

The Need to Deemphasising Theoretic Projects and Emphasise Experimental Research among Arts Students in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: There has been a steady economic decline in Nigeria, right from the early 80s, with a resultant decline in government's funding of Universities and research institutions. Yet, Universities and research institutions in the country are import-based, with regard to equipment for teaching and learning in laboratories and studios. Thus, there has been a progressive dearth of equipment, for instance, in arts departments in Nigerian Universities because of lack of to replace or restore broken-down imported gadgets. This study believes that the Nigerian economy can no longer sustain the direct importation of equipment and that, to achieve sound education, the more sustainable alternative is to design and fabricate appropriate local equipment for studies in arts departments in Nigerian Universities. The study uses data generated from graduating Bachelor's Degree students' projects in the Theatre Arts Department, University of Calabar from 1980-2003 to show the undue emphasis on theoretic work and the avoidance of projects aimed at designing and fabricating local technologies in lieu of the no-longer affordable imported equipment. The study then spells-out the need to emphasise practical work and experimental projects, among Bachelor's Degree research students of the arts, with the aim of designing and fabricating local technologies for teaching/practicing visual arts in Nigeria.

Key words: Economic downturn, imported equipment, fabricated alternative, need to deemphasising

INTRODUCTION

That Nigeria has had a crisis of leadership is not in question (Achebe, 1983; Okome, 2001). That this leadership crisis has given rise to Nigeria's gradual economic collapse-from the post-1970s oil boom is also not in doubt (Haynes, 1995; Haynes and Okome, 1997). That this crisis has eroded national managerial capacities and severely strangled the funding of tertiary education in Nigeria is also not in doubt (Adeyemi, 1998; Awopetu, 1998; Duru, 2001). And, that ongoing processes of global interconnectedness generate a constellation of forces that have implications for Africa and African developmental capacities is also not in question (Machungo, 2001; Amoaka, 2002; Ouattara, 2002). What might be in question is the lack of initiatives at the macro and micro levels of Nigeria's economy to structure development strategies that take economic collapse, the imprudence of import dependency and the development of local know-how into consideration. One sector where these inconsistencies are very visible is the tertiary education sector, debased by years of economic mismanagement and inadequate funding, which has affected the ability of University departments to acquire, maintain or repair teaching equipment (mainly those

imported in the neighbourhood of the oil-boom years). After about four decades these equipment in arts departments in Nigerian Universities have vegetated and gone into disuse and disrepair. With 14 years of teaching experience in a Nigerian tertiary institution, this researcher is of the opinion that dearth of equipment is a common problem in Nigerian Universities' arts departments, for instance. Furthermore, this researcher believes that projects that build from local knowledge are the most sustainable ways to bring about change (Blackwell *et al.*, 1991). Since the national economy has collapsed and can no longer support the importation of equipment, one logical imperative is that local technologies be evolved, appropriated and fabricated for use in the teaching and practice of visual arts in Nigerian Universities. One way to generate such local technologies in arts departments in Nigerian Universities is for a good percentage of students' dissertations in those departments to respond to present economic realities by focusing on the development of alternative and indigenous technologies. The purpose of this study is to verify whether graduating Bachelors Degree students' dissertations in Nigerian Universities have responded to the present economic realities by engaging in projects that attempt to design, experiment and fabricate

appropriate teaching equipment that can replace or augment imported but expensive ones. The Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar-one of the most prominent universities in southeast Nigeria-is used as a case study, representative of the typical Nigerian University established in the 70s oil-boom years. Though the research is done in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, the inferences gleaned from the data is largely applicable to other Nigerian Universities-insofar as they are all products of the same social, economic and cultural environment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to find out the subject focus of graduating Bachelors Degree students' research projects in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, projects done in the following randomly selected academic sessions were collated: 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1984/85, 1990/91, 1997/98, 1999/2000, 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. The aim of this collation was to find out the number of students in the selected years that have done research projects in diverse areas of study, including practical designing and fabrication of appropriate theatre, performance and visual equipment. By a careful reading and categorisation of all the final-year projects done in the department in the years under review, 11 diverse subject areas were identified. Theatre Studies in the University of Calabar was then broken down into these eleven research areas, dictated by the focus of the students' projects. Thus the students' projects in the randomly selected years were organised and analysed on the bases of the compartment of the 11 identified research

