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## Learning Pathways and Motivations of Becoming a Theatre Technician: A Thematic Synthesis of South Asian Context

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### Abstract

Theatre technicians are an important yet under-documented workforce in the Nepali performing arts sector, where recognition of informal learning pathways by the formal TVET system is yet to be acknowledged. This gap limits insights into professional development and implications for productive TVET. So, this study employed a thematic literature review of 14 peer-reviewed articles, reports, and institutional sources from global, South Asian, and Nepali contexts, along with contextual practitioner knowledge. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, the study identified a blend of institution-based and informal community-based or led learning pathways. The study identified strong intrinsic motivational factors like satisfaction from problem-solving, community belonging, etc., tempered by the extrinsic limitations like weak institutional support and lack of a formal system for developing professionalization. The findings revealed that learners' unique competencies develop in situated production environments despite barriers. Finally, this paper proposes an integrative and innovative ecology in the Nepali performing arts sector that balances the benefits offered by informal community-based learning with vocational certification for gainful employment.

*Keywords:* theatre technicians, learning pathways, motivational factors, professionalization, TVET

### Background

Research on vocational pedagogy and workplace learning (e.g., Billet, 2011; Lucas, Spencer & Claxton, 2012) shows that guided practice, observation, and community participation gradually build occupational competence. Lucas et al. (2012) mention theatre for explaining concepts like “arena” and “lecture theatre”, and in emphasizing the

value of explicitly naming and integrating wider skills with ‘teaching a theatre craft to the performing arts students so that they learn about skills of collaboration for teamwork’. Similarly, Billet (2011) briefly mentions ‘theatre costumes’ while discussing how occupational knowledge is applied in different ways in employment. In

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this case, performing arts, on the one hand, is learning specialized theatre skills, and on the other hand, developing professional skills. Despite their critical contribution to theatre, individuals who work in this sector are often overlooked in reviews, and their skills remain under-discussed (Sangroula, 2024). Nepal is not an exception. Davis (2019) documents the development of the Nepali theatre scene and highlights writers, directors, and organizers of theatre productions, but scarcely records individuals who constructed proscenium theatres, operated lights, or built sets. Sunuwar (2026) argues that practitioners working as technicians or designers in Nepali theatre can not yet accept these roles as their formal professions.

Technical theatre education in Nepal shows that, compared to the general educational pathways of the directors or artists, technical human resources follow unstructured, experience-based routes grounded in informal apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and mentoring. In Nepal, entry into technical theatre occurs through participation in productions where new artists or crew assist senior technicians. Payment is usually project-based and not linked to certified qualifications, as the employers require specialized skills rather than formal credentials. Competences are verified over time through demonstration and trust. These patterns indicate an occupational learning system that operates outside of a formal setting, aloof from the formal TVET system.

The work of theatre technicians overlaps with the trades such as electrical, carpentry, construction, etc. These trades have

competency-based training and short-term skill certification mechanisms. However, such comparable pathways do not exist for theatre technicians within Nepali TVET system. To imagine a qualification framework of South Asian context and streamline theatre technicians' learning and growth journey within the formal TVET system, this study addresses two questions: (a) How do theatre technicians build their competence through informal learning pathways, and (b) How do they aspire to develop professional identity?

## Methodology

This paper has been developed using a thematic literature review retrieved from academic sources and contextualized along with practitioner knowledge. Academic databases, relevant organizational websites and reports, and key journal articles from open-access repositories were searched. Some keywords used were “technical/vocational education”, “apprenticeship/mentorship”, “motivation”, “learning theories”, “learning and confidence building”, “efficacy among theatre technicians”, “technical theatre”, “theatre technicians' learning”, “technical theatre apprenticeship”, “formal and informal theatre education”, “Nepal, South Asian and Global theatre training”. Altogether, 14 core sources have been included for thematic synthesis based on conceptual saturation surrounding two guiding questions. These sources also balanced sources from the globe (mainly Europe, North America, and Australia), South Asia (India, Bangladesh, and regional), and from Nepal.

