

ART PRACTICE BASED RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW OF ISSUES AGAINST ACQUIRING PRACTICE-BASED PhD IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper takes a critical look at education and notes that both the teacher and learners work in harmony under peaceful environments to record past experiences for present and future references. It notes that curricula are centres to meaningful teaching and learning. It therefore needs constant reviewing. Reviewing curricula generates a variety of policy somersaults. For instance, the “publish or perish” or “no PhD, no promotion” issues resulted from such reviews. However, it is the “no PhD, no promotion” policy that appears to be the one generating the most heated debate, especially amongst studio artists. While some believe the policy is right, others believe it will make PhDs “common” thing for all to pick. The paper also takes a look at the concept of “Art practice as research” with discussions focused on “Practice led and Practice Based Research.” It highlights the role theory plays in studio researches and benefits that accrue thereof. Contrary to views that “no appreciable values” accrue to holders of PhDs in studio art, the paper calls for a change of heart by critics who appear to abhor the programme.

Keywords: Art Practice, Art-Based PhD, Practice led, Practice Based Research and Nigeria

Introduction

As time passes, some of the principles that regulate how a game is played become obsolete that the players and onlookers get disinterested. To ensure a game attracts attention of both players and spectators, it is necessary to constantly review the guidelines. The picture painted above is relevant in explaining what happens when experts call for a review of educational policies in order to enhance teaching and learning. Meaningful learning takes place if the teacher and learners agree to work in harmony. While it may be convenient to also state that teaching and learning can take place in less peaceful environments, such situations are better imagined than experienced.

For continuous pursuit of education and research, it is necessary for humans to live in peace in order to control both current and future goals (Dewey, 1938). There appears to be no limit to arguments that one can generate towards advancement of one’s subject area. Buhari in Balogun (2011) submits that in art, professionalism aims at creating structures which ensure artists’ practice and produces the best of art towards developing a country. Elmino’s (2017) views seem to align with the above submission when he states that artists through their ‘endless yearning for reality create things that all can see. Therefore, Paul Klee’s (1879-1940) assertion in Zelanski and Fisher (2007) that it is individuals’ that create ‘reality’ is apt. Klee believes “reality” is “isolated phenomenon latently outnumbered by other realities. Klee’s view is also shared by Vartanian (2016) who states that art doesn’t exist as an isolated phenomenon, it’s part of a long history.

The Issues

It is such history that has led to the debates regarding why tertiary institutions in Nigeria should review their conditions of services. One such recent review appears as though lecturers in certain grades in some Nigeria's Universities are being compelled to either acquire PhDs or forfeit promotion. Various views are being expressed by artists regarding the policy. Some "faultfinders" have had to argue that the policy seems to have watered-down the value which "Master of Fine Arts (MFA)" degree commands. While there seems to be many good sides to the policy, critics have had to point out that it has led to "Mad rush" by artists to acquire PhDs. They contend that the "rush" should be nipped at the bud to avoid PhDs in Fine Arts becoming a "common-thing." But the "faultfinders" missed the arguments as they appear not to consider the need for artists to advance educationally as their colleagues do in other fields. Ignoring the "faultfinders" artists in most tertiary institution's Fine Arts Departments are signing up for PhD programmes.

While this is the reality on ground regarding arguments for or against artists acquiring PhDs, Buhari as cited in Balogun (2011) feels strongly that "the rudimentary factor in judging excellence, particularly as it relates to art should be a person's intellectual output and attitude." He argues that prior to the 1960's, most "art schools started off with mere Diplomas." He observes that artists of that time neither have Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree nor the recent addition-PhD. He claims the "quality of work churned out was more or less infallible." However, he agrees that recent developments regarding PhDs in Fine Arts (Painting or Sculpture) in most Nigerian Universities are steps taken to make Fine Art "more formal and professional."

The argument that acquiring PhDs in Painting or Sculpture does not transform artists' attitudinal or intellectual output in regards to theory and practice should be taken with a pinch of salt. According to Buhari in Balogun (2011), before now, "artists could not attain the peak of academic circle without having a PhD. He observes that the problem is due to the error of perception by most tertiary institutions' management. They keep asking for paper qualifications instead of artworks as requirements for artist's promotion.