areas of theatre studies that they focused on. Each project focus area was given a code to ease identification and facilitate collation and analysis. The codes are as follows: Art Criticism (AC), Art History (AH), Audience Engineering (AE), Media (MD), Culture/Tourism (CT), Development/Educational Theatre (DET), Film Studies (FS), Performance/ Management (PM), Technical Theatre (TT), Equipment Design/Fabrication (EDF) and Traditional African Theatre (TAT) (Table 1). Tabulating the range of final-year students' projects for the selected graduating years and observing and noting the frequencies in respect of the subject area of theatre studies that they address, is the method used to collect data for this research. And, to identify the subject area of theatre studies that a candidate focused on, an equal-to sign (=) was used to mark the corresponding subject area against the candidate's name. Thus, each graduating student in the selected academic sessions is a single case (observation) and both the year of graduation and the subject area of project focus are two independent variables. The frequency with which the range of students' projects confronts specific subject areas in Theatre Studies was then investigated, quantified and analysed to show disparities and inconsistencies in the manner in which students in the Theatre Arts Department, University of Calabar, recurrently locate their final-year projects within 'preferred' but limited areas, to the detriment of other equally vital areas. The data generated from the research was adapted for analysis with the SPSS® 10.0 for Windows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 2 the analysis of the overall frequencies shows that there were 534 recorded projects undertaken by graduating students in the Theatre Arts Department, University of Calabar for the years under review. Of this number, 115 (or 21.5%) focused on Arts Criticism, 17 (or 3.2%) on Art History, 39 (or 7.3%) on Audience Engineering, 74 (or 13.9%) on Media, 21 (or 3.9%) on Culture/Tourism, 69 (or 12.9%) on Development and Educational Theatre, 28 (or 5.2%) on Film Studies, 42 (or 7.9%) on Performance and Management, 33 (or 6.2%) on Technical Theatre, 96 (or 18%) on Traditional African

Table 1: Identified theatre study areas and identifying codes

S/n	Subject Areas	Identifying codes
1	Art Criticism	AC
2	Art History	AH
3	Audience Engineering	AE
4	Media	MD
5	Culture/Tourism	CT
6	Development/Educational Theatre	DET
7	Film Studies	FS
8	Performance and Management	PM
9	Technical Theatre	TT
10	Equipment Design and Fabrication	EDF
11	Traditional African Theatre	TAT

Table 2: Summary of frequencies for the identified subject areas for the years under review

AC	AH	AE	MD	CT	DET	FS	PM	TT	EDF	TAT
Sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum	sum
Totals										
115.00	17.00	39.00	74.00	21.00	69.00	28.00	42.00	33.00	0.00	96.00
Grand Total: 534										
%										
21.5	3.2	7.3	13.9	3.9	12.9	5.2	7.9	6.2	0.0	18

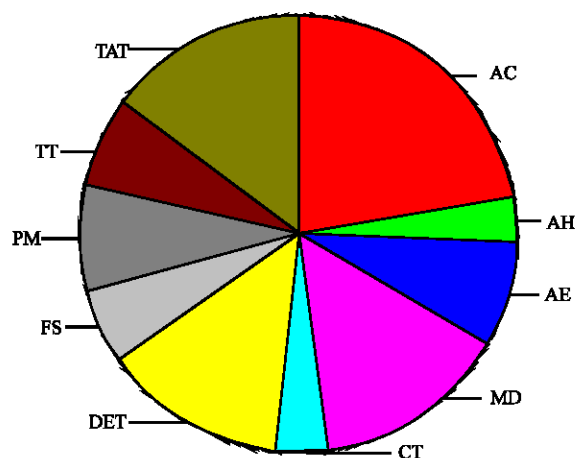


Fig. 1: Pie chart of summaries of total frequency distribution of students' project research focus areas for the years under review

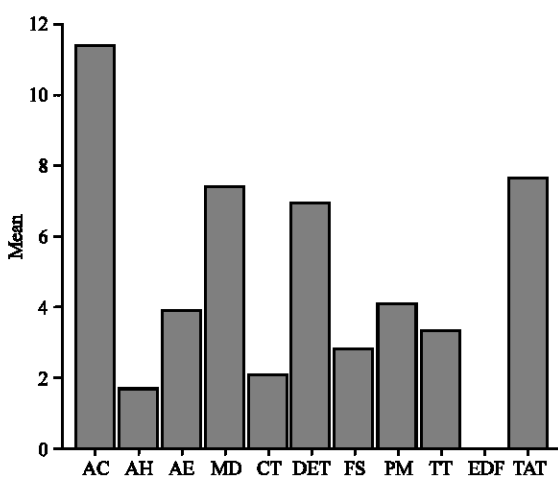


Fig. 2: Bar chat showing the mean frequency distribution of students' project research focus areas for the years under review

Theatre and none of the 534 candidates in the years under review did any project that focused on Equipment Design and Fabrication.

