

Cultivating Kuumba: Applying Art Based Strategies to Any Field

23rd Annual African Diaspora Pre-Conference
Adult Education Research Conference (AERC)

Dr. Auburn E. Ellis

Kansas State University

June 2015

auburn@auburnaesthetic.com

Keywords: Culturally Grounded, Art Based Learning, Adult Education

Abstract: There are many contemporary issues to address in adult education. This paper explores art-based strategies and the utilization of creativity (Kuumba) to expand learning for global communities in any field of practice. Benefits of culturally grounded approaches to adult education are discussed. Images from ongoing field research can be viewed at auburnaesthetic.com.

Cultivating Kuumba: **Applying Art Based Strategies in any Field**

In the broad field of adult education, there are many contemporary strategies utilized to inform participants during training and workshops. This paper explores art-based approaches and the utilization of Kuumba (creativity) to expand learning for adults in a variety of fields. Kuumba is one of the Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba, which is Swahili for creativity. There are numerous benefits to culturally grounded approaches in adult education. Images from ongoing field research will also be viewed to provide applicable examples.

This research and presentation were designed to show adult educators in various fields the benefits of integrating visual referents in adult and continuing education training methods. Graphic facilitation, posters and charts are some of the most common strategies. There are many innovative ways to bring aesthetics to workshops and trainings, therefore improving the way adult learners retain information.

Traditionally most fields lack creatively integrated methods in continuing and professional education. Discourse in this paper will focus on simple delivery modalities, which were tested through field research. The strategies assist in development of new “habits of mind” through critical thinking. This is one of the many reasons that visual methods should not be absent, but rather valued as a tool for success. Creativity and the arts can play a pivotal role in not only the lives of visual learners, but for all adult learners. As contemporary adult educators, we must encourage multiple ways of knowing and doing.

Background of Research Conducted in 2012

In 2012 an African Centered single case study was conducted in the United States. The problem is as follows: K-12 practitioners are faced with unique circumstances while serving marginalized students in urban areas. As a response to this issue, the purpose of this study was to identify and describe curricula used in three African Centered educational institutions in Chicago. African Centered schools are uniquely different, thus the need for research emerges to identify new ways to disseminate knowledge for traditional public school practitioners. Goals of the research were to analyze content and instructional strategies at Africentric educational institutions in order to design a continuing and professional education model based on their successes with students of the African Diaspora. When using the term Diaspora, it refers to people of color worldwide displaced from Africa during the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade.

The research design was an Africentric qualitative single case study that focused on the experiences of six educators in African Centered schools. The Africentric Paradigm was utilized as the theoretical framework. Research questions that guided the study were as follows: 1) how are conceptual and theoretical elements of the Africentric Paradigm reflected in educational environments and incorporated into curriculum and instruction at an African Centered institution, 2) how are the problems that result from sociocultural and intellectual racism addressed both cognitively and affectively through curriculum content, 3) what are the design and objectives of continuing education

programs implemented at African Centered institutions, and 4) what culturally grounded strategies can be transferred to a traditional continuing education model for K-12 practitioners? The data collection instruments were document analysis, interviews, site visits (observations), and photography. To interpret field notes that emerged from observations during site visits, the researcher completed a series of paintings to create a meaning context, which expressed the cognitive and affective impacts of instructional activities.

Several important findings and conclusions emerged from the research. Each site had similar missions and the shared goal of building positive selfethnic image (Colin 1989). This was reflected in both curricula and artistic instructional strategies. African Centered practice is grounded in the cognitive and affective domains. In addition to K-12 curriculum content, what makes African Centered schools different is the focus on building positive selfethnic identity and the importance of community empowerment. Academic rigor and affective growth was developed through a consciousness of African Centered ideas and positive selfethnic image (Colin 1989). These culturally grounded strategies were reflected in the continuing education model that emerged from analysis. If we look at how traditional public schools are affecting our communities, it is clear that our students are being cognitively and affectively marginalized. By employing an Africentric framework, continuing and professional education can play a role in adequately preparing public school practitioners for success with students of this Diaspora.

Implications for future research included examining communities of this Diaspora in other countries across the globe. Commonalities relative to building positive selfethnic image, as well as integrating art based learning in education was the focus. For instance, in the city of Dhaka, Bangladesh some artistic traditions are lost in contemporary practice, although preserved in more rural areas of the country. While visiting remote villages, basket weaving, embroidery, and metalworking were some of the culturally grounded activities conducted daily. Similar to observations in African Centered educational institutions in Chicago, creativity is a mode of knowing and doing for people of the African Diaspora since before Ancient Kemet. The researcher noted that in contemporary society, there are many indigenous traditions and Rights of Passage that have been removed from people of this Diaspora. Inherent remnants of these cultural artifacts exist in contemporary society; examples include patterns in music, language, and artistic practice.

