Digital Inclusion Struggles: Virtual Learning Experiences of English Education Students at Tribhuvan University, Nepal

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ABSTRACT. The widespread adoption of digital pedagogy has brought the issue of digital inclusion to the forefront. Many the learners struggle with limited digital skills amidst vast digitalization of education, often find themselves lost in the process. Such challenges become more vocal when the conventional classes are suspended and online mode only becomes the way out to teaching and learning This study explores the lived experiences of university English education students on their experiences of online education especially at the time when conventional classes were suspended and digital inequalities exposed to the surface. The paper explores their struggle to cope with basic digital skills for learning the curricula set for face-to-face classes. I used Heideggerian phenomenology to explore lived experiences, viewing meaning as co-constructed through existence and context. Data collection began with informal Facebook chats with three teachers and eight students, leading to in-depth interviews with three Master's students in English education and reflective essays from two

others. From the study, I found that the shift to virtual classes brought stress to the students, and they struggled not only to achieve their curricular goals but also to the emancipation from the digital divide. Digital inequality, which emerges from the students' attitudinal factors, their economic background, and geographical location, was a key determining factor for their academic achievement during the time of concern and drew a clear demarcation between haves and have-nots in terms of digital access.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Advancement of technology has considerably affected various aspects of human life, including education. In particular, previously unheard-of progress in digital technology has significantly equipped education with tools to enhance teaching learning (Haleem et al., 2022). Consequently, digital literacy has emerged as a critical skill for both learners as well as teachers. However, this shift from conventional to digitally assisted pedagogy has resulted a divide between people who are digitally literate and who are not leaving the latter underprivileged in numerous teaching learning as well as other contexts where digital media serves as the channel of communication (Lathabhavan & Griffiths, 2020; Thelma et al., 2024). This divide - which highlights disparity between societies and people, popularly known as digital divide (Heemskerk et al., 2005; Bon et al., 2024) is a persistent issue the Global South including Nepal, where majority of population reside in the rural areas still facing the issues like low affordability to purchase digital facilities (Prasain, 2022; Tan, 2024), frequent power cut, and poor internet connection (Lamichhane, 2024). However, others opine that the situation have been largely improved in the recent days (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017; Bhatt, 2021; Kemp, 2014). This interplay brings the issues of digital inclusion and exclusion to the forefront in the educational landscape which gained prominent attention when it suffered an unprecedented blow due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the second week of August 2020.

In Nepal also, the relentless storm of the global pandemic caused schools and universities close abruptly, confining nearly 8.8 million children to their homes (UNESCO, 2020). This never-before emergency that affected the everyday fabric of life along with education left no conventional ways to resume classes such as building temporary learning centers as in the time of Gorkha quakes (Basnet, 2020) because of the restrictions posed by social distancing protocols. This situation had already created a compulsion for educators worldwide to switch swiftly to virtual classrooms, marking a paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches, making necessary transition to existing curriculum in the changed scenario in many countries (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Crawford, et al., 2020).

However, the universal adoption of virtual teaching abruptly was not an easy job, as in many countries of the Global South, such as Nepal, the shift exposed limitations of the system aggravated by internet accessibility, limited

infrastructure, unprepared curricula, and untrained teachers at the time of these natural transitions (Lamichhane, 2023). As a teacher, I also began teaching online, where, in the early days I faced some issues. When I discussed with my colleagues and students the situation of online teaching-learning, it became evident that the shift was not merely a change in medium but a complex journey on a road full of practical hurdles. The problems seemed common.

