

Digital leadership in practice: How online trainers navigate
hierarchy to lead in government training institutes

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Shital Moktan Tamang

ABSTRACT

Nepal's government training institutions transitioned to online training due to pandemic caused by Covid-19. This research explored digital leadership at all levels of the hierarchy, aiming to determine transformational leadership. The study conducted narrative study to gather experiences through in-depth interview from five respondents representing different levels in the hierarchy from two different organizations. The findings revealed that Nepali government training institutions' trainers display digital leadership traits, adapting to new technological learning environments. However, there are differences in enthusiasm and engagement with online training, suggesting consistent use of online tools. Strong digital governance is needed for long-term consistency and ethical application of online tools. Online trainers' showcased digital leadership attributes which can be viewed through the lens of transformational leadership theory. The online trainers exhibited digital leadership attributes such as: visionary leadership, digital competence, technology usage, systemic improvement, digital culture, collaboration and shared values, digital advocacy, leadership engagement, digital citizenship, future readiness, adaptability, flexibility, and innovation, thereby establishing themselves as digital leaders.

Keywords: digital leadership, online training, transformational leadership theory

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on clarifying the background of the study and introducing the research area. The training institutions applied and upgraded their digital technologies to conduct online training programs which were instigated by the pandemic. Thus, the main theme of the research study is to understand whether the officials involved in the digital transformation are digital leaders. The research tries to explore what digital leadership is through literature review and the narratives of officials from different levels in the hierarchy on the concept of digital leadership.

Background

Nepal Government transformed from unitary to federal system after the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 demanding effective and efficient service delivery in the changed context. This obliged updates in the knowledge, skills; and attitude of government officials through training. Thus, government and public training institutions have been established to fulfill this objective through training programs under the Government Officials National Training Policy (2014). The strong social distancing rules posed by the government led to lockdown from 24 March to 21 July 2020, followed by social distancing rules restricting gatherings of more than 25 people at a place. This led to the mandatory use of virtual (online) platforms as the only option for the delivery of training programs.

DataReportal (2024) states that in January 2024, the total population of Nepal was 31.07 million with 22.1 percent in urban centers and 77.9 percent in rural areas. In early 2024, the total number of internet users reached 15.40 million, internet penetration rate was 49.6 percent and active cellular mobile connections was a total of 37.47 million which is equivalent to 120.6 percent of the total population of Nepal. The population between the ages of 18 to 24 is 14.6 percent, between the ages of 25 and 34 is 17.5 percent, between the ages of 35 and 44 is 12.0 percent, between the ages of 45 and 54 is 9.0 percent and between the ages of 55 and 64 is 6.5 percent. The trainee officials from the government and public organizations range between 21 to 58 as Nepali citizens can enroll for the level of section officer from 21 years and serve until the retirement age limit of 58 years. Thus, the government officials rarely face the digital divide as

they are digitally literate and have access to internet through mobile data even if internet networks are unavailable making it feasible to conduct trainings online.

Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC), with the mandate of training, research, and consulting for the capacity development of the government and public organizations of Nepal initiated change in practice from face-to-face programs to online training. According to the Digital Nepal Framework (2019) government ministries and NASC has been quoted as stakeholders for making the public servants digitally ready and for reducing cost and increasing the reach of training programs by leveraging digital technologies. Various governmental training institutions, including the Bankers' Training Centre of Nepal Rastra Bank, Local Development Training Academy, National Judicial Academy, and Telecom Training, Research Centre of Nepal Telecom and Nepal Judicial Academy initiated online training programs. Subsequently, numerous other training institutions adopted online training in Nepal.

Applying digital devices and technology in educational management is defined as digital leadership and characterized by transformational leadership style (Hamzah et al., 2021). The senior management level of the institution demonstrated their leadership skills during the transformation of the face-to-face training programs into online modality. Simultaneously, the trainers also transformed their course design and delivery methods while transitioning into online mode. However, it is unknown whether this demonstrated leadership in the top management and also in different levels within the hierarchy can be labeled as digital leadership. Thus, this study tried to understand digital leadership through analysis of literature and narratives of trainers involved in online training from different levels in the hierarchy.

Statement of the Problem

The transition from face-to-face to online training required leadership from both senior management and trainers, who adapted their course design and delivery methods to the new modality. Senior management exemplifies leadership in establishing a supportive atmosphere for online training by articulating a definitive strategic vision, allocating necessary resources, and promoting collaboration within the institution. They allocate resources for technological infrastructure, support professional development for educators, and promote the acquisition of new digital competencies to aid the shift. Senior leaders function as change agents by formulating policies, defining performance standards, and tackling issues, so facilitating a

seamless transition to online training (Northouse, 2018). They promote innovation by permitting flexibility in teaching methods and cultivating a supportive atmosphere that enables staff to experiment with new ideas, so boosting the overall effectiveness of the program (Yukl, 2013). Trainers exhibit leadership by cultivating a favorable atmosphere for online training through the adaptation of their pedagogical approaches, the enhancement of engagement, and the provision of ongoing assistance to students. They demonstrate adaptability by modifying course materials for the online format, using interactive tools, and employing technology to improve the learning experience (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). By fostering open communication and promoting active engagement, trainers cultivate a feeling of community among learners, which is essential for effective online education (Anderson, 2008). Moreover, trainers exemplify mastery in digital tools and model successful online behavior, so inspiring learners to engage more profoundly with the topic. By providing consistent feedback and tailored assistance, they foster a sense of connection and support among learners, thereby cultivating a positive and productive online learning atmosphere (Garrison, 2011).

The past researchers support that the senior management and trainers demonstrate leadership in different aspects for successfully conducting online training programs. Such practice of leadership was evident during the transformation from face-to-face to online training by the officials of the government training institutions. However, it was unknown whether the leadership demonstrated across different levels of the institution can be categorized as digital leadership. The absence of a clear understanding of digital leadership, specifically within the context of online training for government officials, created a gap in both practice and literature. Thus, this study aimed to address this gap by examining digital leadership through a review of relevant literature and the narratives of trainers from various levels in the hierarchy involved in online training.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore digital leadership in the context of government training institutions in Nepal by identifying key indicators and attributes through the perspectives of senior management and trainers at various hierarchical levels. Additionally, it aimed to determine whether digital leadership is exhibited at all levels, independent of hierarchy.

Research Question

- How do online trainers from government training institutes experience their roles as digital leaders in virtual learning environments? What experiences and challenges do they face while leading digital learning initiatives?

Rationale of the Study

The shift from in-person to online instruction at government training institutions demanded substantial leadership from both senior management and trainers. Senior management exhibited leadership by formulating a definitive strategic vision, assigning requisite resources, and cultivating a collaborative atmosphere, therefore fostering innovation and adaptability in pedagogical approaches. Trainers demonstrated leadership by modifying their teaching methods, increasing student engagement, and offering continuous assistance, thereby fostering a positive online learning environment. However, there is a deficiency in both practice and scholarly literature on the comprehension of digital leadership in the context of online training by the government training institutions of Nepal. It ambiguity remained whether the leadership exhibited by both senior management and trainers qualifies as digital leadership. This research has attempted to fill this vacuum by exploring digital leadership and whether all levels in the hierarchy demonstrate digital leadership in online training. The study provides insights into digital leadership within the context of Nepal, helping to determine whether individuals at all levels of the hierarchy can be considered digital leaders within the framework of transformational leadership.

