Experience of Teaching Anthropology: Interrogating the Semester System at Tribhuvan University, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the teaching of medical anthropology and research methodology under the newly reintroduced semester system at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. It mainly consists of my experience of teaching anthropology under the semester-based education system in its Central Department of Anthropology for postgraduate anthropology students. In addition, it comprises of information acquired from students and colleagues from the Department and other colleges about the very subject. This paper does not provide any guideline for a better course of action for teaching anthropology. Instead, this paper emphasizes the imperativeness of the semester system that facilitates employing student-centred and interactive teaching and encourages elevating their potential through the effective teaching-learning mechanism. It portrays how the typical pedagogical approaches adopted under the semester system can contribute crucially to facilitate students to enhance their skills in critical reading and creative writing.

1. Introduction

The semester system has been introduced in various disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tribhuvan University (T.U.) in 2014. This is not the first time that a semester system has been introduced in this faculty at this oldest Nepali university. Following the adoption of Naya Sikshya Pranali (New Education System) in 1974 the semester system of education had been introduced in Tribhuvan University for the first time. Regmi (2016) has pointed out that semester system could not continue in this faculty because of certain internal factors related to the semester system itself and some other external factors prevailing in the university system. It could not sustain even a decade and an annual system of education replaced it in 1981. Resumption of semester system after more than three decades began with various Central Departments under this faculty. Finally, it has unfolded into all affiliated and constituent campuses throughout the university by 2018.

Once initiated and having undergone the bitter experience of failure, not to recur the past tragedy, it is my belief that it is imperative to have adequate discussions, sharing of experiences and learning from the stakeholders about implementing the semester-based education broadly in the humanities and social sciences. Limited scholars have begun to write about the semester system in Nepal, but largely, their scholarly contributions are confined mainly to describing and highlighting its benefits over the preceding annual system (Paudel, 2018; Uddin, 2017; Uprety and Pokharel, 2017; Regmi, 2016). There is a vast gap in expanding the pool of knowledge on narrating the thorough handling of the semester system. As an additional step in this direction, this article aims to help further improve and sustain this kind of education system in the days to come. Realizing this pragmatic imperativeness, I present my experiences of imparting knowledge through this approach, which I hope will invite other scholars to extend on the scholarship.

The primary purpose of this article is to share the experience of teaching anthropology with the faculties, students, and other stakeholders. I hope this kind of effort facilitates creation of knowledge about the process of production and transfer of knowledge and skills, especially in anthropology. The semester-based education system in humanities and social sciences in Tribhuvan University began at the Central Department of Anthropology (and other central departments), where I have also contributed in designing and implementing some papers for anthropology postgraduate programs. With the kind of university which has adopted collegial system and thus have numerous departments in various colleges in other parts of the country, it will be crucial to share with faculties and students, from other colleges also, about how it is implemented at the institution and by the faculties, who were involved in designing the syllabi and implementing them initially.

The typicality of Nepali higher education, especially at Tribhuvan University lies in its multi-collegiate context in which curriculums were developed, and teaching materials were selected centrally. Tribhuvan University comprises one thousand eighty-four affiliated colleges and sixty constituent colleges located across the country. The official website of Tribhuvan University (2018) itself regards the adoption of the semester system in its present giant structure as a 'daunting task'. It further confesses that its size increased mainly after adopting the policy of providing affiliation to private colleges since 1979-80.

These constituent and affiliate colleges adopt the same curriculum everywhere, and they are primarily designed by the faculties from the respective central departments, however, the involvement of the concerned Office of the Dean is inherent in this process. In addition to limited participation of faculties from other

colleges, the problem lies in the way these curricula are adopted in all the colleges, and in terms of implementation of internal assessment, précis, term paper, and even participation and presentation of students in their classes.

Semester based system departs fundamentally with the annual system mainly in the areas of teaching-learning and evaluation. Continuous learning, evaluation, and feedback are only factors that uplift the semester system from the shortcomings of the yearly system (Regmi, 2017). The traditional yearly system was handicapped with its burden on students. They have to study the entire syllabus for the yearly exams, whereas, some of the students were not keen on attending the classes regularly (Mazumdar, 2010).