The traditional teaching methodologies and students' and teachers' technological know-how clashed in the changed landscapes. The chaos in the initial days with teachers struggling to schedule classes, students striving with the intricacies of joining online sessions, the parents managing the online sessions, and new etiquettes of virtual classes exposed digital inequality to the surface. One of my colleagues said that he could not learn to share the slide properly and was lost in every session so he found a way to email his document to one of his students who shared it on his behalf and he just read it out. One of my students said she mostly missed her first lecture as she had to walk uphill for fifteen minutes because she did not have a broadband connection at her home and the mobile network was poor there. On the other hand, on the hilltop, she could use the Wi-Fi network available at a community school. Meanwhile, a boy from Khotang district became viral on social media who used to climb up a tree to catch up with his online classes as the network was rather good there and there was news that people had to climb up trees to make phone calls (Setopati, 2015; Mirmire Online, 2019; Online Khabar, 2019). These challenges unfolded against a backdrop of socioeconomic disparities, echoing the broader narrative of the digital divide and affirming digital inclusion as a social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Moreover, the virtual classroom experiences highlighted several issues affecting the academic performance of students and associated inequalities, especially affecting public school students in under-resourced regions (Nepal Economic Forum, 2022). In unison, the psychological trauma on both students and parents emerged as a concerning undercurrent. Studies revealed heightened levels of anxiety associated with the uncertainties of the pandemic, online learning modalities, and the broader socio-economic context, underscoring the urgent need of digital inclusion (Zhang et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Dangi & George, 2020). The situation highlights the dual impact of online education: it exacerbated existing educational inequalities and contributed to psychological stress among students and parents. Thus, the urgent need for digital inclusion is clear, as it is essential for bridging the educational divide and supporting the well-being of both students and their families during times of crisis.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of university English education students with online learning during the suspension of conventional classes,

focusing on their struggles with digital skills and the impact of digital inequalities on curriculum engagement.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs the Heideggerian phenomenological perspective as its research methodology. To implement this approach, the researchers first adopt Heidegger's philosophical framework, which situates human existence within the world and emphasizes interpretive inquiry. This method rejects bracketing, begins with a priori categories, and culminates in the emergence of themes (Zahavi, 2019).

Applying this methodology requires several key steps. First, the researchers must engage in interpretive inquiry grounded in Heideggerian philosophy. Second, a historical critique is necessary to reveal how the subject matter has been historically obscured (Heidegger, 2005). Third, the study should employ a qualitative research design incorporating in-depth interviews, field notes, and reflexive journaling to collect and triangulate data using an inductive approach (Bernard, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The primary research tool should be interpretive phenomenological interviews, enabling researchers to explore participants' lived experiences within their real-world contexts (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, data analysis involves multiple readings of transcripts, systematic note-taking, and thematic coding, with themes consolidated into three or four major categories for narrative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013). Heideggerian phenomenology not only facilitates the identification of universal patterns within participants' experiences (Willig & Billin, 2012) but also enables the development of deeper theoretical insights through the interpretive synthesis of narrative, analytic, and reflective voices (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Darroch & Silvers, 1982).

This article examines the lived experiences of Tribhuvan University M.Ed. English Education students in their virtual learning journeys, focusing on the challenges they face in achieving digital inclusion – an essential form of social capital – amid the shifting educational landscape. To explore these issues, I employed phenomenology, a qualitative research methodology that seeks to uncover and interpret the meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Fochtman, 2008). Drawing from my own emic experiences, I investigated this phenomenon through a Heideggerian phenomenological lens, which posits that human meanings are co-constructed through our existence, collective experiences, background, and the world we inhabit (Byrne, 2001, pp. 830-831).

For this study, participant engagement and data collection were initiated through informal chats on Facebook with three teachers and teacher educators, along with eight university students. The conversations were strategically oriented toward the study problem. Subsequently, three participants were selected for in-depth interviews, all Master's level students specializing in English education from a

Tribhuvan University campus located in the Kathmandu valley. Two additional Master's level students in English education were asked to submit reflective essays, further enriching the study with diverse perspectives. I followed up with the participant as the situation normalized and kept memos of their responses too. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, I concealed their real names and other identifying details and assigned them pseudonyms (Participant-A, Participant-B, Participant-C, Participant-D, and Participant-E). Employing thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) I identified 153 codes from the transcription of the in-depth interviews recorded via video conferencing and the written reflections of the respondents. These codes were then refined and consolidated into 35 basic themes using an Excel sheet. Subsequently, the basic themes were regrouped into 12 organizing themes, which were further condensed into four global themes for the final analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I have reviewed theoretical bases of digital inclusion and exclusion along with some empirical studies.