While these demands have yet to be extended to artists in Polytechnics and Colleges of Education in Nigeria, the "faultfinders" would not stop for nothing in dissuading artists from registering for PhD programmes in Fine Arts, especially, in Painting or Sculpture. Their "faultfinding" activities appear to be targeted at artists even when they see that the artist's colleagues in the Sciences and Social Sciences are obtaining PhDs both for personal, lecturing and promotional purposes. Buhari in Balogun (2011) bemoans the above situation regarding what the artists have to undergo to qualify to lecture and be promoted. He claims that, perhaps, because Universities in other climes "are much older than their African counterparts

[they] feel very reluctant imbibing the pattern of paper qualification for art Professors.” He states that, it is “the quality and intellectual capacity of a person’s work” that matters. Nevertheless, writing “Dr.” before one’s name could also mean the person is an expert in every subject.

In the educational sector, for instance, one of the essences of acquiring higher qualifications is to boost one’s career opportunities. Though a lot of people may sign up for PhDs in order to further open up opportunities to earn higher salaries, others do to improve their abilities to understand and solve work-place problems while growing confidence. These make them better communicators of specific skills that may lead them towards having better jobs. Of course, we should not confuse people’s desire to be referred to as “Dr.” because they believe they have certain talents that are not being valued and so want to be respected by those people around them. Yes, anyone would want to have “Dr.” written in addition to his or her name. Those with a PhD (Dr.) are often treated with respect by people around them. Obviously, the “faultfinders cannot be absolutely right when they make it appear as though, it is wrong for artists to sign up for PhDs and earn them.

From the foregoing, it would be seen that even where PhDs are required for promotion in to senior lecturing positions in most Nigerian Universities, the degree does not automatically translate into academic excellence for those who have them (Buhari in Balogun, 2011). One is neither saying getting a doctorate is not intellectually rewarding nor financially rewarding, at least not in the short term. While these views are not iron cast, the argument for or against artists acquiring PhDs in the Fine Arts goes on.

Practice led/Practice Based Research

Both practice led and practice based researches fall within the general area of action research. In these researches, researchers’ aims are to advance knowledge about practice and within the practice. Both researches are easily distinguished one from the other by purposes. For instance, a research is termed “practice based” if it is targeted at creating artifact which its basis is to contribute to knowledge. Nevertheless, a research is termed “practice led” if its outcome points out new understanding about (art) practice. On the other hand, practice based research is undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcome of the claims of originality which the researcher puts forward as basis of the research. The claims to originality and the contributions to knowledge may be demonstrated through the creative outcomes (artifact) which may consist of images, music, designs, models, digital media, performances and exhibitions (Candy, 2006).

A practiced based PhD is distinguishable from a conventional PhD because the creative outcomes from the research process are or may be included in the submission for examination of the claims of contribution to the field. It must include substantial contextualization of the creative works. In this sense, practice based research deals with locating a problem in a practice that can lead to research which can be presented

textually. This results from constant exploration in the studio or laboratory which eventually produces new knowledge and understanding. Motivation for the study may be based on tacit knowledge which emerges from personal learning outcomes over the times which can be shared with others. This view is also shared by Burgess, H. and Wellington, J. (2010). They submit that people sign up to professional doctorates and PhDs for a variety of reasons which are not mutually exclusive. That aside, it should be noted that tacit knowledge is not the same with scientific knowledge that is testable and validated by scientific processes. Again, tacit knowledge is personal and difficult, if not almost impossible to transfer from one person to another especially by verbal or written means. The ability to speak a language, play musical instrument or design and use of complex equipment requires knowledge that is not always known explicitly. Hence, it is difficult or impossible to transfer such knowledge to others. The knowledge is kind of hidden unwritten, unspoken emotions, experiences, insights, intuitions, observations and so on. The under listed are examples of what constitutes “tacit” knowledge;

- i. How to speak a language
- ii. Innovation
- iii. Leadership acumen
- iv. Aesthetic sense
- v. Body language
- vi. Humour
- vii. Intuition (ability to understand things without using logic)

The long and short of the matter is that one cannot acquire “tacit” knowledge either by being taught or reading books. Rather, it is knowledge that is based on one’s personal experiences. Hence, PhDs are believed to be stereotyped esoteric activities that people chose to undertake in the academic world, protected from the realities of the external world (Lee, 2009). PhD programmes in the Fine Arts, according to Buhari in Balogun (2011) are concept based. Studio based research in art are theorised through practice. Kirk (2011) explains further that theory is the basis for the generation of ideas. The pathway for interrogating idea is through practical production of art. In all this, there is no one fit-it-all methodology that researchers can readily adapt to carry out PhD researches in either Painting or Sculpture.

