

Part 5

Law and Education

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Integrating Art and Creative Practices into a Programme of Support for Nigerian Students Studying in UK Higher Education Institutions

Abstract

This scoping paper explores the experiences of overseas students from Nigeria studying in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom. It considers the context for these students and some of the particular 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, 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: painting, creative practices, transition, international students, academic success

Introduction: 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, p. 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 (e.g. 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, p. 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.

Fifty six years after independence, the need for a sound education has not decreased. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that the need is much greater for approximately twenty years into independence, research reports were showing that in spite of the economic progress made as a result of the oil industry, there was a general sense of dissatisfaction with the progress made in education and other sectors (Brownsberger, 1983; Joseph, 1983). The need to bring education standards in line with commendable international standards was dire. 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.

Additionally, the UK's quality assurance practices in higher education ensure that students are exposed to the most efficient and effective teaching and learning environment possible found in UK institutions, which is backed up by institutions such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body, is responsible for safeguarding standards and improving the quality of HE in the UK (QAA, 2012).

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.

For example, with regards to funding and other financial issues, FLS has approached sponsors directly on students' behalf. Another example comes from the area of ICT. FLS has collaborated with colleges and universities to give additional support to students to improve students' ICT skills. Similar support is given in FLS' Saturday School to support students cope with their demanding school work and to get acquainted with the British educational system and standards.

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. The following vignettes give an indication about their backgrounds and experiences in UK HEIs, as well as their relationship with FLS.

Case Study 1: Student C

I dreamt of studying in the UK when I was in secondary school in Nigeria. Coming to UK was my dream come true. However, my first year was not funny. I missed home so much that if allowed; going back should have been a choice, but when FLS visited our College with the Chairman. Their presentation to us was like a medicine to the cure of my home sickness. The support and courage picked me up and the most important was working with them until I finished my first degree and

progressed to Masters. I came for first degree in Oil and Gas, within the four years of my award and with the support from FLS, I obtained two degrees.

Case Study 2: Student X

Like every other student that has just arrived from Africa for the first time, I faced many challenges. These challenges were mainly centred on adapting to both social and educational life here in the United Kingdom. This was mainly as a result of the wide difference between the African and the British society... The challenges I faced was very much reduced when I was introduced to the Focus Learning Support Limited. This company was already established in the UK and was noted to have helped Nigerian students to adapt to life in the UK. My meeting FLS was a dream come true... FLS ensured that I received my allowances from my state Government when due. After I had finished my university foundation programme, they helped to secure admission in the University of East London... I have benefitted immensely from FLS.

Case Study 3: Student Y

I came from Nigeria as a mature student with no ICT skills. I found it rather difficult to cope with my studies because I had to use computers to do my assignments and class presentations. In fact, everything I did revolved around ICT. This made me very unhappy. FLS came to my rescue by giving me extra support at its Saturday School and the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) from the University of East London.

Case Study 4: Student Z

FLS has been very helpful to me. When I came to the UK, I got frustrated because I needed financial help and academic advice. I thank God I met a friend who requested I should contact FLS. I then checked online and eventually had contact with Dr. Elizabeth, whom I fondly call "Helper" because of how she salvaged the situation. Since then I have never failed to contact FLS whenever I face any challenge. I recommend that Nigerian students take my advice and contact FLS for any academic problems or to get other advice that they may require.

These quotes highlight not only some of the typical challenges faced by Nigerian students attending UK HEIs, but also the way in which an organisation like FLS is uniquely placed to implement innovative approaches that could help such students even more in the future.

Artistic and creative aspects to the students' courses

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 have exposed me to 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 where 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. The purpose of Focus Learning Support (FLS) is to educate and empower students, families and interested persons by bridging the educational gaps that prevent them from realising their fullest potential. FLS emphasises that educational development is a lifelong learning venture that merits continuous support from various societal organisation and institutions. To this end, FLS, with assistance from community alliances, embarks on a variety of teaching and learning activities to help it to fulfil its aims.

The objectives of FLS are to:

- Encourage learners to pursue educational goals;
- Provide all students with the guidance they need to pursue specific courses of study;
- Incorporate current educational philosophies and initiatives into all learning programmes;
- Revise content, objectives and resources if necessary, to keep in line with educational trends;
- Build on what students have already achieved;
- Imitate good practice;
- Strive to maintain a quality 'culture';
- Establish learner-friendly environments.

Currently its main activities can be summarised as:

- Recruitment of international students;
- Saturday School;
- Educational TV Programmes;
- Panel discussions;
- Tutorials and supervision;
- Seminars and conferences.

FLS operates within the framework of the above objectives and activities. It recognises that it is impossible to be efficient and productive without assistance from members of the Nigerian community in the UK, support from concerned members of the UK society and community organisations from both communities. FLS is therefore making 'selected' individuals and community groups and organisation an integral part of its activities. In this way it places itself in a better position to contribute to the regaining of high educational standards in Nigeria and eventually to national development that will give the nation political, economic and socio-cultural significance in a competitive world.

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-Rafael 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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