Digital Pedagogy: Navigating the Pressures of Forced Necessity

Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 guarantees the right to education for people. Along the same lines, the government assures public expenditure in this sector (MoE, 2016). It allocated 11.64% of the total budget to education for the fiscal year 2019/20 (ICAN, 2020). Similarly, in the fiscal year 2023/24, a budget of 196.89 billion rupees (11.27% of the national budget) was allotted for education which exceeds 910 million rupees more than the year before, despite a contraction in the national budget as a whole (Edusanjal, 2023). Besides this, there are billions of dollars in funding from donor agencies every year. The government received immediate funds to respond to the COVID-19-stricken education sector. In the year 2020/21 Nepal signed a 29-million-dollar agreement for Nepal's COVID-19 response with the World Bank (World Bank, 2020). These initiatives were taken to ensure digital transformation of the education sector.

The COVID-19 outbreak affected around 958 thousand children who were set to begin their school in the session 2020/21 along with another nine million students whose classes were suspended (UNESCO, 2020), prompting authorities to explore alternative modes for teaching and learning by conducting distance classes via radio, television, mobile phones, or online platforms (Burns, 2020). The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) issued the Guidelines to Facilitate Students' Learning 2020 on May 31, 2020. Aligned with the National Education Policy 2019, these guidelines outlined provisions for formal-informal, alternative, and open modes of education (MoEST, 2020).

The MoEST invested 70 million rupees for the operation of online, and other alternative classes, while the country's leading cellular operators announced some special data packages aimed at the students at discounted prices. Despite these efforts, the shift to a new mode of instruction aided by technologies posed a risk of widening the digital divide, given that internet access remained a luxury for the majority (Dahal, 2020). Household expenditure data (CBS/UNDP, 2016) revealed that over 53.8% went to food, 12.9% to rent, and only 4% to education. In 2021/22, 94% of households had electricity, but around 10% lacked it. Access to technology necessities remained limited, with 23.4% having a radio and 55.8% owning a television (CBS/UNICEF, 2019). Internet penetration was at 71.52%, with 15.33% using fixed broadband and 55.39% using mobile data. However, rural areas faced challenges with 2G or 3G data, insufficient for synchronous e-learning platforms during the lockdown (Prasain, 2020).

In the present situation, the Internet is a necessity, not a commodity. During the lockdown, access to ICT became compulsory for a child as a pen or paper. But it was another face of the fact that for the majority of children, this was still a 'yet-to-be-materialized' dream (Goldschmidt, 2020) besides the fact that the consumption of the Internet has grown rapidly in the last few years. As physical classes were suspended for a long time due to COVID-19, the internet became a dire necessity of education, and those people who had no access to it had to suffer. As all the families could not provide appropriate homeschooling or access to technology to aid online learning during lockdown situations, such vulnerable families suffer from the digital divide (Lathabhavan & Griffiths, 2020). The virtual model of learning was least emphasized in the country until the pandemic outbreak. When it was suddenly introduced, it was likely to create chaos among the learners, educators, and guardians. Most of the teachers prefer lectures on ours. They read the faces of children and modify their teaching techniques accordingly. The virtual mode has disrupted the chemistry between the students and the teachers (Nepal & Atreya, 2020).

Education in Emergencies: Lessons Learned

An emergency can be both – natural, and manmade. During the time of emergency, education also falls under a vulnerable sector that needs to be addressed properly. There may be a discontinuation of children's school-going and formal classes. Therefore, emergency-period-teaching requires to encompass both formal as well as non-formal modes (such as life-saving and life-sustaining skills). However, there is a need for sustainable policy and long-term planning that could address the damage caused by the situation (UNESCO, 2006). Emergency conditions may cause people to face long-term serial disruption and psychosocial damage. It is not surprising that emergencies of any kind, whether those brought on by disasters, conflicts, health crises, or economic crisis ramifications, have a direct effect on people's ability to access education. Many

students could be cut out of the teaching-learning process and subjected to psychological suffering as a result (Creed & Morpeth, 2014).