Figure 1 and 2, a Pie-Chart and a Bar-Chart respectively, privilege the graphic analysis of the summary of the data in Table 2, where the size of the pie and the height of the bar represent the distribution of graduating students' projects that focused on the corresponding subject areas of Theatre Studies at the University of Calabar.

From the data above and its analysis, it is clear that graduating Bachelors students' research projects in the years under review at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, have not tackled the issue of

designing and fabricating locally made equipment. Rather, data indicates that graduating students at the Bachelors level have tended to prefer to locate their research projects in the theoretic areas of theatre studies to the detriment of experiments at designing and fabricating appropriate equipment that can replace or augment those imported (and mainly disused) ones currently available at the department. Data indicates, for instance, that Bachelors students' projects at the Department have leaned towards art criticism, traditional African theatre, media, development/educational theatre, performance/management, audience engineering, technical theatre, film studies, culture/tourism and art history (in the order of preference), while avoiding equipment design and fabrication. Considering the present economic predicament of tertiary institutions in Nigeria and their inability to afford the enormous foreign exchange required for importing theatrical and visual arts equipment, this trend among Bachelor's Degree students is ultimately negative. As a trend, the perennial focusing of final-year Bachelor's Degree research projects on theory is negative because it goes a long way to exacerbate the dearth of equipment problem. For, locally-made alternatives are not evolved while, at the same time, imported technologies are economically unsupportable. The end result is that the study of theatrical and visual arts at the Theatre Arts Department, University of Calabar (and in Nigeria generally), is greatly hindered because students are unable to garner the practical knowledge they need for surviving in the highly competitive third-world labour market. This practical incapacitation is a direct result of lack of equipment for adequate teaching and learning of theatrical, visual and other communications skills. One very clear way of addressing the dearth of equipment-due to unavailable funds for importation-is to design and fabricate appropriate devices locally. Such equipment and devices include (but not limited to) painted backdrops, painted flats, studio/stage lights, stage props, throwing wheels, ceramic kilns and the like (Plate 1-3). The advantages of locally fabricated equipment over imported forms are that:

- They are likely to be cheaper to acquire
- Maintenance may also be cheaper since technical know-how is indigenous
- Consumables will be easier to come by since they are locally sourced in the first place.

The significance of these three points is that locally fabricated theatrical and visual arts equipment will be more sustainable-under the present economic circumstances-than wholly imported forms installed in



Plate 1: The researcher applying surface finishing to three studio/stage lights that he fabricated. A fabricated dimmer is housed in the bag, which enables the lights to be dimmed and brightened as required in the visual arts studio. This locally fabricated equipment, cost a small fraction of what the imported forms do. Besides, it is cheaper and easier to maintain the local technologies since foreign exchange is neither required to import parts/consumable nor to pay for expensive expatriate labour



Plate 2, 3: A ceramic kiln and throwing wheel fabricated by my colleague, Mr. Chris Echeta for a small fraction of the cost of the imported forms. Echeta's equipment are the ones used in my own Department for teaching ceramic skills to visual arts students. Without these equipment, teaching would have been impossible, since there are no funds to pay for the imported versions

Nigerian Universities. And, research students in the Universities themselves should be the biggest stake holders (because they are most affected by the dearth of equipment) and participants in the quest for appropriate

local technologies. However, as data from 1980-2003 in the Theatre Arts Department, University of Calabar, indicates, Bachelor's Degree students of the arts in Nigerian Universities have not been researching towards the design and fabrication of locally-made equipment.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, in the light of the Nigerian economic reality, which causes the dearth of equipment in arts Departments in Universities and makes the importation/maintenance of foreign equipment impossible, there is then an urgent need to emphasise practical and experimental work among research students in order to encourage the design and fabrication of appropriate local technologies for teaching/practicing visual and theatrical arts in Nigeria.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I deeply acknowledge the cooperation given to me in the course of this research by the following persons in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, Nigeria: Professor Kalu Uka, who helped to dig-out student records; Professor Chris Nwamuo, who provided logistics; and Dr. Ojukwu Enendu, who provided additional student records.

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