Field Research in Local Institutions

Adult education is a pivotal part of the work force in any global community. Whether recruiting, medical, law or counseling, every field has training strategies to ensure employees are equipped with resources to perform to their highest potential. In most careers, for example, there are frequent changes in utilization of technology. To assist adults with comprehension and updates, workshops help foster proficient performance.

As modeled in the research, what if other facets of adult education utilized art based approaches to learning? Program planners for adult learners are charged with the responsibility of providing participants with contemporary strategies to diversify

instruction. The foundation of workshops should include, but not be limited to creative approaches to building community and identity development. For example, in the city of Chicago, ONLI STUDIOS provides workshops for educators. Practitioner training can take place at a museum or in the studio space and includes exemplars of curriculum enrichment, for instance pairing graphic novels with classroom instruction. Graphic novels have an impact because they can serve as a medium for transmitting positive cultural messages. Regardless of discipline, utilizing art-based strategies equip trainees with the tools to serve in diverse communities.

Urban communities affected by economic depression have created unique circumstances for K-12 educators serving racially marginalized students. Adult education programs (more specifically continuing and professional education) have a responsibility to address these issues through programming. The Chicago Public Schools continuing education policy mandates participation in professional development (a form of adult education programming) to renew certification, but does not regulate the content of the programming that educators have to complete. An undergraduate degree is not enough; whether tenured or first year, art based continuing and professional education activities and workshops should be required annually for traditional public school educators.

In fields outside of education, artistic practice can be helpful as well. Regardless of the profession there are several skills that can be improved through these methods. Three specific areas will be discussed: (1) improving communication skills, (2) strengthening observation as well as identification strategies and (3) enhancing global and diverse engagement. In addition to the improvement of these workplace skills, each activity can be designed to a specific vocation and the varied roles of participants.

Communication and listening skills are important to develop between colleagues in any work place. Improving teamwork can be another challenge. During training, icebreaker exercises can help participants build rapport with peers, as well as learn strategies to converse about difficult situations more effectively. It has been proven that challenging conversations are “never about getting the facts right, they are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values” (Stone, Patton, Heen, 1999, p.10). Art based workshops are a practical solution.

Strengthening observation and identification skills can also be accomplished through workshop activities. In one particular exercise, participants are asked to write descriptors of artwork displayed on a projector upon entering. As a whole group, general observations are identified. Afterward, small groups discuss a series of possible stories surrounding events that occurred before and after the inspired plot of the painting. Observation is key here because in a majority of conversations, the apparent “gap between what you’re really thinking and what you’re saying is part of what makes a conversation difficult” (Stone, Patton, Heen, 1999, p.7). Counselors, for instance, find this exercise helpful when training to meet with new clients or patients. When identifying potential issues, it becomes imperative to understand not only what is said, but also what is not said and pick up on non-verbal cues. Workshops with creative frameworks can improve these specific skill sets.

For each of the aforementioned activities global and diverse engagement is what brings people together. Art is connected to stories and experiences that we all share. Using commonly known artwork for discussion segments is a great strategy. For

example Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Wood's *American Gothic* and Munch's *Scream* are familiar paintings from a global perspective. Using popular artwork as a referent engages participants and becomes a critical component of team building. Although trainings have a creative framework, other objectives can be reached through arts based activities. The most important are as follows: (1) giving and receiving constructive feedback, (2) enhancing problem solving strategies, and (3) improving collaboration. These skills are valuable to any workplace practice.

History of Art Based Approaches to Adult Learning

Cafarella (2002), in *Planning Programs for Adult Learners*, described a planning process from initial brainstorming to analysis and assessment. Chapter three, entitled *Interactive Model of Program Planning*, also emphasized the importance of an ethical approach. Cafarella (2002) states, "using an ethical approach in making decisions about education and training programs for adults should be of concern to all parties involved in the process of planning such programs" (p. 49), reminding readers that adult education is rooted in the preservation of the moral imperative. She agrees that this ethical approach ensures that programmatic goals and objectives are truly reflective of the needs of populations being served. This framework is critical because issues like systematic oppression and economic depression must be addressed especially when planning programs for participants working in underserved communities.