Delimitations of the Study

I only tapped into understanding digital leadership through the lens of online training practice by the officials of government training institutions. The government and public training institutions were referred as government training institutions in the research. The research excluded the trainee officers' perspective and only focused on the training institutions and trainers involved in online training. I might have unconsciously misinterpreted data even though the data collection tools and guidelines were meticulously administered.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Leadership

My initial understanding of digital leadership was the demonstration of ICT leadership by the head of the institution or top management for digital intervention or transformation in the organization. Reviewing various literatures, I found that some researchers used the terms digital leadership or e-leadership to describe the leadership capabilities of the leaders promoting technological transformation in organization. The first appearance of the studies on e-leadership can be dated back to 2002 by (Avolio et al., 2000, p. 644) “whose findings are relevant to understanding the effects of e-leadership.” Pioneering the idea of digital leadership, Peter Fisk stated that such leaders demonstrate transformational behavior and that “digital leadership is not concerned only with high-tech businesses. Digital is a state of mind just as much as it is a technological phenomenon. It is about making new connections and creating value in new ways.” (Fisk, 2002, p. 46)

Some researchers also use other terms to describe digital leadership, such as “digital thinking” (Peng, 2022); “digital competence” (Schiuma et al., 2022); “ICT skillfulness” (Antonopoulou et al., 2020); “digital culture” (Mihardjo et al., 2019a; 2019b; 2019c); “innovation” (Tanniru, 2018); “digital transformation management” (Zhong, 2017) and “behavioral digitization” (El Sawy et al., 2020) among others. Focusing on the review of digital leadership in the area of education or training; researchers have stated various attributes and competencies to qualify as digital leaders. Ghamrawi and Tamim (2022) argue digital leadership as transformational leadership based on the leaders’ expertise to strategically and meticulously adopt, advocate and promote the utilization of innovative digital technologies for competitive advantage. Stana et al. (2018) share about social influence and that digital leadership can occur at any levels regardless of hierarchy in an organization which is unlike my initial understanding on the topic. Thus, I broaden my horizon on the subject and accept that digital leadership can be demonstrated not just by the top level or senior management but, can be observed in any hierarchical level in an organization. “Since the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the concept of digital

leadership has been included into the literature as a means of achieving leadership in the digital realm and facilitating further digital transformation.” (Sağbaşı & Erdoğan, 2022, p. 25)

The studies revealed that digital leadership is a recognized term among scholars as the leadership approach to handling the digital tools and technologies effectively for gaining competitive advantage. Unequivocal use of the term digital leadership was found in various international and national literatures related to educational sectors such as: schools, higher education, teacher training, and principal’s leadership; nevertheless, the term digital leadership in training institutions was rarely obtained during the review although some literatures mention the significance of integrating technology in teaching and training 2Ts for effective learning. However, through this review, I understand that digital leadership can be categorized into different indicators based on the leadership demonstrated during digital transformation.

Digital Leadership Indicators

Hamzah et al. (2021), share that the dimensions such as visionary leadership, digital era learning culture, professional practice excellence, systemic improvement, and digital citizenship should be displayed for digital leadership. This cross-sectional survey for examining the digital leadership practices exhibited by principles for integrating digital learning was formed on the foundation of International Society for Technology in Education Standards for Administrators (ISTE-A) for promoting digital leadership practices and use of innovative technology in education. The qualitative study by (Zhong, 2017) also implements (ISTE-A, 2009) to explore the indicators of digital leadership performance indicators for schools and defined it as using instructional technologies such as digital device, service and resource to inspire and lead through digital transformation by creating and sustaining digital learning culture, supporting and enhancing technology-based professional development, providing and maintaining digital organization management, and facilitating and managing digital citizenship. The researcher discusses about various studies using the Principals Technology Leadership Assessment (PTLA) to describe principals’ digital leadership developed from previous ISTE-A standard. The findings reveal that visionary leadership encompasses both an integrated technology vision and support for technology plans by all stakeholders. “Indicators of digital leadership constitute awareness of digital leadership, support from all stakeholders, digital resources, technology modeling, practical professional development, digital learning community, maximized learning

achievement, competent personnel, strategic management, robust infrastructure, technology agreement form, and filters” (Zhong, 2017, p. 12). Through the review I have realized that many scholars apply established standards for investigating on digital leadership practices in education. However, even when using the same standards, the indicators of digital leadership are not similar. I have found similar practice in literatures that are subjective and do not follow a set standard. The indicators are defined as per the perception of the researcher on the phenomena.

Ghamrawi and Tamim (2022), posit that digital leadership represents an advanced iteration of transformational leadership that includes the attributes and competencies such as digital competence, digital culture, digital differentiation, digital governance, and digital advocacy for embracing the use of digital technologies in educational research. They share that digital leaders are responsible for fostering favorable culture and cultivating shared values that prioritize student learning by ensuring collaborative work for a common vision and desired outcomes within specified key performance indicators among organizational members. This case study centered around the creation of classification system for digitalization of processes in higher education institution (HEI) during one-year period of transitioning to digital culture, while simultaneously investigating the leadership qualities exhibited by the core leadership team in Arab State in Gulf. The themes generated by the researchers as attributes playing a crucial role for the achievement of digital transformation initiation and addressing the resistance during its implementation does not touch upon organization politics. Karakose et al. (2021) examined the roles of school principals in digital leadership and their technological capabilities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Case study-based qualitative approach was applied to investigate the perspectives and experiences of teachers. Digital technology usage, support for the digital transformation, support for technology-based professional development, support for digital learning culture, and digital leadership skills were determined as the five main themes. The results revealed that school principals demonstrated adequate level of digital technology utilization and actively supported digital transformation and technology-focused professional development within schools. Their contributions were instrumental in fostering a digital learning culture. The study identified three key categories to assess digital leadership skills: technology use, managerial skills, and individual skills within the context of K-12 education.

The studies conducted in different settings provide grounds to infer that digital technologies embraced by educational leaders for technological transformations are known as

digital leaders. However, such leadership can be categorized into different indicators which varies when the research is conducted in different study groups by different researchers thus creating own perspective while developing digital leadership indicators. Many researchers have proposed measurement tools for digital leadership. The review has expanded my idea to not stick on the indicators provided by previous studies but to focus on generating indicators of digital leadership based on the understanding of the respondents of my study in the context of training in Nepal. Moreover, these results conducted in educational institutions provided a guideline for my research to further generate and incorporate the dimensions of digital leadership which could be prevalent in training institutions readily applying digital advancement in the context of Nepal.

Online learning

To study the effective implementation of online tools and technologies for imparting knowledge and foster learning in training organizations of Nepal, it is very important to understand the term online learning. Online learning is defined by using various terminologies which include “e-Learning, internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, virtual learning, computer assisted learning, web-based learning, and distance learning” (Ally, 2008; Wargadinata et al., 2020). “E-Learning is also considered as easy and supportive tools for both teaching and learning. Students and teachers believe that e-learning promotes quality with audio and video materials” (Pangeni & Karki, 2021, p. 137). Mohd Basar et al. (2021) defines online learning as the utilization of different digital platforms including 'Whatsapp', 'Zoom', and 'Google Classroom' to facilitate teaching and learning process between teachers and students where the teacher provides assignments and activities online and it doesn't refer to direct learning alone. Dhull and Arora (2019) state that online learning is the method of imparting education over computer networks by using technologies such as the worldwide web, email, chat platforms, new groups and text-based materials. Adebo (2018) discusses on effectively captivating and involving contemporary learners through online teaching and learning by using popular tools such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). He argues that online courses share much with the face-to-face teaching in terms of content. However, they are different in terms of pace and delivery.

The review of these various studies clarified that online training requires unique skills and requirements which can be delivered effectively by seizing the learning opportunities

provided by online technologies with tailored courses. As Covid-19 posed social distancing, the training institutions in Nepal that were able to implement the wholly online training in live online learning modality were functional.

