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Improve the quality of traditional education of calligraphy in Iran by using of collaborative e-Learning

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Abstract

The philosophy, content and methods of teaching changed alongside developments in science and technology. In spite of this, Master - Apprentice method still cannot be changed. In some Manuscripts of Calligraphy Training is mentioned that to writing a well script, the three principles is necessary: master training, writing a lot and the purity of the conscience. This study aims to consider collaborative e-learning as the new model of learning instead of traditional education of the Iranian calligraphy by challenging of confined space of the traditional teaching of calligraphy training. After a brief mention of the history of calligraphy in Iran and its teaching methods, the process based on collaborative e-learning, which consists of four sections goal, content, implementation and evaluation will be expressed. The discussion shows how collaborative-learning could do as Improvable method in traditional education of calligraphy and added many advantages.

Keywords: Art education in Iran, calligraphy, collaborative e-learning;

1. Introduction

Every society owns cultures proportional to its social system; each culture has its special learning, education and research. Art training owns its learning culture in Iran, too. For centuries, in the process of art education in Iran, ethics learning was prior to art education.

Nowadays, education in general and art education in specific are not just information transmission. In education, the most significant consequence for learner is not his deep and accurate learned knowledge. The most important achievements of the education system are methods of knowledge acquisition, certain mental habits, testing methods and theoretical positions (Bourdieu, 1969).

Recent century developments affected by information and communication technology advances have been effective on different aspects of social and cultural human life e.g. education. Changes and evolutions in education are of fundamental cultural deeds in society evolution; educational technologies are considered as cultural media in distribution and propagation of cultural values in the developments of training methods. Development of information and communications technologies provides new possibilities and opportunities for educators to expand artistic upbringings. These technological tools and facilities provide multi-sensory and 3D training materials, facilitate access to abundant information, establish possible synchronous and asynchronous relationships and
prepare appropriate settings through removing distances to nurture some skills like: problem solving, critical thinking, aesthetics, sympathy and gratitude of others (Conole & Dyke, 2004).

This research aims to investigate the ways to improve art education at the field of calligraphy through ICT.

2. Iran Art Education Background

Art education was done from the teacher to student for centuries in Iran.

In this way, students chose their teachers and sometimes teacher chose their students. In such a situation, instead of pure education, teachers had trained students and sometimes played the roles of parents for them. Initially, the teachers aimed to purify students from selfishness and taught them humility, eyes and heart purity, respecting people especially parents and teachers, not forgetting God and always being needy to learning in Art schools and workshops.

Close contact of teacher and student led to living and creating friendship between them and had other practical and implicational lessons. This process continued until the late Qajar era and lasted during the first Pahlavi era, too. Establishing the Faculty of Fine Arts and providing semester based system in 1319, the traditional system was marginalized and deteriorated. This type of training was followed outside the university as limited. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the traditional arts got important, but in a system which was not compatible with the traditional system.

3. Art and Its Relation with Spirituality in Iran

Arts origin is God inspiration in ancient Iranian believes. The artist is a virtual media between the earth and the heavens and after beholding the truth, he would manifest a part of it as a work of art. Those who have tried good deeds could be favored by God to be placed in such a dignity (Avesta, 1370, vol 2, p 87). Thus, many arts and crafts are attributed to the - God favored -prophets in literary references.

Also, mythic figures in ancient mythology were founder of an art, a profession, or a ritual (Christianson, 1377, 466, 301 and 110). After Islam, any professional assignment to one of the prophets, angels or God men is remarkable in the letters attributed to chivalrous generosity. In all generosity letters, the last agent selected for the early career is Imam Ali. In Sufi practices, he donors his cloak and he is also known as the Kufic calligraphy founder (Monshi Qomi, 1359, 13). Thus, the Art of Calligraphy is a significant art in Islamic arts and since it has emerged due to writing Quran verse, its spiritual value is multiplied.

