



Laxman Gnawali • Balsamo Asian Scholar

Reciprocity and Growth in Communities of Practice

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Teacher professional development is an integral part of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. When EFL teachers make professional development efforts by creating challenges for themselves and learning from their experiences, they can cope with the ever changing situations. They may undertake personal initiatives and those based on collaborative practices. Whatever approach they may take, it is considered healthy for teachers to proactively be involved in their own development process (Mann, 2005).

Of the myriad opportunities EFL teachers may avail themselves of, language teacher associations



offer perhaps the best benefits. On one hand, they give a sense of belongingness and identity to their members as communities of practice with all members bringing the same agenda. As Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1), language teacher associations as communities of practice provide opportunities for members not only to learn through training, conference participation, exposure visits, and the like, but also help other members learn with their sharing of experiences and insights. The teaching, teacher training, lecturing, research, leadership and management, and writing and publishing (Baber, 2012), these members carry out do not take place with just individuals. They are all the results of the social interactions and exchanges which are possible with the environment the associations create.

Gradually, from these gives and takes with internal sharing and the knowledge gained from outside the organization, the language teacher associations build an environment that has been termed as *social capital*. Social capital is the sum total of the actual or potential resources of a durable network of relationships of members which are institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). This situation supports its members with the collectively owned knowledge body. The relationships among the members exist with meaningful exchanges created by the synergy of the members within the networks and associations. The capital is sustained as long as the members keep giving to the associations and receiving from them, and there is a trust on either side.

A study I previously carried out on the relationships between the language teacher associations and their members revealed that the two sides, the members and the associations, existed and thrived with a principle of reciprocity (Gnawali, 2016). Their relationship was sustained on the grounds of give and take. In this study, the data were collected from the central committee members of the Nepal English Language Teachers Associations (NELTA) who had noticeably engaged with NELTA and had also visibly benefitted from it. I decided to explore how the provincial leaders perceived their relationship with this association to see how the leaders who had worked from provinces with less chances of availing themselves of the opportunities

Balsamo Asian Scholar Program

In 1988, JALT started an *Asian Scholar Program* through which teachers from other Asian countries are hosted in Japan, meet with teachers here, and give presentations at the annual international conference as well as at local chapters all over Japan on the *Four Corners Tour* program. In 2008 the program was renamed the *Balsamo Asian Scholar Program* in honor of Bill Balsamo, president of the Himeji JALT Chapter and founder of the Teachers Helping Teachers SIG. Over the years, teachers from many countries have visited Japan on this program, including four teachers from China; four from Vietnam; three from the Philippines; two each from Cambodia, Laos, India, and Malaysia; and one each from Russia, Pakistan, Indonesia, South Korea, Bangladesh, and Thailand. The scholar in 2020 will join us from Laos.

Laxman Gnawali

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compared to the central leaders. I used the same interview guidelines for data collection. The participants included the chairs of the seven provincial committees, who happened to all be men. I thematically analyzed the data and presented the outcomes under two headings as before: contribution of the association to its members and contribution of the members to the association.

Contribution of the Association to its Members

When asked how the members benefitted from the association in terms of their professional development, the participants largely ascribed members' professional growth to NELTA. They believed that members develop their professionalism outside their work places mainly due to NELTA. Mr. G stated, "Lots of opportunities to enhance their professionalism. For example, training, workshops, seminars, and other networking opportunities. Exposure visits, scholarships too." For him, there was more, as he "gained social respect and was a recognized figure because I belong to NELTA." Other participations echoed him and added that NELTA changed their outlook through publications and visits to the IATEFL and TESOL conferences, the Hornby scholarships, and expanding network, thereby expanding their horizons. Mr. B shared, "This umbrella creates a sense of belonging. We develop our professional development from both local and global expertise." All participants sounded highly grateful to this association for what they had achieved. They believed that this kind of benefit for the members was possible due to the provisions made in the policy as outlined in its statutes. However, the spirit of the association did not materialize for all members, due to the size of the membership. The number of life members exceeded 5,000, but the opportunities were limited.

Contribution of the Members to the Association

Responding to the question on how NELTA benefitted from them and from other members, they stressed volunteerism. The members gave time and organized activities for no immediate return. Mr. B explained, "As the Chair of my province, I try to get more life members. We conducted events at local schools from which NELTA has been established as a renowned organization." Mr. R, who campaigned to construct an office building for his committee successfully, was proud to share, "We also contrib-

ute monetarily for conducting events and raising money for large projects like acquiring buildings." The responses of the participants largely corroborated those of one another. Mr. N was cautious that not all members made similar contributions, either because of their own limitations or their attitudes.

Conclusion

The study showed that the association in the study formally stipulated professional development strategies for its members in its official documents, placing professional development at the core of the association activities. The members benefitted from the opportunities made available through internal, as well as external resources. The members also contributed to the growth of the association. The association and the members operate as a community of practice in a reciprocal relationship, both sides contributing to the growth of each other, and the growth of one impacts the growth of the other. As shown by my previous study, the social capital builds through the reciprocity between the association and the members, as seen by the participants of this study. The participants shared some limitations on both sides. As I was trying to see if there was any difference in the way these provincial leaders perceived the benefits they and other members got compared to what the central committee members expressed, there was no difference. The provincial leaders did not complain of being away from the center. It shows that NELTA as a community of practice maintains the social capital, not only at the central level, but also at the provincial level. However, there is a resource and opportunity gap between the association and the members' expectations.

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