

Lifelong Learning in Nepal: Contexts and Prospects

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Abstract

Learning is a lifelong process. Many countries in the world, basically the European and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, have adopted it as an important vehicle for human development. They have also made it a policy agenda for meeting the human capital need for twenty first century for economic prosperity. However, the concept of lifelong learning is still new in many developing countries including Nepal. With UNESCO's efforts some policy documents have made some provisions to enhance non-formal education in Nepal; however, no specific provision has been made so far to enhance informal learning despite the fact that that has been proved as one of the vital constituents of lifelong learning. This article discusses some of the fundamental concepts attached with lifelong learning and also sheds some lights on the prospects of lifelong learning in developing countries, with particular focus on the Nepalese contexts.

Learning

One of the important reasons behind the development of human civilization to today's stage is human curiosity to learn. In the world of competition people who learn more are always moving ahead. We should be intellectually, physically and emotionally equipped to survive in this world that needs learning (Lengrand, 1975). In a sense the source of knowledge is learning and production of new knowledge has contributed to make this world further advanced and comfortable to live.

Learning, in general, is a process of acquiring knowledge or developing the ability to carry out new behaviours (Mazur, 2006). Normally, the word 'learning' is associated with school; nonetheless, much of human learning occurs outside the classroom, and people continue to learn throughout their lives. Along with the advent of 'lifelong learning' as a new paradigm in education, the notion of learning has changed. Now learning incorporates both school and out of school human endeavours that develop ability to carry out new behaviours.

Though learning and education are mutually inclusive nomenclatures, they give different significations when we take them in a specific context. If we talk about adult

learning and adult education, the former refers to acquisition of knowledge by an adult through his/he own will, without any imposition from outside agency. The latter, on the other hand, refers to the process of imparting knowledge through teaching (Encarta Dictionary, 2006). Hence adult education is something imposed by outside agency such as government of a particular country. Learning is a cognitive process internal to the learner that can occur 'both incidentally and in planned educational activities' while education is only the planned activities (Smith, 1996, 2001). But whether it is imposed or freely accepted, I argue that acquisition of knowledge is always at the discretion of learner. Even in school learning becomes informal when students internalize the content being taught that is what I believe is the stage of learning. Thus educating or teaching means providing background for learning. In a more general sense - in normal communication - it will not be a mistake to use the terms interchangeably.

Different types of learning have been discussed in the literature of educational psychology. In 1970s, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE) differentiated three types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal (Torres, 2001). There are other types of learning identified by psychologists and discussed in the literature. For example, UNESCO (1991, pp. 17-18 as cited in Torres 2001) identified a fourth type of learning - experiential learning. However, with the broad spectrum of these three types of learning - formal, non-formal and informal - all other variants of learning can be included. For example, experiential learning can be taken as a part of informal learning as it comes from experiences of individuals rather than from formal schooling (Regmi, 2009).

The lifelong learning perspective – the new paradigm of education – amalgamates those three types of learning as the fundamental constituents. Formal learning is typically provided by an education or training institute, structured and leads to certification. It is intentional from the learner's perspective. That is to say a student knows that learning is taking place when he/she is in school. But non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically doesn't lead to certification. However, it is structured. The non-formal education comprises out-of-school and continuing education, on-the-job training, etc.(Torres, 2001).

The third constituent, informal learning, results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. Unlike non-formal learning, informal learning is voluntary and self-directed. It results from personal exploration and discourse and may occur spontaneously in everyday life situations, within the family circle and neighbourhood (SEEQUEL, 2004). It is

not structured. Typically, it doesn't lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional or incidental/random (UNESCO, 2005).

Educationists and progenitors of learning theories wonder on how real learning takes place. Which form of education – formal, non-formal, or informal – is better for learning? They carried out a number of lab experiments and propounded many theories. Almost all of them focused on formal education. For example, B F Skinner and Ivan Pavlov tried to define human learning by showing the connection between stimulus and response. The implications of those theories were made in classroom teaching because, in the past, advertently or inadvertently, we focused on formal education.

