
Teaching and learning Visual Arts in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: Most tertiary institutions in Nigeria and elsewhere offer visual arts either as an independent discipline or as a corollary to other courses, especially Education. Visual art is a specialized area and probably requires talented pupils and students to study them. In most cases, visual art is stratified into branches and these separate branches are handled by experts in such areas. This stratification includes graphics, painting, textiles, ceramics, sculpture, fashion, art history and art education, these various areas are subsequently grouped into fine and applied arts. Those that fall within the gamut of fine arts are painting, sculpture and art history whereas graphics, textiles, fashion and ceramics are in the domain of applied arts or industrial design. Drawing or draftsmanship falls within the area of fine arts but is also an important aspect of all other branches. This stratification is done as a result of their functionalities; however, the teaching of these various areas is not without their attendant problems which stem from the students, the teachers, the parents, the institutions and the government. The methodologies used in the teaching of these various aspects of visual art are the same because of the peculiarity of the course. The main objective of this study is to compartmentalize and analyze these problems to find lasting solutions to them. The method employed in carrying out this research is both pedagogical, descriptive and quasi-survey, whereas, in the end, it was found that the problems associated with the effective teaching of visual art in tertiary institutions are multi-faceted and probable solutions were proffered. Conclusions were drawn and it was recommended among others that all courses in tertiary institutions should be provided with adequate learning materials.

Keywords: Tertiary Institutions, Education, Visual Art, Methodology, Problems.

Introduction

Various authors and personalities have come up with various ideas and definitions of what art is. The Britannica dictionary defines it as something that is created with imagination and skills that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings. Generally, art is the creation or expression of beautiful things around us, especially in visual form; but Gombrich (2006) has a somewhat philosophically contradictory but thought-provoking view about art which states:

There is no such thing as art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today some buy their paints, and design posters for the hoardings; they did and

do many other things. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence.

The underlying effect of Gombrich's assertion is that art is such a nebulous concept and that trying to define it is like asking different persons to describe an elephant. Art practice, according to Sturken and Cartwright (2001) started in pre-historic times as the cavemen expressed in drawings on their cave walls, scenes of their daily hunting expeditions. Suffice it to state here that when God was creating the heavens and the earth, a time came when He made (Sculpted) man out of clay; this scenario, in the words of Hyatt-Mayor (2012) is probably where the practice of art started and one may not be wrong in saying that in all aspects of art, the sculpture is probably the oldest.

The Concept of Art

In most tertiary institutions, visual art includes a wide array of media, tools and processes, whereas the area most people associate with the visual arts includes drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture and photography. Consequentially, Whelpton (2014) thinks that the most probable basic and general meaning of what art stands for is that art is the creation of someone's creativity and imagination inherent in someone's visions, expressions, emotions and feelings. It could also be referred to as the expression or application of human creative skills and imagination, typically in a visual form such as paintings and sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power rather than their functionality. Art is often considered the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions. It encompasses a diverse range of human activities, creations and ways of expression, sometimes including music literature and theatre. And so, visual art is a fundamental component of the human experience reflecting the world and the times in which we live. Art can help us understand our history, culture, lives and the experiences of others in a way that cannot be achieved through other means. Art has also been defined by Philips (2012) as a vehicle for the expression or communication of emotions and ideas and as means for exploring and appreciating formal elements for their own sake and as mimesis or representation. The visual arts, therefore, are art forms that create works that are primarily visual such as drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, crafts, photography, video, filmmaking and architecture.

In most Nigerian tertiary institutions, be they universities, polytechnics or colleges of education, the study of visual arts is almost basically the same judging by the calibre of teachers or lecturers handling the course and the course content. To qualify a lecturer to handle a particular art course in a Nigerian university, such a lecturer must at least hold a Master's degree in relevant areas and ultimately a doctorate; in polytechnics and colleges of education, lecturers are to possess at least a first degree and must be proficient in their respective areas.

