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## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CLASSROOM IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The 21st-century classroom in Nigerian higher education has evolved into a dynamic, technology-driven environment that promotes flexibility, access, and student-centered learning. However, the increased use of digital tools has also introduced significant classroom management challenges, including student disengagement and overreliance on quick information retrieval. This theoretical paper explores the implications of digital distractions on teaching and learning, it critiques traditional authoritarian management styles, and advocates for proactive, flexible, and engagement-based strategies. Grounded in self-determination theory, the study highlights the importance of fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning environments. It concludes by recommending practical classroom management approaches that integrate digital tools meaningfully to enhance motivation, participation, and academic achievement in the modern Nigerian university context.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> -century classroom, classroom management, digital distraction, higher education, student engagement, self-determination theory

## Introduction

The classroom of the 21st century is an evolving educational space that incorporates contemporary technology and creative teaching approaches to assist students in attaining their learning goals. It highlights critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and digital literacy, which are crucial for thriving in today's knowledge-oriented society (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). In Nigeria, universities are progressively embracing digital resources and hybrid learning frameworks to improve accessibility, adaptability, and student involvement (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). For example, several postgraduate programs now provide students with choices on how to deliver their coursework (online, blended, or in-person), enabling them to finish assignments and submit work online.

Lecturers commonly utilize digital platforms to share learning materials, organize evaluations, and encourage online interactions, demonstrating a significant reliance on technology in teaching and learning throughout Nigerian universities (Adebowale et al, 2025). This transition aligns with international educational trends which focused on producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also adept in critical 21st-century skills essential for engagement in a global economy (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Nevertheless, the incorporation of digital technologies brings forth new difficulties. It is not uncommon to see students disengaged during lessons, often distracted by their smartphones or other digital gadgets, mistakenly believing that quick answers

(like those provided by AI tools such as ChatGPT) can substitute for in-depth engagement with course material (Rosen, 2017). This trend presents a considerable challenge for lecturers who find it difficult to sustain student attention and motivation in a digital context (Junco, 2012).

Consequently, there is an immediate need for the formulation of contemporary, practical, and realistic classroom management techniques designed to meet the demands of the digital age. These strategies must guarantee that technology functions as a resource for enhancing learning rather than becoming a source of distraction, cultivating environments that encourage prolonged focus, active involvement, and significant educational experiences.

## Problem Statement

Although digital technologies have revolutionized higher education in Nigeria, offering increased flexibility and accessibility to education, they have also brought forth notable challenges in classroom management. In particular, student disengagement during instructional sessions has emerged as a rising issue, exacerbated by continual access to digital devices and an inclination towards quick information access instead of thorough engagement with educational content. This escalating issue has negatively impacted student academic success and teachers' effectiveness. Numerous lecturers lack effective and realistic classroom management techniques to tackle these modern digital distractions. While certain research has examined the adoption of

digital learning in Nigerian higher education (Okeke, 2021; Eze et al, 2018), a theoretical gap remains in defining classroom management models that are adaptable to the realities of the 21st-century digital landscape.

This theoretical paper investigates the specific challenges of classroom management in Nigerian higher education within the context of the digital age. It seeks to examine literature on 21st-century teaching and learning, shed light on the impact of technology-driven distractions on student involvement, and suggest practical, theory-driven classroom management strategies that educators can employ to nurture active, meaningful learning experiences in a technology-rich environment.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Modern Classroom Management Approaches**

Classroom management refers to the strategies employed by teachers to maintain order in the classroom, thus fostering an environment conducive to learning (Asiyai, 2011). It involves effectively addressing the challenges that arise in a typical classroom so that education can occur, such as ensuring students settle down, controlling noise levels, and engaging uncooperative or disinterested learners. Additionally, it includes managing students' cellphone distractions and ensuring they focus on instructions. Bluestein (2018) describes classroom management as a teacher's capacity to create a secure, connected atmosphere that promotes student self-

regulation; a skill that helps students concentrate on tasks and avoid inappropriate conduct in the classroom. Bluestein (2014) stresses that creating connections begins with establishing relationships; students must first connect with their peers before they can engage with the learning material.