The importance of non-formal and informal learning is increasing these days. There are several factors behind the burgeoning importance of these two facets of lifelong learning. Change in the field of information delivery, political awareness, globalization, etc. put a demand to acquire new knowledge to the people of all ages irrespective of their involvement in formal education (Lengrand, 1975). With the acceptance of human capital theory as a panacea to both developing and developed countries to fulfill their need for economic prosperity motivated and also compelled people to acquire knowledge so as to fulfill the national need of human capital. As societies became complex the members of these societies felt the need of getting more and more dynamic. For this, schools systems became unable to cope with political, economic, and social realities, and became unable to meet the basic learning needs of children, youths and adults (Torres, 2001). Lifelong learning emerged as a national policy in education in the twenty first century.

Lifelong learning

The inadequacy of formal education to fulfill the burgeoning learning needs and the subsequent tussling among formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning has culminated in the emergence of a new form of learning known as 'Lifelong Learning' (Regmi, 2009). Though the term seems to be new, the concept is not new at all. The concept existed with different names such as continuing education, recurrent education, adult learning, lifelong education, and distance education, and often "these terms are used interchangeably" (Abukari, 2005, p. 146), however, in specific context they give slightly different connotations. For example, adult learning doesn't include the learning that takes place at school and the knowledge and skills acquired before a child goes to school. The notion of lifelong learning includes all forms of learning that occurs between two extremes stages - cradle and grave - of human life.

A number of changes have occurred with the changing paradigm of education or adaptation of lifelong learning perspective as a major drive of educational policy today. Firstly, different countries in the world are taking lifelong learning as a best educational policy. The educational policies are converging towards similar goal. In many countries – small or big, rich or poor –“lifelong learning has emerged as a potent way of framing policy and practice.” (Edwards & Usher, 2001, p. 275).The major agencies to harmonized educational policies towards lifelong learning are some of the international organization - G8, the ILO, OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank- and regional organizations - APEC, ASEAN, and the European Union (ILO, 2003).

Secondly, though lifelong learning has been a new catchword in educational policy dialogue, it is not a uniform or unitary theme within policy. It has emerged at differing times and in different nations over the last years, with differing emphases (Nicoll & Fejes, 2008).According to Edwards (2008), there have been many tracings and translations of the discourses of lifelong learning with a multiplicity of meanings. Like the terms postmodern, “lifelong learning with its current concern for developing human capital means for some an abandonment of the traditional significance for education of the struggles for personal development, justice and social equality”(p. 21).

Thirdly, the process of acquisition of knowledge has transcended the boundary created by notions of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Learning has been viewed as a “lifespan endeavour, whether in the formal, non-formal or informal mode, to enrich the quality of life of the learner as an individual and of the general community as a whole” (Abukari, 2005, p. 143).

According to European Commission, lifelong learning is “all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment related perspective (Thomas, 2003, p. 4 as cited in Abukari, 2005, p. 143). Lifelong learning accommodates the global provision of education and skills on the basis of equality of opportunity, inclusiveness, emphasizing the importance of key qualifications, basic skills and primary knowledge (Olssen, 2008).

Some scholars have associated the ideology of Foucault with lifelong learning in terms of power and governmentality. According to Edwards (2008), in Foucault’s terms, “wherever and whenever learning takes place, those learners are required to bring forth their subjectivities for disciplining so that they can become a particular type of person”(Edwards, 2008, p. 25). It advertently indicates that lifelong learning crosses the boundary of formal education and encompasses both non-formal and informal modes of learning.

The developed countries such as America, Canada and the member states of European Union (EU) have already accepted lifelong learning as a suitable vehicle to ameliorate knowledge economy. The developing countries like Nepal are also in need of making lifelong learning ‘a policy agenda’. According to Torres (2001), “the acceptance of lifelong learning as a need for all and as an organizing principle of education and learning system in the 21st century applies both developed and developing countries” (p. 1). Similarly, Kokosalakis (2000), an editor of European Journal of Education, claims “lifelong learning has been a fundamental goal of education policies, both at the national and international level” (p. 25).

