted in the structure of actions through our virtual engagement. Our motivation and identity are related to the power relations that make an individual or online learner feel empowered and transformed. The passionate Sugam used ICT as his weapon, and the online platform has a space to exercise his power extended to his social relations in the workplace. Both Sugam and Sandhya said they benefitted by entering the program which helped them to experience change and to gain confidence. The social system stigmatized Sandhya and challenged Sugam. On top of that, both could not have the best learning as described by Sugam.

Power relations shape human subjectivities. Power relations are revealed in our practices. The social, cultural, economic and geographical context of the learners put them in the position of either domination or suppression. An online and distant learner (Sandhya in this study) who is socially, economically and geographically backward experiences digital deprivation in the digital era. To have an access to the graduate program through online and distance mode becomes a significant achievement and the other usage of technology is secondary. This is the situation at present, in the Nepali context. The power relationships are not static. It changes along with the change in an individual's social, economic and geographic locations. Access to ICT through ODL can even play a role to transform their lives. ODL, therefore, is such a platform that has the possibilities to empower or marginalize the learners technologically besides the cognitive aspects. If we have access to the internet and digital devices we can get benefitted from the ODL platform resulting in self-development. On the other hand, if we have no access to digital tools and lack digital skills then it can further marginalize the learner by poor academic performance, low

participation in the study, developing a sense of being isolated and might drop out from the program. So the learner's power relationship with the digital platform and the social perceptions associated with it is crucial.

Interaction Constructs Learner's Identity

My participants are not only online distance learners, but they are in the teaching profession for many years. They have already developed their teacher identity in society, but their new identity as online learners helped them understand themselves. Their efforts to learn from online distance mode pushed the limits to cope with the challenges. It fostered their agency. While they heard about online distance education programs and actually enrolled, their doubts and queries got a clear path. Being adult learners and digital immigrants, they did their assignments, course work and exams against all odds. It helped them to acknowledge to be passionate learners. However, they were missing connections with their peers, online community, and felt the gap of serious efforts in pedagogy to address their needs.

ICT not only became an important medium for learning, but it also bestowed them with better skills necessary for the digital world and to become better teachers in their life. The process of identity construction as an online learner and a teacher taught them to be vocal against discrimination and harassment. To be better learners, they challenged the system and stereotypes of society and ensured a better relationship between themselves and the world. The social-cultural aspects of them as online learners allow them to develop their identity with intrinsic self-meanings of emotions, activities, situations, and consequences.

There are certain myths and stereotypes that people have towards online and distance education. At first, the learners might enroll the course just because he/she is not able to attend the classes physically due to their time and geographical constraint.

But later, when they undergo the courses, it demands a lot of effort and time besides digital literacy. They encounter those myths in society, and they might also experience stigma. In this regard, the identity they have formed in the society will replicate most of the time as they take on the new identity of an online and distance learner. Ram's better image and strong identity as a dedicated teacher helped him to overshadow such questions in the conservative society he was leaving. And Saloni's own elder family member still expects her to explain how it actually works, and the degree is owned without physically attending the college.

A professor of psychology, Pelz (2004), has analyzed major myths about online learning. Firstly, it is said that students have to do most of the work by themselves, but according to him, online teaching is based on the student-led discussion in all reading courses. Students help each other with peer discussions and assistance. The second is related to the interaction, which is believed to be the heart of effective learning, but a teacher has been absent in the online course. According to him, interaction requires listening and talking in a traditional classroom, but online interactivity requires reading and writing. He believes that reading and writing are superior to listening and talking for learning. He practised the interactive like a collaborative research paper, research proposal, and team project in which interaction takes place. In the case of Rishi and Saloni, they could not counter these myths as the online and distance education in Nepal had recently started where teachers were not able to apply the interactive features of Moodle, and students and teachers both had to struggle to experience the online learning, which was just in its infant stage.

Online learning has been massively adopting by educational institutions globally after sophisticated technological innovation. It also created the myth about only technological oriented learning and its effectiveness. Justice (2017) argues that

“many continue to assume that the technological design and instructional format of delivery are most important in its degree of effectiveness” (p. 1). Taking this myth, she studied three Cs for whether these variables affect the effectiveness or not. The Cs include connectivity, communication and compassion. She found that among the three Cs, communication was the most important variable for online and distance learning education effectiveness rather than technological design and instructional format.

There are various and new ways of exploring and expressing the learner’s identities in the virtual world. So, it needs to be contemplated as fluid and dynamic with engagement in the digital era of networked technologies (Lizenberg, 2013). The adult learners and the young learners’ identities differ due to many reasons such as their prior experience, status, age, perception, and professional life. It gets more complex when these adult learners' multiple identities are entangled and salience changes as per their situations. So, it is dynamic with multi-faceted characteristics. However, the adult seems to have clarity of their identity by virtue of their self-understanding and experiences.