The inclusion criteria for literature selection were a. sources that discussed theatre technicians or backstage technical roles in performing arts, b. studies or reports that addressed learning pathways in creative or TVET contexts, and c. materials from global, South Asian, or Nepali settings relevant to technical theatre or creative trades to make sense of the global south context. The exclusion criteria were a. sources on performers, directors, or audiences in theatre without mention of technical labor, b. theoretical work with no link to learning, work, or motivation in creative or vocational practice, and c. South Asian and Nepali grey literature that is not readily available online, or the undocumented local practices.

For real-world creative or vocational practice, websites of institutions providing technical theatre education or jobs to technicians, along with definitions of technical theatre or roles, have been examined. This approach enabled an in-depth synthesis of experiential learning and motivational patterns grounded in real-world creative and vocational practice in response to the Nepali technical theatre scene, where formal empirical studies are scarce, but practitioner accounts are available.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Thematic Analysis Framework was adapted to review literature. We (a) familiarized ourselves by repeated reading of the 14 texts and taking reflexive notes, (b) generated initial codes inductively, (c) collated the related codes into potential themes, (d) reviewed themes

for coherence and merging overlaps, (e) developed meaning from the themes, and (f) selected extracts from literature for narrative synthesis. Data-driven (open) coding was used to generate categories. Theory-driven (closed) coding served as lenses.

One of the authors is a practitioner-researcher in Nepali theatre and the education field. So, the author maintained bracketing through initial reflexive notes on assumptions like "precarious experiences" and revisiting the notes at each phase of analysis. With peer discussion and disagreements, text patterns were prioritized over prior experiences, and interpretive decisions were tracked. This helped balance insider insight with transparency for the credibility of this study.

However, the limitations of the study include low generalizability and peer-reviewed rigor, which primary empirical work can offer. In the dearth of formal academic papers on theatre in the South Asian context, the grounded insights drawn from practitioners, voices appearing in interaction with relevant individuals, and reflections on observations represent strengths of illuminating undocumented informal practices.

### **Blended Learning Pathways**

The theatre technicians across the globe figure out their professional learning pathways through a mix of formal training, experience-based on production practices, and apprenticeship with the masters (Farthing, 2012; Morey, 2014). Technical theatre can be understood as production

work behind the scenes, backstage, or offstage. Such technical roles and tasks require technical expertise and teamwork (Brooks School Summer Programs [BSSP], 2022). Theatre technicians need a variety of competencies, including backstage craftsmanship and supportive creative storytelling with their inputs. Figure 1 below is adapted to interpret how technical theatre, as a subset of performing arts in this model, sits at approximate equidistance from all three media of learning. Theatre technicians learn with the physical materials while they make sets, work with lights, etc. They also learn the use of symbols like sound cues, light design briefs, and drawings. And they

