



# Enhancing STEM Education in Africa through Collaborative Learning and Technological Integration

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of sociocultural and economic backgrounds on STEM education in Africa, emphasizing the significance of active and collaborative learning environments. Highlighting the current state of STEM education and the unique challenges faced, the paper explores the principles of collaborative learning and presents case studies from various African countries. The iSafari project, a virtual learning community that uses game design and mobile technology to deliver STEM education, is discussed as a model for enhancing learning outcomes. The study concludes with recommendations for implementing collaborative learning strategies to improve STEM education across the continent.

**Keywords:** STEM education, collaborative learning, African education, active learning, sociocultural influence, iSafari project, educational technology and problem-solving skills.

## INTRODUCTION

The sociocultural and economic background, such as gender, culture, and socioeconomic status, of the students may influence how students learn STEM as well as participation and success in STEM programs [1]. To stimulate the interest and enthusiasm of students, the popular trend in formal and informal societal structures is introducing an active and collaborative learning environment as the educational process [2]. Framed within collaborative learning, connected STEM learning takes full advantage of a culture of shared responsibility, which creates intellectual clashes [3]. These connections allow students to understand the broader context for learning by supplying real-life applications [4]. Therefore, a learning environment that encourages active learning through group activities can improve students' achievements in some of the most fundamental STEM areas. However, instead of passively receiving information, it strengthens the lesson by engaging students in learning [4-7]. Whether the student is in a classroom or outside the class, the active involvement will activate the learning, which will be more vibrant. When collaborating on a complete course project, students not only learn the particular target content but also distribute tasks, learn time management, communication, critically joint evaluations that are essential for a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics career, and get inspired for working in a diverse team [8-14]. The acronym 'STEM' stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics [9]. This integrated approach to teaching science and technology aims to help students break the traditional barrier between different disciplines. It calls on all stakeholders involved in education so that future generations engage in economic activity based on the latest scientific and technical developments [11]. The mission of the STEM approach is to support the realization not only of trained but also innovative and entrepreneurial students. Educational innovation should not focus only on the content of educational material but also on the process of transmitting and acquiring that content [15]. In the 21st century, it is important for students to learn not only the content of a discipline but also the ability to explore problems, solve abstract, complex, open-ended problems, and handle new challenges. Students need to develop the problem-solving skills of the real world to maintain a competitive advantage [16]. African education models that stress memorization and choral methods of learning do not develop an individual's problem-solving and critical thinking skills [17-21]. Today, all African countries are looking for education systems that will raise the next generation of problem solvers and critical thinkers [20]. The following quote from The Ministry of Science and Technology of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2009) illustrates the importance of thinking critically: "Science and Technology are central to every economic activity. The breakthrough in science and technology can be a catalyst to the development of the economy of the country [22]. Without the invention and adoption of modern technologies, the African countries will not eliminate poverty, hunger, and famine." The education systems in many African countries, national policy papers, and international education partnerships all have similar goals: to develop

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their STEM students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills [14]. Many African students do not learn the problem-solving and critical thinking skills that they need to become independent learners in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. While STEM education reforms often emphasize the development of these components in students, the assessments used to measure the effectiveness of these reforms often focus on more traditional content knowledge and skills [15]. It is important to specifically develop problem-solving and critical skills so that STEM students are capable of innovating, especially given the role that STEM fields are expected to play in the economic future of the African continent [23]. We discuss efforts to implement and assess a student model illustrating how students learn problem-solving and critical thinking skills from collaborative project-based instruction in a mechatronics course at the African Leadership Academy in South Africa [24-26]

### **Current State of STEM Education in Africa**

Universities in Africa have much more pressing problems than finding the resources and incentives to incorporate state-of-the-art, research-based methods of science and engineering pedagogy into our classrooms [18]. Nonetheless, we hold that some human resources and financial resources should be available to improve the science and engineering pedagogy used in African universities, and that although our circumstances are different from the circumstances that underpin the creation of the growing, worldwide network of research universities that provide the majority of science and engineering Ph.D.s, some of the reforms currently underway in science and engineering Ph.D. education elsewhere in the world should be of relevance to Africa's universities [25]. STEM education in African universities challenges global paradigms. STEM education in African universities faces unique problems and challenges, as African countries contend with poverty, rapid population growth, rapid urbanization, and unpredictable weather patterns that exacerbate the economic difficulties their citizens face [19]. One major challenge in African countries is to develop a population with the skills and knowledge necessary to sustain inclusive economies and inclusive political institutions [27-30].