National ICT Policy

The National ICT Policy (2015) in Nepal aims to establish infrastructure for e-governance across government services by 2020, laying the foundation for a "Digital Nepal." Key areas include Cloud Computing, Electronic Transaction and Digital Signature, and Social Media integration. The policy aims to elevate Nepal's ICT readiness to rank in the top second quartile of international ICT development and eGovernment rankings. It emphasizes enhancing digital literacy skills among citizens and fostering ICT-related human resources. The policy also aims for universal internet access and plans for automation of operations in land administration, revenue administration, registration, passport services, and citizenship certificates. It emphasizes promoting equal participation of women and youth in building an inclusive Information Society, addressing gender norms, and facilitating response services. The policy also focuses on enhancing ICT awareness among youth and women, promoting literacy programs, and providing affordable access to ICT tools and services. It also addresses cybercrime, establishing a national-level initiative to create a robust legal framework and enhance enforcement capabilities. This policy sets the standard for all of Nepal's ICT strategies. It addresses the significant issues that the country needs to handle in order to accelerate the revolution of technology in every sector. Since, this research dealt with digital leadership in online training this policy was reviewed to understand whether it provides specific guidance or solutions for contemporary issues associated with delivering training programs through online technologies. However, since the policy was formulated in 2015, it lacked any concrete guidelines on this issue.

Digital Nepal Framework 2019

The Digital Nepal Framework (2019) is a strategic plan for Nepal to harness digital technologies for rapid growth. It focuses on eight key sectors: digital foundation, agriculture, health, education, energy, tourism, finance, and urban infrastructure. The program aims to generate up to NPR 800 billion in impact by 2022. The Digital Foundation sector focuses on digital connectivity, skills, and governance to create a strong digital infrastructure. The

government has also developed an eLearning platform for government agencies to provide digital training. The framework is crucial for supporting online training in the long run, with strategies such as national optical fiber networks, 5G networks, and public wi-fi hotspots. The Nepali language computational resource pack minimizes the digital divide in education. Digital skill development and ICT implementation encourage online tools and technologies, promoting e-governance 2.0.

This document was important for my research as it highlights the government's commitment to 'Digital Nepal,' with education as one of its core pillars. The initiatives mentioned, such as the national optical fibre network, advancements in 5G technology, and public Wi-Fi hotspots, would significantly enhance accessibility for both educators and students, which is crucial for the expansion of online training programs. Additionally, the development of a computational resource pack for the Nepali language could help overcome language barriers in educational technology, making digital training more inclusive. The emphasis on digital skill development and ICT integration aligned with the goals of my research, as these are essential for facilitating online training through e-governance 2.0. However, the document's lack of concrete instructions for implementing online training courses underscores the need for further exploration on digital leadership, which is the area of my study.

National Training Policy

The National Training Policy for Government Officials (2014) in Nepal aims to enhance the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of government officials to contribute to organizational goals. The policy has undergone two amendments, emphasizing the changing political, administrative, and social landscape and addressing public service challenges. It emphasizes modernization of training institutions and modernization of technology-enabled training methods. Key elements include enhancing trainer capacity, cultivating citizen-centric high performers, and building physical infrastructure. The policy also emphasizes inclusivity, equality, respect for diversity, and collaboration between national and international institutions. The policy supports the implementation of online training programs, but challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic have hindered its success.

The review of these policies indicated that Nepal is eager to implement contemporary technological developments. The policies' commitment to employing innovative and

sophisticated technologies for the development of the training sector also aligned with the objective of establishing online training programs.

Examining context, existing information, and theories is crucial for understanding research issues. Comparing empirical studies to analogous contexts provides valuable data for informed inferences. Thus, I tried to review and compile as many relevant empirical papers as possible to compare the phenomena to other studies.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978), who highlighted the importance of leaders in uplifting followers' needs and bringing about significant changes in individuals, communities, and organizations, is credited with developing the idea of transformational leadership theory. Lugtu (2020) states “researcher Bernard M. Bass expanded upon Burns’ original ideas to develop what is today referred to as Bass’ Transformational Leadership Theory.” Bass (1985) presented a refined model of transformational leader, defining it as the process by which a leader inspires others to put the needs of the group ahead of their own to realize a goal. He emphasized that transformational leadership is characterized by its impact on followers, encompassing facets such as moral standards, authenticity, harmony, and persuasive appeals. In the digital age, transformational leadership extends beyond conventional attributes like vision, inspiration, and motivation. It adopts additional skills such as sensemaking to effectively navigate challenges. Bass (1985) outlined the four components of transformational leadership in his book. The first component idealized influence can be characterized by high ethical standards, the ability to take risks, and confidence that the right action will be executed. They are role models who are admired and trusted by followers. Inspirational motivation is the second component in which the leaders inspire excitement and hope for the future along with commitment to shared goals. The third component, intellectual stimulation encourages innovation and critical thinking in leaders when they question assumptions and promote new ideas. Individualized consideration is the final element, in which leaders act as mentors and coaches to their followers, fostering open communication and nurturing their personal development.

Transformational leaders possess deep understanding of digital transformation strategies, prioritizing strategic integration of technology to accelerate business activities and leverage digital opportunities effectively. It is also related to the business model innovation for the

development of unique value delivery concepts and leveraging digital technologies for implementation. It also entails holistic strategy implementation and strategic talent management. Furthermore, transformational leaders drive culture change by inspiring and mandating change, implementing sustainable intervention programs, and breaking down organizational silos to foster a culture of adaptability and collaboration. “Transformational leadership is very effective in developing and changing organizations because transformational leaders work to make a difference and take on the responsibility of creating change.” (Saad Alessa, 2021, p. 5)

The leadership literature is enhanced by research on transformational leadership by Bakker et al. (2023), which shows how leaders empower their followers to take on leadership roles. According to Ly (2023), transformational leadership is emphasized in the literature on leadership in a digital context and digital transformation. My research delves into leaders' roles in initiating digital transformation for online training by focusing on team members' opinions, attitudes, and perceptions regarding innovation adoption. A close association between digital transformation, digital leadership, and transformational leadership is also suggested with digital leadership being a component of transformational leadership which aligns with my research. Therefore, considering the focus on initiating digital transformation for technology adoption in online training, the applicability of transformational leadership theory was chosen as the key theoretical framework for my research.

Research Gap

The review of literatures found that digital leadership has been widely explored in the education sector. But, there is a lack of research focusing on its demonstration within the context of government training in Nepal. Existing studies on digital leadership developed various indicators using different methodologies, leading to diverse terminology and interpretations. However, it was unclear whether senior management and trainers at different hierarchical levels in Nepali government training institutions recognize their efforts in conducting online training as a form of digital leadership. Thus, this study addressed this gap by exploring the understanding and demonstration of digital leadership through qualitative analysis of the experiences and perspectives of the senior management and trainers involved in online training. Given the novelty of this area, the research would provide valuable insights into how digital leadership is perceived and practiced within the context of government training in Nepal. Additionally, the

study would help to determine whether officials at all levels exhibit digital leadership behaviors, thus contributing to the recognition of digital leaders in Nepal's government training sector.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter sets forth the methodology of the study, utilizing narrative enquiry as the research approach. Narrative enquiry enables an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and viewpoints. The chapter outlines the methodologies employed for data collection, explains the procedure for selecting the study site and participants, and articulates the procedures for analyzing the gathered data. Furthermore, it examines ethical considerations and the quality standards maintained in the research, thereby ensuring the study's integrity and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This research employed qualitative study approach. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) believe that qualitative studies allow participants to create their own knowledge within experiences. The research design combined narrative inquiry and content analysis to offer a thorough knowledge of the experiences of senior management and trainers at various hierarchical levels in government training institutes of Nepal on digital leadership.