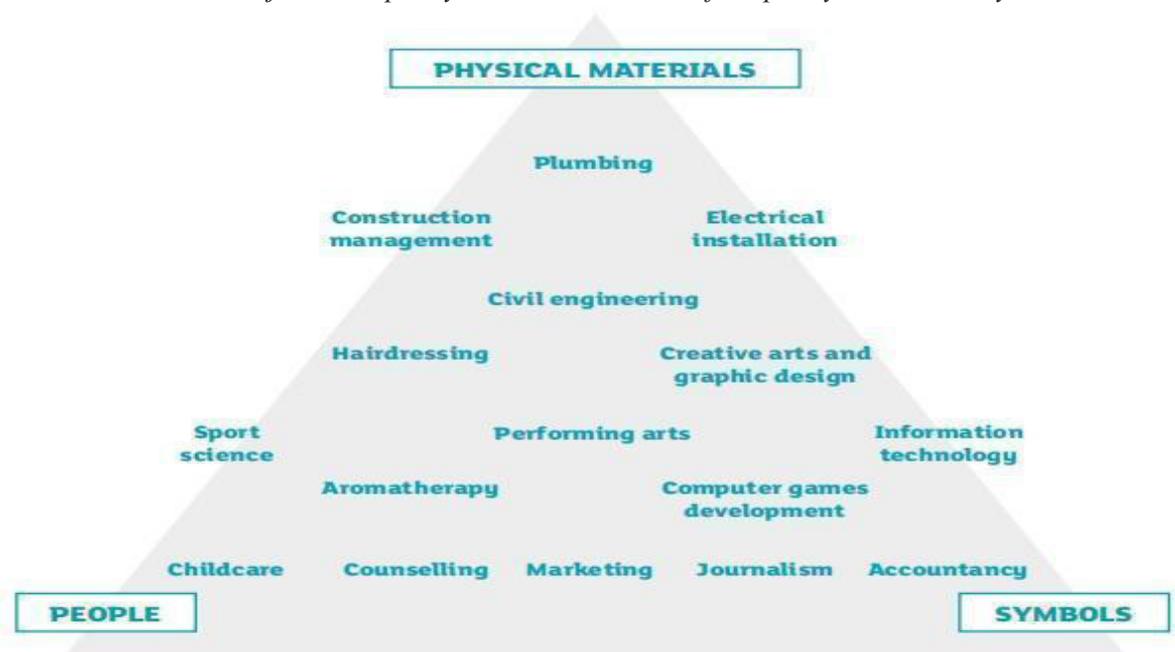
collaborate with people like the directors, performers, and crews in the context of productions. Technical theatre also borrows from multiple creative art forms like playing music, tailoring, make-up, etc. This implies how these trades combine technical know-how, people skills, and creating tangible and intangible things to tell stories to the audience through the medium of theatre.

### Institution-based Training

Formal institution-based training consists of workshops, coursework, and production tasks (SkillsFuture Singapore & National Arts Council [SSNAC], 2024). They balance theoretical knowledge, practical application,

**Figure 1**

*Further Education Subjects Grouped by Predominant Media of People, Symbols, and Physical Materials*



(Source: Lucas, 2015)

and experience. Day (2021) argues that technical theatre serves as a bridge between academic knowledge (theory) and vocational skills (experiential learning) and holds value in teaching performance technologies as a part of theatre courses, workshops, exchanges, and productions. It also provides apprenticeship and workforce development programs combined with hands-on immersion and professional mentorship. Sometimes these companies offer a blend of paid professional work and on-the-job experience as they also complete technical coursework. This enables the participants to learn as they earn. Some companies focusing on the backstage work with apprenticeships provide pathways for equitable access and inclusion of people who have historically been excluded from attending formal training pathways.

In Nepal, institutional training services in technical theatre are limited to being offered technical sessions as a part of the ‘drama workshop’ and ‘workshop production’. For instance, theatre training and workshops are often short-term and production-oriented. They do not sustain formal technical education programs, although that can happen informally. A review of Cultural Institution Art Training Procedure-2081 (Sanskritik Sansthan [SS], 2025) shows that the government-funded cultural institution also provides acting training but does not specify specialist technical theatre training. The formal theatre or drama education offered in the universities is academic in nature, with a focus on genre and criticism of

written and sometimes performed texts, and is devoid of practical training. The duration, depth, and scope of the theatre short courses offered by independent theatre companies, except for the ones like the Mandala Theatre, which provided one year long fellowship, and Shilpee Theatre, which provided a residential fellowship, are limited. They overlap mostly with morning classes or day classes for people who are also enrolled in other formal academic programs. At times, international organizations, international theatre companies, or visiting artists offer short community theatre training or workshops, which often been catalysts for some, but in terms of impact, they are limited, with trainees or workshop participants hardly finding ways to implement the learning in productions.