4. Calligraphy Background in Iran

Calligraphy is an Iranian art which exists before Islam and it is the path that is started at least from the Achaemenid period and is reached excellence in the Sassanian era. In the Islamic era, some events occurred due to the possibility of more public education and calligraphy became more prosperous. After Islam, Iranian share is very high in promoting calligraphy. In the early seventh century AH, when the Mongols were again invaded Iran, Kufic and sextuplet scripts (Sols, Naskh, Mohaqeq, Reyhan, Toqi and Reqa) were being used.

Sextuplet scripts are selected from various scripts that had come into existence until then. In this period (seventh century), special Iranian fonts developing movement began with the Arabic alphabet. Result of sustained efforts by Iranian calligraphers have led to the creation of three scripts, Ta’liq(Figure 2), Nasta’liq(Figure 1) and Shekaste (broken) Nasta’liq(Figure 3). Rising Nasta’liq - Iranian National Script - in the late tenth century and very carefully observing its elegance, there appeared a need for a script with more writing speed. In the eleventh century until the late twelfth, broken Nasta’liq was generated and reached perfection. Shekaste Nasta’liq is the last innovative script in Iranian calligraphy history.
5. Calligraphy Education in The Past

There are three categories of calligraphy instruction in most papers.
1 - self-purification
2 - writing method and beautiful writing
3 - Calligraphy tools and how to prepare them

5.1. Self-Purification

Baba Shah Isfahani† scribes calligrapher’s desirable traits in Adaab al-mashq booklet:
“The writer should be away from bad humor, since bad humor is the sign of immoderation and no moderate job would be done by an immoderate person. Such as tree is, such is the fruit. He should find good humor in order to reflect the good deeds in his writing and satisfy clever people.”

Professor Motaqadem believed that the script which is in higher grade of perfection and dignity cannot be created without a pure heart and this quality comes to the script for good humor which is absorbed in human nature.

5.2. Writing Method and Beautiful Writing

In the Paper Favayed al-xotut, it is stated about how to educate in such an expression: "And good writing comes from three things: First, a professor of education; second, more practice; and third, a pure heart.

Moral education is an introduction to calligraphy learning. Respectful look toward the teacher is the most significant and valid learning reference and causes that former artistic achievements are transmitted from generation to generation as artistic originality and the quality is added gradually. In this way, the teacher’s trainings are accepted by the students as rules and the most important educational basis. The students should be completely

† One of the calligraphers in Safavi era (17th century)
devoted to the teacher and listen to the teacher by all heart, leave laziness and be stable and consistent (Boxari, 1373, p 335).

Speaking less, getting permission before asking a question, not protesting, respectful behavior toward the teacher are of apprenticeship rules (Va’ez Kashefi, 1350, 101).

It is stated that if someone aims to reach higher degrees in calligraphy regarding principles and geometry, he should respect his teacher from the beginning to be guided in this technique. If he relies just on his thoughts, he is doing a useless job.

The second factor is practicing. One of the basic foundations of learning calligraphy is something which learning this art is impossible without it, i.e. homework. Practicing calligraphy and its types are so important that some ancestors paid to them in their studies.

Baba Shah Isfahani writes:
"Homework is of three kinds: by pen (practical), theoretical and imaginary."

Homework by pen: transcription of letters and words by pen through imitation.

Theoretical homework: looking carefully at the letters and words written by the teacher and paying attention to the pen movements which is done through eyes and affects the viewer.

Imaginary homework: the student who has learned writing rules by teacher’s guide can write something without imitation by his own in order to investigate his skill. In this stage, the student can gets permission from the teacher to sign his works. This means that learning is finished. This method which exists today causes transfer of teachers’ experiences and former achievements to the next generation (Sadri, 1389, 31).

5.3. Heart Purity

Heart purity comes from self-purification and it is an introduction for entering calligraphy world. If someone cannot do such things, even if he becomes a calligrapher, his works will not be that good.

5.4. Calligraphy Tools and How to prepare them

In many treatises on calligraphy training, tools and equipment needed in the art such as: paper, pen and ink, paint, are described.