It is a challenging task to continue education in an emergency, mostly when the formal classes are suspended and the students are displaced. Moreover, the primary concern of the stakeholders in such situations is not the formal education but the non-formal one which includes life-saving knowledge and skills (UNHCR, 2015). Most of the governments of the world reacted likewise after the cases of the Coronavirus spread pandemically. In Nepal, hygiene and health promotion practice in schools, ECD centers, and non-formal classes was the preliminary concern for the COVID-19 preparedness and response plan (UN Nepal, 2020). The initial failure to estimate the gravity of the pandemic and the duration of active infection left the formal education sector in an indecisive state.

Before the outset of the pandemic, Nepal had already experienced a grave emergency– the 2015 earthquake when almost one million children were displaced from the schools, which damaged almost 24 thousand classrooms, leaving no place for them to read (Richardson, 2015). At that time, schools were demolished and classes were destroyed. After the normalization of the situation, transitional learning centers were made of bamboo, wood, and tarpaulin, and classes were resumed (BBC, 2015; Basnet, 2020). Similar measures have been suggested for the students of Bangladesh, a country prone to natural disasters like floods and Cyclones (Global Education Cluster/NIRAPAD, nd.). However, the COVID-19 caused an emergency of higher gravity as social distancing became a key protocol, and mobility was restricted, leaving no possibility of physical classes. This situation served as a lesson for the educators and policymakers worldwide, underlining the need for an effective response to emergencies when resuming suspended classes proved challenging. In such circumstances, digital pedagogy emerged as a panacea.

Digital Literacy: Challenge to Bridge the Divide

After the World Wide Web was made public, it brought an epochal shift in various aspects of human concern. It has replaced physical proximity and brought everyone we wish to communicate to our virtual neighborhood. It influenced media, administration, business, and education as well. It offered more freedom to the writers to write without the consent of their editors, and to students, it has brought opportunities to learn without the help and guidance of their teachers. In students, the impact of the internet was even more solidifying. Internet usage has changed students' learning ways from traditional linear patterns, according to Prenskya (as cited in Richardson, 2010), which presents a challenge to teachers used to traditional teaching methods. This change increases the possibility that the educational system won't be able to adapt to the changing needs of its students. Though there are recent efforts to enhance digital literacy among teachers and the younger generation is open to ICT technologies, the digital

divide persists due to financial limitations, social and family contexts, and remoteness. This gap has become a notable form of social inequality in modern societies (Korupp & Szydlik, 2005).

There are two opposing views regarding the role of ICT in education. Some argue that embedding the internet and interactive multimedia can improve teaching and motivate students to learn. They assert that this act favours disadvantaged students by providing equal opportunity to access a vast bulk of information, which can help them improve their academic achievement and contribute to the reduction of social inequalities in education. On the contrary, some people argue that ICT may increase inequality in education as the digital divide between computer haves and have-nots, between computer literate and illiterate, and between people interested and uninterested in using the internet (Heemskerk, Brink, Volmanw, & ten Dam, 2005).

The former argument supports the view that ICT enhances the formation of social capital - a positive product of human interaction - and strengthens individuals (Huo, 2013; Kenton, 2019). It is more precisely known as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words, to membership in a group" such as a school or a club (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). It is very often as effective as physical capital (tools, machines, resources), and as an individual's human capital (individual's skills and capabilities) for it is also both input to or output of the development process and has both negative and positive effects on the other types of capitals, and, it is more long-lasting than others (Bebbington & Perreault, 1999).

Further, social capital is "convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). On the other hand, the latter perspective views ICT as a source of the digital divide, creating inequality based on access to technology. This divide, especially in terms of computer and internet access, is recognized as a societal issue requiring concerted efforts from politicians, government agencies, corporate leaders, journalists, and educators to promote equitable technology use in education (Damarin, 2002).