### **Community-based or Led Training**

Generally, technical human resources grow their competence in the theatre industry through informal learning approaches. Artists in Nepal do not get opportunities within the country to pursue formal academic training, and those that are available abroad are limited and expensive (Mottin, 2022). The theatre training available in Nepal and India is dominated by the teaching and practise of acting (Sangroula, 2023). So, they engage in receiving mentorship in production(s), participating in and performing or helping with organizing community workshops, and benefiting from collaborative agreements within a course, fellowship, or scholarship with private but community-oriented theatre

companies. These companies thus support skills diversification of theatre technicians and provide them with creative agency. Creative agencies can become one of the negotiating tools for demanding higher compensation and better working conditions when transitioning to the professional work environment. As Sengupta (2014) iterates in the South Asian context, technicians commonly take up the paths of on-the-job learning and peer mentoring, which happens continuously over time and helps them improve their technical crafts. Those theatre technicians who have already been introduced or inducted into theatre and are working there acquire skills by immersing themselves in the practical scenarios.

When theatre technicians engage in work-based learning, they work under professionals or colleagues in real production settings and acquire and refine their skills. Working in such an environment also means being trained to meet the current needs of the industry. At the same time, they get to learn different roles or trades, be technically literate, and develop their problem-solving abilities because the technicians are commonly moved around different departments, giving them the necessary cross-disciplinary exposure. Such exposure and experiences prepare them to approach theatre-making holistically. So, apprenticeship and mentorship remain vital approaches in technical and vocational education in the performing arts. Besides this, the theatre technicians also take up different non-formal learning routes that are available to them at different times and stages of their

careers. Such non-formal routes are national, regional, and international workshops, exchanges, and projects of a collaborative nature (Farthing, 2012; Kušnírová, 2023; Morey, 2014). Furthermore, in the South Asian context, technicians may also get opportunities by engaging in community theatre work and creating or partaking in collaborative performance scenarios (Roy Chowdhury & Khan, 2023). This helps develop technical competence and the ability to adapt to various real-life situations.

### **Motivations for Working in the Theatre Sector**

Motivation among theatre technicians encompasses intrinsic and extrinsic factors for working in theatre as technical human resources or performing the roles of theatre technicians. The intrinsic factors could be satisfaction derived from personal growth, competence, and community engagement, and the extrinsic factors or challenges could be income opportunity, job security, and recognition (Li et al., 2025). In the following sub-sections, we describe these drivers in detail.

#### ***Internal Satisfaction, Community Belonging, and Recognition***

Technical crew, who often work backstage/ behind-the-scenes, need to bring out the artistic vision of the creatives while meeting the technical needs. Striking that balance while delivering with precision and excellence, which is vital for any production to make an impact on the viewers, becomes

a source of pride for these technical human resources. Bongaerts (2019) found technicians sharing that they derive internal satisfaction when they successfully master the creative systems they work in, which is often complex. Getting a chance to witness a magical transformation brought about by their technical contribution in any production becomes another motivational factor for them. They are often indirectly or have limited visibility on stage, and perhaps, their work too, in isolation. Their recognition and contribution are less noticeable than that of the performers. But their work makes things happen and contributes to bringing things together. This gives theatre technicians a strong sense of belonging within production teams. Deci and Ryan (2000), in their self-determination theory, elucidate lucrative forces behind an individual's work as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. People in creative professions continue their engagement owing to the fulfillment of their intrinsic motivation and psychological needs. In the case of technicians, they work with autonomy in their specific field and on their craft, make creative decisions on what materials to use, and the like, exercise departure or creative difference in briefs by the director, designer, or manager based on the implementability, etc. They master their technical skills on a daily basis with each engagement and derive satisfaction from solving problems. And they collaborate with other members of the team and situate the contribution of their work in the larger scheme of things, with contributions of other parts of the production and creative, technical,

and professional contributors/ crews to the production, and this is the relatedness aspect of the theory. These sources of motivation are in line with what Bongaerts (2019) and Kušnířová (2023) found the technicians reporting, viz., creative independence, pride based on skills, and collaborative belonging. So, this balance is drawn from a strong sense of belonging in relation to personal satisfaction and collective initiative that strengthens and sustains emotional engagement and commitment.