In the University of Benin for example, the Department of Fine and Applied Arts has been moved from the Faculty of Arts to the Faculty of environmental sciences in line with the NUC regulations and global best practices and the department is sub-divided into sections namely: Art History, Ceramics, Painting, Graphics, Textiles, Sculpture, Metal Design and Fashion Designs, each with a sectional head and in each of these sections, there are courses to be undertaken by each student from year one to year four before specializing in a particular area in year three and of course with electives in other departments with some relevance to the particular course undertaken by the students. In a way, visual arts straddle most of the arts and social sciences in terms of functions and articulation.

Importance of Art

Art, as a specialized area, has a lot of advantages for students and consequently for society in general. According to Emeka (2014), beyond the qualities of creativity, self-expression and communication, art itself is a type of vocation. From time immemorial, artists and artisans have involved themselves in various artistic vocations. From the guild court art of the ancient Benin Empire where men and women were arranged into various specialized guilds according to the dictates of the

Oba, to this present time, people have taken Art in various forms as a means of livelihood. In the words of Freedman (2003), art has been a universal language that is being spoken and understood even in other fields of human endeavour. This assertion of Freedman is valid in the sense that art is a part and parcel of most other areas, especially the sciences; for instance, in the medical sciences, imaging technology in art plays a prominent role, ceramics and textiles in the art are mostly dominated by chemistry especially in the areas of glazing and chemical applications whereas graphics deals with physics in the domain of photography and light. In this era of technological advancement, the use of the computer which has gained ground in most areas of human endeavour has also become one of the commonest tools in art. In the area of sculpture, the use of 'thixotropic' which are essentially chemical elements suggests the ascendancy of chemistry. The initial conceptualization and visualization of sketches of motor vehicles, aeroplanes and most household appliances begin at the table of the industrial designer who in most cases is a graphic artist. Medical imaging centres and hospitals need the help of graphic artists in their imaging departments. The developments of websites, design and advertising, and film and television animations are all works of graphic artists.

Art, in the words of Sickler-Voigt (2019) helps in the development of a sound mind, especially in the areas of self-expression; it exposes children to the appreciation of the world around them by critically studying scenes and drawing them in colourful renditions.

Art helps in the psychomotor skill development of the child; with regular exercise of the muscles of the arm through drawing, painting and sculpting, the muscles undergo gradual and symmetrical development.

Art makes a potential graduate self-reliant and independent; this could be exemplified by the fact that as the student graduates, he already has a vocation that can sustain him for life while his colleagues are still roaming about with their certificates, seeking white-collar jobs.

To society, art serves as a tourism potential to a country that in turn engenders foreign earning potentials. And ultimately, since visual art is a component of the human experience reflecting the world and the time in which we live, it can help us understand our history and culture. In the same vein, Goldstein (1980) posits that art helps an individual process his emotions and understands his surroundings. Stressing further, he wrote that art allows one to see life from a different perspective and makes one feel alive. Corroborating this stand, Knobbler (2018) stressed that art has always been an important part of human society since the beginning of time and has been used as a tool for cultural exchange, education and expression.

Since art is an integral aspect of education, Schofield (2012) outlined three criteria for education which in turn is a translation into art thus:

1. Education implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it, meaning that art is the transmission of creativity by practitioners to society at large.
2. Education must involve knowledge and understanding and some sort of 'cognitive perspective' which is not inert.
3. Education at least rules out some procedures of transmission because they lack willingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner.

Judging from the submission of Schofield, art as a specialized area of learning, require all seriousness and attention from all concerned.

In concluding this aspect, Sturken and Cartwright (2001) summarize the importance of art as follows:

1. It is a natural human behaviour: It is important because it is not different from the reason why one needs food, shelter and clothing and comfort.
2. It is a language: an adage says "A picture is more than a thousand words", Art speaks its language that is audible to the deaf and visible to the blind. All items we use revolve around art, from the house we live in, the clothes we wear and our dressing accessories to the furniture we use at home and our home decorations.
3. Art tells a story: Art is a way of documenting and preserving historical facts through photography, videography, paintings, textiles, ceramics, sculpture and even music and dance.

