

Get smart

- Sharthak Neupane, Kathmandu | Jan 29, 2013

Many of us have probably been part of debates, whether at school or college, and are therefore acquainted with the benefits of such an exercise. It has long been established that debates are useful in building confidence, developing research and presentation skills, as well as one's capacity for immediate response. There are a number of initiatives within the Valley that have been operating regular public-speaking and debating events, intending to pull in high school students and other young folk—generally between the ages of 14 and 25—and they have been largely successful in generating interest.

This growing number of young public-speaking enthusiasts has given rise to various youth circles involving members who devote their extra time to activities and workshops designed for things like personality-enhancement and other useful skills associated with public-speaking. The Smart Club is one among these, formed with the intention of promoting the use of English in young people. Having been formed in 2005 when a group of students had gotten together to work on their English-speaking abilities, the Club had later been converted into a formal session when members recognised just how effective it was.

The Smart Club's name essentially captures what the initiative aims to achieve—it is about getting smart by harnessing the positive attributes that the mastery of public speaking has the potential to unlock. This youth-led leadership programme welcomes passionate individuals who want to be a catalyst for a progressive society in the future, and who are eager to be in possession of skills that will help them contribute to this cause the most. The club believes that being able to share your views regarding political, social and educational spheres, with a mass audience—and in English—is a key quality in such an endeavour. To that end, it has been regularly organising speech competitions, debates, discussions and presentations—encapsulated in weekly sessions held every Saturday morning at the PIC Hall, at Hotel Yak and Yeti, Durbar Marg. And response hasn't been too bad; the club presently has about 1,500 regular visitors on its Facebook page.

Saurav Bhatta, the club's convener, says that it's been their long-time motto to create 'leaders' who can take on challenges. "We want to produce strong individuals, who are backed by a solid base of knowledge and skills, and who are able to be forceful and stimulating in their communications with others." Bhatta adds that he has himself witnessed a boost in confidence over his time with the club.

For Supriya Tamang, who regularly attends the Smart Club's sessions, practicing public-speaking has changed her life. "I never thought it would be so powerful, and I always thought of debates as either too monotonous or too aggressive," she says. "But it's not like that at all; it's a tool that allows you inspire people with your words, and to be inspired in return."

Another group that is doing much the same work as the Smart Club is the Nepali Debate Initiative, but in this case, the organisation's reach is not limited within the Valley. They have thus been able to promote the public-speaking culture beyond Kathmandu, conducting competitions and training programmes for school and college-level students in far-flung places. "I wouldn't say I'm surprised

at the interest young people have shown,” says Usha Parajuli, the coordinator of the Nepali Debate Initiative. “It gives you a platform to vent your views, to have your voice heard, and it’s great that more and more people are finally waking up to that now.”

The Nepali Debate Initiative is also a supporting partner of Kathmandu Debates 2013, a programme being organised by the Sano Sansar Initiative, with support from the US Embassy in Kathmandu, and technical partnership with the Leo Club of Kathmandu Central Town, between January 18 to February 7. The event marks the introduction of the Karl Popper Debating Championship (KPDC) format—wherein participants are divided into teams of three, and must research both sides of each issue, and each side is given the opportunity to offer arguments and direct questions to the opposing side—for the first time in Nepal.

Kathmandu Debates 2013’s director, Pradeep Ghimire, says that the KPDC format is very scientific, with a great emphasis on the development of critical skills. “We also provide training to participants, something that makes our event unique.” Ghimire had actually been involved with the Smart Club for five years*, following which he had gotten the opportunity to represent Nepal in the First IDEA Asia Youth Forum held in Thailand last May, where he was able to interact with participants from more than 20 countries.

“It’s not just about going up in front of a crowd and saying things out loud,” Ghimire says. “It’s about immersing yourself in your social context and using that knowledge to put forth views that are researched and pertinent, with confidence. And being able to do that gives you a great sense of satisfaction.” For those still hesitant about their abilities to take up the podium, Ghimire has only one thing to say: “You’ll never know until you’ve tried it.”

(Published: 30-01-2013 09:24 in The Kathmandu Post’s Online Platform | archived at <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2013-01-29/get-smart.html>)

*(*Correction: two years)*