

Integrating Art and Creative Practices Into A Programme of Support: A brief Literature Review and Scoping Study Focusing on Nigerian Students Studying in UK

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ABSTRACT This literature review and scoping paper explores the experiences of overseas students from Nigeria studying in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom. The paper sets the scene for the research by considering, through a literature review, the role of art in education and the interrelationships between art, creativity and student motivation and success. It goes on to explain the context for Nigerian students in UK HEIs and some of the pressures and challenges they experience in making the transition from education in Nigeria to achieving academic success and adapting to life as a student in the UK. With reference to the work of Professor Claudio-Rafael Vásquez-Martínez, University of Guadalajara, Mexico, at the outset of a collaborative project to explore these issues further, this paper considers whether the use of painting and other creative practices could assist these students in managing the transition more effectively and ultimately in succeeding in their academic studies. For the present study, qualitative data was gathered using interviews with Nigerian students who came to study in the UK with the assistance of a London-based organisation, Focus Learning Support Ltd, which assists Nigerian students in their applications to UK HEIs, and which supports them throughout their studies.

Keywords: art education, painting, creative practices, transition, international students, academic success.

Introduction – Art, creativity and student motivation

There is an extensive literature and research into the role and practice of arts and painting in education and its role in the motivation students and their academic engagement, developing talent and creativity. This was explored in the work of Moorefield-Lang (2008) at Chapel Hill, which focused on an investigation of student perspectives, opinions, and narratives which offered insights into their thoughts on the

arts-based electives in their schools. The work throws light on how art education is seen as a discipline of teaching in education and can generate motivation for students in developing their talent and creativity in arts and painting.

Arts education can also be viewed as teaching creative problem solving as well as continuous questioning of issues and ideas (Moorfield-Lang, 2008). As identified in the literature and the work of Prof Martinez in his research project, the practice of arts and painting in education is linked to mathematics in the sense that art work and painting require organisational skills and mathematical calculation of materials to accomplish a task or good design. His work further indicates that the development of a logical thought, of the appropriate mental structure to solve problems and to manage technological tools and the disposition to investigate, necessary for the scientific formation, are some of the elements that alone they are acquired through a solid mathematical formation (Martinez 2003), which similarly can be found in arts and painting work in education.

Contemporary Arts is the art of what obtains in the modern era, produced by artists who are living in the twenty first century and provides the opportunity for those interested to reflect on society and issues around us and the world at large. Interested artist work in the global world and more so in education institutions and are influenced by culturally diverse, global and technologically advanced century of today. The work of an art student is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts and subjects that can generate motivation of students to achieve academic attainment. A lot of literature and research have presented, explored and discussed the possible relationship (Moorefield, 2008) that arts can have to student academic achievement and transfer of knowledge in education arts and painting.

Motivation is considered as providing reasons that we act towards a goal. Psychologists understand that motivation can only be understood through behaviour. Although only you can fully explain the many factors that can have you reading this lesson right now, psychologists have created theories to try to understand and explain behaviour and why people respond positively to doing things and achieving goals. Motivation to achieve a set academic goal can be either be extrinsic or intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation is factors external that can cause a student to act toward a fulfilment of a set academic or educational goals. They are usually punishments or rewards. A punishment can motivate a student to act in order to avoid the punishment such as failing an exam or being forced to undertake a course that they cannot enjoy doing, while rewards can motivate a student to act in order to receive the reward or accomplish the educational attainment on their interested career or subject.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is a motivation that comes from within a student to engage in achieving a goal. Students will intrinsically be motivated to achieve and progress in their career when they are engaged in a career of their choice such as arts and painting students because of the motivation derived in doing it, and because they may find the work satisfying, fulfilling or enjoyable. Because they are doing the course of their choice, what they enjoy, it provides them with the motivation. Intrinsic motivation is often more effective than extrinsic motivation, because it comes from within the person rather than being imposed on the individual.

Linking art and creative practice with key factors for student success, such as their intrinsic motivation (regardless of their academic discipline or course of study), opens rich possibilities for developing a new creative pedagogy – and a more interdisciplinary approach in the field of education – in order to improve learning outcomes and enhance student success.

The potential of art and creative practices for enhancing students' learning

As set out in Vásquez-Martínez et al. (2015), with reference to the work of Purves (2012), we know that the operation of the left and right hemispheres of the brain is associated with distinct forms and types of thought and perception. The left hemisphere is the part of our brains which focuses on digital, lineal, logical and direct language – it is adept at analysis, mathematics and logical reasoning. The right hemisphere, meanwhile, is where we process *“images, non verbal language, paraverbal language, analog, it is the creative, dreamer, intuitive, sensitive, poet, symbolic”* (Vásquez-Martínez et al., 2015: 18).