For Khaniya (2014), continuous evaluation of students is the primary criterion that distinguishes it from the annual system. Opportunity for interactions inside the class, in the form of mandatory provision, distinguishes it paradigmatically from that of the annual system, which eventually falls in the premise of knowledge imparting in the way of 'transfer of knowledge' from what he regards as the knowledgeable faculty to the students who are deprived of that. Uddin (2017) adds that the availability of full-time students, scientific methods of teaching and learning, and regular evaluations compel students to keep themselves updated all the time. Uddin's argument weighs more on compelling factors rather than construing enthusiasm among the students in learning. Paudel (2018) rightly pointed out that the significance of applied and practical curriculums, practical and interactional classes, timely exams and results, and full rights to teachers make the semester system advantageous. Singh (2016) gives priority to the examination as a motor that drives the semester system.

Whereas, the aims and implications of the semester system show that it follows the principle of interaction, in this system of learning, I would emphasize that knowledge is co-created by the efforts of the faculties and the students, engaging with the texts which they go through, in the context of the prevailing and emerging dynamic social reality. They can bring the latter frequently as a subject of discussion in their classroom. The regularity of the faculty and students, increasing the pass percentage of the students, convenience in credit transfer can also be added to the laundry list of distinguishing criteria.

Uprety and Pokharel (2016) had highlighted the manageable size of the class, referring to the small number of students, periodic exams and routine evaluations, the regularity of students (80% mandatory attendance), students led teaching and learning method in which no student is exempted from presentation and participation in the class, and routine compulsory reading and writing. Ultimately, these requirements contribute to developing critical reading skills (Wallace and Wray, 2016) and creative writing skills (Lengelle, Meijers, and Hughes, D., 2016), and enhance presentation skills as every student has to present in his/her class. To materialize these skills, students are provided with all the reading materials on the first week of each semester or at least a week ahead. I believe that all these factors are the means to enhance the overall quality of students, one of the primary aims of the university, and create a conducive environment for learning anthropological knowledge and skills.

This article broadly deals with some of the preliminary research questions. I describe the process of how the knowledge is imparted under this system. It also sheds light on how students are evaluated and assessed. How do some of the students measure their learning, and are they different than in their previous degrees, which they get through the annual system? What are the initial challenges and obstacles faced by the students, and faculties and how did they manage to handle them?

2. Materials and Methods

In this paper, I would like to covenant with my experience of teaching under the semester system at Tribhuvan University. In this sense, its methodological foundation is the autoethnographic approach (Reed-Danahay, 1997), in which I portray self-narratives of my experience of witnessing and going through the process I am dealing with. Reed-Danahay states that autoethnography is increasingly in practice in literate society and along with the growing trend of textualization of self-reflection. The typical feature of this methodology is that here the researcher is both the subject and also the object of the study. Following such definition, it is evident that this method falls within the lap of the constructivist paradigm, which envisions that there is no need for detachment of knower from the knowledge; rather, it emphasizes the inseparability of the knower from the produced knowledge. Knowledge, to larger extent, gets situated upon the positionaility of the knower. Along with reflexive awareness of my positionality (Kondo, 1990) and adoption of social network emanating from there, beyond what Delamont (2014) has confined autoethnography, this paper gives primacy also to the classroom as a field site and students and faculties as participants.

Adoption of the methodology is not confined to this self-centred approach only. This paper has also been informed by the queries, comments, feedback, and grievances of anthropology students who studied at the University Campus, Kirtipur under the semester system. They have provided such information on different occasions, inside the class, in the workshops, or while passing through the corridor, at the tea shops, in the picnic through the poetry, or in the front yard of the university complex where anthropology is taught at the University Campus in Kirtipur.

