Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication | A journal published by the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group

Vol. 8, no. 2 (2018), pp. 69-71 http://www.aejmc.us/spig/journal

Reflections on Teaching at a Nigerian Private University

Cornelius B. Pratt
Temple University

Abstract
This essay is a reflection on the author's teaching and research experiences during his semester-long return to Nigeria, his birth country. When he left that country decades ago for graduate studies in the United States, it had only six universities—all public government-run and all but one modeled strictly on the British higher-education system. The growth of the private university is fueled by public frustration over frequent closures and the inadequacy of institutional infrastructure in government-run tertiary institutions, particularly after mid-1980s. The semester experience in Nigeria showed that while the private university system promises an uninterrupted educational experience, it does not share the same rigorous academic standards common among the original six public universities, from their founding through the early 1980s.

Officially I was classified as an expat on the campus of the American University of Nigeria, a 15-year-old private university in Adamawa state, in northeast Nigeria. That classification reminded me of the depth of my foreignness—regardless of how perfunctory or how substantive it was—and of my decades-long absence from the country of my birth. In this essay, I reflect on my semester-long experience on the university's main campus in Yola. For a U.S. educator returning to a developing region, the experiences were as rewarding in the classroom as they were to me in my professional development.

In one of the courses I taught at AUN, I spent little time teaching the usual topic on the Public Relations Society of America, on the American Academy of Advertising, and on the American Association of Advertising Agencies; rather, my illustrations were largely from the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria, and several of Nigeria's commercial banks and microfinance institutions. To ensure teaching through using culturally relevant illustrations, I steered classroom discussions toward local, ready-to-understand organizations to demonstrate the strengths of Nigeria's professional organizations while hoping that, for the most part, the students would reflect on the domestic environment within a much-needed global context. Even so, I observed how animated my students were when I used videos of U.S. Super Bowl LI (2017) advertisements. I was reluctant to hold long discussions on such advertisements, but the students thought they were creative, engaging, entertaining and informative, all at once. They shared favorable comments on them, noting how unique each was. And they compared them to what they described as the bland advertisements in the homeland.

Keywords: American University of Nigeria, Nigeria's Private Universities, Oral Communication

Two ads had subliminal political messages in bold undertones—a rarity in Nigeria. I used the Super Bowl ads less to emphasize cross-cultural differences in commercial messaging than to fill a void in my firsthand knowledge of the rapidly expanding marketing-advertising landscape in an increasingly dynamic nation. How else could I have identified the characteristics of competitive advertisements—other than to use illustrations from the world's largest economy and one of the most competitive business environments there is?

My own academic background is that I was an undergraduate at the British-style University of Lagos (UNILAG) in the 1970s, when Nigeria had only six universities—all government-run. As of this writing, it has 162 National Universities Commission-accredited universities, of which almost half, 74, are private. Nearly all students in my graduating class at UNILAG earned graduate degrees—with about a quarter of us enrolling as government-scholarship recipients or as Nigerian university-sponsored scholars in graduate programs abroad.

Sadly, that was then. Today, government-run universities tend to be victims of campus unrest and violence; of nonvisionary, puny leadership; and of anemic institutional funding, heightening the importance of private fundraising and of campus security. Perhaps the reason is that a goodly number of students back then were on some form of government sponsorship or tuition waiver, and there was some sense of entitlement to benefits, unlike among students in today's private universities whose tuitions tend to be much higher. Because students in private universities tend to be self-sponsored, they loathe engaging in activities that would lead to the closing of their institutions and to extending their graduation clock, thereby incurring additional educational costs.

It was not surprising, then, that not once was privately run AUN closed during my sojourn there. Not once was the power supply significantly interrupted. Not once was internet connectivity significantly diminished. AUN's initial massive investment in a modern infrastructure kept campus activities at full throttle, making it possible for its students, staff and faculty to be consistently engaged on and off campus.

There were two major differences between my U.S. classroom experience and that on the AUN campus. The first, to my puzzlement, was the unofficial expectation that faculty members should provide textbooks or reading materials to their students, well beyond listing readings on syllabi. Such generosity, common among some AUN faculty, tended, in my judgment, to deprive the students of the ability to investigate course materials on their own. College students must be creative and resourceful, and, to some degree, independent in their search for knowledge and skills; dependence on their instructors undermines their competitiveness. I remember requiring my students to download my own research article for class discussion. They balked, hemmed, and hawed. Reluctantly, I distributed the article in class. I had wanted them to engage in the search process on their own and, by serendipity, download related articles from the electronic alleyways and byways. That way, a student's electronic library can grow exponentially through her or his scholarly doggedness while being exposed to additional online scholarly resources hitherto unbeknownst to her or him. Students expected that, because they were paying premium tuitions and fees, some of their quotidian academic responsibilities should be borne by their faculty whose salaries and perks were significantly higher than those of their public-university counterparts.

The second difference between my US university and the Nigerian university was some students' notorious aversion to impromptu in-class conversations—particularly for courses in the liberal-arts wing of the university. U.S. students generally engage their instructors without being cuddled or prompted. In anticipation of that possibility on the AUN campus, I reminded the students on several occasions that education was not a spectator sport. And I wrote on all my syllabi the following: "You are required to identify yourself immediately before or after each **robust** [emphasis in original] in-class participation. Such information is required only for your professor's records. No mussitation. Mumbling or uttering your words sotto voce is unacceptable. Project, project—and project well." For some, that was a welcome opportunity to demonstrate—if not to strut—their oral communication skills. For others, it was a pain—if not an embarrassment—to express themselves publicly in class. Such a reaction was a knock-on effect of the dominant one-way, asymmetrical communication common in Nigeria's undergraduate classrooms.

In conclusion, my semester-long experience on *a* private-university campus in Nigeria indicated four realities. The first was a disciplined student body that was not susceptible to embracing campus gangs and rival cults. The second was the stability of its academ-

ic calendar. The third was the tendency for its students to depend, to a much larger degree than U.S. students, on instructor-identified reading materials. The fourth was the reluctance of my students to engage voluntarily in open, robust classroom discussions. Even so, AUN, an exemplar of Nigeria's top private universities, is poised to contribute to enhancing the academic and professional strengths of the world's seventh-largest country, by population.

Cornelius B. Pratt is a professor in the Klein College of Media and Communication and president of the Faculty Senate of Temple University. He taught communication courses and conducted research during fall semester, 2017, on the main campus of the American University of Nigeria, Yola. E-mail: cbpratt@temple.edu

© Cornelius B. Pratt, 2018. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.