Each hemisphere has its own distinct, and ultimately complimentary, modes of operation and expression. Thus, the left hemisphere is associated with verbal expression (using words to name define and describe); whereas the right uses nonverbal, yet nevertheless conscious, expression.

The left hemisphere operates through processes which are analytic (thinking in a step by step way), symbolic (using symbols to represent), abstract (taking a small fragment of the information and applying it in order to represent something), temporal (adhering to time and order in sequencing things), rational, digital (eg. using numbers), employs logic and is lineal (thinking in terms of chained ideas, one thought followed by another, leading to a conclusion at the end of the chain).

The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is synthetic (grouping things in order to make teams), concrete (capturing things as they are at the present moment), analogical (seeing similarities between things, understanding metaphorical relationships), timeless (centred in the present moment), unreasonable (not depending on facts and reason), spatial (seeing where things are and how they combine in order to form a whole), intuitive, and holistic (seeing complete structures or patterns at once).

This insight into the workings of the brain has important implications for teaching and learning. Interestingly, it is noted that different cultures and educational traditions (eg. Western and Eastern) place differing emphasis on each type of thinking, with Western teaching styles typically devoted more to the development of left hemisphere thinking. The paper goes on to argue that the greatest achievements may occur when the two hemispheres are integrated and balanced. Indeed, it is concluded, *“an aware teacher... will develop activities to stimulate the two hemispheres in order to keep the attention of his or her student and never miss motivation”* (Vásquez-Martínez et al., 2015: 18).

The aim of this paper is to apply this insight to the experiences of Nigerian students studying in HEIs in the United Kingdom. These are students whose education in Nigeria typically has been very left brain oriented, with their chosen degree courses in the UK reflecting this orientation, as the most popular subjects to study

are in areas such as engineering, business, law, computing, economics and so on. There are many challenges for overseas students in adapting to education in another country and the work of Vásquez-Martínez poses the intriguing possibility that integrating arts and creative practices into their learning (even though only indirectly related to their chosen discipline) may help these students in their studies. This is the central focus of this paper and the proposed further research to follow from it.

The Case of Nigerian Students Studying in UK HEIs

Nigerian students studying overseas

Despite some economic challenges faced in African countries such as in Nigeria, education is still viewed as the key to success and national development; this has led to the government and parents investing heavily in education of the youths both at home and overseas.

The rapid growth and expansion of education programmes and activities in Nigeria since its independence in 1960, demonstrate the value that the country has placed on education. This is not just a pastime for political leaders who are trying to attract voters. It is a genuine desire of most, if not all members of the Nigerian community to acquire the knowledge and skills that are necessary for nation building. It is generally accepted that education plays a very significant role in the social and economic development of the country. It is also the tool that can keep the country in step with what is happening around the world, and can help it to develop regional and international partnerships that are able to benefit the overall growth of the country.

The government of Nigeria recently initiated higher education policy reforms intended to bring its university system more in line with international good practices. The reforms promoted increased institutional autonomy, greater system differentiation, strengthened governance, and mechanisms for quality assurance. They seek to create a more flexible and responsive system of university teaching and research that, over time, will contribute increasingly to national innovation capacities, productivity gains, and economic growth.

Given that the above policy reform will make a valuable contribution to national development, it seems practical for all Nigerian students to avail themselves of situations that provide opportunities that will help them to increase knowledge and improve skills and capabilities. Opportunities to study overseas with leading HEIs are therefore crucial in helping overseas students, particularly students from Rivers State and Niger Delta regions of Nigeria to achieve their fullest academic potentials.

The choice to study in UK HEIs

Over the decades, students from around the globe have been coming to the UK to study in colleges and universities. According to the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the organisation responsible for managing applications to almost all full-time undergraduate degree programmes at UK universities and colleges, in 2011, of the 1.8 million full-time undergraduate students in Higher Education (HE), over 104,000 of them are international students (UCAS, 2012). Evans (2011)

reports that “UK universities educate about 2.5 million students annually, with a 28% increase in student numbers overall in the past 10 years”. These data suggest that studying in the UK is a popular choice for international students and also as means of being assured of gaining a qualification within a shorter period of time.

It is generally acknowledged by educators and researchers that the wide range of courses offered, the practical experiences gained, the new skills learned, the opportunity to study in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting and pursuing courses of study in English, an international language, are some of the factors that attract overseas students to UK universities and colleges and this is paramount to Nigerian students who place a high value on a UK degree qualification. Besides, English is often referred to as ‘the language of business’, and if business is to drive economic growth, then it is vital for overseas students to have ‘English’ qualifications.