The transition from conventional learning to online and distance learning gave unique experiences to the research participants in this study. I found that there is a mix of emotional struggle alongside their academic competence. Adopting and adapting to the new technology, meeting expectations of their own identity standards, and responsibilities with the relationships they have with the social world contributed to understanding their own position and progress. The emotions were disruptive sometimes, but these learners managed to convert those negative emotions to better learn and accomplish their aspirations.

Identity constantly develops with different social practices. I believe that the social, economic, and cultural aspects from where the online and distance learners

enact and react are very important to consider while studying their context and experiences, especially when relating the phenomenon in a new setting. By participating in social practices, the learners learn the norms, roles, and culture and develop their identity by reflecting upon themselves as they are engaged in daily activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I learned that understanding oneself is very important while there is a transition from one to another identity or in the process of developing it. During the process, they want the interaction to confirm their beliefs, which was lacking in the online and distance education program of universities. While reflecting on the interactions between diverse social contexts and learners with different needs, scholars have found that the social-cultural perspective contributes to the understanding of complex forms of human consciousness concerning the external conditions of life (Park, 2015).

Cook (2020) says that if a person is well aware of oneself according to reality, it is a healthy identity. By this, he meant that *“If the way others see us is not aligned with how we see ourselves, it is because we lack awareness about certain aspects of ourselves”*. When Rishi and Saloni were concerned about ‘what others would say if they fail,’ I could understand that though they seemed to have the clarity to some extent, they needed to understand the healthy part of a learner identity that they would not remain the same or could perform in the same way all the time. Identity is marked by both positive and negative traits (Cook, 2020). And it is influenced by the emotions within our mind which are created by our relationship or attachment with the material thing. This is what the socio-materiality approach tries to explore from the learner’s perspective on the digital platform. When we have easy access to information and an easy way to express ourselves and reach out to many people, it also puts us in a vulnerable situation where we encounter the dynamic virtual world.

Without a doubt, the role of interaction is fundamental to identity construction, community building, and learning. When there is an imbalance or breakdown in interaction, this results in other issues such as feeling isolated, reduced confidence, non-participation, reluctance to contribute, trouble-making, etc. Socio-emotional factors are necessarily involved as individuals construct their identities during their interactions. Online learners need deliberately composed to compensate for any lack felt by not having a physical presence (Delahunty et al., 2014).

When there is an absence of physical interaction between teachers and students in online and distance education, it limits the learning of the course and understanding each other. If there is adequate interaction through synchronous and asynchronous means in the online platform, it allows the learners to engage actively and reveal their real selves. Learners being social and relational beings seek interaction to gain knowledge and for a better learning experience. Interaction shapes the learner's identity so adequate social interaction should take place during the study in ODL.

The Social Constructivist Approach For Learners

The learning of individuals takes place twice, where the individual constructs knowledge based on the social and individual surroundings. The knowledge is not generated from within the individual but is constructed through interactions with others and with the object in the culture. Here, social interaction with others develops knowledge construction. Through social constructivism, I agree that objects exist only after they enter communicative space (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). The experiences of online and distant learners presented in this study helped me understand the concept that it is a social composition that defines the objects (ICT tools) within a social context and brought it into existence (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). The online platform

has an extensive range of applications easily available on the internet and web portals. Thus it stimulates learning on a social constructivist paradigm (Mbatl, 2012). Therefore, what students learn and the processes by which they learn is fed through the constructive perspective (Cobb, 1994, as cited in Hrastinksi, 2009). Here in online and distance education, online participation, communication, and information exist in each setting about the other. So, the instructor-facilitator plays a vital role, so strong mentoring is part of the social constructivist as Vygotsky emphasizes. While knowledge is individually constructed through one's experiences, learning is a social and collaborative activity as learners construct meaning in the course of their interactions with each other.

Social constructivism theory assumes that our understanding, meaning and implications are in collaboration and synchronization with other human beings. The social constructivist theory acknowledges how other individuals play a role in knowledge construction. Here, learning is a social process, and teachers have an important role to play. Maya was motivated with the frequent interaction with the teachers. Madan wanted to keep anonymity and had less interaction with his teachers and friends. Rishi would always feel happy whenever he received an email from the teacher. But at the same time they experience being left out when there is no interaction with their teachers. A teacher can contribute to knowledge construction through stimulating discussion and thought, assessment, learning is dual-agentic (Adams, 2006). There are learning and engagement between the two to co-construct the socio-cultural realm and to scaffold each other. So, the constructivist learning environment emphasizes the individual to allow to talk, share their learning where the teacher's role would be listener and observer as well as encourage the learner to engage in knowledge construction. Further, this learning mode strongly supports the

notion of social constructivism and situated practice. Therefore the learners are motivated when they interact with their peers of diverse background. Vygotsky (1978) argues that the culture and context of learners are crucial in shaping the understanding and therefore learning is not purely an internal process. Thus, learning is more as a social process than a psychological that a learner internalizes.