In Nigeria, there is often an emphasis on strict discipline and authority (Adzongo & Olaitan, 2019). Bluestein (2014) characterizes this as an authoritarian and heavy-handed approach to classroom management. In such environments, the teacher retains control, and students are expected to adhere to classroom regulations. Nonetheless, in the 21st century, particularly with the advent of digital technologies and changing student expectations, these authoritarian strategies have become less effective. Traditional classroom management typically involves a more authoritarian style where the teacher acts as the primary authority, maintaining control through rigid rules, discipline, and restricted student freedom (Charles & Senter, 2012). While traditional methods may create quieter environments, they often fail to promote critical thinking or self-discipline.

Recent classroom management theories advocate for forward-thinking, relationship-focused, and engagement-oriented methods (Panorama Education, 2015; Ryan et al, 2017). Marzano and Marzano (2003) highlight that developing positive relationships between teachers and students serves as the cornerstone of effective management. Moreover, approaches such as flipped classroom models, blended learning, and gamification have been shown to enhance student engagement while

diminishing behavioral problems (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

In Nigeria, the adoption of blended learning, which combines face-to-face teaching with online interactions, has demonstrated potential, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). However, as Oleson and Hora (2014) point out, many lecturers lack the necessary training or readiness to adapt to these new models, often attempting to replicate the instructional methods they were taught. Underlining this call for innovation, Adeoye et al, (2020) assert that Nigerian universities need to reconsider their educational delivery methods by incorporating flexible, technology-oriented classroom models in the post-pandemic landscape. The capacity to manage a classroom effectively is critical in assessing teaching effectiveness and underscores the significance of instructional abilities in creating a learning environment that supports successful teaching and student comprehension (Okeke & Lee, 2025). The researcher posits that modern classroom management should be adaptable, centered around students, and integrated with technology to achieve success. Lecturers must cultivate digital skills, emotional awareness, and facilitation capabilities to adeptly navigate today's evolving classrooms. Simple rules and punitive actions are no longer adequate; instead, classroom management needs to promote active involvement, self-regulation, and responsible digital citizenship among learners.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom**

The classroom of the 21st century signifies a transformative learning environment where students actively participate in developing information and communication skills, problem-solving capabilities, digital literacy and interpersonal skills during the learning process (Sedivy-Benton & Leland, 2014). This transformation represents a crucial shift in teaching methods, policies, and practices, motivated by the changing characteristics and requirements of contemporary learners (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). The incorporation of 21st-century learning strategies has redefined the roles of traditional educators, teachers now take on the role of learning facilitators, while students engage in collaboration, utilize diverse information sources, and participate in inquiry-based learning. Teachers are now tasked with nurturing cooperation, curiosity, and self-direction among their learners (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008).

This shift in paradigm calls for a thorough reassessment of instructional strategies and classroom management techniques. Traditional models of discipline, which often rely on control and compliance, are increasingly inadequate. Instead, effective classroom management in this new era must encourage collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and the thoughtful incorporation of technology (Dange, 2022).

In modern educational settings, the scope of classroom management transcends mere rule enforcement. It strives to create a structured yet student-centered environment where learners take responsibility for their actions



and level of engagement (Marzano & Marzano, 2023). Teachers are now expected to cultivate vital skills such as digital literacy, collaborative capabilities, and proficiency in innovative teaching methods (Jan, 2017). Moreover, they need to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students (Okeke, 2025).

The lecturer's role has also transformed to become more inclusive. Instead of maintaining an authoritative stance, they are encouraged to distribute responsibility with their students, empowering them to take control of their own educational journeys (Nola, 2025). This approach necessitates a careful equilibrium between freedom and guidance. Instructors must assist students in utilizing their autonomy effectively while also promoting a respectful, orderly, and enriching educational atmosphere.

