

Blended pedagogies: The challenges of Visual Arts education

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Abstract: This paper exposes, through qualitative inquiry, the effects of blended learning on training and acquisition of hard and soft skills among Visual Arts students at Mampong Technical College of Education. Two weeks of unobtrusive observation of blended learning lessons were done. Three focus group interviews involving 15 level 300 Visual Arts students to assess the level of impact blended learning exerts on their training and skill acquisition. Findings reveal that the WhatsApp platform was the most used for the online component of the blended learning whereas traditional face-to-face lessons were coupled with OERs and YouTube videos. Students' enthusiasm for personal learning through exploration using OERs has increased and able to produce end of semester group Visual Art project works despite the challenges due to the blended and learner-centred pedagogies implemented deployed by their tutors. There is a need for further studies to investigate the pedagogic competencies of the MTCE student-teachers in their teaching practices to ascertain their level of skills acquired through the blended learning since their success would impact the national agenda of raising critical and creative thinkers through the standard-based curriculum.

Keywords: Art education, Blended Learning, Pedagogy, Visual Art

1. Introduction

Multi-complexity of the 21st-century job market is competitively on the rise. This global phenomenon is catalyzed by the modern technological advancement in all aspects of human socioeconomic endeavours including education. It is, for this reason, Visual Arts education, especially at the highest peak, should be targeted at training individuals with robust critical thinking and innovative skills to fit the contemporary job market. Agreeably, competency-based learning and acquisition of both hard and soft skills have become core targeted goals for education to help maximize employability and as well battle the poverty rate in most developing countries (Kigotho, 2022; Levine & Patrick, 2019). Ghana for instance, in 2018 embarked on reviewing the pre-tertiary curriculum from objective-based to standard-based with optimism to instil employable competencies in Ghanaian children right from school-going age (NaCCA, 2018). But, educational institutes have been challenged globally by the outbreak of COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ali, 2021). This led to the adoption of blended learning pedagogies by higher institutions thus, traditional universities and technical universities of which the colleges of education in Ghana are no exception. As a technical and vocational training institute, there is the need to assess the impact of blended learning on skill acquisition for the future employability of learners.

The sensitiveness of critical thinking in this era is characterised by the volumes of information available (Almeida & Franco, 2011). Higher institutions now focus on competency-based learning which stimulates critical

and creative thinking. Critical and creative thinking are inseparable (Birgili, 2015; Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018) in the process of solving societal problems through innovation. For Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutes like Mampong Technical College of Education (MTCE), a great premium is laid on skill acquisition. Thus, student-teachers of MTCE are trained to acquire both pedagogical and vocational skills. With the introduction of a standard-based curriculum following the pre-tertiary education reform in Ghana (T-TEL, 2017)), the teacher trainees are expected to be the full implementers of the basic school curriculum upon graduation. Consequently, the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework (NTECF) led by T-TEL (Transforming Teacher Education and Learning) was to maximise the efficacy of teacher trainees towards their deliverability of the basic school curriculum (Tuenpusa et al., 2021). As part of the transformational process, college tutors undertook professional development training to beef up their pedagogical and content knowledge for training teachers (Adu-Yeboah & Kwaah, 2018; T-TEL, 2017).

Through a series of professional development training programmes, MTCE tutors became equipped with blended learning pedagogies to some extent. In the face of the damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected education globally (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ali, 2021), MTCE tutors migrated onto blended learning mode. Blended learning has its challenges (Benali & Ally, 2020) but regardless of technological challenges in Ghana, the blended learning approach was used for teaching teacher trainees. As a TVET college, the researchers found interest in assessing the level of impact the blended learning exerts on skill acquisition of MTCE Visual Arts students after implementing it for two semesters. As blended learning is now yoked with modern education, the study analysed empirical data to inform modifications on pedagogical competencies of Visual Arts tutors using blended learning for training teacher trainees in Ghana.

The study espoused a qualitative inquiry approach to investigate the research question: To what extent do the blended learning pedagogies used by the tutors impact the skill acquisition of visual arts students in MTCE? Selected theories in literature on blended learning and experiential learning were reviewed in light of the phenomenon for empirical analysis.

2. Empirical Review

2.1 Blended learning and how it impacts experiential learning

Blended learning is becoming more popular in both academic and corporate settings. Blended learning, which combines the best features of online and face-to-face education, is expected to become the most popular teaching method in the future (Claypole, 2010). According to Zhang and Zhu (2017), blended learning is an unavoidable trend because traditional face-to-face learning environments are essential for social aspects of teaching and learning. However, Internet-based asynchronous technologies such as e-mail, WhatsApp, LMS, forum, listserv, blog, e-portfolio, web folio, and others provide learners with more flexible and interactive learning environments that are time and space independent (Fabrizz, Mendzheritskaya & Stehle, 2021; Fordham University, n.d.). Blended learning combines face-to-face interactions with online learning components to gain from the best of both worlds (Yousef et al., 2015).

