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Original Article

Students' Transformative Learning through an Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy in Undergraduate English Creative Writing Class

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Abstract

This research recounts the ways Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy (EDSP) has been used in a classroom to explore interpretative and creative spaces for transformative learning. I examine this practice through an experiential approach that cultivates learners' critical self-narratives for a meaningful engagement in the classroom (Pandey, 2021). Central to this research is the premise that transformative learning emerges most powerfully when learners, along with their teachers, critically question their assumptions and decision-making in relation to others in their social contexts. Building on this understanding, we have remained attentive to people, place, and culture, particularly at a time when ethical involvement in education appears to be diminishing. The use of ethical dilemma stories in a transformative setting has encouraged students to connect themselves with their surroundings, listen to and speak up about their experiences, and actively participate in their personal, familial, social, and moral development. It incorporates dialogue and critical reflections to nurture students' multiple ways of knowing, thereby motivating towards cross cultural understanding, mutual respect, collaboration, and trust. Thus, the use of EDSP in English teaching, which is culturally relevant in Nepal, can open interpretative and creative spaces for deeper learning.

Keywords: critical reflection, student engagement, transformative learning

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Transformative Learning through Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy

Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy (EDSP) addresses a growing concern that academic discussions on moral choices would awaken critical awareness and inspire transformative learning as a process by which "we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76). It creates opportunities for students where familiar social, cultural, and household practices invite them to question assumptions, connect with others' experiences, and reflect more deeply on their own ways of seeing the world. EDSP, in this regard, can serve as a shared learning space where students make sense of their identities, values, and lived experiences through dilemma stories of "value-based choices between disparate interests and actors" (Hyry-Beihammer et al., 2020, p. 2). It promotes the use of culturally relevant narratives, enabling Nepali students to engage more meaningfully with ethical issues grounded in their social realities.

Learning, as I am inspired by the ideas of John Dewey (1938), Paulo Freire (1970), and Jack Mezirow (2012), is something that grows through curiosity, resources, dialogue, conscientization, and reflection. While my main field of interest has been nurturing creative thinking among university students in the context of their English learning, one statement I value is: "*We start walking, the path becomes clearer"*. This perspective works as a guiding inspiration in my teaching and learning journey, "underpinned by my own pedagogical lived experience as a [learner] and a teacher in transcultural settings" (Tan, 2024, p. 1).

As a lifelong educator, I encountered a range of learning theories, philosophies, and practices aimed at improving students' classroom learning experiences. Each new technique that attempted to address deficits in prevailing pedagogies. The reflective interactions, as Nuraeni and Heryatun (2021) note, have a positive impact on my teaching and learning practices. My reading of Comenius, Froebel, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Piaget, Kohlberg, Dewey, Freire, and Brookfield (Brookfield, 2012; Bruner, 1986; Freire, 1970; and Power, 1969) strived to advance a more progressive and enlightened approach to my becoming an educator, a storyteller, and an author.

Stories can develop learners' critical sensibilities, including compassion, courage, and hope even though we do not have any specific method for solving all the world's challenges. By engaging with stories, students can empathize with characters and critically reflect on multiple life situations. According to Denzin (2014), "[i]n the social sciences today there is no longer a God's-eye view which guarantees absolute methodological certainty. All inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer" (pp. 70-71). Ethical dilemma stories, hence, enhance the ethical and socially just decisions (Smyth et al., 2014) by examining local, varied, and challenging ethical situations in people's lives around us.