In this way, I adopted an unstructured interview technique considering its strength of 'minimum control over informant's response, to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace' (Bernard, 1994, p.209). Likewise, anthropology colleagues teaching at the Department and other colleges have also shared their feeling and experiences of teaching under the semester system, in numerous conversations at the Department and in many other Nepali anthropological conglomerations. This article embraces information generated through various forms of interactions, observations and reflections from 2014 till 2019 in my capacity as a faculty involved in teaching, including designing the syllabi, research, and learning activities under the semester system in Tribhuvan University.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Practicing Semester System at the Central Department of Anthropology

Against the above backdrop, initially, of how the semester program is implemented and its distinctiveness compared to the annual system, now, I would like to turn towards my reflexive understanding about the functioning of the semester system based on my experience. At Tribhuvan University, our MA in Anthropology is a two year program with 60 credit hours of weightage spread into four different semesters. Each semester comprises of five papers/modules except in the last semester in which there are three papers and six credit hours of compulsory dissertation writing. The dissertation has to be grounded with the filed data from their own ethnographic research. Forty eight hours is allocated for each three credit hours of paper. Generally, at the Department, our student intake ranges from 15 to 25 in each semester.

Usually, in our Department, the first class begins with the involvement of as many faculties as possible to meet and greet the students, commonly referred to as the Orientation Program. Amidst this, generally the Head of the Department briefs about the semester system to the newcomers and the other faculties present on the occasion share briefly about their experience of semester-based approach, in addition to their engagement with anthropology. At CDA, a faculty single-handedly runs the whole class throughout the day, which officially runs from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Out of that, the last one hour is allocated for discussion with the students.

Students get all reading materials at the beginning of the semester. They are supposed to read specific prescribed texts for the day. To ensure that every student reads the prescribed text and participates in the class, they have to prepare précis, about one to two page long response paper for the article/book chapter which each of them has to read. We have some flexible practices about how to develop and submit précis. Some students who have access to computers submit electronic copy, whereas, others hand over their handwritten précis, ideally, before the class's commencement. A faculty is supposed to provide comments and suggestions, in written form, in the next class. In my classes, I have been providing comments and suggestions on both the content and the structure of their writing. I ask students to develop their précis as an independent essay as a response paper, containing introduction, the body and conclusion, instead of writing a plain summary. A student who recently completed his MA, with an excellent grade and proven efforts, had made a crucial remark in his class, on the first day in his second semester in 2018 while reflecting upon his experience of pursuing first semester, about this required writing practice:

Up to the bachelor level, we used to write only at the final examination. The situation is different here at the Masters' level that we have to write something and submit this to the teacher in every class. This has helped to enhance my writing skills significantly.

In my discussions with the faculty members, I have found that I am not unique in realizing this situation. Getting students to write précis is not an exceptional experience for any faculty. However, gradually, along with the passage of the first semester, faculties have also realized that habituation of writing précis has significantly contributed to uplifting students' skills in organization and presentation of ideas lucidly. On top of the everyday practice of précis on their specific readings of the day, students have to write a term paper for each paper by the end of the semester term.

I have found that term paper serves as a mini-research/writing project. I learned that most of the faculties ask the students to conduct mini-research on a topic relevant to the respective paper and write about eight to ten page long essays or three to four thousand words in length. The term paper comes with a precise topic reflecting the content of the paper. Generally, students select the issue in consultation with the respective faculty member. It also delineates the sources and methods of data collection/generation and describes the phenomena a student has dealt with. Acknowledging their novice state during the first semester, I do not ask students to interpret and analyse their data, employing any sophisticated theories which they come across in anthropological theory papers and other specialized papers as well.

To make students realize the need of the term paper preparation and for their convenience to select the topic, I usually encourage them to be clear about their topic by the initial fourth week, considering my realization that it may evolve gradually in a month. Then they can plan the time to conduct mini-research

for its preparation. There is an exact deadline for term paper submissions, along with an email reminder. In my term papers, I have realized that asking students to develop their term paper engaging with 5-6 key literature which they have gone through in the respective paper makes them habituated in reviewing the literature and engaging with them. I have found that students do make effort in preparing a term paper when they realize that it is crucial beyond ten marks for their internal assessment. Along with other faculties at the Department, I have been asking students not to look for quick solutions and avoid plagiarism (Jereb et al., 2018), collusion, and multiple submissions. Besides, we provide much flexibility to students in terms of the structure of the term paper, which has eventually helped them to become creative and conveniently express their ideas.