Narrative inquiry is a crucial qualitative research method that delves into individuals' life experiences, allowing them to convey their perspectives, ideas, and knowledge through storytelling. Creswell (2013) explains that a narrative case study investigates multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection. This approach involves utilizing various sources of information, such as observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, and documents and reports. This approach fosters a collaborative relationship between the researcher and participants, where their stories are shared and co-constructed in a meaningful way (Spector-Mersel, 2010). By focusing on personal narratives, narrative inquiry provides a deeper understanding of individual viewpoints and enriches qualitative research. Stories capture our life experiences and the worlds we inhabit (Clandinin et al., 2017), positioning us as characters in both our own narratives and those of others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Ultimately, narrative inquiry serves as a lens for exploring and reflecting on human experiences (Clandinin, 2013).

Through in-depth interviews, I collected individual stories and narratives from participants who had experience with implementing online training programs as a transformative process from face-to-face modality. This narrative inquiry approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the participant perspectives, beliefs, and experiences. I interpreted the stories, analyzed and interpreted the data to gain insights into the participants' experiences and their understanding on digital leadership.

Content analysis of existing documents related to the topic was also conducted to supplement the data collected from interviews. This involved reviewing and analyzing relevant documents such as research studies on digital leadership, its indicators and online training policies that support application of digital technologies and online training; and theoretical review of transformational leadership to support the inquiry. This content analysis provided a broader context and theoretical framework for understanding the current practices and understanding on the demonstration of digital leadership during the transformation and implementation of online training programs.

Site Selection

The study site was the government training institutions of Nepal that provided online training for capacity building of government and public officials. The government training institutions residing in bagmati province was selected for the study.

Selection of Research Participants

The data was collected from one senior management official equivalent to special class, two high level officials equivalent to first class, one training official equivalent to second class and one training official equivalent to third class to understand perspectives on the demonstrated leadership during the implementation of online training. Out of the five participants, three were selected from Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC), as the training institution pioneered in conducting online training programs during Covid-19. The training institution is mandated to provide training to the gazette Class - I, Class - II and Class - III officials of the government organizations. The officials from this institution were relevant for the study as they have the experience of being involved in the transformation process from face-to-face to online training program. Two participants were selected from Local Development Training Academy (LDTA)

as the training institution is mandated to provide training to the non-gazetted officials from government organizations. The officials from this institution were selected as their experience of delivering the training programs from face-to-face modality to using online technologies would provide an insight into how the officials demonstrated their leadership during the transformation process to provide training for the non-gazetted government officials. The selection of both these institutions would cover the training institutions mandated to provide training to the government officials from all levels i.e. gazetted and non-gazetted. Thus, as the officials from these institutions would be able to reflect on their experience and provide an insight on the research area holistically, the officials from NASC and LDTA were selected for the study.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was applied for in-depth interviews with five officials from government training institution with an experience of conducting online training during the transformation from face-to-face to online modality. The respondents were directly involved in the digital transformation process during Covid-19 scenario to implement the digital tools and techniques for conducting training programs fully in (virtual) online mode. The participants were selected meticulously to understand their perspectives on the research area.

Participant profile

Respondent 1: One senior level official representing the senior management level (Special Class) of Nepal Administrative Staff College with an experience of more than one and half decade in the institution. The official was involved in higher level decision making, monitoring and supervision of subordinates to ensure the smooth implementation of online programs during the online training programs conducted during the pandemic. He was also involved in the development of one self-paced training programs through learning management systems (LMS) which is still available online. He is also currently involved in the design and development of online training programs for ensuring the continuity of online trainings. He actively used the online systems for facilitating sessions as a faculty as well. His education background is in the field of population studies. He is currently pursuing PhD.

Respondent 2: One high level official representing the management level (First Class) of Local Development Training Academy with an experience of more than 27 years in the field of

training was selected for the study. The official involved in higher level decision making, monitoring and supervision of subordinates to ensure the smooth implementation of online tools and technologies. He also used the online systems for facilitating sessions as a faculty as well. His education background is in the engineering field with a master in urban planning.

Respondent 3: One high level official representing the management level (First Class) of Nepal Administrative Staff College with an experience of more than 12 years in the field of training was selected for the study. The official involved in higher level decision making, monitoring and supervision of subordinates to ensure the smooth implementation of online tools and technologies. She also used the online systems for facilitating sessions as a faculty as well. Her education background is management in master degree and MPhil in public administration.

Respondent 4: One mid-level official representing the middle managerial level (Class – II) of Nepal Administrative Staff College with an experience of more 12 years in the institution was selected for the study. He worked in the IT department to ensure the procurement, installation, monitoring and supervision of subordinates to ensure the installation and running of the online systems. He is currently involved in a team that is working on developing an online training program. He is also the user of the online systems for facilitating sessions as a faculty. His education background is computer engineering and he has a PhD from IIT Bombay.

Respondent 5: One low-level official representing the operating level (Class – III) of Local Development Training Academy with an experience of more than 14 years in the institution was selected for the study. He was involved in conducting training programs in online modality in his specific area of expertise. His education background is management.

Data Collection Process

In this research study, interviews and field notes were applied as information-generating techniques to gather the necessary information including personal experiences to fulfill the purpose of the research study.

Interview

This method is widely used in qualitative research as it allows for in-depth data collection through interviews. Qualitative interviews involve purposeful conversations with individuals, allowing for a deeper exploration of complex issues such as values and understanding (Mason,

1996). Face-to-face interviews were conducted as part of narrative inquiry qualitative research, which provided the advantage of collecting rich and detailed data (Opdenakker, 2006).

For this study, an interview guideline was developed to collect experiences and guide the discussion on demonstrated leadership practice to implement online training programs. During the interview, detailed notes were taken to capture the respondent's opinions and feelings. These qualitative research discussions provided valuable insights into the topic under investigation.

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed verbal consent was obtained from the participant, and the interviews were recorded for accurate documentation. Each interview were approximately forty five minutes to an hour, and an interview schedule and was followed to ensure a systematic approach to data collection. The participant will be provided with a clear understanding of the interview process and its objectives.

After the interviews, a thorough review of the collected responses was conducted to assess their adequacy in addressing the research question. Additional information or clarification was sought from two respondents to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. The collected data was then organized, coded, and sorted to identify common themes and patterns. This approach facilitated a thorough exploration of the issues, offering a deeper understanding of the realities and complexities of digital leadership in online training programs.

Field Note

Field notes are a vital technique that was used to gather information for this study as it plays a significant role in documenting new ideas and insights that arise during interviews and interactions with participants. Serving as a detailed written record of these conversations and observations, field notes provided a valuable resource for analyzing and referencing the data.

Data Analysis and Meaning Making

The data analysis process involved a careful examination and interpretation of collected data taking into account the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Using a systematic and rigorous approach, the data was analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and recurring themes that illuminate the research findings.

Thematic presentation was employed to organize and present the findings in a clear and coherent manner. The identified themes were explored in detail, supported by relevant quotes

and examples from participants' interviews and collected artifacts. Each theme was given a name and definition, and the findings were presented in narrative form. Throughout the analysis process, utmost care was taken to accurately represent the participant's responses and viewpoints. To enhance the clarity and depth of the findings, relevant quotations from the interview transcripts were included to illustrate and support the identified themes. This approach added richness to the analysis by presenting the participant's experiences and insights in their own words, ensuring that their perspectives are accurately represented.

Meaning making in qualitative research involves going beyond the surface-level analysis and delving into the underlying meanings, interpretations, and implications of the findings. I engaged in a reflective and interpretive process, drawing on existing literature and theoretical frameworks to contextualize and make sense of the data, providing a broader perspective on the implications and significance of the study.

Quality Standards

One of the key features of qualitative research is maintaining quality standards throughout the study. In this research, great attention was given to ensuring data quality by employing rigorous methods and techniques at every stage. I meticulously recorded data to uphold the integrity of the research. To ensure a diverse range of information, multiple approaches were followed for data collection including literature review and interviews. Building a positive and trusting relationship with participants was crucial for obtaining relevant and meaningful information which was maintained during the study. Significant time was spent fostering rapport and understanding with participants. As a researcher, I maintained the study's quality by ensuring sociality, temporality, and place.