In the context of this paper, EDSP has been the dynamic foundation for Nepalese students learning English. We trace the idea of this pedagogy to the works of Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), as the pioneers of moral education. Drawing on the work of Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (Crain, 1992), this approach connects moral development with real-life experiences. It inspires students to participate in transformative reflection serving as powerful windows for learning while their dilemmas are based on a combination of their life experiences and moral and ethical sensitivity (Bullough, 2011). During the past decade, EDSP served as a subject of research aimed at developing more 'socially responsible' narratives in science and mathematics classroom environments in Australia (Werth, 2017). In keeping with Polkinghorne (1988), such narratives involve "personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and the everyday stories we use to explain our own and others' actions" (p. 1). Stories that are relevant to learners' day-to-day lives grab learners' attention. Drawing on previous studies, this paper aims to awaken learners' critical awareness in the Nepalese context. It encourages learners to share, evaluate, and justify their perspectives rather than rely solely on teacher-directed answers. Roman and Nunez (2020) emphasize that human motivation is dynamic, shifting through the different stages of life, and deeply connected to an individual's personal goals, passions, and inner drives. This study, hence, encourages learners to promote culturally relevant narratives that enable them to interact meaningfully with issues rooted in their social realities, extending prior research into the Nepali context. Most recently, I have been incorporating more culturally relevant pedagogy into my teaching of English in Nepal. Culturally relevant pedagogy, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), "would necessarily propose to do three things – produce students who can achieve

academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (p. 474). In other words, I facilitated creative writing activities in an English classroom and encouraged students to explore local knowledge easily available in their vicinity. The writings after any discussions on ethical dilemmas reflect their different cultural backgrounds and the stories to which they have been exposed (Davies & Heyward, 2019). An illustration of this idea would be to discuss the history behind celebrating the major Nepalese festival such as *Dashain* and *Tihar* at the time of harvest instead of, for instance, discussing the *Maypole dance* in England that they celebrate during the coming of summer. Let me share the following table with some empirical examples where local Nepali contexts can illuminate the class discussions into more familiar ones and make them more engaging.

Table 1

Localizing Class Discussions Using Familiar Nepali Contexts

Heading/issues	***Nepali/Local Contexts***	***Unfamiliar/ Foreign Contexts***
Exposition	*Hospitals, Local grocery stores, Tea shops*	*Supermarkets, Airports, Shopping Malls*
Food	*Dal, bhat, Chiura, Roti, Tarkari, Momos, Chat, Pani-puri*	*Pizza, Sandwich, Burger, Cereal*
Events	*Dashain, Tihar, Chhath,*	*Halloween, Thanksgiving*
Nature	*Monsoon, River, Lakes, Pigeons,*	*Red wood Forest, Bush walk, Oak trees, Snow, Ocean, Swimming*
Leisure	*Marbles, Volleyball, Basketball, Musical Chair*	*Skiing, Baseball, Footie*
Transport	*Truck, Bus, Auto rickshaw, Motorcycle, Staircases*	*Train, subway, escalators*

While implementing EDSP, my students actively engaged in critical reflection regarding their school-based learning and life-worlds. The activities focused on critical thinking skills in students, as the underlying force behind their oral contributions to the ethical discussions. As a teacher-cum-researcher, I observed how my students, as research participants, explained their life events through their narrative voices.

The Ethical Dilemma Story Method

In a rapidly changing world shaped by technological advancement and globalization, traditional moral frameworks often fail to address emerging ethical challenges. The centuries-long underlying concepts of traditional farming and livelihood are changing in Nepal. For instance, Nepali people from remote hill villages migrate to cities and to the plains. Traditional farms are almost non-existent, and youngsters leave their villages for different places in Nepal, India, and overseas in search of long-term employment opportunities. While people's leaving of homes is actively visible, their emotions, cultural knowledge, values, rites, rituals, and practices remain with them. They are moving beyond conventional learning habits and require flexible, innovative thinking to align with complex social realities. As they struggle to adjust to new lives, they need to develop their resilience to cope with such adversities and become transformative learners. In such a process, rather than being limited by a uniform approach, Wang (2018) suggests to "give [students] more autonomy to the class by allowing to design learning activities of their choice" (p. 10). Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy (EDSP) responds to this need by offering a space where learners can explore ethical issues rooted in both local and global contexts, and feel competent and proactively involved even in activities of varying difficulty. Here, I share one of my ethical dilemma stories I created for classroom use, with moments for reflection, discussion, and response, and rooted in a Nepali context and characters. The story, *A Choice of Life, Love, and Loss*, raises issues such as poverty, migration, intergenerational responsibility, healthcare crisis, and ethical questions surrounding end-of-life decisions, realities commonly experienced by Nepalese families in recent years. The discussion aims to help students connect the issues raised to their own lived experiences, sharpen their thinking, and support their ability to express ideas clearly, both in speaking and in writing.