4. Art is therapeutic: It is a way of calming oneself and relieving stress. This is exemplified especially in the treatment and rehabilitation of mental patients.
5. Art evokes emotions: This is most noticeable in songs and other artistic areas. People respond to various art forms in different ways.
6. Art increases creativity. Art and creativity go hand in hand. The more one practices, the more he becomes perfect.
7. Art engenders happiness: The psychological positive effect of art is that people are happy when they see the good work they create.
8. Art is vital to human development: It increases the cognitive and psychomotor domains of a child's development.
9. Art beautifies: whether it is the offices, theatres, streets or city centres, art acts as a catalyst for beautification.
10. Art is good for the economy: When artists make money from their works, it rubs off on the economy of the nation.

Problems of Visual Art Scholarship in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Despite the importance of art and as beautiful and lucrative as art is, visual art scholarship in tertiary institutions in Nigeria had over time been bedevilled by a myriad of problems. These problems, in the view of these writers, are multi-faceted and stem from these sub-divisions as follows: students, parents, teachers and lecturers, institution and government.

The Students

On the part of the students, nonchalance and lackadaisical attitudes towards the study of the subject is a big problem; to most of the students, truancy, stubbornness and absenteeism is a commonplace behaviour, so they end up with very poor grades or drop out altogether. Most of these aberrant behaviours on the part of the students start as a result of drug and substance abuse, cultism and lack of concentration and goodwill to face the course.

The study of visual art is capital-intensive. In an ailing economy such as Nigeria, the purchase of art materials and tools is a very herculean task and the fact that these art materials are imported, foreign exchange conversion to purchase them becomes very difficult; and in a situation where most parents find it difficult to meet up with their families' demands such as payment of children's school fees, life becomes difficult for these students and sometimes, some of these students are not in school until a later part of the semester and at the end are unable to cope with the rigours of the program; and in most cases, to meet up with demands, these students engage in illicit and extraneous activities which may complicate their problems.

Added to the above, the wrong placement of students into various areas of specialization is another problem. In most cases, students are placed according to their grades and not necessarily according to their interests or areas of natural strength; there have been occasions where conflicts occur between where they are placed and their areas of interest and natural strength; when this happens, frustration sets in on the part of the students and this affects them adversely at the end. In certain aspects of art, abstract ideas abound and the inability to comprehend these abstract ideas is another problem on the part of the students.

In the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, popularly referred to in visual art circles as the '*Uniben art school*', there are two categories of visual art students.

The first category is those that studied Fine Art in their secondary school, sat the qualifying examinations and credited it and were subsequently admitted into the department.

The second category is those who never studied fine art in their secondary schools, they never picked Fine and Applied Arts as their course of study but find themselves in the course because they were probably not qualified in the area they initially picked but were drafted to fine and applied arts as alternatives. This second category is the most problematic, so they are categorized as 'syllabus B' students with special tutoring to make up for their deficiencies.

The parents

Sometimes parents constitute a lot of problems in the course of their children's visual art training. The attitudinal disposition of most parents towards the study of visual art is, to say the least, discouraging. Edwards (2017) noticed that most of these parents see visual art as an area for the '*never do wells*' and as such, instead of encouraging their children if they have the natural talent to study the course, they do everything to discourage them. Oftentimes, they prefer their children to read courses like Medicine, Engineering and Law; and by the time these children find it difficult to cope, some may eventually find themselves back in the visual arts but not without the attendant psychological trauma. Such children find it difficult to concentrate and make a meaningful impact. Some parents, either overtly or covertly refuse to pay the fees of their children or get them art materials.