3.2. Learning by Doing: Inherently Embedded in the Semester System

I think learning by doing has to be cultivated as an essence of the semester system. One cannot learn anything unless he is actively involved in the very process. I often remind the students saying that 'you cannot learn writing unless you write'. In every class, usually, students lead presentations on the prescribed reading of the day. From the very beginning of the semester system, the Central Department of Anthropology has adopted a different modality of the class hours in comparison to the prevailing practice in the annual system. Now, we run classes from Sunday to Thursday, and there are no classes on Friday. Instead of taking several courses for different papers each day, now, our whole day is dedicated to a paper every day. Generally, last Friday of every month comprise of colloquium series on a different topic. Students and faculties participate, interact, and learn from the presenting scholars. Scholars from around the world and from different disciplinary backgrounds present their research in these series.

I assign student(s) to lead the next day's class presentation in the previous class. Usually a student or small team of students is identified, in most cases voluntarily, to lead a paper/chapter presentation. Influenced by my experience of being a student of Medical Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam during 2005-2006, I have been implementing a specific modality of class presentations. I term this as MACQ and which stands for:

- M = Main Quotation (s)
- A = Arguments
- C = Connectivities
- Q = Queries

No one is exempted from participation in discussions (and reading of the text). Before the presentation begins, I ask other students to locate the main quotation(s), which they think represent the reading. This process ensures that everybody has gone through the readings at home, though, he/she has not to lead the presentation. Then, the student(s) leading the paper deal with the arguments portrayed by the author in support of the 'main quote'. Students are encouraged to present the coherence of the overall arguments clearly. An individual argument may be in support or sometimes even against the 'main quote'. Depending upon the style of argumentation of the author, students identify, discuss, and sometimes interrogate various arguments. As a class teacher, I join the students in different stages of their presentations, mainly to emphasize a particular issue, to clarify the topic, and to encourage all the students to participate in the discussions.

I encourage the leading students to connect the essence of the paper/chapter with the other literature which they have already read, and more importantly, to their life and the society which they are enduring as a member or an actor. I use this process as an analogy to the literature review as well, in which they have to engage with other literature, in light of their research questions. Here, they are encouraged to relate real-life situations in

light of the article/chapter under study. As "learning is ultimately about linking the education of students to its consequences for communities and society" (Kassam, 2010, p.1), when students start to initiate learning linking the concept/subject, eventually it will enhance their learning. Moreover, Kassam takes it as a heightened feeling of ethical awareness of linking freedom (derived through education) with responsibility. Finally, all the students are encouraged to reflect upon what kinds of queries have come up in their minds while going through the literature or during the discussions in the class. In this way, we do not read any article; rather, interrogate, examine and review each article/chapter in the class.

I also persuade students, other than the ones leading the presentation, for their participation in the discussions of the topic. I ask them to join on different occasions through their contribution, mainly when there is a turning point in the topic. Running the class in this way, allows it not to become mono centric but polycentric and thus ensures that no one can remain passive in the class. Sometimes, we carry on the discussions following the presentation of a student. We follow the same procedure for each literature to be discussed in the class. Finally, the class ends with the planning of the next class.

Sometimes, when there is some new(s) thing related with the prescribed article, conventionally it may not fall within the prescribed curricula, but I think that as relevant for the students/class, e.g. news about the scarcity of free medicines to be distributed by Government health facilities, scarcity of health personnel in a particular district/region/health facility, confrontation between the service providers and health seeker, and so on. These illustrations facilitate the students to understand the embeddedness of health in the local socio-cultural milieu (Dahal, 2007). I bring such topics to class on the relevant occasion. It can be at the beginning of the class, somewhere in the middle or at the end of the class. The class

may spend a few minutes of discussion on the topic/issue. We also encourage students to look at the social and cultural realm as temporal reality and link social and cultural transformations taking around them with the domain of health and illness (Dahal, 2018a). In addition, students with diverse social, cultural, regional, and caste/ethnic backgrounds bring in rich examples from their respective contexts and enrich the class with empirical examples. These examples and arguments help students to get out of their cultural luggage and expand their horizon beyond ethnocentrism (Buchowski and Červinková, 2017) even within their classroom that ultimately leads to nurture the value of open societies. Such engagements and illustrations also facilitate the students to explore data around them and do not always look for the exotic and the others.