A Choice of Life, Love, and Loss

Characters: Sita, Ramdai, Rama, Hema, Rajendra, Sumana, and Kamana

After eating alone, Sita murmurs to herself, "[m]y poor husband has not eaten anything since yesterday." Ramdai, her husband, is at the hospital waiting beside their daughter Hema, who met with a serious accident the previous month and has been in a coma ever since. Hope has grown faint in the family, like a shadow slowly disappearing! The doctors say, "It is unlikely that she will recover."

"Oh, this life; what sort of life is this?" Sita, a mother of two, cries out after bottling up her feelings for a long time.

Hema had fallen off a cliff while collecting fodder in the nearby forest and suffered a severe head injury. After lying in a hospital bed for more than three months, her health has deteriorated rapidly. Until the previous year, her family life had been stable. Her husband, Rajendra, had been working in Malaysia, earning a good salary and regularly sending money home, during Dashain and other festivals. Rajendra's sudden illness and sudden death in a Penang hospital turned the family's luck for the worse. Last year, his body, wrapped in a shroud within a coffin, was returned to his village home in Nepal, leaving the family without its only breadwinner. By coincidence, just a week after Rajendra's death, Kamana, the youngest child, was born. Since then, Ramdai, the grandfather, had had no other choice but to care for Hema and her two young daughters, Sumana and Kamana.

Hema's hospitalization had deepened the family's financial crisis. Debt continued to grow, and the burden became even heavier as the family had lost their elder daughter, Rama, earlier in a landslide, leaving behind three children now under the care of grandparents.

Interruption 1: Reflection, Discussion and Response

A warm-up activity: What ethical dilemmas can you identify in the story? Do you think they differ from person to person? How?

Then, pair up and share your ideas on any of the following situations (10 minutes).

1. Do you think this family is really in trouble? Can you identify the nature of the family's problems?
2. If you were Sita, what would you do to improve the situation?

3. Consider if your point of view might change if Hema were an older person? Please explain your reasons!

The story continues…

Already elderly, Sita and Ramdai struggle physically and emotionally under this weight. Now, they carry the huge responsibility of supporting Hema and the grandchildren.

Ramdai stays at the hospital, seeing Hema lying helplessly, he feels certain that she will soon pass away. Sita also whispers that she cannot bear to lose her only remaining daughter. Yet, they feel as if Hema is silently pleading: Help me, ease my suffering, and let me go. Several days pass by.

Interruption 2: Reflection, Discussion, and Response

Think individually about these dilemma questions: Pair up and share your ideas on any of the following situations (10 minutes).

1. Put yourself in the shoes of the parents - would you ask the doctor to help put an end to Hema's life? Explain your reasons for your decision!
2. Now put yourself into the doctors' shoes - having taken the Hippocratic Oath when entering the medical profession to work to sustain lives – how would you respond to the parents' request to let their daughter die? Explain your reasons for your decision.
3. If hypothetically a decision were made to put an end to Hema's life, who do you think would suffer the most from this decision? Explain your reasons for the decision!
4. If hypothetically a decision were made to put an end to Hema's life, who do you think would benefit the most from this decision? Explain your reasons for your decision!

The story continues…

By now, Hema has been in a coma for over three months without any improvement. The doctors see no possibility of recovery. This situation raises painful questions for Sita and Ramdai. At home, when Sumana asks about her mother, Sita replies, "Hema

has gone far away for work." She will return one day with gifts and a better future for you both. Saying this, however, breaks her heart, and she retreats to cry in silence. The next day, after arranging care for the children, she goes to the hospital. Sita lets out a cry of despair as she enters the room and sees her daughter Hema lying unconscious and Ramdai sitting silently beside her. The head nurse rushes in and asks Sita to remain quiet, as it is an intensive care unit. She quietly leaves the room.

