

# Education in the Throes of the Pandemic: Digital Pedagogical Responses of Visual Arts during the Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Starting with a series of conspiracy theories on social media and the attendant apprehension generated by a forced lockdown on the economy-cum-restriction of movement, COVID-19 arrived Nigeria in “grand style”. Many businesses were forced to fold up, downsize or reinvent to remain relevant within the economy. Educational institutions witnessed a complete lockdown as students were instructed to stay at home until further notice, while alternative learning modes were devised. In the visual arts, the lockdown triggered an array of responses, adapting existing digital tools in art teaching, mentorship and practice. This paper discusses some of these under three headings, namely; art business and management, art exhibitions, and technology-driven art practice. Using participant observation and unstructured interviews, the study examines the form, content, mode of delivery and impact of the pedagogy. The analysis shows significant impact as viable teaching and mentorship modules in the visual arts that should be retained in continuum. The paper adds to our knowledge, the impactful free online teaching and mentoring programs on art, organized by individuals in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Lockdown, Artists, Innovation, Practice, Learning, Teaching

## Introduction

**T**he exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic awoke humanity to a new normal. While the globe grappled with the uncertainties associated with the pandemic, life seemed to move from the physical to the digital space. The experiences learned from COVID-19 pandemic will change our world forever. Millions of people have been infected and hundreds of thousands of people have died (Hovestadt, C., Recker, J., Richter, J., and Werder, K., 2021:1). The COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria came into effect in March 2020, and for much of the year, the people of the country lived indoors. Outdoor socialization and merchandizing came almost to a halt, as systems and structures associated with them were restricted. The digital space, thus, became the alternative window for cross-country

interaction. One of the most important factors in a crisis such as the pandemic, Trilevic I (2021: 56) opined, is to protect the health of people, which requires creative measures and is ultimately a matter of taking advantage of opportunities and adopting them fast. This could be seen in the way individuals, businesses, religious bodies, institutions and corporate entities exploited the digital space in various ways. The social media and other interactive platforms were quite active in the period. The artistic community, which is the focus of this paper, responded by harnessing these platforms in a variety of intellectually stimulating and beneficial ways. Some of these are discussed under three headings, namely; art business and management; art exhibitions; AND technology-driven art practice.

The objectives of the study are to determine participants' acceptance as viable educational and mentorship modules, impact on participants knowledge and skills, and challenges if any. The research design is exploratory. Exploratory research tries to understand a subject of study in a preliminary way. Stebbins (2001: vii), opined that in exploratory research, people discover things through their own experience and power of reasoning by exploratory and sometimes serendipitous procedures. Being exploratory in nature, generated data can be the basis for future quantitative researches or deeper scientific inquiry. Using both participant observation, and unstructured interview, the research sought answers to the relevance of the digital module to participants, the knowledge impact, and challenges they encountered, if any, during the lectures, training and mentorship sessions. The population of the study is drawn from people between the ages of 17 and 35. They cut across visual arts students of tertiary institutions, unemployed graduates and practising artists. Random sampling method was adopted for the selection of participants for interviews and the administering of questionnaire. Data was collected from interviews, questionnaires, direct observation and a number of literary sources, which were analyzed.

## Art Business and Management

There were quite a number of digital responses to the COVID-19 lockdown in Art Business and Management. They include virtual interviews, presentations, discussions, and lectures given by practising artists as well as scholars of visual arts. Discussed below, are three inputs:

‘Talent is Not Enough’: It was an interview series conducted via Instagram by Bolaji Ogunwo, of the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. The focus was simple management techniques useful for art business and entrepreneurship. The module took two forms: interviewing accomplished artists on how they attained success, while upcoming ones listened and asked questions; and interviewing younger artists on current challenges and steps taken to overcome them. Artists interviewed include Sam Ovralti (poster in plate 1), Duke Asidere (poster in plate 2) and Abidun Olaku who are successful and renowned within and outside of Nigeria, and a number of upcoming ones like Sam Ebohon, Timi Kakandar and Titus Agbara.