- Understanding the paper type, paper and color definition, making starch and rubbing it on paper and calender
- Carving the pen and the carving quality, cutting, understanding pen and a good pen features and how to use a pen and finger movements
- Making ink and the amount of materials in it
- Preparation of ink singular and composite colors, dissolving gold and silver

6. Current Teaching Calligraphy in Iran

The traditional art of calligraphy in Iran has accounted for an impressive place. The reason for this art success compared to other traditional arts is the educational aspect and its place in Iran. It is one of Iranian traditional arts which have a clear lesson plan. Calligraphers in all branches across the country use a clear method for training. The strong point in Iranian calligraphy is that learning is completely optional, because this field is not in college, yet. It is not essential in learning in school, too.

In modern Iran, two scripts are more important than others; Naskh which is used to write Quran and other religious books(fig4) and Nasta’liq which is used for other literary works(fig5), printed books and artistic tableaus for exhibitions. The current calligraphy instruction method was established by Emad Al-Molk Qazvini in late Qajar era through publishing 34 volumes of educational pamphlets. Current masters’ efforts paved the way to teach this art. All calligraphers have accepted calligraphy sources and common calligraphic concepts and terms.

At the end of each term, there is a final examination and the teachers give a mark to students from 0 to 20. The average scores are the scale for acceptance or rejection of students.
Calligraphy classes are held both privately and in the branches of Iranian Calligraphers’ Association. Students are currently learning in classes two days a week. When the teacher writes a model for the student, and corrects former homework, it lasts less than 15 minutes. But in most classes, there are no limitations for the use of time for correcting other students. So, the time when students benefit from teachers has been declined compared to former centuries.

7. Weakness of teaching and learning of contemporary of calligraphy

7.1. Repeat and Imitate Without Thinking, Lack of Creativity and Innovation

Today calligraphy has become a skill that is only earned by imitation, practice and repeat, while, in the past, after theoretical and practical learning, there was an imaginary learning.

This imaginary exercise is based on the calligrapher creativity. He would have such a skill that can be created independently.

7.2. Lack of confidence

Today students, practicing and imitating, do not have temerity to create innovative works. This caused lack of confidence in creating artistic works.

7.3. Lack of Interaction with the Teacher

In the past, due to friendship between teachers and students and professional actions, students were always involved in artistic works. Although they always obey the teacher, due to a theoretical exercise, they were involved in the artistic works. But now, the students consider calligraphy as an entertainment or do it beside other activities, so students are only receiving information, and knowledge of his teacher.

7.4. Lack of Students Interactions

In the past and present, a teacher in the classroom is served as the only key. He is the only spokesperson of the class. The students should always look at the teacher’s hand carefully for a long time to learn and there is not enough time
for students’ interaction. They think that learning from each other without the presence of the teacher makes the process not properly trained, while experience exchange between students is important for sharing information, because every student has tried to achieve the key points that his teacher has not taught him completely.

7.5. Lack of Training Techniques and Key Points by Teachers

One of the things that its effects are still there perhaps is hiding secrets and techniques of the masters’ work. Some teachers, who considered art and learning higher than their reputation, did not follow this way and always try to open up artistic techniques, because through expressing and transferring them, many doors can be opened on the art of calligraphy.

7.6. Lack of Exercise and Homework

In the past, when someone was attempting to learn calligraphy, his future career was dependant on it. So, he would try hard and do much homework in order to achieve higher levels of learning. Calligraphy is somehow an entertaining learning today. After students leave the class, if the student is a strong one, only one or two-hour workout will suffice, because the time for such exercises will not remain for him.

7.7. The Uniform Education for All Students

Today, more Calligraphy Classes are conducted outside the academic environments. Age group divisions are different. In a class, you will find primary school age children to elderly people. Training is done uniformly to all individuals. Considering differences between students in terms of talent and ability is not possible.

