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## Reorienting Art Teacher Education Pedagogy towards Learner Empowerment during COVID-19 Restrictions

### Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions, open and distance learning (ODL) has become the preferred delivery model of instruction at most institutions of higher learning. The ODL mode of instruction has become the most common alternative even for art teacher education amidst numerous practical challenges. This conceptual paper argues that the reorientation of art pedagogy in ODL changes learning and teaching habits of art practical content providing independent critical thinking as well as a new appreciation of learners' intellectual, emotional and social involvement in learning. The paper recommends critical art pedagogy as a pedagogy that develops critical skills and generates emancipatory and transformative patterns of teaching and learning art. This could inform both theory and practice as well as relinquish the lecturers' authority in traditional face to face teaching. Critical art pedagogy could address the dilemma faced by many institutions during this COVID-19 era in their desire to engage and empower art student teachers.

Keywords: critical art pedagogy, critical thinking, gallery narratives, contemporary art, open distance learning, open data resources

### Introduction

Many institutions of higher learning across nations were forced to adopt the ODL model of instruction but still grapple to integrate it into practical disciplines of their curricula such as art. ODL has not been easy for practical art modules such as drawing, painting, and sculpture. The major challenges with implementing practical modules through ODL include the struggle to implement and monitor the demonstration as well as the development and acquisition of skills without physical contact. ODL has become inevitable and necessitated the adoption of new strategies to critically engage open distance learners to optimise individual learning. ODL provides opportunities to learn within an open academic and social environment which has been inundated with numerous open data resources such as contemporary public artworks and gallery narratives (Dziwa, 2018). Resorting to ODL creates the opportunity to reorient art pedagogy and the potential to access and use open data visual resources. This paper interrogates the efficacy of critical art pedagogy in ODL.

### Background

COVID-19 (C19) has severely challenged the global health landscape and education systems. C19 is a communicable respiratory infection caused by the coronavirus which originated in Wuhan, China in October 2019 and spread throughout the world. Since January 2020, C19 accounts for over 40 000 deaths both

in Zimbabwe and South Africa and over two (2) million deaths globally (*Covid-19 Alert*, February 2021). The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared C19 a pandemic and drastic measures such as quarantine, restricted movements, and minimised gatherings have been implemented to reduce the spread of the virus. Due to restricted human contact and interaction in education, the ODL mode of teaching and learning replaced the contact mode in most institutions. Therefore, this paper focuses on the need to reorient pedagogy in art as a practical subject toward using the ODL mode of instruction while continuing to provide high-quality technical education.

There are several challenges faced in the practical aspects of art pedagogy through ODL (Pityana, 2009). These challenges include the restriction to only watch demonstrations without being able to touch and feel the materials used by lecturers; the uncertainty of the authorship of the artworks produced by learners who are not being monitored; lack of immediate lecturer-learner feedback that could help validate the practical processes such as that provided for in contact learning. However, pragmatism philosophy has guided the practical orientation of art for several decades and became an important objective of the subject (Eisner, 2002). Regrettably, the global health restrictions have rendered contact learning impossible. The major problem deterring implementation of practical subjects in ODL remains on how can lecturers ensure that learners have authentic practical engagement in an open distance pedagogy.

Critical theorists such as Paolo Freire (2000) and Henry Giroux (2011) have critiqued passive educational systems and pedagogies. They advocate for democratic social transformation. For Freire (2000), emancipatory education involves subverting the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, in which oppressed individuals undertake a transformation from object to subject, and thus properly become the subject. Hubard (2007) argues that traditional contact learning errs in neglecting the role of the students in shaping and reflecting on their encounters with art because of too much prescription of work. Most contact learning tends to be teacher dominated while in ODL learners can actively participate in their education through critical pedagogy engaging with contemporary artworks and gallery narratives from their localities. The engagement provokes learners to form compelling interpretations through thoughtful processes (Hubard, 2011). Engaging with familiar artworks that are within their socio-cultural contexts is an avenue for learners to simulate and encourage themselves toward empathetic reflection, meaning-making, creativity and empowerment.

Thus, ODL offers vast opportunities for students' autonomous learning from open data resources available in their socio-cultural environments (Atenas, Havemann & Priego, 2015). Guided by this background, this conceptual paper explores the efficacy of reorienting pedagogy in ODL to engage learners with open data resources that can afford critical thinking which facilitates learner empowerment through individualized practice, creativity, and self-directed learning. This is envisaged as the suitable pedagogy for teaching practical skills through ODL.