Plate 1. Sam Ovralti with Bolaji Ogunwo

Photo Courtesy: Bolaji Ogunwo



Plate 2. Duke Asidere with Bolaji Ogunwo

Photo Courtesy: Bolaji Ogunwo

‘Awaken Your Creativity’: This was a lecture series delivered on YouTube and Facebook by Theresa Oghogho Iyase-Odozi of the Iyase-Odozi Arts Foundation, a private art organization founded by Iyase-Odozi. Iyase-Odozi is an artist, curator and art empowerment expert. She holds a doctorate in Visual Arts from the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos.

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Her ‘Awaken your creativity’ focuses on inspiring creative innovation from within, and “thinking outside the box”. The target audience are practitioners in the visual as well as performing arts. Topics covered included self-realization and actualization, practice and industry. Apart from direct teaching, Iyase-Odizi also interviewed creative arts practitioners and collectors. Some of the connoisseurs of art interviewed included Otunba Yemisi Shyllon (see promotional poster on plate 3) who is the largest art collector in Africa, and Otun Rasheed (playwright) of the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. Lectures on “Awaken Your Creativity” can be viewed on YouTube (yaseodozi arts), Instagram (yaseodozi\_arts) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/princesstheresa.iyaseodozi>).



Plate 3. Promotional Poster of ‘Awaken Your Creativity’  
Theresa Iyase-Odozi (left) with Omooba Yemisi Shyllon  
Photo Courtesy: Theresa Iyase-Odozi

Lectures via WhatsApp: Several lecturers communicated with their students through WhatsApp during the lockdown. WhatsApp media supports communication by voice, video, text as well as data transfer via upload of digital documents (soft copies). The wide

application makes it attractive for digital use. With about 1.3 billion users worldwide (Delam, H., 2020), the media was perhaps the most patronized digital platform during the lockdown. It was easy for students to discuss their challenges on group platforms, and for lecturers to respond directly knowing that everyone would get to read them under normal circumstances. It was also easy for lecturers to upload lecture notes, short videos, voice and other documents on the group platform for students to listen to, watch, read or download at individual convenience. The medium is an easy, cheap and convenient method for dissemination of information to students of large classes via texting and upload of digital documents.

### **Art Exhibitions**

Art exhibitions during the COVID-19 lockdown were mainly virtual. Physical displays were rare, but done with strict compliance to social distancing. Virtual art exhibitions were streamed live on YouTube while the exhibition brochures were distributed digitally on WhatsApp platforms. The links to exhibitions were posted on WhatsApp group pages, while meetings of art bodies like the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) were done via zoom.

In its debut virtual art show during the pandemic, ‘Breath of Hope Africa Gallery’ assembled 20 artists, from across two generations titled, “DeFiAnCe: Creativity in Times of Crisis”. According to the curator and director of the gallery, Adebimpe Adebambo, the exhibition was organized to celebrate the visual stories told by 20 Nigerian artists “from the depths of their hearts” in the middle of a pandemic (see posters on plates 4 and 5). The exhibition was live-streamed on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnPOIXOTtgI>), with pictures also available on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/breathofhopeafrica/?hl=en>).

## Olaku, others in DeFiAnCe against COVID-19 pandemic



Plate 4. A painting titled “Sources of Peace” (series), oil on canvas, 2020.  
by Abiodun Olaku featured during the virtual exhibition.  
Courtesy: Screen shot from the Guardian Arts (August 02, 2020)