Ethical Consideration

I was true to the study and made sure not to tamper with or guide any sample during data collection. I ensured that there was no bias during data collection, interpretation, analysis, and results. I maintained the integrity and justice of the data and did not use the data in any other form other than for research purposes. The data was collected through the informed consent of the respondents and their confidentiality was maintained. I was careful to mitigate any harm including unintended harm. I respect the intellectual property of the past researchers and scholars

and have ensured no plagiarism in the research content. I maintained honesty, quality assurance and ethics while conducting the research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The study analyzed digital leadership in online training through in-depth interviews with five officials from government training institutions. The research used narrative inquiry and content analysis to explore complex issues, with field notes documenting emerging ideas. The data analysis identified patterns, trends, and recurring themes. The findings offer a structured understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. The findings are presented thematically for clarity and coherence as follows:

Transition to Online Training & Challenges

The theme relate to the shift from traditional to online training and the associated hurdles while focusing on adapting to online training, overcoming obstacles, and the difficulty of engaging participants in the new mode of learning. The respondents share about the challenges and barriers to the digital transformation including the readiness issue, mindset of people, lack of required expertise from the human resource and the lack of investment to train employees, lack of infrastructure among many challenges. Respondent 1 shared, "There is certain inertia or more ifs come there. We talk about the risks e.g., what if the internet system breaks down, if receiver end doesn't provide time what would happen." He also added that "We don't have the required technically trained HR and we haven't invested in training them either." Respondent 4 shared, "In 2019, it felt like when there was crisis then it was a need. The technology was there before, but it wasn't in use then." So, he pointed that the crisis led to everyone to harness the benefits of using technology for conducting virtual training programs. Respondent 2 shared, "It became difficult for us to start in the beginning as it required infrastructure and equipment." Respondent 3 also shared the initial difficulties while conducting the online sessions as, "during one of my earlier sessions, I shared video for 4 minutes but nobody said anything while it played. After it was finished the participants shared that they heard nothing." However, the respondents also share that despite the challenges they have the inquisitiveness to learn and are very dedicated towards self-learning. Thus, there is more of learning by doing and self-initiative in adapting to technology. Respondent 1 shared, "We are self-exploring and self-learning on it. We are learning by doing." Respondent 3 shared, "In the beginning it was a hassle. So, later I got to understand

what needed to be done one after the other." The respondents shared about addressing challenges in content and tools usage. Respondent 3 shared, "In the beginning how to use zoom and google meet was unknown like when we buy a new mobile phone, we don't know all the functions." The respondents also showed concerns in terms of participant engagement. Many challenges and issues were faced by the trainee officials which was also shared by Respondent 2, "Some of our participants had to shift from their hometown due to internet issues or had to stay on the roof to get the internet access." The respondents also shared that many trainers are skeptical about the transfer of required knowledge, skills and attitude through online training and most aren't thinking deep into the crux of the issue. Respondent 1 shares, "We aren't trying to figure out how we can make the participants engaged in our session, how to give them space, how the discourse can take place, using interactive tools, developing exercise, additional inputs and participatory tools." The respondents shared apprehensions about the gaps in terms of technological literacy and engagement among the trainers in all levels of hierarchy and senior management. The respondents also shared their distaste to online training as their body language was restricted and even small pauses in between seemed awkward. Respondent 2 shared, "Sometimes I felt that while conducting online training only I am speaking and there is nobody in the other side." However, despite initial challenges, some responders share their experiences of self-learning and inquisitiveness to use novel online technologies during online training programs to make the sessions more engaging. Respondent 1 shared, "In online training, when using Google meet we used Google classrooms, breakout sessions making them interact and giving some exercises." However, the mindset of the trainee officials also sometimes challenged learning as Respondent 5 shared, "It was difficult to receive their feedback and assignments because even the participants acted like it wouldn't be much of a problem if the assignments were not provided." In the later phases, the trainee officials enrolled in online training from their respective organizations which was a challenge. Respondent 3 shared, "When the participants were involved in the training from their office they had issues such as citizens or other officials would come seeking for service." Respondent 1 highlighted the importance of, "bringing people in the same level of thinking means our staff members and the users who are to be trained." In the early days, there were higher gaps in faculty preparedness and participant engagement which can be corroborated by the statement from Respondent 4, "In the early phase understanding the system like mute, unmute and difficulties in instrument administration were faced by me. But they were

handled slowly." However, he also doubts whether these gaps have been addressed in the years that trainers have used the online tools and technologies as he questions, "Are the trainers ready to learn and upload contents? Are they aware about how or what games or activities can be or should be developed to engage the adult in virtual learning platforms?" Respondent 2 said, "We didn't use polls or breakout sessions other stuffs. We opted for more individual exercises." But, in order to ensure that the participants are engaged in the learning, he further added, "We even requested the participants to turn on their video so that we could monitor whether they were engaged in the sessions." So, learning new technologies available to make the session fruitful was a challenge for some respondents. The responders demonstrated adaptation to online tools and technologies during training by learning and migrating to digital platforms despite the challenges to transition into online training. The online trainers also demonstrated their resilience as digital leaders through their readiness to adopt technology and persevere in the face of difficulties. This demonstrates that they were resilient and persistent to ensure that their sessions were delivered smoothly during the online training modality. They put in their continuous efforts to make sure that they were using the systems effectively to run the online training programs. Thus, the respondents revealed that they were adaptable and resilient. Thus, this theme encapsulates several key aspects such as adaptation and resilience through the challenges and barriers to using online tools and technologies, continuous self-learning, learning by doing, technology and participant engagement, mindset and organizational challenges, persistence to continuous exploring of solutions.

Advantages of Online Training

The respondents highlighted the positive aspects of online training and its potential for future while sharing their experiences. Respondent 3 shared how the lockdown imposed by covid led everyone to get caught up at home. The face-to-face programs were stopped but then, "the concept of why not to translate the same into online training was generated." So, moving forward he shared that the courses were run online and everyone benefitted. Respondent 1 shared, "It is also cost saving in terms of receiver's end. It is convenient for them as they don't need to travel and they'll be techno savvy as well." Respondent 2 shared, "The good thing about online training is that it has greater coverage and more than 30 people could be enrolled." The respondents also shared that more number of trainees were able to participate in the training programs even more

so exceeding the training targets and achievements. Respondent 3 shared, "The target number of CDRC trainee officials exceeded to 800 – 900 through online training. Our initial target was 500 in face-to-face program." Some respondents were very positive about the continuation of online training programs in the future. Respondent 1 shared about the ongoing research on the design of a hybrid program which will provide guidance for the design of a full-fledged online training program. Respondent 2 shared, "Maybe the online training should be introduced to the new recruits in the government because they would be young and more techno savvy." Respondent 5 also shared, "There are some good aspects also such as ... we could conduct trainings in such critical phase and I could see online training as an alternative." Respondent 2 also pointed the same, "I feel online platform and training is very advantageous because it saves time and my energy is saved, travel time, cost, I can manage my other tasks and also do those online trainings simultaneously." Although they do not recognize that all training programs should be conducted online because some contents are better delivered face-to-face and because the face-to-face training has its own benefits. Respondent 5 shared, "the online training should be conducted only if and when the content can be effectively delivered online or in blended mode. For some topics, it is important to make sure that the training is face-to-face". Thus the opinions of the respondents generally show that they are very positive towards using technology and being familiar with online tools as they also want to relate with the demands of the techno savvy future generations. Thus, the theme highlights several aspects such as expansion and increased reach, cost effectiveness and convenience, optimizing the training delivery, technological engagement, flexibility, future readiness and future potential of digital tools and technologies for online training programs.