Suddenly, Sita voices a difficult thought: Should we ask the doctors to let her pass away peacefully? And should the little girls see their mother one last time? She asks Ramdai to speak with the doctor about removing life support. Overwhelmed with sorrow, he approaches the doctor.

Doctor, may I speak with you?

Of course. What is it?

Our daughter Hema is still not getting better. She remains in a coma with no hope of recovery. Do you think there is any point in continuing like this, or should we consider removing the life-support systems?

The doctor pauses. "I understand your pain," he says gently. Please give us some time. We will discuss this in our team and advise you tomorrow.

Interruption 3: Reflection, Discussion, and Response

First, think individually, then pair up and share your ideas on any of the following situations (10 minutes).

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1. Who is placed in an ethical dilemma situation here: the doctor, the father, the mother, or all of them? Explain your reasons why you think so!
2. Consider what reasons each person might have that affect their individual decisions?

The story continues…

"Oh! What a situation to be in," Ramdai sighs to himself and adds, "This life; what sort of life is this for my wife and me?"

The situation becomes a bit tricky for everyone: the doctors, the nurses, and the family. Doctors who are involved in deciding on Hema's treatment cannot deliberately

bring life to an end. The doctors had taken an oath to save lives to the best of their ability before being qualified. Thus, the matter will have to go before the ethical panel of the hospital.

Interruption 4: Reflection, Discussion, and Response

Think individually and try to answer the following questions:

1. What do you think is happening in the grandparents' minds? In the doctors' minds? Please explain your reasons for what you are saying!
2. If you were the doctor, what response from your colleagues and the hospital management could you imagine?
3. How much should financial considerations influence a doctor's decision?
4. How do you think hospitals can remain financially stable if doctors start discharging patients at the family's request and thus lose the income from the continued hospital treatment?
5. Let's form two groups, each consisting of one person from each pair. Summarize your responses on a poster from each group to mount on the wall for whole-group discussion (20 minutes).

Or, something creative (Individual): Write a dialogue where a tourist in Bhedasing (Asan, Kathmandu) asks for a discount with a pharmacist on an expensive medicine.

This story represents many economically vulnerable families in Nepal, grappling with similar heart-wrenching situations. The family has an ethical dilemma in making any further decisions, whether to keep their unconscious daughter in the hospital with little chance of recovery. Doctors are bound by their oath to preserve life, yet this case presents a profound dilemma for the medical team and the family alike. The matter needs to be reviewed by the hospital's ethics panel. Thus, the decision is not simple.

Implementing Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy

Learning occurs in multiple contexts, whether at home, in the playground, on the road, or in the classroom. It is a process that involves reflective engagement and the capacity to see oneself as both participant and observer (Freire, 1998). It can happen in a range of planned and unplanned ways in relation to the people, place, and culture

around us. Guided by these considerations, I developed a lesson plan with a step-by-step guide for teachers to encourage students to think, reflect, and share their ideas through interruption and discussions activities where students unpacked many layers of ethical tension in the story. One student shared as the problem was not only poverty, but responsibility. Another student, however, approached it from a more emotional angle; she thought the real dilemma was emotional, Even if there was no hope of recovery, parents could not decide to end their child's life. These responses reflected how students were not only engaging with the situation intellectually, but also bringing their own values, emotions, and lived understandings into the discussion.

During my teaching, I considered key context-setting questions to prepare my students for the ethical dilemma story lesson, such as what prior knowledge they bring, while I introduced the story in the class, namely, pre-reading, familiarization of 'difficult' vocabulary terms that were going to be used in the story, and whether to include role-play activities during the class time. I also reflected on time management, guiding discussions, structuring group and whole-class interactions, evaluating students' arguments, and encouraging them to write reflections. The class conversations revealed a diversity of perspectives shaped by cultural values. One student expressed as no one could interfere as life is believed as God's gift in the Nepali society. Meanwhile, another student offered a different view saying suffering had no meaning when there was not any hope of recovery; then letting go can also be humane. Thus, students actively participated in tasks through pair and group activities and presentations.