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

In a rapidly advancing society, a coherent and comprehensive education system that integrates both nonformal and formal activities has to be arranged so that every citizen has an opportunity to be numerate and literate, which in turn enhances learning capabilities [23]. The issue is far greater than simply increasing student numbers together with the improvement of student retention rates and increases in the number of trained teachers. The real concern is to ensure the provision of meaningful and relevant quality education [12]. The need for this provision has been echoed frequently on the world stage; for example, we find it within the Education for All goals of the United Nations, as part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the African Renaissance, and the 2020 of the International Commission of Ladapo, as well as the Open Educational Resources, the Tokyo Declaration, and the Global Learning Space of the Third Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD III), the Internationalization of Higher Education in Africa, and the National Vision 2030, the education commitments made at the Geneva Ministerial Meeting of African Commonwealth Education Ministers, and so on [17]. These plans and visions serve as a guide to the commitment and the right of all citizens to learn life skills to promote sustainability, to learn about global citizenship, and to engage in relevant and meaningful practices of lifelong learning [16]. Although there has been significant expansion and improvement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education in African countries over the past decade, there are still many areas that need to be addressed. There is still a huge divide between African STEM education and those in the West, particularly in the facilities, the standard, and quality of education levels [31]. Yet African STEM graduates are an essential part of the national workforce, providing skills in science, technology, engineering, health care, commerce, services, and, indeed, any industry requiring technical skills [34]. Two key issues are that many African teachers lack the necessary subject knowledge and up-to-date pedagogic methods for STEM subjects, and that the majority of children leave primary school with little, if any, exposure to good quality education beyond basic literacy and numeracy. These issues urgently need to be addressed if the population is to grow in the era of the knowledge economy [32-37].

### **Principles of Collaborative Learning**

Another principle for implementing collaborative learning is positive interdependence. Collaborative learning is dependent on mutual interdependence between learners; thus, each student must participate in some way in the activity [28]. It conveys the message that learning should not be perceived as a limited resource that can only be acquired by one student at the expense of another but rather as an unlimited resource [26]. It implies resources, the ability to generate multiple interpretations of a topic, and create new knowledge. When students value positive interdependence, they value working together, they believe it helps them learn, and they actively try to support and help their peers [33]. They see that learning is not a zero-sum endeavor: one student's learning aids another's. There must be elements that must depend on their mutual dependence in a sense that interactional, social, procedural, executive, and emotional help community can be then achieved successfully [35]. Several principles and ideas focus on collaborative learning [34]. In its simplest stage, collaborative learning requires those involved to work together.

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It is an understanding between all the learners that they occupy a common place and an interrelated set of goals which can be successfully achieved only through a combination of the various personal goals. In the classroom, the three main functions are characterized by engagement, interaction, and reflection. Engagement evokes careful focus on the topic, attentiveness, and thought [38]. Interaction entails the exchange of information, ideas, and views to co-construct new meaning and knowledge. Both interaction and engagement are held together by reflection, which allows learners to think about the learned material, and importantly, to think about how they think and to monitor and regulate their level of understanding, which leads to metacognition [39-42].

#### **Importance**

Educational Alliance, an educational program situated in New York City, states that in recent years the number of STEM graduates has declined [43]. According to the Alliance, the educational diploma in adult STEM has increased by more than 100% during the last decade. These statistics reveal that the growth in the number of graduates surpasses the growth of 17% in non-STEM education [44]. The numbers also highlight the fact that the economy itself is generating all that is being requested in times of an increase in men and women capable of a STEM profession. Career technical training, occupational life, and basic life at a tertiary level have experienced severe budget cuts. The time to facilitate classrooms includes flaws and failures [45]. This generated a dilemma for the ability to educate extra future scientists and researchers. Conceivably, a diverse, smarter, and more concentrated strategy is needed [47-49]. In order to accomplish this, a dialogue aims to stimulate and debate interest about the best approach and information that science can use to promote a useful and active debate [40]. The United States is concerned by students lagging behind in assessments of numerical and scientific literacy. Its economic future depends on producing graduates with strong information of mathematics and science [33, 28, 31]. In order to meet these demands, there needs to be an established infrastructure. However, there are currently too few graduates considering research in these areas. During a demand to fill jobs in science and technology, research training is a critical need. STEM education is designed not only for those purposes, but also to address the serious need for better educational achievements. In these tough economic times, most countries are facing budgetary restraints and domestic cuts [41-46]. Funding for social and research agencies has been capped or reduced, and cash-strapped school districts are confronting a downturn in enrollment, which results in less money per pupil. The current climate is now focused on sparing the most important things [41]. Because the Indian American economist, Esther Duflo, said, today more than ever we need to save money, most of whose expenditures have quality results. The belief is especially with respect to education; the current system needs to prepare students to handle 21st-century challenges [39]. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education generally refers to an integrated approach to teaching science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in ways that reflect the way these subjects are applied in the real world [47-54]. STEM education is designed to do more than teach individual subjects such as physics, mathematics, or biochemistry. It is designed to enable more effective cooperation and collaboration between these different fields of study, and in the process to make the study of these different subjects both more interesting and more relevant to learners of all ages [55-60].