Leadership, Strategy, and Organizational Support

The respondents focused on leadership, decision-making, and strategic direction for implementing digital transformation. The emphasis was on their role and the senior leadership's role in guiding the transition, advocating for digital strategies, and making crucial decisions. In terms of the strategic vision and role of leadership, respondents pointed to the senior management, especially the executive director as the driving force of the organization for ensuring the success or failure to conduct online training programs. Highlighting on the importance of leadership and investment in the digital transformation, Respondent 1 shared,

"The leadership requires that level of awareness to invest in the required level of resource." The respondents also pointed that the top leadership is one of the main reasons as to why the technological advancements and proper systems for online training programs are affected.

Respondent 4 shared, "The leadership does not view ICT ecosystem, HR policies and practices, business process etc. as a strategic element." Sharing about the successful running of the online training programs during covid and how it was discontinued after we returned to normalcy, he added that, "This was an achievement. But we failed to capitalize it. If we could have continued it then we could have had more success."

However, they also do not deny that the success in the delivery of the online training was also possible due to the top management. Respondent 3 shared, "The management together decided on the guidelines like how many hours the sessions would run in a day, two hours or three hours or how many days to conduct the training." She further added,

The top management is the person to make the final decision. Even if all of the members of the management proposed online training but if the decision maker top management wouldn't have been convinced then we would have to stop it.

Respondents agree that the persuasion and advocacy for digital transformation is important in all levels of hierarchy. They shared the significance of convincing the senior management in the initiation of the online training programs. Respondent 2 shared, "Earlier, even the senior management wasn't convinced but some of us we continuously tried to convince the senior management and then it was done." The respondents also shared that it is important for the person persuading to understand the online technologies and its overall ecosystem and scenario when pitching the idea to get the best response and resources. Failing to express the required tools and technologies also leads to failure which can be corroborated from the experience shared by Respondent 1:

Many systems fail because in the output level we thought was easily possible, we failed to calculate about the background works... amount of works to be done, so resource support was not adequate or... I would say we were also unable to claim why such system was required with the management. So, somewhere we miss it... So, it requires upward, downward and horizontal management. All three are equally important.

The respondents also highlighted how their individual roles are also crucial in promoting resources, restructuring courses, and establishing guidelines. Recalling the success of the project to develop online course using learning management system under his leadership which was once a failure when led by some other colleague, Respondent 1 shared, "Leadership matters and someone has to take it up like it is their important task and that it is their cup of tea and move forward. Else it is not possible." He also pointed his future plans of creating a self-paced course with a team of like-minded people within 2 years, further stating, "Transformation is not to say to others but to live by example." They were actively involved in maintaining and enhancing online training initiatives thus, driving a strategic vision to the organization. Respondent 4 shared his continuous efforts in advocating for institutional change to adopt and adapt to online tools and technologies through the development of long term IT strategy. He added, "Maybe we should be able to connect with the existing systems of the Nepal Government as well in the long run." Respondent 1 also shared his struggles with persuading and convincing the senior management, subordinates and juniors to view online training through the holistic lens. However, he further stated, "I don't like to give up on anything or any assignment. I don't like to leave the task until it reaches the end." The respondents also shared their experience of developing guidelines and norms for conducting the online training programs. Respondent 2 said:

I thought that the methodologies need to be customized for online training. So, in order to start it we needed the operating procedures because we wanted to have a document that guided us through the training and we didn't want anyone questioning us about how the training programs meet the minimum requirements when conducted online. So, I along with my team prepared such guidelines.

The respondents agreed that the top management is the person in priority for any high level decisions and that the officials in other levels can only take risks within their jurisdiction. They shared that they can give suggestions, advocate for the betterment and demonstrate how change can be done but it is for the institution head to decide whether to take that idea forward or not. However, they also share that they can demonstrate leadership within their area or within their given task. They said that in case of their online sessions, although the course were redesigned and approved by the senior management, they had the flexibility to use different exercises and

online tools to make the online session more effective. Respondent 3 shared, “in terms of the institutional level decision it is always on the leader. If it is within my authority I’ll decide like how I’ll handle my sessions online within my thematic area”. Respondent 1 shared, “I can at least provide my viewpoint on what needs to be done or what my requirement is. I can generate an idea about how which systems can be helpful to us and how it can function.” The respondents also predict their role for effective online training programs. Respondent 4 shared, "My role would be to understand the business process, the type of online training program we are looking to develop, look at the business value." Thus, the theme highlights the interplay between leadership, strategy, and organizational support in ensuring the success of digital transformation efforts, focusing on the importance of leadership at all levels and its role in guiding, advocating, and supporting change within the organization. The theme capture several aspects such as role of senior leadership in digital transformation, strategic vision and decision making, investment and support, institutional advocacy and change, individual leadership within the organization, collaboration and guidelines development and flexibility and adaptability in leadership roles.

Technology Adaptation and Tools

The respondents shared their journey of learning, adapting, and increasingly leveraging digital tools for effective online training delivery. The usage and adaptation of technology for effective online training, including both initial struggles and growing proficiency was shared by the respondents. The technological readiness among faculties, senior management and trainee officials were pointed by the respondents. Respondent 1 shared, "Couple of issues are there though such as readiness issue. We have resistance to change from a system that we are familiar with." Respondent 4 shed light on the limited utilization of the ICT tools by sharing, "The DMS was rarely updated. The officials who had been working for many years didn’t use the system.... Moodle had so many facilities which wasn’t used by others and only I was involved in uploading and using the system."

However, the respondents also shared that their drive along with the institutional drive led to the adaptation and adoption of latest available technologies to develop and deliver effective online course. In terms of ICT infrastructure development Respondent 4 shared, “Later we bought the license of zoom and google meet and it was renewed twice...Other halls which included devices to conduct online classes were also prepared for conducting online training programs." The

respondents also demonstrated their inquisitiveness to learn for designing engaging and interactive content. The respondents pointed to learning by doing for technology adaptation. Their originality was apparent in the utilization of instruments for interaction and content dissemination. Respondent 3 shared,

Technology is all about learning and doing. If we can have that patience then we can learn and I think I had that patience so I could learn.... To make the content more engaging and more participative I designed my sessions by using polls to summarize the sessions and to take their feedback I used Miro. To make interactive I used videos and chatbox to engage them. Breakout rooms and sessions were used to enhance participation.

However, some respondents also shared their lack of advanced tool usage. Respondent 5 shared, "I didn't use the polls and other tools during online session. I later got to know that those things can also been done." Respondent 2 shared, "We didn't use polls or breakout sessions other stuffs. We did group works in face-to-face but in online we opted for more individual exercises. Maybe we didn't explore more about it". Nevertheless, the respondents exhibited technological proficiency by incorporating digital tools and techniques to improve online training delivery. The respondents shared that they explored which technologies were available and how they could be more effective in the delivery of online training programs. So, they bought the systems including physical infrastructure and software applications to run the program smoothly. They also tried to explore the freely available tools to make their sessions engaging demonstrating their technological inquisitiveness and innovation. Respondent 2 shared, "We used Google meet and Google classroom by buying the license." The respondents demonstrated that they understood that until and unless the demand side i.e. the trainee officials comprehend how to use the online systems, as it is novel to them as well, the training programs conducted in the online modality wouldn't be a success. So, they provided training to the trainees to familiarize with the online tools. Video tutorials and user manuals were also prepared and disseminated. Respondent 5 shared, "We prepared tutorials for the trainee participants so they could refer to steps and join online classes." Some respondents came up with new innovative ideas to conduct the sessions by including exercises and effective use of technologies such as polls and breakout sessions for group works. The respondents showed persistence in making the online training programs work

during the crisis by making the required customization in existing courses and methodologies as they understood that the existing methodologies and course contents were not sufficient to deliver the required knowledge, skills and attitude to the trainee officials. Thus, this theme highlights the specific areas such as initial struggles and resistance to change, drive for technological adoption, learning by doing, exploring available tools and technologies, technological proficiency and innovation, training trainees to use technology and innovative approaches to engagement.