Assessment of student learning

A variety of classroom approaches emphasized both active participation and personal reflection to assess student learning. Such reflective notes provided a window into how they handled ethical dilemmas, revealing their critical thinking and assimilation. I encouraged students to share their thoughts and feelings about the dilemmas, which gave them opportunities to engage with and understand others' perspectives (Withrow et al., 2004). When everyone had valuable feedback on their experiences, one student shared, "We were encouraged to step outside the classroom, observe our surroundings, and transform those observations into poems or reflective pieces. These activities reminded me that creativity is present in everyday moments we simply need to pay attention to". Another student writes, "I gradually began to

understand writing as a craft that requires deliberate choices and creative structures". Each student maintained her/his journal where they wrote their reflection as self-assessments, noting what they understood, what worked well, and what they needed to improve. A growing sensitivity was visible in their reflective journals. One student wrote with such an honesty that at first, she thought the answer was simple and stood for saving life at any cost. However, after discussion, she realized that suffering, financial condition, and family responsibility also matter. This reflection suggests how students began moving beyond straightforward answers toward more layered and thoughtful understanding. This reflective process helped them think about how they would approach similar situations in the future. One student writes, "As I reflect …, I pause and breathe for the attainment of all the learnings that I have had, the learning of self-discovery, and the learning of what defines creativity". Students reflected their ideas through a poster presentation, sharing the outcomes of their learning where a student shares how she found friends' similar response who presented on last session saying, "Everyone's definition of creativity was different; there were diversions- the diversions of choices (of what to present), the diversions of approach to creativity, and the diversions of materials".

Cultivating Creativity, Confidence, and Ethical Awareness in the Classroom

The transformative process in education is about empowering students towards innovative ways of thinking. It invites them to reflect on their prior assumptions, and make thoughtful ethical decisions, reshaping how they understand their own experiences and the world around them (Mezirow, 2012). Transformative learning, in this regard, encourages students for their holistic growth that goes beyond their classroom experiences. In a writing task, one student captured a deeply human moment by writing a request to the doctor saying she knew the hospital cost was expensive; still when the situation expands to such dilemma the hospital could discuss her request in the team and reduce the price of medicine. Through this simple expression, the student brought to life everyday struggles many families face, blending emotion with reality. It showed how students were able to turn ethical tensions into familiar, lived situations, expressing both creativity and a strong awareness of their social context.

When teachers create a classroom environment of caring, sharing, and collaborative decision-making, learners become more creative, innovative, and confident. Wang et al.

(2019) suggest that reflection helps us recognize our strengths in making decisions with greater clarity and confidence. Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy (EDSP) enabled a reflective, engaging learning environment in which students participated cognitively, creatively, and ethically. During the group presentations, one group arrived at a powerful realization that there was not any right answer but the decision would depend on love, financial situation, and hope. Their conclusion reflected a shared struggle to make sense of a deeply complex situation in the contemporary Nepalese society. The findings suggest that EDSP functions as both a pedagogical technique and a transformative framework that integrates language learning with ethical inquiry. While students were involved in ethical dilemma stories and collaborative classroom practices, they demonstrated interrelated conditions of transformative learning experiences: creativity, self-confidence, intercultural understanding, critical thinking, and meaningful assimilation of learning into lived experience. These dimensions collectively reflect a shift from passive participation to active, reflective, and life-connected learning as we followed the step-by-step processes in the classroom. Although Liu (2025) emphasizes that these instructional approaches support students' learning, this study found that challenges such as low participation, difficulty conceptualizing ideas, and a limited variety of styles can still impede students from fully expressing their thoughts to classmates.

