

Between Grades and Grit (Posted on Facebook on November 14, 2021)

Last week Wednesday, I had an interactive session with undergraduate students of Classics Department at the University of Ibadan. I spoke generally about how such components as "Statement of Purpose," "Literature Review," and "Justification of Study" they write for their undergraduate projects go beyond the fulfilment of condition for grade and graduation. Throughout our lives, I emphasized, we will always have to justify why we take certain actions and "sell" our ideas to people who don't have any reason to listen to us. We will always have to write, organize our thoughts, and communicate hidden and obvious ideas in text.

Essentially, I explained how the core features of an undergraduate research project apply to real life situation in the real world. Throughout our existence, we must justify why someone should invest their time, resources, and energy in us. Even professors write proposals for research funding and publication. Dangote, as rich as he is must still convince investors that his ideas are superior to existing ones. The rigor that students apply in stating why a project topic is important can easily be adapted into justifying why someone should care about their idea. Ideas rule the world. And people who can translate abstractions into reality have the world under their feet. No one would take you serious, if you cannot explain why your idea is unique. This is the same principle of a "Literature Review," which is about looking for why existing body of knowledge is not superior to your own, by demonstrating that you know what is out there.

When you write your "Justification of Study," you are making a case for why your idea is original, having explored existing approaches to a particular idea/problem. This same principle of "Justification of Study," if rigorously conducted, applies to how individuals and groups chart new directions through a critical appraisal of existing practices that must be revised or abandoned to give way for something innovative. For me, it is not enough to say that the humanities prepare graduates for bigger roles and challenges in the real world. What is far more important is how specific components of humanities education connect directly to how students see or imagine themselves in the "real" world.

I told the students that while first class in the humanities in Nigeria is based on students' ability to memorize and regurgitate, the core principles of research, which is applicable in real life scenario are determined by meticulousness, conscientiousness, and grit—all of which you don't acquire by just memorizing facts, but by being disciplined and consistent. This explains why a 3rd class graduate who is conscientious and willing to learn, step-by-step, can turn out to be a fantastic scholar, a brilliant administrator, an inventor of unparalleled things/ideas, and a world-class thinker. I told the students that I don't know what my mentees, studying across the world, graduated with. I only look for grit and trainability, not GPA. Hence, I always ask to see their BA/Bsc projects, not transcripts. The fact that you scored A in your BA project doesn't mean you are smart. I have seen some C projects that are far more innovative and original than some As. I have mentored students from the verge of graduating with a 3rd class to securing full funding for PhD program, and now doing incredibly well.

I know the difference between students' real ability and GPA because I graduated as the best student in my class of 2004, with a 2.1—the highest category possible in the history department until a few years ago. I told the students how I would start memorizing class notes, right from the beginning of the semester and "discharging" by teaching co-students, word-for-word, as contained in the notes. Yoruba-Muslims who attended local Arabic schools would understand how memorization works—an interlocking chain/building block of progression. There was another student in my set/cohort, who also made a 2.1. He wouldn't come to class. He would arrive on campus a few days before final exam and memorize everything. Yet, he was adjudged to be better than dozens of other students who attended all classes, and evaluated to be as good as Saheed who memorized throughout the semester and spent countless hours "discharging" to fellow students.

I made a 2.1 because I studied through repetition. I told the students that I'm actually not as smart as most people think. What I have always had, till today, is not "smartness" per se, but the grit to learn new things through repetition, consistency, and the discipline to do it every day until I get it right. While self-teaching through memorization can produce better grades in most settings, they are unfair for 21st century pedagogy that must recognize that all students don't learn the same way.

I thank Dr. Idowu Alade and Head of Classics Department Professor Olakunbi Olasope for inviting me to speak about ideas that have worried my head. After the event, they bought me a good amala at the UI staff club. I had fun!