Kuumba (creativity) has played a salient role in adult education since our displacement in America. Because African Americans were denied the opportunity for educational advancement, *Nia* (purpose) and *Imani* (faith) (Colin 1998) were conveyed through various forms of visual and creative arts. Even during slavery there was an inherent aesthetic developing in the United States. Artists like Henry Ossawa Tanner and Edmonia Lewis depicted life and culture, cultivating a rich history of creativity rooted in Africa. Traditionally, art was a pivotal mode of instruction for people of the African Diaspora, literature being one of the most important forms of Kuumba (creativity). Alain Locke was one of the leaders who continued this tradition, helping the world appreciate the consummate talent of this Diaspora. As Miller (1926) writes, "The Negro must learn to know his own story and to love it" (Miller, 1926, p. 5) and passing these stories to the next generation is a pivotal role of liberatory educational practice.

Kelly Miller is notably one of the first African American philosophers and adult educators. His book written in 1908, titled *Race Adjustment* discusses a wide range of racial issues from the early twentieth century, most of which are still relevant today. In reference to the educational facility of Kuumba (creativity), he writes, "It is noticeable that the names which the Negroes have contributed to the galaxy of the world's greatness are confined almost wholly to the fine arts" (Miller, 1908, p. 242) and we continue to play a critical role in the arts. History from a Western perspective often obscures artists of color; in major museums around the world it is difficult to find work by artists like Henry Tanner, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Alexander Dumas. Relative to our wealth of cultural artifacts, Miller states, "They show the American people that the Negro, at his best, is imbued with their own ideas and strives after their highest ideal," (Miller, 1908, p.

189). Creative practice in this sense is reflective of Kujichagulia (self-determination) and Nia (purpose), which is inherently embedded in art making.

Cultivating Kuumba: Advantages of Culturally Grounded Approaches to Learning

What is Kuumba and where is it derived from? Kuumba is one of the Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba, which is Swahili for creativity. Observing the world through the Africentric Paradigm helps transform ordinary practice in different ways. As it pertains to workshops or training, culturally grounded programming is centered in the socio-cultural experiences of an ethnic group, building positive perceptions of identity and community development. Adult education programs with diverse frameworks should be available so that learners can engage in discourse grounded outside of Western rhetoric.

The purpose of this presentation is to fill knowledge gaps by informing adult educators about innovative and creative techniques. This approach is considered culturally grounded because it is derived from a rich cultural ethos of the African Diaspora. Unless the trainer has a background in the arts, most programs do not encompass Kuumba (creativity). Given the benefits of artistic practice, the question emerges why more adult educators do not use these methods. Although everyone is not a visual learner, all participants can benefit from this approach.

There are three types of learners in a room of participants: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. The visual learner needs to see and connect aesthetically to a presentation. Traditional power points or charts are generally engaging. The auditory learner values listening over all other experiences; reciting information is effective for reflection. The kinesthetic learner is more stimulated by tactile experiences. Being hands on is key for this individual. Creating a collage or utilizing colored post-its is a great way to connect. The art-based approaches discussed ensure that combinations of styles are used in each workshop.

Regardless of the field of practice, utilizing art-based strategies equip educators with a variety of modalities for delivery. Expressions of Kuumba (creativity) are reflective of human experiences we all share and are easy for adults to connect with. Workshops and art-based instruction can be utilized as a tool to engage adult learners in multiple ways. A majority of workshops use power points, a presi, or handouts to present pertinent information. As proven through field research, by following the proposed culturally grounded approach learners can improve communication skills through the explanation of concepts and expand observation skills engaging with artwork. Subjects are more approachable for diverse learners and visual stimulation is increased. Using these frameworks can assist adult learners in coming up with new questions and innovative solutions to queries in their field.

The Afrikan Descent, 2012
Acrylic

What does the term Diaspora actually mean? It refers to the displacement that has occurred as a result of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. People from Africa were dispersed and sold from Europe to South America and scattered on every island in between. The term "descent" in this painting refers to not only our rich cultural ethos and bloodline, but also to the tragedies that led to our ultimate triumph.



References

- Cafarella, R.S., (2002). *Planning programs for adults*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Colin, S. A.C., III. (1989). *Voices from beyond the veil: Marcus Garvey, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the education of African American adults*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northern Illinois.
- Colin, S. A.J. III, & Guy, T. C. (1998). "An Africentric Interpretive Model of curriculum orientation for course development in graduate programs in adults," *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*. No. 7, p. 45-55.
- Miller, K. (1908). *Race adjustment*. New York: Neale Publishing Company.
- Miller, K. (1926). *An estimate of Carter G. Woodson and his work in connection with the association for the study of negro life and history*. Washington DC: The Association for the study of Negro Life and History.
- Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen S. (2000). *Difficult Conversations*. New York: Penguin Press.