Collaboration, Support, and Peer Learning

The respondents shared their experience related to team collaboration, support, and peer learning in online training programs. The respondents pointed that it is difficult art to persuade the senior management to support in the use of advanced technologies for online training. However, they also stress that the support from the senior management is important for any project to start and become a success. They even shared that it is more fruitful to share the good aspects and benefits of online training rather than the risks and negatives to persuade them. Respondent 1 shared, "I talk about the positive side and in case of risk I tell them how such risk can be minimized." They also shared that most decisions cannot be made individually and would require the support of the senior management and subordinates for success. They also shared that in some cases collective decision making was done where all the senior management level officials provided their opinions and consent to innovation. They even highlighted that collaboration with the senior management is necessary as it is also stated in the organization rules and because it would minimize errors. Respondent 3 shared, "It would be a collective decision making and collective risk taking scenario." The respondents also highlighted the importance of collaboration, support and peer learning from their subordinates. They also highlighted that they practiced team learning. Sharing his experience of working closely with the IT personnel during online training, Respondent 5 said, "In the beginning phases I requested Ram Hari Sir to stay along with me while conducting session and luckily he was my assistant, so, I asked him to make sure my system was working properly." Respondent 3 shared, "In office also our colleagues shared about the tools for survey or polls. So, internal sharing was done for online training." She mentioned that peer learning through progressive discussion with IT officials, seniors and colleagues and also informal conversations made it easier to learn the systems. She further stated, "Most of the

decisions cannot be taken individually. It was shared with the senior management and also because it was to share with others what we are doing and also to have learning." The respondents also stated that their idea was successful due to collaboration with all staff members. This theme reflects how collaboration, support, and peer learning within teams and across organizational levels are vital to overcoming challenges, fostering innovation, and achieving success in online training initiatives. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of team members and the shared efforts that drive progress in digital transformation. The key aspects of this theme include persuading senior management, collective decision-making, team collaboration, peer learning and knowledge sharing, role of informal collaboration, learning through practice and collaboration and collaborative success.

Reflection, Improvement, and Future Prospects

This theme includes themes related to personal growth, continuous improvement, and reflective thinking needed in the digital transformation process for online training. The respondents shared that their reflection of the past events of conducting the online training have also helped them understand the good and bad aspects of their design and delivery of programs. Respondent 1 shared, "I reflect which parts were good of the earlier training. I try to see which parts were not good and how I can minimize them or enhance them." The respondents also reminisced about their shortcomings and how they overcame those through learning by doing to succeed in the design and delivery of online training programs. Respondent 2 shared, "In the initial phases it was difficult for me as well as I was not very well versed in Unicode for Nepali typing. But I learnt that also because we had to deliver through online." The respondents also opened about their willingness to transfer their learning of new tools and skills with their peers. Respondent 3 shared, "I like to learn and share and don't feel that such learning and information should be kept only with me unlike many people." Some respondents also admitted that they were only able to obtain basic knowledge of online tools and technologies and that their knowledge would have been broadened with the continuity of the online programs. Respondent 5 shared, "If the online training would have continued maybe I could have or would have learnt to use them as well." However, the respondents also reflected on the challenges and some even shared that they do not feel like they have done something extraordinary. Instead they felt that it was a part of their job assignment which they fulfilled successfully. Respondent 4 shared, "I don't feel that I have done

something wow because all these tasks are what a technical person is supposed to do and I have done that." The respondents are in unison in terms of the need for quality in the online training programs and share that the trainings conducted in online modality should maintain it. Some respondents also shared the long-term vision of online training programs. Respondent 2 shared, "With little enforcement and development of required guidelines and norms, I feel that we can conduct online training programs." Respondent 5 said, "If the nature of the training and the readiness of the trainee officials are favorable then we can opt for online training." The respondents agreed that the future of online training programs could be through blended training programs moving forward towards self-paced trainings based on the context of the content. Thus, the respondents shared about their reflections stressing on continuous improvement. The theme reflects how personal growth, reflective thinking, and a commitment to learning drive continuous improvement in digital transformation processes. It highlights the respondents' adaptive mindset, collaborative spirit, and forward-looking approach to online training. The key aspects of the theme includes reflective thinking for improvement, overcoming initial challenges, commitment to sharing knowledge, acknowledging limitations, perceived ordinariness of achievements, commitment to quality and vision for the future and continuous improvement as a core value.

Resource Management and Technical Challenges

The theme deals with managing resources, technology infrastructure, and handling technical difficulties for successful online training. The respondents shared the challenges of resource management and procurement of technologies during online training programs. They shared that it was sometimes difficult to explain to the senior management regarding the expertise and technicalities of developing a system. Respondent 4 shared, "Such huge systems cannot be developed by one person and that it takes effort from many people to procure systems, manage and maintain server, setup and manage computer lab, repair personal systems of officials." They also admitted that most ICT related projects are not successful or lack continuity due to the lack of knowledge on the ecosystem. Respondent 1 shared, "Many systems fail because in the output level we said it is easily possible, but we fail to calculate about the background works, amount of works, so resource support was not adequate." The respondents also share about the dependency on vendors and outsourced IT professionals due to lack of required technical personnel in the organization has also created a challenge. Respondent 4 shared, "The issues of outsourcing such

as the selection of low-quality vendors due to our procurement laws also cause problems." They shared that most of the times they were unable to persuade the senior management for proper IT policy and training programs for the technical and non-technical staffs to ensure the sustainability of the online training programs. They also pointed that there is a lack of strategic vision for technical integration by the senior management which creates a huge challenge in the technical resource allocation and continuity of online training programs. However, they also do not deny that the senior management was very open to the utilization of required technologies to continue with the online design and delivery of training programs during the pandemic.

Respondent 2 shared, "We increased the internet bandwidth through separate dedicated line...

We also bought powerful, faster and better computers at that point of time in different halls of LDTA to conduct the training." However, expectation of the same attitude throughout after everything came back to normalcy was difficult. They point out that there is a need for quality standards and guidelines if the training programs are to be conducted in the online modality.

Thus, the theme highlights the importance of strategic planning, effective resource management, and robust technical policies in supporting online training programs. It reflects the respondents' insights into navigating technical challenges and their recommendations for creating a sustainable infrastructure for digital training initiatives. The key aspects of this theme includes challenges in resource management, lack of ecosystem knowledge and strategic vision, dependence on external vendors, mixed support from senior management, technical training and policy development, need for quality standards and guidelines.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The study examines digital leadership in government training institutions as facilitators shift to online instruction. It presents the importance of technological adaptation, enhancing digital skills, creativity, innovation and leadership for promoting digital transformation. The transformational leadership theory offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of leadership in online training, thereby transforming individuals into digital leaders.