Digital inequalities are not only the features of the third world but also those of the developed societies in the world. Such a divide has globally even challenged ambitious ICT projects to equip citizens with digital skills, derailing the project outputs into unexpected complications from their predetermined goals. It is because most of such technology projects focus on providing hardware and software, paying little attention to the human and social system that "must change for technology" to make a difference (Warschauer, 2003). The divide is subject to aggravate when the policymakers ignore the existing socioeconomic inequality in society. Moreover, the technical competence of the target population is another factor responsible for the widening divide as handling smartphones, computers, and the internet requires specific skills, at least more than 'push-and-go'

applications (Korupp & Szydlik, 2005). Therefore, for the mitigation of digital inequalities, focus on increasing digital literacy is as important as the development of digital infrastructures.

The emergence of informational capitalism (Castells, 2010), in which the entire economic and political system is controlled by information mechanisms, has left digitally deprived people behind in the race to gain power. A class enjoys the luxury of artificial intelligence, and others struggle for basic connectivity (Viveret, 2001). This is one of the fundamental characteristics of the digital divide when the deprived ones suffer from access discrepancies.

Results and Discussion

This section includes the findings drawn from the analysis and interpretation of data retrieved from participants.

Finding a Way Out Amidst Struggles for Digital Inclusion

Learners' struggle for learning was doubled in comparison to the usual time when they were away from the real classes. Their struggle to learn the given curricula was on one hand, and the other, there was the learning of the virtual classroom etiquettes. Further poor digital infrastructure was also a challenge that aggravated the situation. The physical classes were suspended after the COVID-19 outbreak and the university and campuses closed. Almost after a month or longer time of complete closure, the university decided to resume classes using digital platforms. Students were summoned to join the online classes, which was a new experience for them. Participants said they sought to learn to participate in the class by doing. The poor internet quality spoiled classes; however, people kept struggling to join it. In rural areas, wired broadband or optical fiber connections are still not available. To join their classes, people used mobile data, which falls under the slower category in the global ranking (Rijal, 2019). Participant-A said that she could not join the class from her home because there was poor telecom coverage, she went to the local secondary school, at the top of a hill, and borrowed the Internet to join the class. In the same way, Participant D, who submitted a reflective essay, wrote that he walked half an hour uphill to his abandoned house at Lek, grassland up to the hill, where he could connect 3G mobile data easily.

They learned collaboration in times of crisis. In the beginning, it was very difficult for some people who could not catch up with the new technology easily. They learned to operate the applications from their co-learners. Participant - A said, "I downloaded the Zoom app several times but failed to join the class. Finally, I made a telephone call to a friend, she taught me from the phone call." However, all the participants didn't have similar experiences about collaboration. Participant- C complained that her co-learners were smarter and never thought of

the slow learners. She said, “Those who say they understand never understand that there are slow learners too.” She expected her co-learners to be helpful and share their ideas with others. She further complained that her co-learners had benefited from the virtual classes, but they had never considered that when they asked the teachers to proceed ahead, many people suffered. Here, the gap between people having and not having digital know-how seems to victimize the academic achievement of those who are not compatible with ICT skills. Collaboration can be an effective way to overcome the digital divide (Chelliah & Clarke, 2011), and it can be more effective when the physical classes are on suspension. But the collaboration itself is not that possible when the social distancing protocol was a must-follow. Participant- C said that she would ask co-learners when she would have problems, but she even did not recognize them by face because she was in the real class only for two days, and after that, the university shut down, postponed the physical classes.

During the pandemic crisis, people used social media as learning platforms. There are many webinars, streaming live on Facebook and YouTube. Further, people are using Facebook chat as a tool for sharing their learning experiences. Participant- A, Participant- B, Participant- D, and Participant- E accepted that they formed a chat group of all the students in their class and joined their teachers there. They shared the information, documents, notes, and other learning materials on it. They discussed the subject matter too.

As Tolle (1999) says, “When there is no way out, there is still always a way through” (p. 185), people find solutions to the problems they encounter. The participants of this study also proved this. When they found that physical classes were not possible at least for a few months, and till then, virtual classes were the only alternatives, they began learning ICT skills. Participant- C said she started learning to operate a computer only because she had to join the virtual classes every day. “I wouldn’t have been motivated to learn if there hadn’t been online classes.” Said she. She grew confident in using the computer and the Internet in comparison to the beginning of the class. She said that from this she realized that “the more you try, the better you learn”.