#### **Examples from African Countries**

Kenya: The KICD (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development) in Kenya has taken the first move to equipping teachers with content to use e-classrooms. Further, most learning institutions in Kenya (private and public) have equipped the E-boards with large screens in interactive mode [61]. These E-boards allow teachers to present information to their students, in addition to allowing students to participate [62]. The E-board also allows teachers to record their lessons and share them with students over the internet in real or near-real time [51]. The schools form mini-e-learning centers, and each center is connected to a line that connects to its neighbors, further creating communications networks covering 153 [63-67].

Ghana: Primary and secondary schools in all the ten regions of Ghana received the proposed interactive learning content beamed via satellite to the teach support units using the cost-effective and straightforward to install, low maintenance DVB-IP transmission approach [68].

Zimbabwe: The Research Council of Zimbabwe, in collaboration with Endasolutions (Pvt) Ltd, an ICT consultancy company, developed and introduced Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) software to all Government Colleges, Teacher Training Colleges, and "A" Level schools with the main aim of increasing the number of potential enrolments in higher learning institutions and providing a resource base material for the prospective students who wish and have the capability to continue with OPS [69-71].

South Africa: The Mathforum is a mathematics e-learning forum in South Africa, which is a South African initiative to bring South Africa into the information society. It consists of teachers, lecturers, district officials, subject specialists, and business partners that work together to create a community of practice where the improvement of the teaching and learning of mathematics is an integral part [72].

#### **Implementing Collaborative Learning in African STEM Education**

Currently, there does not seem to be work addressing these types of measures [73]. It is also important to investigate the interplay between the different components, how one influencing factor impacts the performance of

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other influencing factors, and how different environmental settings influence what is feasible [74]. In other words, the most important aspects to the limiting of what can be done are not first-order environmental factors but higher-order interactions among environmental factors [75-77]. It is always possible for skilled individuals to counteract the impacts of unfavorable environments. Therefore, a complete understanding of a complex environment will need to account for such potential interactions [52]. Factors related to student engagement in primary and secondary STEM education are also widely discussed topics in the educational psychology literature [58]. These mainly result from encountering problems of learning construct concepts in the primary or secondary classrooms. The South African experience in using technology in a collaborative learning format presents a number of useful lessons that warrant consideration in addressing this critical issue [78-81]. These lessons serve as the basis of a number of recommendations that have relevance across teachers from other African countries that aim to enhance their ability to encourage and support effective STEM learning [82]. It should be noted that the exploration of the education environment described above is still descriptive. The next step is to validate how the different components interact and the level of influence of the different components [83]. The validation is performed using structural equation modeling statistical analysis by determining statistical relationships among the models' variables. The different observation indicators for the different constructs are then systematically implemented or observed and analyzed through inferential statistics [84-87].

### CONCLUSION

The integration of collaborative learning and technological advancements in STEM education offers a promising pathway to addressing the unique challenges faced by African educational systems. By fostering an environment that encourages active participation and practical application, students can develop essential problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The iSafari project exemplifies how innovative approaches can bridge educational gaps, making STEM education more inclusive and effective. To realize these benefits, educational stakeholders must invest in training teachers, developing relevant curricula, and leveraging technology to create dynamic learning experiences. Implementing these strategies will not only enhance the quality of education but also equip students with the skills necessary to drive economic and technological advancements in Africa.

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