EDSP still creates meaningful opportunities for students to connect academic learning with their everyday life activities. One student writes in her reflection: "I was able to write a convincing proposal for my documentary about my grandparents". Such realisation contributes to a more engaged and reflective educational practice that cultivates creativity, confidence, intercultural harmony, and critical reflection. Such integration of emotional, personal, and experiential dimensions reflects the core of transformative learning, where students reassess their assumptions and reconstruct their perspectives through eight essential, key conditions (Pandey, 2021) that resonate with the themes that follow this study as (1) Connecting students' and teachers' lives to their learning (*Linking life and learning)*; (2) utilizing cultural and social contexts for learning (*cultural and linguistic diversity)*, (3) emphasising creativity and imagination *(nurturing creativity in student writing)*; (4) incorporating authentic and engaging pedagogies *(enriching student writing through engaging pedagogies)*; (5) encouraging collaboration for sustainability in learning (*Teacher-student collaboration)*; (6)

fostering mutuality, respect, care and trust *(Cultivating mutual respect, care, and trust)*; (7) encouraging critical reflection, analytic skills and empowerment (*Self-empowerment, resilience, and growth)*; and (8) promoting emotional, intellectual, and artistic development of the learners *(Emotional, intellectual, and artistic engagement)*. The open-ended nature of ethical dilemma stories encouraged students to move towards creative and imaginative exploration.

Creativity, in this context, operates as a process of documenting lived realities through reflective practice. Students showed increased attentiveness to their life events, transforming mundane moments into many meaningful analytical insights. Both reading and writing activities served as academic requirements and as meaning-making practices. Sustained involvement with ethical reasoning and interpretative analysis strengthened critical thinking. Students demonstrated a transition from merely descriptive answers to more analytical thinking, showing their capacity to challenge underlying assumptions and consider diverse perspectives. One student noted that the recurrent discussion and reflection facilitated the refinement of arguments in the class.

EDSP's dialogic structure encouraged group discussions, peer interaction, and reflective writing. It provided a supportive space for students to refine their ideas. Self-confidence was also clearly visible in students' responses. Students realized how they moved from initial hesitation to more active participation. They expressed confidence in both written and oral communication skills. This shift reflects a growing sense of ownership over their learning. They began to see themselves as capable contributors to knowledge construction rather than passive recipients. Another important dimension in this study was to assess intercultural understanding. This was developed through students' interaction with diverse perspectives during dilemma discussions. While students encountered differing viewpoints, they reconsidered their assumptions to recognize the influence of cultural, social, and personal contexts on decision-making. Such reflections indicate an increased awareness of how meaning is shaped by these social contexts. The activity promoted empathy, mutual respect, and openness to alternative perspectives in culturally diverse settings.

Most notably, the findings show that students meaningfully connected classroom learning to their personal and social realities, with individual discussions serving as tools for understanding empathy, self-exploration, assimilation, and social

understanding. These characteristics allowed students to critically examine their own experiences in relation to broader social, cultural, and political issues. Students, thus, became more observant, reflective, and ethically aware human beings; finally, learning extended beyond the classroom. Their attention to the wider "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959) has played a significant role in transforming them, together, into active, socially aware, and better members of the community.

Conclusion

The result showed that students, as participants in a literature and language learning classroom, became more attentive to their prior assumptions and developed a more responsive attitude toward others within their social contexts. The Ethical Dilemma Story Pedagogy (EDSP) transformed our students' everyday classroom experiences into a meaningful, transformative learning space for reflection, dialogue, and ethical engagement. It enabled them to link ideas with their lived realities, strengthening their critical thinking, self-expression, and collaborative learning through culturally familiar narratives. It also encouraged learners to connect learning with life, rethink their perspectives, and keep growing into thoughtful, ethically aware, and socially responsible individuals before reaching the summit, because when one reaches there, there would be nothing more to climb (Dillard, 2013). Overall, EDSP supports transformative learning by nurturing critical self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and reflective decision-making.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's authorship and publication.

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