Gendered Experiences of Online and Distance Learners

Male and female learners have different purposes for getting into ODL programs. Sandhya and Maya were quite motivated to study, but if they had no scholarships, maybe they would have postponed their plan to study for the next few years. All three female participants were unfamiliar with online learning, but after they were enrolled in the program, they learned it and got accustomed soon. Sandhya's economic conditions limited her access to digital devices at home. Saloni had no such issue in access as she was able to afford it. Male participants though from rural backgrounds, gave priority to own laptops and internet access either through personal investment or utilizing the resources from their workplace. They were more focused on getting the digital skills, as, in their opinion, those skills were a must to have. They prepared and equipped themselves before joining online and distance education programs as they thought it was an important skill for their own professional development or better-earning opportunities. Madan was less techno-friendly and had less interest in technology than other research participants. Sandhya was interested in learning digital skills but was restricted by her economic and geographical constraints and her gender roles at home. My three female participants learned to use computers and the internet when they had to. So, I acknowledge that there is increasing participation of women in technology in terms of access and use. ODL had provided equal access to male and female learners.

Online and distance education programs have become instrumental for learners to pursue their higher education and become familiar with the use of ICT in their learning. However, we cannot ignore the various gender aspects that are restricting women in their ability to perform through the use of ICT. As they learned, they have excelled. So technophobia is no more a gendered phenomenon, but rather, associated with the exposure to the virtual platform and more with its practice. The transformation through ICTs was observed among the learners but all learners do not necessarily experience the same. The social, cultural and economic norms of a patriarchal society have influenced women's performances and achievements. Women are not privilege in the same way as men are . It was clearly observed that society reinforces gender differences and treat them differently. The male learners in the study never had the issue of convincing the family and the society about their role as online and distance students. Comparatively the female learners' had more struggle in dealing with their family, colleagues and neighbours about their new identity as a student. They were mocked and challenged for attempting a new mode of learning. They were duty-bound and made accountable in the role of a daughter, a wife and a mother. Further, they had problems in accessing the digital device easily in the initial phase of their study. Therefore female learners had a different experience than male learners due to the social-cultural context of Nepali society. So the context of the learners influenced by the patriarchal norms matters in online and distance learning. It is even very pertinent in the case of learner's first-hand experiences. So the knowledge gained through experiences is more about process rather than a product. For the online and distant learners, the learning process is subjective to their context that includes their location, attitude, relations, social norms, gender, reflection and identity.

Conclusion

Every individual has their own unique story and experiences. By listening to and presenting the stories of the research participants, I am not in a position to have a single conclusion or generalize it to other places, people, and contexts. However, I have gained various insights from the experiences of my research participants. The beauty of narrative inquiry is that when we look into the holistic approach, we do not limit it with only a single perspective. We learn multiple perspectives for the same experiences. Regarding digital natives and digital immigrants' technical ability, the online learners' motivation and perception towards technology and access is crucial. Positive perception is necessary for intrinsic motivation, which allows for the relevancy of the contents in professional and personal life. Irrespective of the learner's gender, whoever can find the connection and relatedness will get through the program, whether it may be in a completely new platform as ODL.

Motivated learners can retain till the end of the program. / . For that, interaction and connection are fundamental. The institutional role is important in connecting with students and could be one reason for students quitting the study on the ODL platform. Students always want their space in ODL and make every effort to create it. Likewise, the economic aspect is very important to gain skills and devices. Digital skills and physical materials are instrumental in power relations. If we use ICT for our career and academic growth, it helps to multiply the benefits of ICT and bring many opportunities. I accept the role of ICT in our life for enhancing our skills and opportunities in life, and it is even of utmost importance for online and distant learners. However, I am equally concerned that we are being controlled through disciplinary power which influences our learnings and achievement. This study highlights the important aspects of online learning which was less explored. There is a

short of understanding the learner's holistic perspective and addressing it in online and distance education in the context of Nepal to date. Yes, my study draws attention to it.