While this may appear as if there are no extant methodologies applicable to art, Sullivan (2010) argues it is not the case. While submitting that artists work in distinct ways that share the goals of other forms of inquiry, which is to build and add to knowledge, it is this reason that makes O’Brien (2001) to state that researchers in Fine Arts spend much of their time “refining the methodological tools to suit the exigencies of the situation, [by] collecting, analyzing, and presenting data on an ongoing, cyclical basis.” PhD programmes in the Fine Arts, especially in Painting and Sculpture are hinged on acquiring knowledge and

research skills to enhance professional practice that are linked to work, other related challenges and questions (Lee, 2009).

According to Tennant cited in Lee (2009), PhDs are not only about application of expertise “knowledge” in practice. It is also about “generation of knowledge from within the practice milieu itself. This is why most studio art researches, according to Reason (2000) in Seyed (2009), focus on the “self-directing, self-generating, self-knowing and self-transcending abilities of the researcher who acts knowingly to foster research approaches that will be seen to be personally derived and, which cannot be copied.

As Gregory (1995) in Lee (2009) observes, PhDs pay attention to exploring knowledge and expertise in a narrow aspect of a subject area. McVicar in Lee (2009) believes both educational and professional doctoral studies are “positive” opportunity for “employers.” This is contrary to the generally held views that PhDs in either Painting or Sculpture gives no clearly significant advantage to their holders over what they may have previously learnt. But that is not true. Would it be right to think that if a person has earlier on read a number of books, he or she should not bother reading others because such would not add to one’s knowledge? This is not true. McVicar in Lee (2009) list some of the gains that accrue to persons who have discipline themselves towards obtaining PhDs. She asserts that at the completion of a PhD, the candidates are able to:

- 1) develop research skills
- 2) develop organisational skills
- 3) improve in management and leadership skills
- 4) improve in organisational performance and outputs

According to her, such skills are particularly developed and generated within the organisational or professional context in which one works. She notes that all PhD holders have potentials of making direct contributions in the organisational or professional contexts in which higher levels of transferable skills such as research expertise, advance communication and leadership, critical thinking and problem solving are needed. Such gains are enough to motivate people to want to enroll for a PhD in order to support and enhance their professional practice. Such moves are expected to culminate into improvements in both career and personal achievements for the holders. Also, acquisition of a PhD enhances one’s self-esteem, confidence, personal identity and promotion in the workplace. It shows the person has sought and would continue to seek and generate knowledge towards enriching the pool of knowledge to make the world a better place.

Conclusion

While every claim to knowledge is relative, signing up for a PhD programme, offers artists an opportunity to develop further research skills. Acquisition of such skills enhances the artists’ professional practice both

in private and in the academia. Those thinking it is unnecessary for artists to acquire PhD degrees in the studios do have a point but like almost all things, they are just one side of the coin. Indeed, most tertiary institutions in Nigeria are encouraging their members of staff to acquire PhDs in Fine Arts. It is time, therefore, for arguments against the newly introduced PhDs in the studios in Nigeria to cease. Like any other thing in life, educational policies cannot be implemented through coercion. One must love something enough to want to have it. Currently, most artists want to improve their teaching and practicing skills with a PhD degree in the core areas where they had previously had in-depth knowledge. Luckily, some reputable Universities in Nigeria with Fine and Applied Arts Departments offer Art History, Art Education, Graphics, Textiles, and so on. Most of these sections or units already offer PhD programmes while the recent additions (Painting and Sculpture) is a welcome development because they also contribute to Nigeria's development.

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