Table 1. The comparison of instruction in the past and today

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too much practice was performed</td>
<td>Practice was performed in little time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between teacher and student was high</td>
<td>Teacher and student have interaction of one or two hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students were patient against difficulties of calligraphy learning</td>
<td>Students lost ability and endurance of performing repeated practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation was based on periodic tests</td>
<td>Evaluation was based on periodic tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students were the same with respect to sex and age</td>
<td>Students of any age and sex receive instruction in classroom jointly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer instructional classes</td>
<td>Shortening the instructional periods and high rate of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not limiting the instruction period</td>
<td>Determining the instruction period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of access to teachers' works</td>
<td>Existence of various works of teachers and easy access to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructing students for applicative use of calligraphy</td>
<td>Instructing students for decorative use of calligraphy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. The concept of collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is an approach that emphasizes learning through working together. This approach insists on learning through partnerships with others, Instead of what the trainer or speaker could do. On the other hand "collaborative learning” refers to a method in that all learners at different levels of performance work with each other in small groups toward a common goal. In collaborative learning, participants share their understanding of subject learning with others and, support, cooperate with each other. They are involved with higher levels of emotional and cognitive skills in related and targeted process.
"The collaborative learning" is a way in which learners learn educational materials together and with helping of each other (Seif, 2000). Participation and collaboration among members of the group will allow people to hear each other's opinions, make common decisions, improve their work and learn meanwhile (Lachs, 2000). One of the ways to provide collaborative learning by using ICT is a research community. Research communities, are groups that seek collaboration in cyberspace, They don’t think just merely information exchange. They try to look at scientific issues from the perspective of others through exchange their ideas (Attaran, 2007).

The main goals of collaborative learning are learners involvement in the learning process, eliminate single mode and teacher-centered classrooms and creating interest and motivation for an active learning.

9. E-learning

Using the Internet and the other information technologies as learning tools is now spreading rapidly in the education.

Rapid expansion of Internet technologies has made e-learning an important form of education in the information age.

Features and capabilities of these technologies such as; learning at any time, in any place, using multimedia give many opportunities for educational practitioner, providing new learning environments to overcome some obstacles of learning environments.

10. Collaborative e-learning

Collaborative e-learning is intended to collect learners together by personal computers linked through the Internet by focusing on learners as a "learning society", Sharing resources, knowledge, experience and mutual responsibility through collaborative learning In this type of education there are two kinds of Learning tools: Non-simultaneous and simultaneous. Simultaneous tools support simultaneous interaction between group members. Non- simultaneous tools support Individual activities that contribute to group processes, such as e-mail, Synchronous versus asynchronous, face to face versus long distance, such as Videoconferencing.

Collaborative tools consist of email, computer networks, electronic whiteboard, discussion boards, chat, audio conferences, video conferences, instant messages, etc.

Learners can communicate with teachers and their classmates from all around the world. In addition, the electronic white board can help to Learners focus on specific ideas or processes. In addition to the Synchronous learning, there are many opportunities for collaboration in asynchronous learning environments. There is no geographical or time limitation for cooperation. For those who want to ask questions in real time, conferencing tools often include the chat. Annotation tools also offer abundant collaboration facilities in e-learning. Collaborative Web browsing allows team members to highlight the important ideas and take a note. Direct comment on the network or documents will expand online participation. The electronic book tools such as Meta Text enable learners to highlight parts of the digital books. Moreover instructors could put their guidelines for learners without leaving a sign on the physical version. Scenario-based simulations, give an opportunity to test the knowledge and skills in a safe environment for learners. It is imaginable be that such a system and tools could reinforce formal and informal learning.

11. Collaborative e-learning and teaching Calligraphy

Nasta'liq since it's in the second half of the eighth century has faced to many of changes and developments of innovation. The most important change in the thirteenth century was coordination and compatibility with the printing industry. This change was done by Mirza Reza Kalhor (shamsi 1260 - 1245) who was genius artist in calligraphy.