In our introductory and some other papers, some faculty show relevant videos to sensitize students about the anthropological engagements, research, and concerns. Videos could familiarize some anthropologically crucial things, about the cultural contrast, or certain aspects of the fieldwork process. As part of learning by doing, students are taken for the field visits under the supervision and monitoring of experienced faculty. We have realized that all the faculties' involvement in such field trips would be far better instead of being led by only a few. Frequent obligatory academic writing, in different stages of their semesters and on various occasions, opens up opportunities for the students to learn through their involvement in performing educational activities. On certain circumstances, instead of taking concepts developed in the West for granted, we also encourage students to look for local concepts, analogy and metaphors (Dahal, 2018b) that are embedded in local Nepali social and cultural context (Dahal, 2007; Dahal 2018c). For instance, in medical anthropology course, sometimes I ask students to look for terms/phrases available in their respective native culture and thus embedded in there, and denote health, illness, or healing. This

also helps students to interrogate critically 'making familiar strange and making strange familiar' through problematizing the concepts and cultural components and learning about new and diverse cultures.

Ultimately our efforts in the semester system are to make students be able to present persuasive arguments both orally and in writing, learn to communicate clearly, and inform their learning with empirical examples from their environs and around the globe both based on the literature and the lived experience. They are encouraged and equipped to portray their experience reflexively. Ultimately, we aim to instill the habit of teamwork, participation, and self-development not only in principle but also through deeds.

3.3. It is Far Better but Full of Obstacles!

Based on my observation at the CDA, information shared by the colleagues from other colleges both inside and outside of Kathmandu, and information provided by the students in their daily encounters with them, I can state that there are some difficulties for some students to carry forward their studies in semester system.

Many students are sceptic with the fact that they have to depend upon the reading materials most of which are in English. A faculty from a college located in the province one says, "We are sorry to say that this year we could not get students who can read 'original' books/articles (written in academic English)". To overcome this hurdle, they are planning to provide a simplified version of such texts by the faculty members themselves. The concern of both the faculties and the students is whether these students can continue with their studies. Even some of the faculties have experienced difficulties in going through the text in such complicated language, for example, writing of Bourdieu, Foucault, and so on. This colleague further added that because of the provision that students securing C Grade in SEE (Secondary

Education Examination) cannot opt for management and science, they are compelled to go for humanities and social science. He fears, in the future, till this provision remains in effect, "we may not face the lack of student intake, but we have to seriously think about what kinds of students we are getting". This should be the concern not only of anthropology per se but that of the whole social sciences and humanities.

While looking at the educational culture in the country and the provision of students scoring lower grades at the secondary level who can easily opt to go for social science and humanities, it has become a source of systemic marginalization for this branch of knowledge production. I disagree with the argument that the level of achievement, measured in the form of scoring the marks, at the school level can substantially affect the learning capacity of the students at the higher level of education. However, this has immensely contributed to creating the symbolic gulf between the potential intake for the social science and humanities and other academic disciplines. I believe, many students, and also some faculties, have suffered from such a prejudiced attitude.

Some of the faculties who teach at the colleges where classes are run in the morning and evening hours confess that problem of regular attendance by the students prevail there. As they are working students, when they visit elsewhere, e.g. in the field, they obviously cannot attend certain classes.

The concern related with reading materials is not at all about its availability. Students and also the faculties have realized that in specific papers, the reading materials are colossal in quantity that it is difficult for both the faculty and the students to manage reading for a day. The gap between the Bachelor's level and the Master's level and mainly the lack of habit of serious critical reading among the students, initially, appear as formidable issues. They can overcome this gradually over the subsequent semesters; nevertheless, it is

especially tough in the first semester. In view of this reality, instead of trying to impose "all the good readings" that a (team of) faculty wants from students in a single paper, I believe that it is better to be selective to have limited readings for a paper and make the students curious to explore more in the area they are willing to specialize. The excessive reading materials have directly affected their ability to prepare précis as it leaves them with little time to write after going through the whole reading.