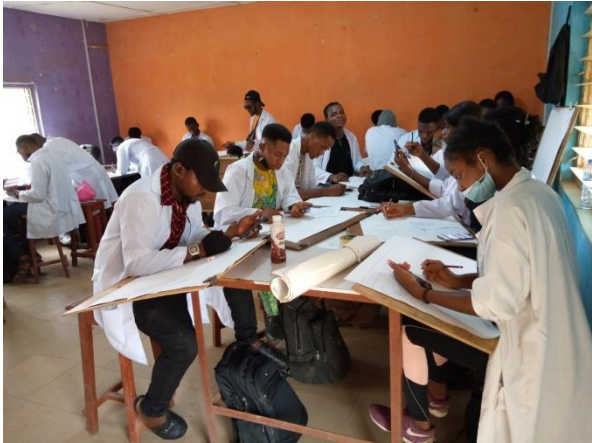


Plate 1: 400 level Uniben students in drawing class

Photo by Felix O. Osaigbovo



Plate 2: 400 level Uniben students in computer design class

Photo by Felix O. Osaigbovo



Plate 3: Uniben Ceramic Studio

Photo by Felix O. Osaigbovo



Plate 4: Uniben Sculpture studio

Photo by Felix O. Osaigbovo

The Course Handlers

Personalities referred to under this rubric are the teachers or lecturers that are in charge of teaching these courses. Oftentimes, most lecturers lack the necessary teaching experience by way of

methods of teaching. Some of these lecturers merely go to the classes and studios to talk and administer assignments without proper groundwork in that area. Lecturers who do not have Education backgrounds are most likely not going to be perfect teachers. Some lecturers are placed in the wrong courses; what one does not have, he does not give; therefore if the wrong lecturers are allocated the wrong courses, the resultant effect is a disaster. Some of these lecturers are not qualified to handle certain courses, for instance, a graduate of engineering is drafted into Fine and Applied Arts; what does such a lecturer know about the course? Impatience on the part of the lecturer is also a problem. This is so because art is an area that requires patience with the students otherwise, the students will lose interest and motivation in such a course. More, some lecturers go to such extent as using abusive words on their students which is not encouraging. Some lecturers also display truancy and absenteeism and lack the necessary charisma to motivate the students.

The institutions

Just as the students, parents and lecturers constitute some degree of problems, more often than not, the institutions also have their fair share of these problems. For instance, for effective teaching and learning of visual art in institutions of higher learning, there had to be quality studios for painting, drawing, graphics and indeed all aspects of art but in most Nigerian institutions of higher learning, these studios are grossly inadequate in the sense that even where there are studios, they are ill-equipped, uninhabitable and very uncomfortable for students to study; some of these studios are old and dilapidated, therefore it is impossible to carry out effective teaching in such studios.

Added to the above, there are basic materials and equipment that are supposed to be supplied by these institutions but are not supplied; this in return, places a heavy financial burden on the students and their parents. Equipment like kilns, throwing wheels, light tables, easel, donkey seats, dye baths, welding machines, grinding machines, computers, adequate lighting systems and good water supply, projectors and screens and a well-equipped photography studio is lacking and as a result, students are left to provide this equipment for themselves and in a situation where they do not have the wherewithal to provide for themselves, they either end up with poor grades or drop out altogether. The inability of these institutions to recruit qualified teachers is also a problem; a situation where one lecturer is overloaded with courses and such moves soon get the lecturer worn out, especially without proper corresponding incentives.

The Government

In all these catalogues of problems, the government has the lion's share of the blame. In Nigeria, where the government is at constant loggerheads with university unions, especially the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), most lecturers have found their way out of the university system. The insensitivity of the government towards university education in Nigeria has exacerbated the problems of visual art scholarship. For instance, in February 2022, the Academic Staff Union of Universities embarked on an industrial action to press home their demands for better conditions of service and for government to actualize its agreement of 2009 with the union. This nonchalant attitude of the government towards university education in Nigeria led to the collapse of studies in Federal and some state universities for eight months during this period, lecturers' salaries were withheld, and when the union decided to suspend the strike in October 2022, contrary to expectations, the lecturers were paid their October salary on a pro-rata basis meaning that they were only paid for the days they worked. This has further resulted in frustration and low morale of the lecturers as the government kept treating them like casual workers. Any government that has the interest of its teaming youth at heart will not act how the Nigerian government does towards university education. This lackadaisical attitude of the Nigerian government has led to brain drain, not only in the university system but also in the health sector where the best brains in the country have found their way abroad where they will be given their pride of place and, where they will be recognized and treated like civilized persons. The concomitant effect of this strike was a near-total breakdown and collapse of studies; the students were sent home the fact that no lectures were ongoing; and as a result of this, a number of the lecturers either travelled

