

Chapter 13

African Art Students and Digital Learning

Paula Uimonen
Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Imagine 120 students sharing 5 computers, yet feeling that they are part of an interconnected world. This is the social context framing digital learning for African art students, the material limitations and cultural imaginations of which this chapter is concerned with. Based on extensive ethnographic engagements at TaSUBa, a national institute for arts and culture in Tanzania, this chapter investigates the development of digital media skills. Using the concept of digital learning to cover the acquisition of ICT skills as well as the use of ICT as a learning tool, the analysis spans from early expectations of connectivity to current forms of media engagement. Focusing on the social and cultural aspects of digital learning, the concept hybrid media engagement is introduced to capture the creative ways in which African art students overcome limitations in infrastructure, while exploring new forms of cultural production.

INTRODUCTION

The students sit cramped together, two to three sharing each computer. Some are seated on the floor between the wooden tables, without access to computers, a few at the back of the room, with laptops of their own hoisted on chairs or low tables. The curtains are drawn, ceiling fans shifting the

hot air around. The teacher stands at the front of the room, using a projector attached to his laptop. Images of his computer monitor are projected onto a worn-out screen that has been refastened to its frame with some string. The computer interface is in English, but his instructions are in *Kiswahili*. The students are in their final year of studies at Taasisi ya Sanaa na Utamaduni Bagamoyo (TaSUBa), a national arts and culture institute in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. Regardless of their major subject, in

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dance, drama, music, stage technology or fine arts, all students study ICT. But as much as they enjoy their ICT classes, they are also frustrated by the lack of facilities, the student population of 120 sharing 5 computers.

This chapter investigates the development of digital media skills at TaSUBa, from the initial introduction of computers and Internet access to current learning and user practices.¹ When computers and Internet were first introduced in 2004, most students had no or very limited ICT skills. In the absence of formal training, students employed various methods to acquire these skills, not least through peer-to-peer learning. Even so, a baseline ICT user study carried out the following year showed that the computers available for students were largely underused (Uimonen 2006). In the new curriculum that came into effect from academic year 2006/2007, ICT was made a compulsory subject, and is now taught throughout the 3-year diploma programme. A trained instructor gives students weekly classes in a variety of ICT skills. Unfortunately, the formalization of ICT training has not been accompanied by infrastructure development. This lack of facilities is not merely attributable to financial constraints, but is expressive of managerial priorities and strategies, factors that constitute the institutional setting in which digital learning is embedded. Even so, students find creative ways of bypassing the limitations posed by infrastructure, thus developing innovative forms of *hybrid media engagement*.

BACKGROUND: DIGITAL LEARNING, ACCESS, AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

In this analysis, I am using the concept of digital learning to capture the acquisition of ICT skills as well as the use of ICT as a learning tool, focusing on computers and Internet. While a growing body of research is investigating new media skills among

youth, this work is mainly focused on high-tech societies, mostly in Europe and the United States. A growing number of projects and initiatives on ICT in education notwithstanding, very little empirical research has been carried out in African contexts.² Nonetheless, theoretical debates and empirical insights from digitally more advanced societies can be used to shed further light on digital learning among African youth, not least as a point of comparison on questions relating to social context (Livingstone 2006), genres of participation (Ito et al 2008), and variations in user patterns (Facer and Furlong 2001, Selwyn 2009).

In order to appreciate digital learning in the context of African “mediascapes” (Appadurai 1996), it is important to recognize the limitations in Internet access. In Tanzania, one of the poorest countries in Africa, the Internet is only used by 1.22% of the population, compared with 87.84% in Sweden and 74% in the United States, or 8.67% in neighbouring Kenya and 7.90% in Uganda.³ This low level of Internet penetration is particularly evident in the education sector, with most primary and secondary schools having no Internet access (MOEVT 2007). While many institutes of higher education have Internet access, they do not have broadband, the subscription rate for which is a mere 0.02% in Tanzania. In the case of TaSUBa, Internet access is through a dedicated line at the speed of 128kbs, with a monthly data allocation of 40Gb. Questions of digital inclusion and exclusion are thus rather pertinent in this low-access context (Castells 2004, Ferguson 2006).

Since this chapter is concerned with an arts college, the analysis will focus on digital learning in relation to cultural production and transformation. The only institute for practical arts training in East Africa, TaSUBa attracts students who wish to develop their artistic talents. For about half the students, the experience of studying at TaSUBa coincides with their first introduction to digital media, the development of digital media skills thus forming part of their artistic training and their

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