Human beings face many challenges in different modes of their lives. The complexity in peoples’ lives brought by the development in the field of science and technology, population growth, explosion of new knowledge, market competitiveness, etc. have compelled them to learn new things and update their existing knowledge repertoire. For this, they need to keep their mind unlocked throughout their lives (Regmi, 2009). The importance of lifelong learning is growing because of this obligatory necessity of human being living in the postmodern era. The marvellous past of formal education is fading away and the legacy of non-formal and informal learning once shadowed is getting revitalized.

There are a couple reasons behind the importance of non-formal and informal learning over formal learning. Firstly, the heart of lifelong learning lies in the non-formal and informal learning. The field of formal learning or the so-called classical field of learning shares little portion of lifelong learning continuum – from school to the university education. “The classical field of learning was formed by closed institution, that were to be attended in the first or third quarter of the lifespan, lifelong learning declares any place and any time as suitable for learning” (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006, p. 457).

Secondly, formal education system is so structured and rigid that it can be seen as repressive, too costly, generally cognitive and not able to support peoples’ attitudes to becoming active lifelong learners (SEEQUEL, 2004). Actually, human learning is not so structured. It happens without any plan or to say in a more technical term, human learning needs no curricula, no contents and no behavioural objectives as specified by formal education system.

Notwithstanding the contribution made by formal education system we should make some changes in our educational planning and practice. Due to the rapid change in the socio-economic status and widening use of technology, there is a need of reform in educational system. The importance of lifelong learning lies in the fact that it refers directly both to socioeconomic and technological change (Kokosalakis, 2000). The very structure of

education needs to be changed along with the changing trend in lifelong education. The formal learning system needs to be restructured so as to make it useful for enhancing lifelong learning.

It seems that informal and non-formal learning are more important than formal learning for enhancing lifelong learning. However, “within the lifelong learning framework formal education, non-formal education, and informal education appear interwovened in the learning itineraries of individuals, groups and societies” (Torres, 2001, p. 4)

The autonomy of formal education in today’s knowledge world has put it in such a height that undermining it would lead towards systemic chaos in education (Regmi, 2009). The possible solution for this problem would be acknowledging all of them. The notion of non-formal and informal learning can be fostered with the help of formal schooling system so far we have developed as the most vital social institution. The system of acknowledging or validating the knowledge and skills acquired in informal and non-formal setting to the formal schooling system could be a best probable way for the maturation of the concept of lifelong learning in its infancy. Tuschling and Christoph (2006) claim that “the whole development of lifelong learning can be, in fact, described as a formalization of non-formal education and non-formalization of formal education” (p. 460).

There may be a suspicion that whether the spread of lifelong learning would bring any negative effect in the existing system of formal education. According to Kraus (2001) “lifelong learning intends no disorganization or dismantling of national educational system; instead a flexibilization of the given framework of education” (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006, p. 460). Now let me introduce how lifelong learning is making sense in the existing educations system of Nepal.

Nepal and its educational status

Though tiny in the globe Nepal deserves a great diversity in race, culture, and language. Scads of intangible heritages embedded in the ontology of these races, cultures and languages are invaluable assets of this diversified nation. These diversities are treasures and prerequisites for boosting up educational level in myriad ways. Ironically, this racial mosaic has been a daunting challenge due to the lack of a concrete and up-to-date educational policy.

Because of fragile education system, this country lags behind in different development indicators enlisting itself in the list of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) in the world. The Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) value is 32.1% and it ranks 99th among 135 countries for which the index has been calculated (UNDP, 2009). Economy is stagnant leaving more than a

quarter of its population below poverty line. Several studies have shown that the large majority of the people are living in wretched poverty.

Moreover, there is a direct cause-effect relationship between current education system and the vicious circle of poverty in Nepal. UNDP's 20th Human Development Report ranked Nepal as a country posting huge gains in human development over the last 40 years. HDI more than doubled for Nepal from 0.22 in 1990 to 0.50 in 2010. Among 135 countries Nepal emerged in third position achieving HDI since 1970 (UNDP, 2010). However, "Nepal is still a poor country, with enormous scope to improve human development. It ranks 138th of 169 countries in the HDI. Large disparities in school attendance and the quality of education persist, particularly between urban and rural areas and across ethnic groups" (UNDP, 2010).