There are some other problems that the semester system is facing currently. Regmi (2017) has enumerated some of them. He has identified lack of skilled human resource as the first obstacle to semester-based education system. He has pointed out that lack of training of research-based qualification such as M.Phil. and Ph.D. and incapacity of the faculty to include their research papers in their curricula as the main problems. Inadequate infrastructural facilities including library, toilet, an appropriate classroom, seminar hall, canteen, insufficient information, and communication technologies inside the class are the main ones he has illuminated. His list also includes scant orientation and training to the faculty, weaknesses in the curriculum development, compromise in implementing academic calendar, and lack of incentives to the faculties and staff to go into the semester system. While going through his list, one can trace that some problems are inherent to the MA program itself, whereas others are linked with the infrastructural and structural provision of the University.

In their assessment of the semester-based anthropology programs, Uprety and Pokharel (2016) also have uncovered some problems. They stated that lack of uniformity of the student evaluation and teaching modality are critical ones, among the faculties across the disciplines and throughout the colleges. On the other hand, while looking at the perspective of the students, inadequate or lack of linguistic competency (in English)

hinders students from being able to grasp what the curriculum envisions to impart them at the Master's level. On certain occasions, students confess that they are not habituated to read "original text", instead they are used to simplified versions such as guess papers and class notes prepared by somebody else and which are available in the market to purchase as a commodity. For me, despite having such a huge gap in understanding what study is and how to accomplish it, what is more important is these students have realized that they do not want to repeat the mistakes they have made in their previous levels and would no longer want to make themselves be deprived of reading the "original text".

Some of the faculties have realized that the semester-based education system has become illuminating because of its pedagogy, which emphasizes interaction in the class. To realize this, it is imperative to reduce the enormous gap that students feel between the bachelor level of studies and that of the master level, especially in the way knowledge is imparted. One of the first semester students at CDA, who graduated from the central part of Nepal, states that 'it is not only the student but many faculties also do not follow the prescribed reading material in the college'. Further, such faculties advise the students to follow whatever that is readily available in the market, such as guess papers and texts written in Nepali but not included in the reference of the syllabus.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The educational system per se, how good it may be and how far it might have been hailed across the higher educational institutions can face typical challenges when it unfolds in a particular academic context. Ergo, it is imperative that the introduction of new education systems such as the semester system should be rolled out properly in the existing culture of teaching and learning, both formal and the substantially grounded informal ones, so that neither the faculties

nor students may feel alienated, nor would they regard the newly introduced system as imposed from the outside. Such measures can only enhance the ownership of these stakeholders on the academic activities and contribute to create a conducive environment for learning.

One more thing that every stakeholder involved in designing and developing a syllabus needs to consider is delimiting the size of literature in the syllabus. Some papers are required to downsize; no matter how crucial they are, realizing that we cannot teach every good literature at the MA level. Instead, what we can simply do is to generate curiosity among the students to look for further readings in their areas of interest and cultivate the habit of critical reading.

What Uprety and Pokharel (2016) have pointed out based on their assessment and witnessing of teaching and learning of few institutions seems to become alarming in the days to come. How the semester system will be implemented across the colleges throughout Tribhuvan University, in teaching and evaluation and how the university ensures that each of its wings is on par with its vision and plan have become the prominent arena which needs further discussions, input, and monitoring, and supervision. The absence of uniformity and diversity in practices implies that the university's semester system has yet to flourish fully. There are hurdles on the way nonetheless there is no way back for the university but to handle them to achieve excellence in academia.

Some prescriptive recommendations can be made to address the above discussed challenges. It is necessary to commence to enact to overcome the barriers in the reading and writing skills of the students in the English language, which further opens up their academic journey. Simultaneous running of academic writing classes by the University in different shifts, accommodating students from various faculties, without

hampering the regular class can be beneficial for the students. Accelerating their reading and writing skills in English will not only be helpful for them to raise their capacity to critical reading, comprehend well and write lucidly, but it will contribute positively to their professional life. It should not be the matter of an individual department per se but the University as a whole.

One of the criteria of evaluation primarily that of the university authority and the faculties, has to be the success of the implementation of the semester system from their respective location. There should be no room for recurrence of the mistakes already committed three decades ago. I believe in the plurality of knowledge imparting methods and thus do not claim that what I am personally, or the CDA is doing is the ideal. Instead, I do believe that it is there in practice as a modality. Textualization of the reflective narratives on teaching method adds to the discussion on how to cultivate and/or transfer knowledge.

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