The advent of digital technology has profoundly affected student behavior and learning preferences. Today's learners are surrounded by a digital landscape that provides instantaneous access to information through smartphones, laptops, and artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT). This continuous connectivity has fostered a generation that anticipates immediate responses and is accustomed to juggling multiple tasks (Rosen, 2017). Although digital resources present extensive educational opportunities including personalized learning and access to a broad array of information (Means et al., 2013) they may also lead to diminished attention spans and superficial engagement with subject matter (Junco, 2012).

Research conducted in Nigeria by Olojo, Adewunmi, and Ajisola (2021) demonstrates that many undergraduate students spend considerable amounts of class time engaged in non-academic online activities, adversely affecting their understanding and academic performance. Similarly, Akpan and Itighise (2024) point out that while higher education institutions may have access to digital resources, effectively integrating these tools into teaching practices remains a significant challenge. As a result, it is no longer adequate for lecturers to simply use digital tools in their instruction. Kahu (2013) highlights that genuine engagement in the digital age necessitates the deliberate incorporation of technology into learning experiences that are active, collaborative, and reflective. Passive techniques such as merely sharing lecture slides risk increasing student disinterest.

Thus, technology should be reconceptualised not just as a means of delivering content but as a resource for promoting active, interactive, student-centered learning. Successful classroom management in the 21st century must also involve equipping learners with the skills to utilize digital tools critically and thoughtfully. The ultimate goal is to prepare students to be competent, adaptable participants in the contemporary workforce (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008).

### **Student Engagement and Motivation**

In contemporary classrooms, successful management must focus on student engagement and motivation as key elements. Engagement is no longer simply about being

present in class or turning in assignments; it encompasses a deeper emotional connection, cognitive involvement, and active participation in learning tasks (Fredricks, Blumenfeld et al., 2004). This shift in understanding necessitates that teacher's shift away from conventional top-down models of classroom control to fostering environments that encourage intrinsic motivation and active engagement.

Consequently, classroom management techniques should be developed to enhance critical thinking, synthesis of information, and the application of knowledge in practical situations, reflecting the requirements of our digital and interconnected society (Singha et al., 2024). Lecturers must understand that a rigid, uniform management approach can hinder engagement. Instead, effective classroom management needs to adopt a flexible and inclusive strategy that provides personalized support and differentiated teaching to meet the varying needs of learners and avert disengagement (Okeke, 2024). By employing management strategies that emphasize engagement, teachers can enhance positive student behaviors, maintain focus and curiosity, and ultimately boost academic achievements (Okeke & Lee, 2025). Thus, in modern classrooms, overseeing student engagement is not just an ancillary issue; it is vital for effective classroom management and crucial for nurturing a vibrant, motivated learning community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Self-determination theory, as proposed by Deci et al (2000), suggests that students'

intrinsic motivation to succeed thrives when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are nurtured. Autonomy is linked to the ability to make choices and is enhanced when students perceive a sense of ownership over their learning experiences. Competence involves feeling effective during learning activities and wanting to engage in those tasks. It can be developed through well-structured, suitably challenging assignments that enable students to achieve a sense of mastery. Meanwhile, relatedness refers to feeling connected to peers and instructors. A contemporary classroom must be organized in a manner that encourages collaboration, peer assistance, and strong teacher-student relationships. This type of environment will foster inclusivity and is more likely to cultivate intrinsic motivation among students. Additionally, the findings of Komarraju et al (2010) regarding how interactions with faculty bolster students' academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement support this theory.

In the 21st-century classroom, traditional authoritarian methods of management are proving ineffective. Instead, classroom management should establish conditions that fulfil students' psychological needs. Consequently, management approaches should prioritize goal-setting, timely feedback, and acknowledgment of individual progress rather than concentrating solely on enforcing rules. Regrettably, many higher education institutions in Nigeria continue to adhere to rigid, lecture-based instructional models that limit student autonomy (Eze, Chinedu-Eze, & Bello, 2018). This argument posits that to truly boost engagement in the digital age,

classroom management techniques must emphasize autonomy-supportive environments where students are given meaningful choices and a stake in their learning journey.