abroad or went elsewhere to look for alternative means of livelihood. An idle mind, they say is the devil's workshop therefore most of these students, Out of idleness and frustration, could have been instigated to engage in criminality and prostitution; which will in turn result in unwanted pregnancies and even death; and arising from this, many parents, students and lecturers are gradually losing hope in public universities in Nigeria. This was how public primary and secondary schools gradually lost their glory as a result of government neglect and are now left to writhe in backwardness. It is on record that the Academic Staff Union of Universities in Nigeria has embarked on strike no fewer than nineteen times between 1992 and 2022. Figure 1 explains this phenomenon better. The writers of this essay think that this government has something very sinister that they are planning otherwise the poor state of public universities is supposed to be of grave concern to the government. Without an adequate security system, no university will be conducive to learning; in Nigeria, where terrorists invade institutions at will and kidnap students and staff for ransom, yet the Nigerian government pays deaf ears and pretends as though nothing is happening, one will not expect effective learning to take place in such system.

In years gone by, education was accorded priority in government budgetary allocations but never again as education generally has been relegated to the background by the Nigerian government. Federal universities are not equipped; laboratories and studios have become obsolete, there are little or no research materials and these studios are in a state of disrepair, and some cases, the students take it upon themselves to refurbish these studios to make them a little bit comfortable for study.

The looting of the treasury of the Nigerian government by top government officials has impoverished the country over the years and this trend has continued unabated either by way of electronic transfers or physical looting including the stealing of crude oil thereby making the government resulting to borrowing from other nations and further bringing the country to her knees. The resultant effect of this looting is the inability of the government to pay salaries and allowances and withholding of academic staff's salaries and coming up with the obnoxious policy of '*no work, no pay*'; salaries of staff are poor to the extent that most lecturers can no longer cater for their families; so in such occasion, the low morale and low self-esteem of these lecturers has led to lack of interest in teaching.