Formal learning in Nepal

The formal education system that developed under the auspices of modern science gave less space to flourish indigenous knowledge that propagates through informal learning. The formal school curricula were designed for a mainstream and largely urban populace. It became a very limited utility for remote rural communities where more than 80 percent people live. Most rural children failed to adapt these systems and, as a result, rural communities endured high illiteracy rates and poor educational achievement (Horsthemke, 2004 and Bhattachan & Chemjong, 2006).

Nepal's commitment for Education for All by 2015 has been revealed in different conferences and seminars and it has been signatory of various conventions and declarations. It has achieved some notable results as well. For example, the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) at primary level reached 86.8% in 2009 which was only 67.5% in 1995. The overall enrolment at Primary level in 2009 reached 4.90 million from 4.03 million in 2004. This is a 22% increase as compared to the total enrolment in 2004 – the first year of EFA 2004-2009 Plan. The annual enrolment growth rate is 4.0% (Ministry of Education Nepal, 2009).

Nonetheless, such progress has been overshadowed by low retention and completion rates (UNESCO, 2005). One of the estimations from UNESCO shows that the survival rate up to Grade Five is 79% and completion rate of the Primary education cycle is 55% (UIS, 2008). About 17% children repeat classes at Primary level, and Gross Intake Rate (GIR) is 70%.

UNESCO in 2006 had found that 1.4 million school age children and adolescents are out of school in Nepal. There are still 61% girls out of school. The promotion and repetition rates in Grade One are 63.5% and 26.5% respectively. The promotion rates in the upper

grades are better as compared to the Grade One. The overall survival rate to Grade Five is 77.9%, with 77.8% for boys and 79.8% for girls.(Ministry of Education Nepal, 2009).According to Nepal Labour Force Survey, 2008 the overall literacy rate is about 55.6% of total adult population (15+) with about 70.7% male and 43.3% female literacy(Ministry of Education, Nepal, 2010).

In Nepal, caste disparities are even larger than wealth and gender disparities (UNESCO, 2010). According to 2001 Census (after that no census has been taken) the literacy among low caste people (known as Dalits), that constitute about 12.82 % of total population, is only 24.2% (Acharya, 2004). The share of Dalit enrolment is 20.0% at Primary level, 12.6% at Lower Secondary, 8.6% at Secondary and 4.2% at Higher Secondary level (Ministry of Education Nepal, 2009).

There is a great disparity among different ecological belts in terms of literacy in Nepal. The highest enrolment rate is in the Kathmandu Valley (127.1%) and the lowest in the Mountain eco-belt (56.9%). The Hill and the Terai eco-belts have 62.3% and 63.7% Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) respectively. An analysis of GER into Early Childhood Development (ECD) by district shows that there are 37 districts (among 75) with a low GER compared to the 66.2% national average (Ministry of Education Nepal, 2009).

These figures clearly indicate that Nepal is not going to meet the Education for All (EFA) goals in the stipulated time. Neither will it accomplish the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The most challenging figure for this would be the low adult literacy (i.e. 57.9% in 2008) rate with about 50% illiteracy among females. There is still high female youth (age 15-24) illiteracy (i.e. 25%) rate (The World Bank, 2008).

Non-formal and informal learning in Nepal

Despite, comparatively, substantial investment in terms of time, money and human resources to the development of formal education system, a large part of rural populace lacks access to formal education and the goal of mass schooling has been almost unachievable. This homogeneous type of education has not been so fruitful for the diverse society. The good education for a country like Nepal remains a key and a changing issue, deeply related to context, culture, and ideology (Torres, 2001).

If we go back to the history of Nepal, in ancient period (900 BC – 880 AD) and medieval period (880 to 1768 AD), education was almost non-formal and informal (Panta, 2006). But due to encroachment of Western education system, non-formal education remained an inferior complement of formal education and informal learning was not regarded

as the part of learning at all. Again, with the birth of lifelong learning as a dominant paradigm of education the need for non-formal education has again appeared in both occidental and oriental education systems including the education system of modern Nepal.