Several kinds of a research report that blended learning has impacted positively on students' outcomes. According to Means et al. (2013), students who were taught in mixed learning environments performed 'modestly' better than those who were taught in traditional settings. Students in blended learning groups performed better academically than those in traditional face-to-face learning groups (Zhang & Zhu, 2018). Students in blended learning groups had higher learning achievements and were more motivated (Sahni, 2019). Whereas Zou et al. (2020) observe that a blended learning approach using online materials was more effective in stimulating students' collaboration and involvement in active learning. Students in blended learning did better than students in pure online learning (Thai et al. (2020) with greater perceived flexibility.

Although there is a growing consensus on the benefits of blended learning, previous research has shown that its effectiveness is still uncertain (Cheng & Chau, 2016; Cho et al., 2019). According to Rozano and Romero (2016), blended learning influence is higher in theoretical skills than in practice, thus recommending using online resources for both types of knowledge and complementing the latter with offline resources. Considering the multifacet dimensions and its pros and cons, blended learning grounded in the experiential theory of Kolb (1984), would require more than online and offline resources but as well pedagogical praxis to elicit skill acquisition in Visual Art student-teachers. Student-teachers securing practical pedagogy through Art education is imperative for their pedagogical choices for implementing the Creative Arts and design curriculum in Ghanaian Junior High Schools.

The experiential learning theory of Kolb provides grounds for the learner to reflect on their experiences, conceptualise and apply (Akella, 2010). This form of pedagogy, which induces the application of cognitive and affective acumen of the learner's experiences tailored to the construction of creative products, has been described by the revised Bloom's taxonomy as the highest order of learning (Brindha, 2018). The process of making arts is critical and directed toward problem-solving (Rusu, 2018; van Hooijdonk et al., 2020). Hence, an effective application of blended learning which is a multidimensional approach to learning and allows learners to explore their experiences and becomes a fertile ground for the application of Kolb's experiential theory and Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.

3. Methodology

In a qualitative research approach, the study explored exploratory narrative inquiry on how blended learning used by the Visual Art teachers in MTCE impacted on skills acquisition of learners. The exploratory and narrative tools helped in exploring the learning experiences of the teacher trainees (Mohajan, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) while engaging them in deep conversations to collect quality data on their new experiences (Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Data collection began with an unobtrusive observation. Researchers joined the blended learning platforms for two weeks to monitor lessons and students' participation. Data collected from the online monitory induced a quota sampling of 15 level 300 teacher trainees for interviews. The total sample for the study amounts to 16 participants constituting one tutor, nine student-teachers who participated in the online learning and six student-teachers who participated in the traditional face-to-face learning. Three participants each were selected from the level 300 Visual Arts classes in MTCE using persons who fully participated in the blended learning and those who only participated in the traditional face-to-face-learning as qualifications for participation. The sample also includes an exclusive face-to-face interview with one Visual Art tutor. Three focused group interviews were organised at the convenience of the student participants (Chenail, 2011) while maintaining their natural grouping to ensure reliable responses. Interviews were digitally recorded for security and easy transcription of data. To confer anonymity, pseudo names (Allen & Wiles, 2015) were generated for each respondent. Data collected were sorted, configured into themes and analysed in narrative and content analysis procedures using the blended learning theory, Kolb's experiential learning theory and Blooms' taxonomy as key performance indicators (Luo, 2021; Jafarzadeh-Kenarsari & Pourghane, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Oliver, 1998). The researchers' interest was also to examine the impact of the application of the experiential learning theory and the taxonomy on learners' skill acquisition as Visual Arts students. Hence, by extension and validity, the research team conducted two weeks of field observation of traditional or face-to-face lessons. Practical works of the sample group were observed using the experiential learning theory and the taxonomy as tools whereas the artworks were also analysed with the descriptive and visual analytic methods.

Table 1: Summary data on the sample size for the study

No	Participant Description	Numbers of respondents
1	Students-teachers who participated in the blended learning mode	9
2	Student-teachers who participated only in the traditional face-to-face learning	6
3	Visual Art Tutor	1
4	Total	16