### ***Professional Identity and Challenges***

In the South Asian context, motivation is more connected with collective identity than with the individual's creative identity. Their passion for theatre is their dedication to preserving culture and adapting to contemporary theatre expressions, and complimented is their recognition within the theatre community by appreciation from the audience (Davis, 2019; Sengupta, 2014). Such appreciations also give a unique flavor of motivation to the theatre technicians. Technical professionals in South Asian theatre want to draw from cultural values and also satisfy the modern audiences (Davis, 2019). So, they find themselves building and adapting their craft and navigating their voice, while also carving a unique identity in the global scene. In these ways, the motivation of theatre technicians stemming from internal satisfaction also relates to a sense of collaborative camaraderie, and recognition of their technical work by themselves, their peers, and the cultural community. And these dimensions are responsible for

making productions a success. Such a sense of belonging and collaboration within teams during production furthers the intrinsic motivation of the theatre technicians and their professional identity.

Further, Rijal (2024) argues for professionalization, institutional support, and job security of the Nepali theatre professionals in light of unstable employment and unstructured recognition of careers in theatre. Bhandari (2025) expresses ideas on institutional weakness, insecure employment, and career motivation, which can be compared to the Nepali theatre context. So, recognition, income, and career opportunity dimensions of the extrinsic motivation have important implications, but there is a clear lack of institutional support and an unstable theatre industry that limits these motivators. Thus, internal collective fulfillment is stronger in the Nepali as well as the South Asian scenario, where external incentives are relatively weak.

Janamohan et al. (2021) posit that positive actions are important to ensure inclusion and empowerment. Despite their undeniable existence, integral contribution, and value, the professional identity of the theatre technicians is often invisible and marred with inconsistent job security, resulting in continuing workforce instability (Morey, 2014). Sometimes, a lack of terms to denote technical roles also acts as a disadvantage in securing fair pay or decent working conditions. The upside of this fluidity, however, is that mentors or employers can

place and support the growth of certain doers in certain trades over time with referrals and more aligned working opportunities/exposure. Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) also offers a lens for understanding the models of apprenticeship and mentorship as they function as social spaces for technicians to develop their identities through participation and a sense of belonging. The theatre technicians have a gradual evolution of their identities in such settings. And this evolving identity indicates the significance of continued innovation and preservation of the cultural learning or working environment. Baral (2022) found that informal trades are places where workers learn through experience. The workers also connect their day-to-day work with the process of identity formation. Baral (2022) further says that motivation is linked to how workers derive personal satisfaction from mastery. He simultaneously links motivation with identity transformation and social mobility, as learners perceive visible improvements in livelihood, dignity, and recognition through skill acquisition. But the downside of the informality in South Asia is that the lack of standard technical training and unequal access to resources affect their creative artistry and employability (Roy Chowdhury & Khan, 2023). This holds true for over-reliance on referrals, and moving from one freelance job to another, one project to another, without long-term security and without full employment can mean inequitable, discontinuous, and sometimes frustrating chances of learning, getting jobs, staying motivated, and bearing

a professional identity in the industry and society. Bhandari (2025) also critiques unstructured career pathways and the lack of institutional coordination in the Nepali TVET sector. Implying this for the South Asian theatre technicians' context, sustainability and career growth issues can arise among them.

## Discussion

The two themes in the findings section represent two analytical dimensions which emerged across the sources, viz. a. mechanisms of acquiring skills, and b. aspiration that sustains their participation.

Learning occurs 'within a community of practice,' and that learning does not occur in isolation; it occurs in social interaction in the form of 'peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The theatre technicians start as novices with limited or no training. They slowly observe and engage in the working environment during the process of production with expert practitioners. They learn through participation. Theatre educators also advocate for situated learning amidst limited resources (Goble, 2020), which resonates with challenges also faced by other technical and vocational education and training programs in Nepal.