The history of non-formal education is about half a century old in Nepal. The activities related to educational expansion were conducted as a strategy in 1951 for the national development (NRC-NFE, n. d.), nevertheless, all these endeavours became systematic and got policy back up only with an introduction of First Five-Year Plan in 1956. These activities which were initiated by the then Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) remained limited to literacy programs until 1960s. After this, other ministries like those of Agriculture and Health, Panchayat and Local Development, etc. carried out various non-formal education programmes with literacy as one of the important components (Pande, 1989 as cited in NRC-NFE, n. d.).

In 1971, the National Education System Plan stated that adult education would be launched in two forms; (a) literacy extension program and (b) functional adult education program (Chitrakar, 2007).

Most adult education and functional adult literacy programs in the past have focused on 'rural development'. A pilot project known as "Education for Rural Development" in Seti Zone had included a major component on functional literacy. Seti project left a number of legacies to provide functional literacy to rural populace. Some of them are out-of-school program, flexible schooling program, women's literacy program, and community learning center (Chitrakar, 2007).

Since the implementation of Seti Project, a number of national and international organizations have been supporting Nepal government to establish and operate various literacy/non-formal education programs including Community Learning Centers (CLCs)(NRC-NFE, n. d.). Since 1982 CLC have been a regional agenda in the Asia-Pacific region along with the initiation of Community Learning Centre Project in 1982 within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Program of Education for All (APPEAL).

So far as the status of informal learning is concerned, despite the emergence of non-formal and informal learning as the valid process of learning (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006), still, there is no provision of recognizing informal learning in Nepal. Neither the government of Nepal has made any systematic interventions to enhance informal learning including indigenous knowledge and skills. There is not any systematic provision for providing different learning opportunities for those who have not been able to join formal schooling (Regmi, 2009).

Prospects of lifelong learning in Nepal

The issue of lifelong learning for all has become increasingly important in Asia and the Pacific region, as globalization and economic integration are making learning and training policies even more important (ILO, 2003).

When we take non-formal and informal modes of learning as the vital constituents of lifelong learning then, it is obvious that we have to give an equivalent parity to all these three modes of learning. It needs a metamorphosis in the existing policies and practices in education structure of any country and one of the fundamental metamorphoses could be the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning which comes as a major prospect of lifelong learning in Nepal (Regmi, 2009).

Nepal as a developing country is in need of developing a mechanism for providing opportunities to recognize and validate the learning outcomes that come through non-formal and informal means in order to create an environment conducive for supporting lifelong learning. When informal and non-formal learning outcomes are validated it opens up the ways forward for encouraging people to be involved in making learning a lifelong process. Besides the prospects discussed above, the environment of lifelong learning may have the following prospects, particularly, in the case of Nepal.

Firstly, professionals who have a great deal of understanding and experiences in their specific fields need an environment to update their expertise along with new discoveries in their fields. For example, a professor of psychology who has been teaching for several years is in need of getting acquainted with new frontiers in the field so as to instruct his/her students as per the need of 21st century and involve himself/herself in the cutting edge of research and innovation.

The teachers, including both teaching in schools and universities of Nepal, who are often blamed as old fashioned for their reliance on old and outdated notes, are in need of such and such environment that not only provides opportunities to update their knowledge but also a strong mechanism to recognize and validate their non-formal and informal learning and experiences.

Secondly, because of economic and family problems many youths drop their formal education and are compelled to pursue low-grade jobs. If an environment conducive for learning at their workplace and at home is provided, then they can re-enter into formal education with work experience and the knowledge and skill acquired non-formally and informally. For this, the country needs a mechanism that provides recognition and validation

to such learning so that they can be admitted to the higher level than the level at which they had dropped.

Thirdly, the lifelong learning environment can be equally beneficial to employers too. Old employees are the big assets of any company; however, because of their dilapidated knowledge, some of them have been nothing more than decrepit old employees waiting for gratuity and pension. The only best possible means to revitalize their strength and to avail their precious experiences is to provide an environment for lifelong learning. It will have twofold advantages - it will ameliorate the company's performance with the revitalized strengths of experienced employees; and it will provide economic gain by reducing the amount of money that goes for pension.