Today the Iranian calligraphy has found its way through the world of computers. The lines are written by computers and software. ICT impact on the art of calligraphy is also quite evident in Iran. Calligraphy software is
now certified on this claim. In addition, tending to calligraphy-painting and graphic panels shows that this movement is developed and is inclined to produce and supply the calligraphy works in the short time.

12. The Model

It is necessary to mention that the main goal of this proposed model is improving the quality of calligraphy learning. As mentioned, nowadays calligraphy students spend little time to participate and deliberate on their calligraphy assignments because in the modern life, speed and time are key issue. Many students come to Tehran from different part of Iran in order to participate in calligraphy classes. In their towns there is not qualified calligraphy class or top master. Virtual world and ICT could solve this problem. This model will be done as an after classroom activity. Students and Master of Calligraphy meet each other once a week. Master, teaches important point. After this “face to face” learning, he will form groups and will assign them their duties. This process would continue until the end of semester. The proposed model has four stages: Aims, content, implementation and evaluation.

12.1. The goals of collaborative e-learning in calligraphy learning

12.1.1. Cultivating problem solving skills
ICT with provision of non-linear, interactive, and informal situations could provide opportunities for students to exchange their ideas, communicate with others and various sources to solve problems.

12.1.2. Cultivation of decision making
The art process is flexible and unpredictable. Although the artist has the overall picture of his creation in his mind, often in Performance stage, Improvisation replace to predetermination.
On the other hand the ICT environment put different options for learners in terms of content selection, time of study and learning, the choice of complementary learning resources, interact with their classmates. Hence, he should have ability of reasonable decisions and choices consistent choices (Phelps& Kerr, 2004).

12.1.3. Nurturing creativity
Creativity is a process, which is complex, non-linear, sometimes, contradictory and non-predetermined. Its output is ideas and achievements of the efficiency of new, original and independent (Eisner, 1991). ICT gives many opportunities with various tools and facilities to encourage creativity in students. By using tools such as blogs, newsgroups and Wikis, learners write creatively. In addition, they interact with others. Also By using multimedia and three-dimensional tools, students generates new ideas and products.

12.1.4. Cultivating virtues and moral values
According to Brody (1922), the art is able to develop moral and human virtues in students. He emphasizes on this point that aesthetic experience makes a distinction. This experience provides cognition with deep feelings and feelings ICT environment, with facilitating interaction between people and various sources, develops moral agents.

12.1.5. Cultivating self-confidence
Art could provide an opportunity for people to display their abilities. It gives result with hard working, perseverance and continuous efforts. Using ICT tools provides a variety of activities for students in order to participate in activities whenever they want.

12.1.6. Cultivating curiosity
Students should be faced with new situations and phenomena to nurture their curiosity. Process of art invention is interconnected by Innovations and new situations. So this opportunity provides the possibility of fostering curiosity in students (Loveless, 2003).
12.2. Content

Sometimes, the teacher gives model and the questions to students at the same time. The content must be in such a way that suitable combination of educational and technical information would be provided for art education goals. This content should have features that could provide the interaction for the students.

12.3. Implementation

The students are divided into multi-member groups at the levels similar to learning (minimum 2 and maximum 6 members). All group members can exchange information and experiences using facilities ICT have allocated them. There is a need for the teachers to provide them with the role models and every group reviews the lines of their currently written texts. Each student owns his/her special talent. Many students find their talents in letters combination, general structure of imprint words on page, calligraphy illumination and decoration and so on. In each group, information can be exchanged at specific hours, online or offline.

Several skills are needed in calligraphy. Because one piece or a calligraphy tableau includes frame, combinations, decoration, singulars, seating/base line, balance, black and white, form and general structure of connections and so on.