This paper argues that adopting critical art pedagogy in ODL could create a platform that demystifies most challenges associated with teaching the practical modules of art education through ODL. The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of reorientating pedagogy emphasizing the role

and viability of public contemporary artworks and gallery narratives as open visual data in enhancing critical art pedagogy, and secondly, it seeks to elucidate the relevance of critical thinking in providing an enabling space and developing autonomous and critical art teachers in ODL. Questions to explore are:

- What do ODL students gain through their encounters with open visual data?
- What kinds of understandings, meanings, or practical experiences will they have access to along with critical thinking skills through using the ODL mode of instruction?

Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to motivate an ODL critical art pedagogy in art teacher education whose focus goes beyond critical thinking in the development of theoretical and practical skills.

### **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

This paper is hinged on the critical theory framework by Henry Giroux (2011) and the intersection of critical pedagogy, open data resources, and open distance learning forming the conceptual framework adopted. The critical theory originated from the Frankfurt School (Shor & Pari, 2000). Critical theory is an apt framework in guiding this paper which encourages independently-minded learners such as those in ODL who need transformation by questioning the status quo and engage explicitly with questions of truth, power and justice from open visual resources to inform theory and art practices. The conceptual framework adopted from critical pedagogy represents a synthesis of critical theory (through critical engagement with visual narratives) and instructional methodology such as ODL. The intersection entails that the aims of transformation can inform pedagogy and practice (Shor & Pari, 2000). Critical art pedagogy aims to encourage independent learners who critique the status quo through visual narratives and engage explicitly with questions of generating truth, autonomy, and learner empowerment (Shor & Pari, 2000).

### **ODL: Functions, praxis and departure**

Open distance learning refers to a delivery mode or teaching and learning approach which focuses on access to education without physical contact with lecturers (Farrow, 2017; Pityana, 2009). Contact learning is characterised by face-to-face interaction, contact time-tabling, venues, and space for learning. ODL eliminates such challenges because it is an online learning strategy. Learners are flexible to refer to and use life examples prevailing in their contexts. ODL gives the learners autonomy and authority to determine knowledge generation at their own pace and convenience as learning is done from within the learners' cultural context (Pityana, 2009).

Through contact learning, knowledge is normally imposed overtly upon students or covertly via the subtle interactions of the 'hidden curriculum' (Hellman & Ulla, 2019). Classroom pedagogy maintains boundaries between content and the teacher who has control over the selection, organisation and pacing of knowledge transmitted and received. Leong (2005) argues that classroom pedagogy serves the technical and hermeneutic knowledge-constitutive interests which contribute to the reproduction of the societal status quo. Emancipatory knowledge constitutive

interests are not accounted for by the contact model of learning but rather in the ODL model (Pityana, 2009).

### **Open data resources and critical pedagogy**

Open data resources (ODR) can be understood as data that are universally available for anyone without boundaries and restrictions (Atenas, Havemann & Priego, 2015). Dziwa (2018, p. 2) mentions that many classrooms, lecture halls, media and texts (printed or electronic) abound and contain varied visual information. The affordances inherent in visual artworks are certainly worth exploring to establish how these can be used to support teaching and learning in ODL within the communities which house them (Alexander & Schlemmer, 2017). Contemporary activist artworks and gallery narratives are effective data sources for critical art pedagogy in ODL. These are created from real life researches and experiences by practising artists (Dziwa, 2018; Hubard, 2011).

Contemporary artworks and gallery narratives are not constrained by licensing conditions and proprietary environments. For example, public murals, public statues, gallery exhibitions or narratives and graffiti are openly available to the public as contemporary artworks. Graffiti includes the words or drawings that are scratched or scribbled on a wall as murals which include figurative images (Belton, 2001). Such data could improve the art learners' experience as it reduces the friction between the stakeholders of owner's rights and facilitates collaboration between artists, academics and learners as viewers. The contribution to the scholarship of open data resources in art such as gallery narratives and contemporary artworks, as research references and as citeable outputs, is still very limited to academics and students, hence the relevance of this article to ODL in art teacher education (Leong, 2005).

Engaging learners with visual artworks, analysing, citing, and reusing the images is a means how lecturers could flip their instruction to facilitate independent research, teamwork, critical thinking and critical data analysis skills (Leong, 2005; Shor & Pari, 2000). Critical pedagogy addresses the inequalities and differentials of power in and through education and ultimately, focuses on the empowerment or emancipation of individuals and communities (Freire, 2000). Critical art pedagogy is an educational theory that empowers the critical awareness of the learners about the oppressive nature of society through artworks (Shor & Pari, 2000, p. 129). It examines the radical theories, beliefs, and practices that contribute to emancipation and democratic schooling through visuals. We envisage that a critical art pedagogy approach could be used to underpin the development of educational activities based on the use of open data resources from contemporary artworks and gallery narratives.