A crisis does not always bring problems. In some cases, it also represents an opportunity (Tolle, 1999). In the course of finding a way out of a crisis, people learn important lessons. People opt for better alternatives to get rid of the crisis. COVID-19 pandemic worsened the crisis of digital inequality (van Dijk, 2020). Verifying this Participant- A said that she had not gotten internet access at her home, therefore she moved to the city. She travelled to Kathmandu on the back seat of a motorbike when the public transport was suspended.

After a sudden lockdown when the classes were shut, universities and campuses shifted to online mode. It was not a comfortable situation for those people who have used a smartphone only for taking photos, posting them on social media, and making likes and comments. Participants of the study said that they could not gain the necessary digital literacy via formal classes. They, however, got a way

out and collaborated to learn. Their learning struggles led them to success at least to join virtual classes. Participant C, who found it most difficult to use computers and said that though she has a laptop she rarely used it as a 'computer', told me that she can now join the classes easily and see the materials uploaded there.

Digital Inequality: Trauma, Damage, and Loss

After the COVID-19 outbreak, digital inequality or divide emerged as a major issue in the field of education. Though it has been accepted for a long time that integrating ICT with education is sure to enhance the academic achievement of the learners. Therefore, in recent times many governments have emphasized computer skills from school education to enhance ICT-based learning opportunities (Ghavifekr et al., 2014). It was, however, not a compulsory skill in various disciplines. But as the online classes proved to be strong alternatives to real classes in the time of pandemic, the demarcation between computer literate and illiterate; internet coverage area and outside the coverage area; and having a computer or not having seemed to directly influence the outcomes of education. some participants said that they went to their homes after the lockdown was imposed hoping that the situation will soon come under control. When they suddenly got information about the online classes, their first reaction was a worrisome surprise. Participant- D wrote in his reflective essay that he had already joined online classes from Kathmandu valley, but he had to go to his village because his father was seriously ill. He hired a private vehicle and went to his home. Unfortunately, his father passed away from the very illness, and he had to stay home for the rituals. After completion of all the rites, when he asked his friends about the situation of the class, he knew that the classes were regular and the university was planning to accomplish the first semester from online teaching. He tried to join his village but the poor network quality did not make it possible. Despite the rapid growth of internet users and infrastructures, the rural areas of Nepal are longing for simple telephone facilities (Mirmire Online, 2019). In such a condition, the availability of fast internet is beyond expectation. Participant A complained that she could not join online classes only because of the poor mobile network in her village. She said, "How can you imagine for mobile internet when your phone shows a 'no network' sign in a room and very often goes to 'Emergency call only mode'. Participants- B and C also approved her statement. They had been using high-speed broadband but very often they experienced stretching of sound, sudden network discontinuity, and disturbance in the classes. Participant- A further said she could only join the classes almost after three months when she came to Kathmandu with her father on the back seat of a motorbike. Whereas participants D and E said they also had similar problems like A.

This problem of access was of two types: the first was a connectivity issue, and the second one was the unavailability of recharge cards. Participants complained

that recharge cards were not easily available. Participant - A said that there is a single shop nearby and recharge cards ran out of stock there during the lockdown period. This situation kept people devoid of an online class and pushed them into psychological trauma. This traumatic divide has two major causes; the first was related to personal attributes, and the second one was related to infrastructure and economic status. Whatever be the cause, it brought psychological trauma to learners, some of them once decided to give up their studies. Participant A said that she was frustrated and quit the semester-end exams because whenever she opened the Facebook chat, she found people talking about various online resources, and she was hopeless there as she did not have a working internet connection. She rejoined the first semester next year. Participant D said, “I had to drop my studies because I could not join the online sessions and now in 2023, I am again thinking of joining for the Master's.

Here, the divide seems to demarcate students into two classes, the privileged digitally literate class and the underprivileged digitally illiterate ones. Education, which normally aims to emancipate the latter, seems to function otherwise in the case of online education. In online mode, the privileged ones benefitted more, and the underprivileged ones had to struggle to learn their conventional curriculum as well as ICT skills. Participant A said:

> "I did not have the internet at my home because mobile data did not work there. I tried to join the class from a school on a hill with a Wi-Fi facility. I sat on the school grounds, too hot, though. At that time, classes ran after 10 in the morning, opening Zoom meetings, and people from the village would come with curious eyes to see. I was embarrassed!"