I emphasise the reality of the online and distant learner's experience which is shaped by different social contexts. The university has a vital role in valuing their experience and provide support to learners to create a distinctive learning environment in online and distance education. The environment where the learners are exposed in the offline and online world should provide better learning experiences for many reasons. The teaching-learning practices in ODL in the Nepali context should equally consider the importance of the social and affective presence as of cognitive presence. However, there are limitations of the impact of the social, cultural and political impact

Way Forward

The study has opened up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions and insights for further studies and strategies to enhance teaching-learning in ODL, institutional role and policy consideration to reshape ODL in a new paradigm. This study has drawn attention to the gap between the new practices of the modern world and the conventional society of Nepal which is yet not ready to incorporate completely the alternative mode of learning. It demands better planning, more investment, trainings, learner centered designing of the curriculum in ODL and so on. Here I suggest the way forward in different areas in particular to practical issues.

- a) For Teachers - If the innovative, inclusive, and gender-friendly pedagogy is not applied in ODL programs, we will not be able to address the different needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. The learners learn digital skills through ODL, which is good and tangible, but I would also like to emphasize their social and

emotional skills through more interaction, peer, and collaborative learning for their holistic learning. The integration of ICTs through ODL should bring innovative teaching practices, and students should be transformed from passive participants in learning to active creators of local content. The teachers' role does not limit to uploading materials and assessing their work. They should rather comprehend the students' needs and compose engaging activities with a combination of digital tools. For this, the teachers should be provided trainings to use the interactive tools of the digital platform and the engage the students as in the face-to-face mode to motivate them throughout the courses.

- b) For Institution - Though the implementation of ODL was recently carried out in graduate programs, the institutions need to upgrade their ODL program with all the interactive features of whatever LMS they apply. To make the program inclusive for women and economically challenged students, scholarships and technical support are very pertinent. Since students have different emotions while working in remote or applying self-directed learning, institutions can provide the opportunity to attend the classes physically upon their request. So, in a nutshell, the blended learning environment can be the best option to mitigate the challenges of ODL and, at the same time, connect students emotionally.
- c) For Research –The socio-cultural context of the teacher in this alternative mode of teaching is equally important as students. With the fact that digital immigrants are teaching digitally native students online, teachers will confront more challenges than students. So further research can be carried out by bringing the stories and experiences of teachers teaching in online and distance platforms. Their efforts and struggle to teach in a new platform can help for the policy inputs in their organization as well in the national policy.

d) For Policy Implication – There are many external challenges that online learners face due to the inaccessibility of the internet in remote places. In this regard, it contests the purpose of ODL for reaching learners irrespective of their place. The education policy of Nepal has to address these external issues too by increasing its internet bandwidth across the country. Further, the universities need to expand their contact centers for effective services to the students so that students from rural areas do not have to walk for hours and spend money in cyber shops. These contact centers can provide counselling, technical support and guidance in the overall ODL platform. The scholarships to the needy students in Nepali context is much needed. The government should make an investment and prioritize to mainstream the online and distance learning in higher education by providing internet subsidy to the learners, teachers and institutions. This will help in operationalize the well-developed Learning Management System (LMS) to ensure the quality education through student's better engagement and learning.

Contribution of the Research Work

After spending about six years in the rigorous research process, I believe that it should be worthy to contribute significantly to academia. This research is not only an asset to me but also a turning point in the academic career of my life just like any other PhD student. I believe that this study has made some knowledge contribution in the field of online and distance education. As I have emphasized the inclusion of the learner's perspective in the university system, it equally can be relevant in the other conventional method of learning. At the theoretical level, this study adds to the discourse on the motivation theories, identity construction and power relations based on the stories presented here. The stories contribute to providing multiple perspectives on how those theories are relevant and explain the aspects associated with learning.

Since Nepal is in the learning phase for online and distance education, this study contributes to academics to think about social, cultural, economic and gender aspects on student's motivation, identity and power dynamics.

At the end of the study, I have gained friends who are my research participants. There were times when they used to meet, message or call me seeking advice for their thesis work, learning and further plans for higher study. Though I may not be able to make a lot of differences in their life or too many people, during the research process, I have been able to contribute to some extent in extending my help and advice whenever they approached me.

In the pandemic due to Covid-19, many schools and colleges were closed for about 9-10 months. At that time, they opted for online learning classes. The educational leaders and teachers who knew about my research sought my advice. I was able to contribute by sharing ideas through webinars, digital workshops, meetings and communicating through social media. I have disseminated my knowledge at different national and international conferences. I have received invitations to share the knowledge I have gained from the study. Further, my journal articles would also be able to reach a wider audience. The recent pandemic at least in Nepal has made the stakeholders of education realize the importance of online education and therefore need more sharing on how to manage it well for the learner's wellbeing.

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