Art students will learn practically group working when working on a project. Based on the skills mentioned, everyone has the ability to understand special skill or skills more than other skills. In group partnership, everyone notices his/her abilities and skills better. So, the students are asked not to choose their abilities and skills beforehand and try to experience how they can do the job in the best way possible. Thus, the presuppositions that are there about roles and duties are vanished. All assignments are considered as the situations for practice and research in the process of group partnership. Students can provide a blog for their notes and record their own various dynamics of the process done in each project. Also students alternatively report their findings about the projects and group work flow at their class. Different patterns of group partnership necessarily show the methods of resistance against the process, and people skills polishes problem solving in the work process.

One of the significant signs of a healthy and dynamic group partnership is the progress sense that you feel, and the sense that you are moving with its flow (quoted from Rudakov and Thomson, 2002).

At the end of group debate, each group offers its whole results and perceptions to the teacher. Next week there will be new homework and discussion by teacher for students.

12.4. The evaluation methods of electronic participatory calligraphy learning

The systematic process of data collection, analysis and interpretation about students learning which is used to determine the level of reached training purposes is called evaluation (Hickman et al. 2006, p 133). On one hand, evaluation is a factor for consolidation of the learner’s learning and a tool for learning improvement and on the other hand, it is a mean to determine the rate of the learner’s learning (Eisner, 1994; Cappel et al, 2006).

Students have access to materials and resources and different people at the electronic participatory learning environment and they will acquire different skills through participating in the environment like: search, information management, power to establish relationship and critical thinking. Thus, the evaluation method proportional with this environment should consider critical thinking, establish relationship, decision-making power, responsibility, information management skills in addition to subject learning. Bine believes that as new technologies are able to help learning process improvement, they are able to reinforce its evaluation process and help forming real and original evaluation (Conole & Dyke, 2004). In their belief, using technological tools, we can create a kind of evaluation which facilitates learning process and provides a good opportunity to grow and develop artistic skills. So, the artistic evaluation method should: care quality instead on quantity, emphasize on students’ individual differences, care learning methods and their processes more than learning outcomes, create interesting, exciting and creative experiences in the evaluation process, and finally use different sources instead of just one source in the evaluation process. Methods like, self-assessment, creating new artistic works, partners’ evaluation, discretionary
tests and scientific article or composition are some of the evaluation methods which are used in technological environment.

So, evaluation by teachers is done through students’ partnership, electronic work folder, self-assessment, creating unique works and measurement by other students.

12.4.1. Participation

To evaluate participation of every student some criteria should be considered, such as: the level of offering and asking for help, the level of using criteria like, exchange resources and information, how to explain and expand information, sharing knowledge with others, the level of offering and receiving feedback, invitation of members to participate and supervising others’ partnership, the level of interaction and partnership of art student.

Electronic work folder is a collection of tests, class notes, debate submissions and assessments results of each session that are saved and maintained by each art student at the learning period.

12.4.2. Self-assessment

One of the other evaluation methods that are closely related to traditional calligraphy training is self-assessment. In this method, the learner will reinforce his/her critical thinking and Meta cognitive skills through continuous evaluation of his/her activities and learning. Attending self-assessment reinforces the learner independence and clarifies his/her knowledge and skill weaknesses. Through using tools and technologies, we can ask students to self-assess in different situations.

12.4.3. Creating innovative works

Art students easily access to some tools at technological environment and they can design and create new and innovative phenomena with the use of them. This method can be used to evaluate the level of art students’ creativity in technological artistic curriculum program (Sharafi, 2007).

12.4.4. Measurement by classmates

In the art field, classmates provide useful critics and feedback for artistic phenomenon creator because of their close relation to the artistic phenomenon. Hence, they can use technological tools and the specific evaluation criteria to evaluate the performance of their classmates or group mates (Payne, 2006).

13. Conclusion

The discussion results show that the electronic collaborative learning practices as a supplement to traditional teaching calligraphy in Iran can increase participation and creativity level, problem-solving skills, decision-making power, critical thinking, virtues and moral values, self-confidence and students’ curiosity. It can provide students with easier, more widespread and pervasive art learning and can be changed from close and convergent traditional methods to open and divergent modern methods using the traditional learning method of calligraphy in Iran.

References