People had problems handling the gadgets also. A participant said she had a working network quality and a computer, but she suffered because of a lack of technical know-how. She had not used a computer frequently before, but after COVID-19 it became a compulsion. She was absent from the class sometimes only because she did not get the idea to join. She said that she was not comfortable even in simple browsing or using a search engine. She got lost in browsing and even after long periods, she stood barehanded.

Apart from the aforementioned issues of the digital divide, a participant mentioned some other issues too, such as network inconsistency, power cuts, slow speed at specific times, bandwidth issues, and joining issues. These all are covered under the same umbrella of the ‘Digital divide’, which not only brings inequality but oppresses the underprivileged ones with the power of digital literacy. Digitally literate enjoy success and the illiterate ones fall into frustration and anxiety. A participant complained she got her health issues aggravated after she joined online classes.

Attitudinal Shift: From Resistance to Acceptance

The participants' reaction to online classes, in the beginning, was not positive. They strongly preferred the face-to-face classes in the beginning, but soon became used to online. In the beginning, they did not show enthusiasm towards virtual classes. One participant confessed she rarely used digital media though she had a smartphone. They complained about eye strain and other health issues. Similarly, one expressed concern that the online class has various issues. They remarked that there is a lack of cordial interaction between students and teachers. However, they also took the beginning of online classes as the utilization of lockdown time. One of them admitted that they would not have had that much time to study in the face-to-face classes. Another participant acknowledged that it saved her time to travel to her campus. A male participant said he would say 'yes' to this change.

Yet one of the participants agreed that face-to-face classes do more justice to learners because learners' economic identity is concealed there. "You do not have to worry about what dress to wear in online classes." She spoke. She further added that face-to-face classes offer more alternatives and are suitable for all subjects, whereas online classes are not suitable for subjects like mathematics and are not comfortable for subjects like English. Their reservedness to the traditional mode of teaching opposes the shift to virtual classes.

They, to some extent, believe that the unexpected shift to online classes brought problems to the class. They opined that the traditional model was more comfortable and the digital mode of teaching can be a complementary method but cannot replace the traditional model completely. Their strong belief in conventional teaching signals resistance to the change, which is evident in some studies of middle-class students (Alpert, 1991). This non-radical resistance to new techniques in teaching shows their attachment to the conventional ways of teaching. They feel that the inherent values of traditional classes are lost in the virtual classes, especially in terms of the student-teacher relationship (Snyder, 2020). A participant said she lobbied for the postponement of online classes but failed. "I telephoned the concerned authorities… Sometimes I regret that I got admission at the wrong time," she rebuked. She said she would prefer being taught face-to-face and learning from the teacher's life. "The shift was inevitable but unexpected, I wouldn't have preferred it in normal situations," a participant said. This mode of learning created a distance between teachers and students, which was against the ideal situation in which many people take proximity as a must condition for teaching-learning, though not a quantifiable situation (Snyder, 2020).

The unexpected shift to the virtual mode of learning brought problems to the learners. Their lived experiences showcased the sudden closure of the classes left them perplexed initially, but later they expected that the situation would come under control very soon. But it did not happen as expected. This shift was challenging mostly to those having lower-level digital literacy because they got

lost in using computers and ICT. In many learners, it might have exacerbated mental stress (Grubic, Badovinac, & Johri, 2020). All the respondents in the in-depth interviews and reflective essays accepted that they had a certain degree of mental stress after they shifted to online classes. And, most of the stress was either caused by the poor-quality internet or a lower level of digital literacy. This shows the seriousness of the digital divide, its possible extension, as well as its intensity to affect people's lives.