Fourthly, the environment of lifelong learning will be a benefit for young graduates hunting for jobs in the market. Along with passing time, it is obvious that, knowledge rusts. For this it needs opportunities to refresh their knowledge and skills. If an environment of such kind is created then the young graduates can strengthen their calibre and potential. It will increase both employability and adoptability in new job positions. It will also decrease some of the social problems that are caused due to rampant unemployment among youths in Nepal.

Finally, it is a well-known fact that learning is a lifelong process. Each and every event - no matter how jiffy they are – of our life teaches us something useful for us and our society. But the learning achievement remains invisible, implicit, unsystematic and non-transferable until and unless it is recognized and validated. The environment of lifelong learning can make such learning visible, explicit, systematic and transferable. Moreover, it becomes functional not only to an individual but also for entire human community. Therefore, the most important prospect of lifelong learning environment for all communities including Nepal will be the realization of the importance of learning throughout one's life by individuals themselves.

Some of the policy documents of Nepal such as School Sector Reform Plan (GON-MOES, September, 2007), Three Year Interim Education Plan (TYIEP, 2007-2010), Non-Formal Education Policy (NFEPE, 2007), and Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework (GON-MOES, 2006b) have talked about recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which can be taken as a positive presage for opening up new avenues for lifelong learning in Nepal.

The School Sector Reform (SSR) - an ongoing mega project in Nepal - has brought an issue of mainstreaming the students who have acquired knowledge through non-formal means into a formal system. "Non-formal students can be mainstreamed through school tests.

Alternative and formal schooling will be made compatible to permit students to complete their education through either system" (GON-MOES, September, 2007, p. 15). This provision, though not yet implemented in practice, can be a milestone to foster the chances of providing lifelong learning environment to Nepalese people of all kinds.

Similarly, The Three Year Interim Education Plan (2007-2010) of Government of Nepal states "the provision of entering into formal education from non-formal and vocational and technical education and vice versa will be made through equivalency test." The Plan also aims to certify indigenous skills and provide opportunity for higher education (GON-MOES, 2007a). It will be another big achievement, especially regarding the proliferation of indigenous knowledge and skill, which has survived only through informal learning in different shadowed nook and cranny of the country.

Conclusion

Human civilization is the outcome of human curiosity to learn. Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge or developing the ability to carry out new behaviours. There are many types of learning; however, all forms of learning may come under three broad categories: formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

Because of burgeoning human curiosity to learn boosted by the complexity and competitiveness in the world formal learning has become inadequate. With the emergence of the concept of lifelong learning the legacy of non-formal and informal learning that were the genesis of human civilization is being revitalized.

The only valid means of educational attainment in Nepal is formal schooling. Though there is very poor performance in comparison to other developed countries, Nepal has made some progresses in terms of increase in enrolment rate and decrease in dropout rate. However, due to low adult and women literacy, the attempts so far made have got only partial success.

There is very tiny amount of investment in non-formal education but achievement is far below than expectation. There is no provision of encouraging and recognizing informal learning including indigenous knowledge and skill which are the most important potential for the sustainable economic growth of the country.

With increasing focus on lifelong learning by developed countries and international organizations, some symptoms of creating lifelong learning environment have been seen in some policy level document of Nepal. However, the concept of lifelong learning has not got maturity and many people who are in need of it are not aware of it (Regmi, 2009).

The provision of lifelong learning may have many prospects for a developing country like Nepal. Firstly, it will create an environment to update the knowledge and understanding of professionals so as to make their performance more effective. Secondly, it will provide opportunities to re-enter into formal education for the youths who once had been compelled to terminate their studies due to family or economic problems. Thirdly, it will provide strengths to employers by providing opportunities to refresh and update the expertise of old employees. Fourthly, it will provide opportunities for young graduates hunting for jobs in the market to increase their employability by freshening and widening their knowledge and skill. Finally, it will create an environment at all levels that learning is a lifelong process and it should be taken as an obligatory fact for the development of individuals, their society and their country.

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