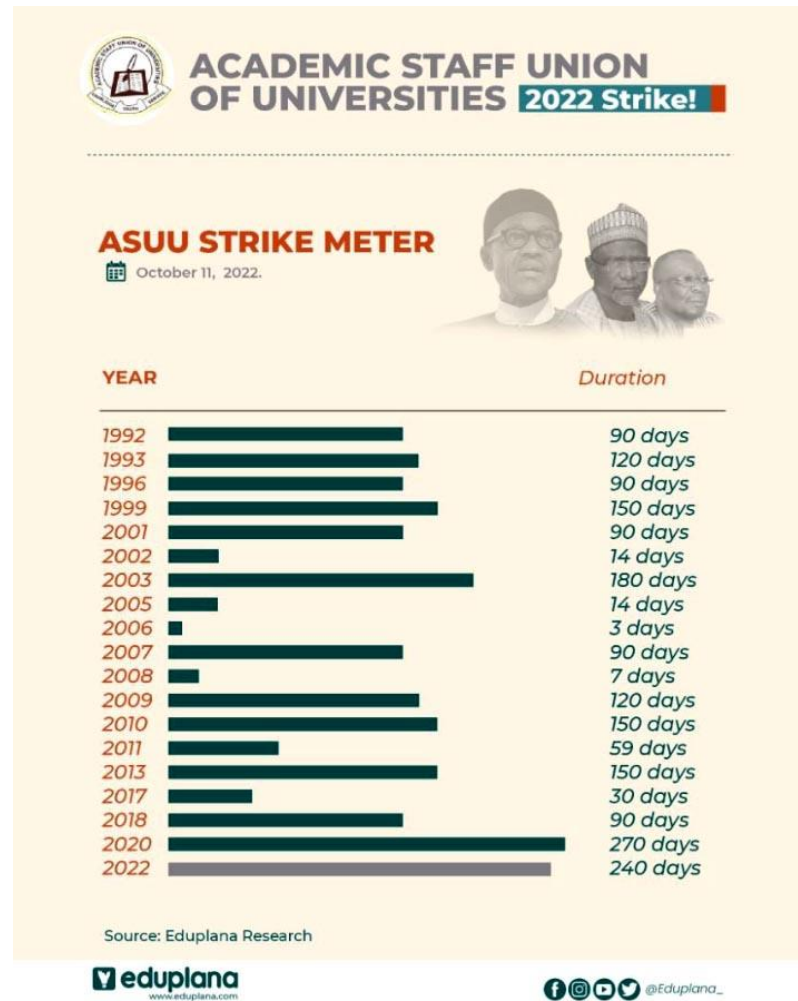


Fig 1: Statistical data of ASUU strike between 1992 and 2022
Source: Eduplana Research

Probable Solutions

Having elaborated on the problems and their causes, one may ask, is this trend redeemable? Is it possible to rectify this quagmire and take education back to its glorious days and make it even better? The answer is probably yes as will be seen in the solutions to this seemingly hopeless situation. Solutions to the problems militating against the teaching and learning of visual arts in Nigerian universities are possible only if the government is ready to do what is right; this is because the success or failure of the higher education system in Nigeria is dependent on the government's proactive stance or lack of it. Government should accord education its pride of place by providing the necessary conducive work environment to teachers in terms of their remunerations and other incentives as this will engender the necessary impetus needed for them to work; therefore budgetary allocation for education should be improved. Salaries and allowances should be paid to lecturers as at when due to serve as a morale-booster because if things continue like this, nothing is going to change. In government also, qualified people should be placed in the right offices; a situation where a medical doctor is made minister of labour amounts to putting the wrong peg in the right hole. Ultimately, any government or party that does not take education as a serious business should be voted out of power to pave way for responsive and responsible government. Those looting the treasury of the nation should be made to account for their actions.

On the part of the institutions, the management of different universities should stop seeing certain courses as less important thereby relegating such departments to the background; therefore, all departments should be treated with the same priority regarding the provision of amenities that will

enhance the study of courses. Government should make housing and vehicle loans available through these various institutions to lecturers to also serve as incentives.

The lecturers need some reorientation to make the study of visual arts attractive. It is a fact that some lecturers are the reason why some students lack interest in art and so these lecturers must constantly update their knowledge by way of research and taking part in seminars, exhibitions and conferences to be abreast of current trends in the teaching of visual arts; the right lecturers should be allowed to handle courses in which they have a comparative advantage. It is surprising that in this era of the digital economy and information and communication technology, some lecturers are still not computer literate and are not internet savvy; lecturers in this category should be given in-house training to enable them to measure up with current trends.

Parents should encourage their children who show considerable interest in art and not see art as a course for the never-do-wells. They should be fully responsible for their children's welfare and the provision of money for materials and upkeep. Parents should constantly be paying visits to their children to ascertain that they are in school always.

On the part of the students, since they have been admitted to study art, they should face it with all zest and courage. Absenteeism and lateness to lectures should be done away with and any negative peer group influence should be avoided. All other distraction tendencies should be avoided and finally, their course advisers should make sure that they are guided towards choosing their specialization areas according to their strengths and interest.

Conclusion

It is already a fact that there are problems inherent in the teaching and learning of art in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. These problems have been recognized, highlighted and solutions proffered. These solutions are not to be achieved by force, instead, the collective will of all stakeholders is a panacea to the quagmire currently bedevilling this area of study and the writers feel that if all the probable solutions are followed, there will be a change for the better.

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