### **Engaging with open visual data resources in ODL**

Shor and Pari (2000) observe that critical pedagogy informs critical thinking skills as well as expressive practice for any form of art, including drawing, painting, and sculpture. Thus there is no limitation of art content that can be included in ODL. Critical pedagogy in this sense does not only provide important thoughtful and intellectual competencies but also enables learners to effectively engage action and skills manipulation (Giroux, 2011). Thus, critical art pedagogy provides space for

democratising and reconstructing art education knowledge which solves practical challenges in society.

Through critiquing visual data from society, students develop research and literacy skills as well as critical thinking skills. These are opportunities that come along with critical pedagogy. Leong (2005, p. 9) suggests that learners as viewers use their critical thinking skills through criticism and dialectical thinking. Contemporary art does not only contribute to the production of cultural knowledge but also influences how we imagine our community and ourselves. Thus, engaging learners with contemporary artworks establish ways for emotional engagement and collaborations amongst students and society (Atenas, Havemann & Priego, 2015). In inquiry learning, students construct and discover knowledge about theory and practice by asking questions like; how are the images created? How are the messages conveyed?

Hellman and Ulla (2019) suggest that artworks are uniquely positioned to engage and integrate multiple ways of knowing. To this purpose, tasks and assignments in ODL should be designed to invite students to observe contemporary artworks and gallery narratives, detect peculiarities, ask questions, infer meaning, probe for alternative explanations, form conclusions, offer evidence, and continually reflect on their understanding by working on personal projects as alternatives or another possibility of expression (Alexander & Schlemmer, 2017; Andrabi, 2013). Engagement should not end with observation and critique; it should lead to activism and practice. In this way, artworks can provoke viewers to form compelling interpretations, decisions and judgments through rational thought processes that inform practice (Shor & Pari, 2000). Experiences with works of art can simultaneously be conceptual and embodied (Andrabi, 2013). Atenas, Havemann and Priego (2015) conclude that being a critical thinker provides discourse and scholarship which identifies the crux of practical discourse.

## Conclusion

From the literature, we concluded that, through engaging with artworks, there is a sense of immediacy in the way viewers begin to apprehend the world. Creative production of new artworks by the ODL learners is active when learners' critical judgment, interpretation, and meaning-making are provoked by observation and criticism of contemporary works available to them.

Critical thinking is fundamentally creative in the sense that it aims to produce a new level of understanding and something new. Creativity is not its competency but a product of thinking critically through observations, analysis, and dialectical thinking. Creativity benefits from recognising the role of critical thinking in projecting novel ideas and practice as situated reasoning (Hubard, 2017).

The use of visual images to encourage alternative and multiple interpretations is vital in ODL for critical conscientisation, the development of critical thinking and to inform practice. The artworks become the center of educational experiences whereby the learners actively interpret and act upon. Atenas, Havemann and Priego (2015) suggest that the potential of using original artworks to expand learners' knowledge parallels the exploration of critical pedagogy in art classrooms.

## Recommendations

Education must enlarge the experience that thinking and reflection are central to the act of constructing knowledge and learning (Giroux, 2011). According to Shor and Pari (2000), critical art pedagogy offers a favourable ambiance where students can engage within the circumstantial and contingent conditions of the world. Critical art pedagogy in ODL is recommended as opposed to dominant conceptions of teacher dominated education and schooling. To sustain this, human resource development is the first recommendation we can make to facilitate the reorientation of art teacher education pedagogy in an ODL set-up. Every innovation requires an equal training and development program to ensure effective implementation. Lecturers need to be trained and to be prepared in module content writing, developing demonstration videos and designing instruction that promotes critical visual engagement for learners.

Universities and schools are recommended to avail information communication technology (ICT) resources to support communication channels. There must be secure communication channels available to send and receive information between lecturers and students. It is vital to keep lines of communication open from the lecturers to the learners and vice versa.

The assessment procedures do not remain the same as in the contact learning model. Portfolio assessment is also recommended as a key assessment method focusing on the process rather than the product. Assessment will be based on the systematic collection of a learner's work such as a finished product accompanied by drafts and sketches, and presentations that represent competencies, exemplary work, displaying learner's developmental progress.

Institutions are encouraged and recommended to ensure that learners have access to materials. Material resource provisions through the institutions remain critical and can be achieved through the following ways for ODL students:

1. Lowering the fees structure for ODL, hence affording them surplus disposable funds to purchase materials and equipment; or
2. Entering into MOUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with respective colleges and institutions around the country where students upon identification as a student of a partner institution are allowed to use the respective institutions' studios close to their homes.

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