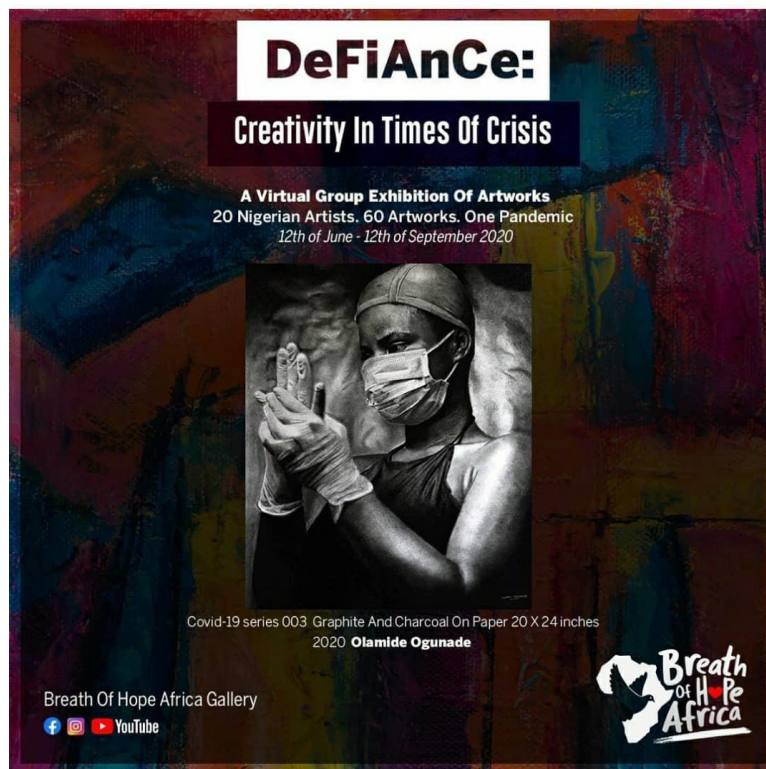


Plate 5. A promo poster for the virtual exhibition  
Photo credit: Breath of Hope Africa Gallery



Many members of the SNA staged exhibitions in their homes and studios as well as using the livestream feature available on YouTube and Instagram. These innovative approaches to art exhibitions were cost-saving and made accessibility easier for everyone.

### Technology Driven Art Practice

Using technology to drive art is the focus of a series of lectures on the Adaptation of 3D Printing Technology for Visual Arts Production anchored by Chiaka Nnodi of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State. The lectures were done in collaboration with Prof. Brando Chidi Okolo of the Steinbeis Institute for Materials Applications and 3D Printing Solutions (MAPS), Germany. The lectures, about seven so far, are delivered via zoom and address topics such as visual arts/machine collaboration, software adaptation for three-dimensional art and design, parameters for 3D digital printing, materials for 3D printing, finishing and post-production matters. The lectures disrupt traditional visual arts practice modes, instigating inclination towards machine-aided applications for higher productivity. Disruptive innovation is critical to understanding what is ahead for online learning (Micheal B.H and Heather S, 2015:3), it holds the key to machine aided visual arts practice of visual arts in the future. Each lecture is illustrative, usually featuring items produced from the method discussed as proof. After the course, the presentation notes and recording links are available to interested participants. They can also be accessed on YouTube and by cloud sharing link. The highlight of these lectures is where and how materials can be sourced locally (see plate 6) and the adaptation of the technology to visual arts practice and other disciplines during the pandemic. One of the 3D machines used for demonstration during the lectures can be seen in plate 7.