However, in the digital era where students have continual access to external distractions through smartphones and other gadgets, maintaining intrinsic motivation is increasingly challenging. Researchers such as Ryan and Deci (2017) contend that while digital tools can promote autonomy, they can also encourage a reliance on instant gratification rather than fostering deep engagement. Within the context of higher education in Nigeria, instructors often face challenges in allowing students the freedom to employ technology while ensuring they remain academically engaged (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). The researcher argue that effective classroom management today must not solely restrict the use of digital devices but should also creatively incorporate technology in ways that address students' needs for autonomy and competence, such as through gamified quizzes, digital collaboration projects, and interactive online discussions. Restrictions without integrated approaches, as noted by Toshali's and Nakkula (2012), may lead to covert disengagement, where students feign participation while mentally withdrawing.

Instead of merely monitoring student behavior, lecturers should serve as facilitators who cultivate motivational environments, for instance, by introducing choice-based projects, peer collaboration, and activities focused on real-world problem-solving. As observed by Komarraju et al (2010), when faculty build positive

relationships with students that support their sense of autonomy and competence, it significantly boost both motivation and engagement.

The literature examined highlights an urgent need to rethink classroom management practices within Nigerian higher education. Traditional control-oriented models do not align with the experiences of digitally connected students. Effective management in the 21st century must integrate motivational theories, accommodate new learning behaviors influenced by technology, and adopt proactive, adaptable management strategies founded on building relationships and engaging students actively. Therefore, this research argues that classroom management in the digital age should transition from control-driven approaches to models focused on engagement, emphasizing project-based learning, collaborative online activities, and inquiry-based discussions.

While technology presents various opportunities, it also introduces the persistent challenge of digital distraction. Rosen (2017) points out that frequent smartphone usage divides attention, increases cognitive load, and reduces students' capabilities to process information profoundly. Furthermore, research such as that conducted by Deng et al (2022) indicates that a significant proportion of students acknowledge multitasking with social media during lectures, resulting in diminished academic performance. Traditional classroom management methods that involve confiscating phones create anxiety in students, which negatively affects their ability to study (Rosen, 2017).

Mandating that phones be stored away proves to be minimally effective in settings where digital engagement is an established norm. Junco (2012) advocates for an alternative approach where lecturers incorporate "tech breaks," digital interaction opportunities, and exercises aimed at enhancing focus to help reshape students' digital behaviors.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricacies of classroom management within Nigerian higher education amid the challenges posed by the 21st-century digital landscape. It emphasizes how digital technologies, while increasing access and flexibility, have also brought forth new challenges related to classroom management, particularly concerning student disengagement and digital distractions. Traditional authoritarian approaches are proving less effective against these emerging issues. Consequently, contemporary classrooms require adaptive, student-focused management techniques that emphasize engagement, collaboration, and digital literacy.

Building on self-determination theory and relevant literature, this study posits that effective classroom management should foster intrinsic motivation by addressing students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social connections. It encourages a transformative shift in the

lecturer's role from being a controller to a facilitator of enriching, technology-powered learning experiences.

### Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following suggestions are made:

1. Higher education institutions should be transformed to implement classroom management practices that emphasize student engagement, self-management, and digital responsibility over strict discipline and compliance.
2. Universities ought to offer ongoing training for lecturers on contemporary classroom management techniques, digital pedagogies, and ways to effectively incorporate technology to enhance learning rather than obstruct it.
3. Education policymakers should amend curricula and institutional regulations to include sections on online etiquette, motivation-driven teaching methods, and tech-integrated classroom management.
4. Lecturers should be encouraged to utilize digital tools in ways that foster collaboration and critical thinking, such as through gamified quizzes, discussion forums, digital projects, and "tech breaks" that constructively address distractions.

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