4. Findings and Discussion

The study reveals that blended learning tools such as Zoom, YouTube and Moodle LMS were used by tutors for facilitating Visual Arts lessons but the most frequently used was the WhatsApp platform. The majority, 13 out of 15 of the participants disclosed in the interviews that the WhatsApp platform was the most convenient and accessible. Whereas all 15 participants admitted that using other online learning platforms was challenging initially but the continuous usage increased their familiarity. Regarding this, all the 15 students used as research participants admitted they had no foreknowledge about online learning applications such as Zoom and Moodle if not for the blended learning approach adopted by the MTCE. During the online learning observation, it was found that the majority (58 out of 62 total class sizes) of learners did not participate in lessons conducted via the Zoom application and Moodle LMS. Interviews with the sample participants revealed afterwards that learners had little knowledge of how to install and navigate the Zoom and Moodle applications whereas the remaining four representing minorities had. All the nine participants (who took part in the online learning) interviewed maintained that they were familiar with WhatsApp and telegram applications and the use of them for instructional purposes was a revealing knowledge since their primary goal for using these applications was not for learning. One participant recounts that “we were already using WhatsApp for our daily social interactions hence using it for learning was not challenging” as compared to Zoom and Moodle (Personal communication with participants, April 4, 2021). Installing, joining and navigating through the Zoom and Moodle applications were other challenges, retorted another participant.

Looking at the disposition of the findings, it is evident that the student-teachers are more grossly tuned to social media apps than educational apps (apps that support learning activities other than mere social interaction). This means that tutors have much to do by assisting learners to become conversant with the use of online learning applications. But in the meantime, the use of the familiar social media applications by the Visual Art tutors in MTCE proves to be a progressive choice. Familiarity with the social media apps like WhatsApp makes it easier for learners to participate in online learning.

Regarding how tutors used blended learning to impact practical skills in learners, it was observed from the online monitory that a tutor used Zoom to teach a drawing lesson. During the lesson, the tutor used the tools in the Zoom App to demonstrate drawing techniques after which he led learners to watch and discuss drawing videos on YouTube. Figure 1 present screenshots of a drawing demonstration and a YouTube video on drawing as observed in one of the tutor’s lessons.

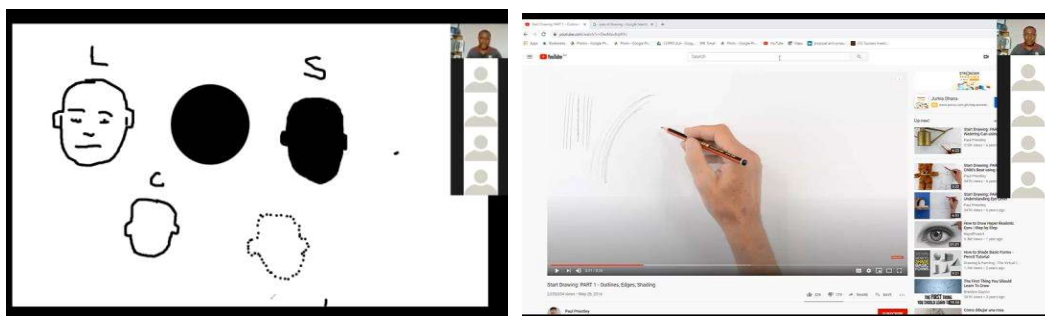


Figure 1: Screenshots of a drawing demonstration and YouTube video on drawing as observed in one of the tutor's lessons

Source: Online lesson observation (July 15, 2020)

Lessons conducted using Zoom and other LMS platforms were later shared on WhatsApp platforms for learners who missed the lessons to have access asynchronously. It enabled learners to study the materials at their own pace and as well engage peers and tutors in deep interactions. The act of sharing recorded online lessons from the Zoom App on the WhatsApp platforms was a demonstration of flexibility on the part of the tutors in that it provides an avenue for the needs of all learners to be taken care of at different learning times. It becomes ideal for learners who had challenges with poor internet connectivity in joining live sessions to have a replay of lessons and not be left behind, hence dealing with issues of inclusivity to some extent. Notwithstanding, in personal communication with the tutor, it was revealed that not every student participated in the asynchronous sessions. In probing further, the tutor disclosed that reports from other students own that some students could not afford the smartphones whereas others were living in completely deprived communities where internet connectivity was a challenge. The tutor added that “occasionally, some serious ones in deprived communities move to nearby towns to call me for updates on lessons within the week” (Visual Art Tutor, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Suggestively, the tutor also retorted that it could be yielding if college authorities could establish other forms of open learning such as the use of radio stations or podcasts and telephone communications to reach out to learners with internet connectivity issues. We argue that for some learners to be left out of participating in lessons raises concerns about inclusivity and practice of special needs education, SEN in Ghana (Deku & Vanderpuye, 2017).