Challenges for Nigerian students studying in the UK

Nigerian overseas students face numerous challenges—political, economic and social, ranging from mild to severe. Some of them are identified below:

- ICT skills
- Financial barriers
- Institutional issues
- Culture shock
- Integration into a new academic environment
- Racial discrimination
- Personal problems
- Family issues and
- The UK’s Tier 4 immigration rules and regulations.

In short, there are a great many challenges that can make it harder for students coming to the UK from Nigeria to succeed. For this reason, many rely on the support of agencies such as Focus Learning Support Ltd (FLS) to help them overcome some of these barriers and challenges.

Scoping Study: Nigerian Students’ Experiences of Using Art and Creative Practices in their Studies

This small-scale research draws on qualitative data, gathered from face to face and telephone interviews, with Nigerian students studying in the UK. These students were all being supported in their studies by FLS.

As part of the interviews, the students were asked about the extent to which artistic and creative practices (eg. drawing, painting) were part of their previous or current academic experience. The following are some answers that were given to this question:

Student J: *“My course which is engineering has a module that requires us to practice drawing and painting or some element of art work that already exists. This is*

what we call initiative drawing which was the first drawing I experienced on my course based on specification to improve original work presented to us in a group or as an individual. In a situation of this nature, you would look at either an object or a design of an artwork the teacher presents to you. The role of the student or group of students will be to redesign the work, which will require you to think, generate ideas and be creative and describe what you have presented or the meanings. I found it very difficult but interesting and challenging task.”

Student K: *“I can recall a group work we did in my foundation days at Anglia Ruskin Cambridge. It was an engineering work that involved drawing, where the teacher gave the group an experience of imagining what a car will look like in 2030 to 2040, transportation and communication which required imagination and generation of ideas that originated from the work. As a group, we met twice a week, thinking and imagining the nature and feature of the cars for two weeks to come up with the ideas. This work involved drawing, design and painting of the look of the nature of the car in 2030-2040. In fact my course has always involved creativity, talent development and imagination which I find here studying engineering easier compared to when I was in Nigeria.”*

Student L: *“Civil engineering course allows you to imagine a building on a non-friendly ground where Earthquake is likely to happen or in a contaminated land. You have to imagine and calculate the implications of putting up a building in a place like this, the need to think of a remedy are all based on imagination and generation of ideas to proceed with a situation of this nature as a civil engineer. I learnt how to think fast and design or draw a building in an Earthquake land with remedy to uncertainties.”*

Student M: *“In my last assignment, I was asked to imagine development of robots and how intelligent it would be in the next decades with its rapid increase. Here I had to use my imagination and thinking to create a robot – computer artificial intelligent and their likelihood of replacing human beings in their jobs. This was also related to the rapid growth and what technology can do in the future. Examples such as building a tunnel under a bridge, the new TBM is now used for speed for a job that could take human being weeks to accomplish. My studies in the UK has exposed me to a acquiring both the practical and theoretical skills that I never would have done studying back home, especially with the facilities not available to see and carry out the real work.”*

As the above quotes represent, all of the students were able to come up with examples of were creative practices had been a part of their studies in the UK. For many this was a relatively new experience, as this aspect of learning had not been a strong feature of their high school education in Nigeria. It could therefore be quite challenging; and these initial insights suggest that there could be much benefit for these students in creative practices being integrated into their package of support from FLS (much as students with limited previous access to ICT are provided with extra computing lessons).

Conclusions and Further Development

This initial scoping paper and research suggests that there is a great deal of potential in exploring the provision of a new strand of support to Nigerian students studying in UK HEIs, namely providing them with opportunities for developing their creative and artistic skills. In this way, they will not only adapt more readily to the practical elements of their courses that involve, for example, elements of technical drawing. It is speculated that this balancing of left and right brain activities might also make them more creative and effective problem solvers and analysts; in short, more well-rounded and capable individuals. It is further speculated that involvement in creative and artistic practices might bring further benefits, such as a valuable form of stress relief and new avenues for socialising and developing social support networks. The benefits may not be limited narrowly to the academic sphere, but extend to these students' wellbeing and happiness.

These are questions for further exploration through more systematic action research with students engaged with FLS. An action based research project undertaken by FLS, with voluntary participation by students from Nigeria wishing to be part of this initiative, is both practically possible and in close agreement with the guidance principles and objectives of FLS. In conjunction with Professor Claudio Vásquez-Martínez, it is proposed to develop a strand of artistic and creative practices to supplement the other forms of academic and non-academic support provided by FLS. The impact of this intervention will be monitored through action research with the participants, who will be encouraged to reflect and report on the project and any ways in which it may have helped them in their learning.

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