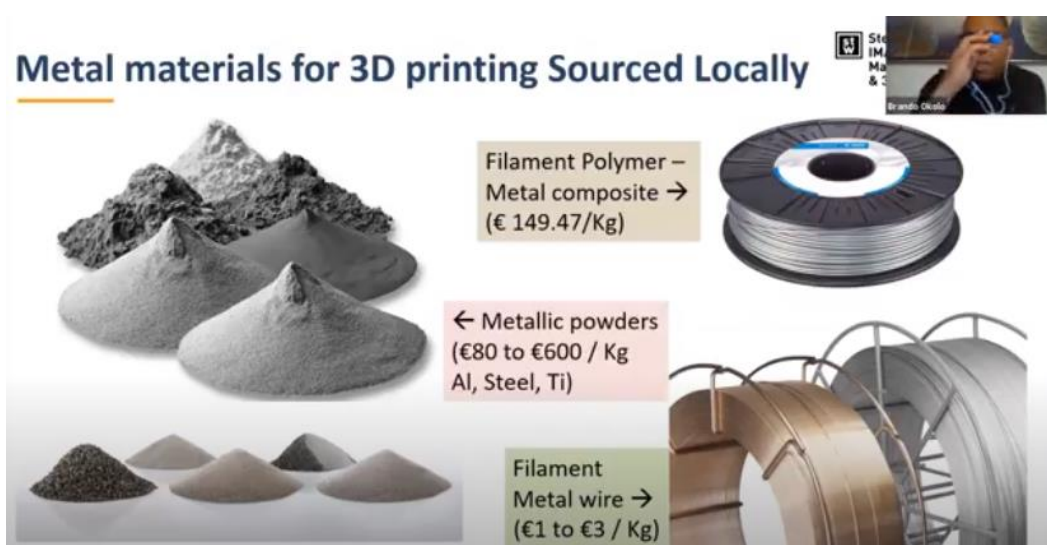


Plate 6. Screenshot from the zoom presentation by Brando Chidi Okolo.

Photo Courtesy: Chiaka Nnodi

The demonstrations highlight the interdependence of the visual arts, sciences and engineering as necessary combo for growth and productivity in the COVID-19 era and beyond. Lectures had participants from visual arts, engineering, architecture, the military, manufacturing and so on.



Plate 7. Chiaka Nnodi (right) and other guests inspecting the 3D printer before the Covid-19 lockdown.

Photo Courtesy: Ms Chiaka Nnod

### **Data Collation and Analysis**

Unstructured interviews were conducted with Bolaji Ogunwo, Thereasa Iyase-Odozi and Chiaka Nnodi in the course of the study. Questionnaires were administered via telephone conversations and WhatsApp to participants across the modules, and to non-participants who were able to access the recordings online after the actual events. All data were collected in Lagos, Nigeria.

Twenty (20) of the respondents (100%) found the lectures and mentorship sessions useful and relevant to their study, career or professional practice.



Twenty (20) of the respondents (100%) agree that the module could be incorporated with some modification into the curriculum of higher institutions

Fifteen (15) of the respondents (75%) find the knowledge of 3D printing useful but impracticable without access to a 3D printer.

The results show the module under study as useful and relevant to academic work and professional practice. In a similar study on the implementation of blended learning in the East China Normal University (ECNU), Gu, Xiaoqing (2016: 40) noted unwillingness of lecturers to adopt the module as an initial challenge in implementation. He also stated that continued teacher education and motivation helped to overcome it as the system evolved. However, in institutions of learning in Nigeria, where online teaching is already deployed, the incorporation of social media tools may be relatively easy.

### **Lessons from the lockdown**

The lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic presented some challenges in Nigeria. There was uncertainty of human existence and true vulnerability of human life (Snower D. .J., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that our economic, political and social systems can serve our needs and purposes only when they induce us to cooperate at the appropriate scale (ibid). Challenges create impetus for evolving methods of continuity with life and effective living when systematically and creatively embraced. As observed by Abulude, Francis O. and Abulude, Ifeoluwa (2020:163), few institutions in Nigeria saw the need to use virtual methods as accompaniment for their programs before the lockdown began. The use of conferencing and webinar was not common, and many Nigerian institutions were not conversant with their use for virtual learning (ibid).

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that Digital media such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and Zoom played key roles for learning, teaching and practice among visual artists during the COVID-19 lockdown. Friedrich Murillo (2021:64) observes that digital tools provide manifold opportunities in motivating students, and support in achieving learning success without physical presence in a classroom. In addition to this observation, the

use of familiar and easily accessible digital tools like the social media will make students' adaptation to, and interest in using these tools for learning much easier. This is shown in the outcome of the module under study.

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