The participants from all three focused groups admitted that the blended learning pedagogies used by tutors helped in expanding their scope on open education resources (OERs). Tutors often engage learners in practical assignments where learners record videos of their practice and upload them onto the WhatsApp platform for discussion. A participant expressed enthusiastically that the blended learning increased his learning and artistic exploration as their tutor often tasked them with practical activities which require that they watch video tutorials from online sources. For those who could not participate in the online learning, watching video tutorials in class and participating in group works proved beneficial as they fall on collaborations with peers and the guidance of their tutors to execute their end of semester group projects (see figure 2). In effect, both categories of participants (those with online experience and those with face-to-face experience only) all shared similar sentiments of progress in their skill acquisition. To them, their experience with the blended mode of learning is better than the previous traditional face-to-face learning which was without the incorporation of any form of technology. One respondent who participated only in the face-to-face mode reflected that, though their tutors used demonstrations to teach practical lessons back in level 100, they mostly found such stills demonstrated by the tutors as the only option. But the recent experience of the tutor showing multiple videos to them in the class had opened their minds to explore other methods and skills. This progress is reflected in their end of semester project

works (see figure 2) as a comparative observation of students' works shows an improvement against what they achieved in previous semesters.



Figure 2: Students working on their end of semester visual art group projects.

Source: Field observation (2020) Photo courtesy of Visual Art Department

To categories of student-teachers used as participants for the study, the major challenge was access to internet connectivity whereas others expressed that it was difficult to afford a Smartphone and data to join the online learning mode. Whereas some were unable to afford the smartphones, others living in the remote villages were completely out of coverage area to access the internet. Such students only relied on the traditional face-to-face learning aspect of the blended approach for learning in MTCE.

During the field observation, it was found that tutors employed digital tools for instruction. Lessons were presented using PowerPoint modes coupled with Youtube Videos. On many occasions, students were tasked in pairs to search for concepts using their smartphones for whole-class discussions. This phenomenon was found to be aligned with the multi-media technique of teaching – an approach described as one of the modern instructional pedagogies (Xu, 2017; Namitha, 2018). More so, there were manifestations of both the experiential theory and Bloom's taxonomy first in the instructional pedagogies used by the tutors and secondly, through the creative works of the students. Learners were mostly grouped for learning and face-to-face presentation. Working together in groups enabled the learners to share their experiences through collaboration or teamwork for their artistic creations. To some extent, the three students interviewed who could not participate in the online learning model expressed that they complemented the lost contacts through the referential lessons by their tutors during the traditional face-to-face mode of the blended learning. With exposure to Visual Arts resources and techniques aided by the use of multimedia teaching methods, both groups of learners were able to execute school-based projects (see figure 2) which tested for application of knowledge into creation. This demonstrates a manifestation of the highest order of the revised Bloom taxonomy.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that blended learning pedagogies have increased the exposure of student-teachers to a variety of OERs. It could be concluded that students found familiar learning platforms like WhatsApp easier to use. In this regard, the result confirms the pragmatic underpinnings of the experiential theory that, learning can be induced from the experiences of the individual. It is therefore recommended based on the study that, when

considering online learning platforms for blended learning, priority should be given to learners' familiarity. Notwithstanding, the majority of the learners were not able to participate in lessons conducted on Zoom and Moodle. It is therefore recommended that the use of online learning applications should be intensified in MTCE as part of developing students' core competencies through ICT education. This introductory course should be a core for all students in the college. There is a need for further investigation to be done on ways to provide sustainable access to internet connectivity to support online learning. Without that, the positive impact of the online learning aspect of blended learning cannot be felt wholistically.

As a limitation, the results of this study cannot be ascribed as a representation of the ideal phenomenon in colleges of education due to its confined scope. However, one crucial inference that could be made from the study is that online learning in MTCE could not address the issues of inclusivity and special needs in a typical case where some student teachers could not participate in the online learning due to the inability to afford smartphones or stable internet connectivity. However, the blended mode turned to narrow the gap as student-teachers who could not participate in the online learning benefited from the traditional face-to-face mode. For a holistic quality training and effective deliverability of the JHS curriculum, there should be no room for mediocrity in training student teachers. Such unsuitable environments question the sustainability of visual art education in colleges of education using the blended mode of instruction. To meet the needs of all learners, the blended learning approach proves to be effective as demonstrated in the case of MTCE, especially in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore imperative to look further into the blended learning pedagogies through expended inquiry for its improvement and practice. Both college tutors and the administrators should collectively devise feasible means of reaching out to learners who may have challenges with staying connected during online learning mode. To address the issues of inclusivity and the needs of all learners, traditional face-to-face learning should be coupled with technological devices and online learning applications. This will help students to quickly familiarize themselves with OERs and as well strengthen the online mode of blended learning.

Finally, an extensive study is recommended to investigate the pedagogical competencies of the student teachers to ascertain the level of skills they have acquired through blended learning in their teaching practices. Their success means the national agenda of raising future generations of Ghanaians with critical thinking, creativity and innovation competencies through the standard-based curriculum can be achieved.

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