Despite these, they pointed out the positive aspects of online classes. They accepted that it is the utilization of time. After the countries took preventive measures, billions of children were confined to their homes, and their learning was obstructed. Online classes resumed learning from school to tertiary level (Li & Lalani, 2020). Respondents said the online classes helped them utilize their time in lockdown when they were confined to their houses and mobility was restricted. One participant said, "I can give more time to study and save the time I had to spend travelling on crowded buses". Another participant said it is better than nothing when there is no possibility of physical classes. They seem to come to acceptance from the state of resistance because this was a single way out. This motivated them to strive to learn ICT skills. A participant said that she asked her children when she encountered any problem while operating gadgets or handling the internet.

Economic Issue: Exacerbating Digital Divide

There was an economic limitation responsible for widening the digital gap. Out of five respondents, only one accepted that she belongs to a well-to-do family, and she does not have any issue buying appropriate gadgets or subscribing to the best internet speed. In comparison to the average purchasing power of Nepali citizens, the price of mobile data in Nepal is high (NepaliTelecom, 2019; Regmi, 2017). The high cost of data discouraged students from joining online classes. This is a crucial feature of the Digital divide in Nepal that people, despite digital literacy, cannot use ICT because of the data costs. A participant said that students in Government-funded institutions generally come from poor families, and the data packages, though not very costly for well-off family students, were unaffordable to them. This shows how limited access to physical capital restricts one from a particular social capital.

Another factor that is responsible for digital inequality is access to advanced gadgets. Pippa Norris (as cited in Fuchs & Horak, nd., p. 14) categorized the divide into three main types. The first is the global divide - characterized by the divergence of internet access between individualized and developed societies; the second is the social divide -characterized by the gap between the information-rich and poor in each nation; and the third is the democratic divide - characterized by the difference between those who do and do not, use the opportunities of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life. The issue related to

access to advanced gadgets is seen because of the social divide, formed by the unequal distribution of economic resources. One of the participants said that she realized the limitation of a low-end device when she had to join online classes. Hence, the economic background of a student emerged as a key determiner of the digital divide. It shows that the demarcation between haves and have-nots in terms of digital access has been affected by the economic class they come from.

CONCLUSION

After the COVID-19 outbreak, all facets of public life were affected because of lockdown, restricted mobility, and social distancing protocol. Students were confined to their homes because classes were temporarily suspended. In such a situation online-classes came as a panacea in the time of crisis (Dhavan, 2020). But in the existing conditions, the existence of the digital divide exacerbated learning outcomes and it became a reason for students' dropout as the psycho-chaotic situation (Islam et al., 2020) caused by the pandemic intensified it. The learners have to spend more endeavour on developing their ICT compatibility which was not included in their normal curriculum to ensure digital inclusion.

The results of the study found that digital literacy, which has become a social as well as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), strengthens digitally included ones (those equipped with ICT tools and skills) and weakens the deprived ones. In this way, the privileged ones are getting more privileged, and the deprived ones are getting more deprived. This is causing the divide more widen and people left at the margin of the information superhighway are likely to lose the associated benefits. As Fuchs and Horak (nd.) opine—in modern societies, technologies are sold as commodities. Therefore, the capabilities to use them depend upon the access of an individual which is most assured in terms of economic capability. Thus, the digital divide is characterized by unequal material access to "usage capabilities of, and benefits from computer-based information- and communication technologies that are caused by certain stratification processes that produce classes of winners and losers of the information society, and participation in institutions governing ICTs and society" (Fuchs & Horak, nd., p. 15). Individuals striving for digital inclusion in the time of COVID-19 intensified because of its use in online classes. Participants of this study grew their ICT skills independently with consistent strivings to emancipate themselves from digital exclusion.

Going through the lived experiences of the participants I found that the participants of the study struggled to develop the necessary ICT skills needed to join the online classes. However, I cannot come to a generalization as the aim of the study is to see the individual phenomena, and every individual has different experiences of a particular phenomenon, they have their unique dilemmas (Whitehead, 2002). Yet, they have various common experiences regarding ICT use, access, and availability for online classes. From these experiences, I

conclude that policymakers should focus on mitigating the digital divide by promoting digital inclusion for the deprived and excluded ones. Using online platforms for teaching can yield better results only when the target group has opportunities for digital participation (Rössel & Seifert, 2019).

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