In the South Asian informal creative industry, what would have been a structured curriculum takes the form of informal mentoring. Such mentoring continues through continued local theatre practices and the sense of community. And so, learning happens in

the workplace and performance context or production environment, over time, learning elements and processes complementing one another. The peripheral participation of the theatre technicians in production work, social immersion, and mentorship helps them transform themselves from novices to skilled contributors. This is similar but not recognized as formal vocational training practice, combining mentorship, practice, and collaboration in the global scene.

The learning environments also help fulfill the core needs of individuals, driving towards mastery of skills, and securing more autonomy in making creative decisions, and relatedness through a sense of belonging to the team (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the lack of institutional pathways, these technicians adapt and persist with their participation, reflecting their organic learning motivation. So, effective vocational education is important for the overall well-being and competence of people as they identify with their occupations (Billet, 2011). From the perspective of holistic human resource development with theatre as a workplace, i.e., life happens and is enriched with and beyond learning and working. In the collaborative environment, the practitioners not only acquire skills but also construct meaning of their work, take ownership, situate themselves in the process and ecosystem, interact with others to grow, learn, and collaborate, and build confidence as professionals.

Despite the essential role of theatre technicians, they are excluded from formal academic credentials and career pathways.

This means limited access to resources, workplace safety, job security, and social recognition. Concentration of recognition and rewards on visible artistic roles in the creative industries causes technical workers to stay in precarious working conditions of exploitation and self-exploitation (Hesmondhalgh, 2010).

Formal technical theatre education could provide structured entry and support to newcomers interested in the field, regardless of age or artistic background. But, effective vocational programs are contextual and developed over time through regular conversations among stakeholders, that is, with a relational model rather than the restrictive demand-supply model (Fuller et al., 2015). The existing non-formal learning systems resemble global technical theatre models. So, as technical theatre education and profession becomes institutionalized, it is essential not to replace the informal systems but to consider how to create an integrative education ecology. Institutionalization can also professionalize mentorship, so access is not limited to a few.

Nevertheless, Rixon et al. (2024) argue that cutting the government funding for apprenticeship causing individuals to pay for training and getting the mandatory certifications, is one of the factors behind skill shortage in production. This also supports the argument for the integration of successful community-based practices that share the training costs and pressures. Also, in several countries, industry bodies

formally recognize workplace learning through certification, safety training, and apprenticeship pathways. So, this calls for acknowledging the learning that occurs in production environments in countries like Nepal.

## Conclusion

In the South Asian context, informal community-based learning processes have evolved as a sign of persistence and the resilience of theatre technicians overcoming the lack of formal technical theatre education opportunities. But theatre technicians have remained an invisible labor force, unrecognized by the mainstream education. They need recognition and understanding of the academic community, besides the recognition among peers, and the cultural community they already enjoy, because recognition in this domain could support better learning environments and working conditions for them. The invisibility of technical theatre roles in the academic milieu in Nepal reflects how societies in the South Asia emphasize academic and artistic studies and professional job positions rather than on manual, technical, and vocational forms of expertise. The resilience and creativity developed by theatre technicians in figuring out their paths in the lack of institutional support for their learning and motivation indicates toward society's encouragement of informality. Recognizing learning and professional identity of learners and workers in non-formal and informal settings is an issue of dignity, and sustainability of

creative technical workers, their jobs, and the industry, not out of fear or choicelessness but out of joy and choice.

This study, conducted with thematic synthesis of limited existing literature and practitioner accounts rather than empirical data, prevents generalizability but offers a foundation for future studies on the under-researched field of technical theatre in the South Asian context. The TVET policymakers could integrate community-based learning into TVET certification. The theatre companies, which also function as educators, can professionalize the mentorships they offer by blending them into the courses and contribute to equitable access.

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