The findings highlight that the respondents possess a distinct vision for digital integration by making good use of internet resources to learn and share knowledge among colleagues. They acknowledge the affordability and global reach of online training programs. The findings stress that the trainers follow active involvement, reflection, conceptualization, and experimenting for learning which is consistent with experiential learning theory by (Kolb, 1984). The educators' digital competence is related to the use of digital technologies to improve instruction, interact with the stakeholders for improving individual growth and fostering innovation (Redecker & Punie, 2017). The respondents demonstrated resilience and adaptability, indicating that educators who use self-directed learning and innovative pedagogical methods are more successful in implementing online teaching (Martin et al., 2020). The study aligns with the research by (Means et al., 2014), suggesting that online training enhances learning accessibility while minimizing travel and logistics expenses. The findings align with (Dhawan, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020) which states that online learning tools are accessible to users of all ages, offering time and location flexibility thus facilitating greater scalability and encourages increased trainee participation. The respondent's focus was on overcoming technical and infrastructural challenges such as technological readiness, infrastructure limitations, engagement issues, and resistance to change. Respondents actively engaged in peer learning, sharing knowledge with IT personnel and colleagues, promoting informal discussions and team-based learning, highlighting the importance of social constructivism in technological adaptation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Transformational leadership, first proposed by Burns in 1978 and later developed by Bass in 1985, aims to inspire and motivate individuals to achieve group goals. The participants

demonstrate visionary leadership by promoting future preparation and utilizing online tools and technologies, a crucial aspect of transformational leadership. The officials promoted growth of a common vision and set of values by interacting with trainee officials and subordinates. Driving sustainable digital interventions, cultivating an adaptable culture, and managing organizational transformation all depend heavily on leaders (Lugtu, 2020). To improve their digital competency, they also exhibit a mindset of constant learning and knowledge application, which is another essential transformational leadership quality. Participants' innovative nature and dedication to improving online training programs led to systemic progress promoting advancements in organizational procedures and personal abilities. Research also shows that by enabling people to assume leadership positions in innovation and change, transformational leadership facilitates digital transformation (Bakker et al., 2023). A vibrant online community has emerged, promoting digital culture and teamwork, exemplifying the qualities of transformational leadership theory.

Participants stressed the significance of a digital culture-driven collaborative learning environment and the need for shared goals among senior leadership and staff for successful online training programs. The leaders emphasized their responsibility to align digital strategies with organizational goals, guiding the transition to support digital transformation within their jurisdiction. Participants demonstrated active leadership by providing clear guidance, strategic alignment, supporting changes within their authority, adjusting to the internet shift with flexibility and adaptability. The findings also revealed that individual sharing was higher during the learning process. Respondents cited external vendor dependency, and procurement constraints as challenges in long-term sustainability. They acknowledged significant digital infrastructure investments during pandemic but stressed the need for continuous capacity-building. It relates with the opinion of (Fullan, 2020) who shares that the organizations often invest heavily in technology and training, but neglect knowledge sharing and creation, finding it challenging to effectively share and utilize new knowledge. He further indicates that a culture of innovation and learning should be prioritized by institutional leadership along with investment in digital technologies. The respondents advocated for the adoption, enhancement, enrichment, and integration of online training programs. Participants demonstrated adaptability, responsibility, and innovation in using new tools and technologies in course content, ensuring an ethical and inclusive training environment, while staying updated on contemporary trends. In line with

digital advocacy, the participants promoted change and digital integration between senior leadership and subordinates.

The study underscores the significance of collaborative leadership and organizational advocacy, which are in line with the transformational leadership framework (Bass, 1985). Participants exhibited a vision for digital transformation, adoption of digital tools, inspirational leadership, problem-solving and innovation, engagement, and collaboration. To improve collaboration, transformational leadership also entails encouraging innovation adoption, empowering team members, and breaking down organizational silos (Saad Alessa, 2021). They demonstrated how transformational leaders exercise ethics and inclusivity by ensuring digital citizenship through an inclusive training environment. The participants' future preparation for online training aligns with transformational leadership theory, emphasizing innovation and continuous development. Their effective use of technology in digital change exemplifies this fundamental component.

However, lack of guidelines and operational procedures highlights a gap in digital governance. Participants showed varied enthusiasm and engagement towards online training, with some showing higher enthusiasm, while others supported online programs but preferred face-to-face training. The group acknowledged that certain content is best for in-person instruction and expressed concerns about its suitability for online delivery. However, they acknowledged blended programs as an effective option. Blended programs, as described by (Picciano, 2017), utilize digital technologies to enhance access to learning materials, promote communication, and foster collective knowledge creation. Some participants prioritized achieving transformational factors, while others lacked consistency and depth, relying on traditional methods despite utilizing online tools for training programs. Interestingly, they revealed that training programs conducted through online modality met training objectives and should be continued, even if they were not as engaging. The study reveals that trainers transitioning to online training often assume leadership roles despite hierarchical constraints, demonstrating transformational leadership characteristics.

Overall, the study demonstrates the four components of transformational leadership theory: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The respondents demonstrated idealized influence through visionary leadership, inclusive practices, and strategic guidance, inspiring trust and confidence. They also

demonstrated inspirational motivation through their visionary approach to digital transformation, commitment to shared goals, and adoption of online tools and technologies. They promoted innovation through organizational processes and empowering teams to adapt. Lastly, they demonstrated individualized consideration through supportive interactions, open communication, and fostering an inclusive environment for digital learning. Although some participants exhibited limited inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation in their approach, they align with the core elements of transformational leadership theory that relates with digital leadership.

“Leaders with a mindset for digital transformation are known as “digital leaders,” who could establish collaborative networks and develop competence in digital areas” (Bresciani et al., 2021a; Frankowska & Rzeczycki, 2020, as cited in Ly, 2023, pg. 2). Through the lens of transformational leadership theory, the study thus demonstrates that online teachers at government training institutions exhibit digital leadership traits, allowing them to be identified as such.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the critical role of digital leadership in guiding government training institutions through the transition to online instruction. Online training programs offer substantial opportunities for expansion, engagement and efficiency despite challenges. Government training institution trainers value digital leadership traits like collaboration, digital culture, inclusivity, and ethical technology use. Their focus on future readiness, continual innovation, and adaptability shows their dedication to enhancing digital training environments. Trainers often act as transformational leaders, overcoming hierarchies to address digital transformation, integration, and competency challenges in the digital realm. Online training engagement varies based on transformational leadership attributes such visionary leadership, digital competence, technology usage, systemic improvement, digital culture, collaboration and shared values, digital advocacy for change, leadership engagement, digital citizenship, future readiness, adaptability, creativity, flexibility, and innovation. The use of online tools and technologies for optimal transformation is promoted through passionate online trainers who are willing and able to continue online instruction. Leadership, strategic planning, institutional support and digital literacy can reinforce successful transition to online training through effective decision-making and advocating for its adoption. Although online trainers embrace

transformation through digital integration, challenges remain in the form of inadequate infrastructure, ambiguous digital governance, and uneven adoption of transformative approaches. Stronger digital governance is required to ensure consistency, sustainability, and ethical application of online tools in the long run. To bridge the digital governance gap training institutions should establish clear guidelines, formal procedures and strategic frameworks. The digital strategies should be coherent with the institutional goals. There is a need for internal capacity building and development of in-house technical expertise to promptly tackle technical issues thus reducing reliance on external support. Leadership should promote the capacity building initiatives such as training on digital technologies to enhance digital competencies at all levels. The institution should empower trainers' transformational leadership attributes and promote continuous reflection on digital practices to enhance their potential. Evidence based research should be promoted to aid in policy making. The institution should develop a proper knowledge management system which promotes peer learning and team-based learning that promotes innovation for sustainable digital culture. Training institutions must address the skill gaps and develop a dedicated IT team in specialized domains which can support the development and sustainability of digital learning.

The online trainers of government training institutions exhibit digital leadership attributes as a part of transformational leadership theory. Digital leaders consistently apply transformational leadership components including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration to sustain digital transformation. Although the participants demonstrate digital leadership characteristics, they also present resistance due to limitations in their technological capabilities and institutional capacity in the sustainability of online training. As literature does not present any demarcation for non-digital leadership, they are digital leaders. However, online trainers must adapt and promote self-directed learning to fulfill their digital leadership roles, enhancing their capabilities through training programs, technology adoption, updates, and exemplary online practices. Thus, "digital leadership" in the context of online training in government training institutes of Nepal refers to the proactive and strategic roles that trainers play in promoting digital transformation through innovation, technology integration, alignment of digital practices with institutional goals, and the demonstration of transformational leadership qualities to foster an inclusive and sustainable digital learning culture.

Future research could explore how blended learning models and institutional policies can further enhance the sustainability of online training programs.

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