

Exploring Artistic Practice in Global Communities of the African Diaspora

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

Exploring Artistic Practice in Global Communities of the African Diaspora

There are many controversial topics to address in the field of adult education. In various communities of practice, adult learners are concerned with preserving the moral imperative while addressing cultural, historical, and contemporary issues. There is much debate over the goals and expectations of this field; the purpose is helping professionals construct new knowledge in their practice. Boyle (1981) emphasizes the importance of practice rooted in the moral imperative (a consciousness that compels people to do that which is right). This is an essential component of adult education programming. Relative to the ethical standards program planners should adhere to he states:

The continuing education programmer should clearly identify his or her beliefs about education, the learner, the programmer, and the program development process...the programmer's beliefs about the rights and responsibilities of the learner will influence his or her actions when involving the learner in identification of the needs or designing specific learning experiences. (Boyle, 1981, 44)

It is essential that program planners "consider their beliefs" as Boyle states. In addition to maintaining an ethical approach when creating programs for adult learners, it is critical to adhere to a set of moral principles.

For educators and other professionals in the field, issues of social justice are essential to consider. When planning programs for adult learners, the needs of both practitioners and the recipients of their practice should be taken into consideration. Goals and objectives of programming must inform participants of contemporary strategies to diversify and improve instruction. Frameworks for curriculum should include culturally grounded approaches. Contemporary methods to building community and identity development in adult learning are topics that are pertinent to address in the field.

Background of Prior 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 in urban areas 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 Abroad in Asia

Field research was conducted in 2013 to explore implications from the aforementioned African Centered case study. During this study, the researcher sought out commonalities relative to building positive selfethnic image and integrating art based learning across the globe. The following perspectives were generated from site visits and fieldwork in South Asia. Even on the other side of the world, selfethnic negation (Colin 1989) was evident. In the areas of travel, it was not clear that selfethnic image was held in high regard in certain communities. Skewed perceptions of identity are consistently forced upon people of this Diaspora in subtle ways.

Sociocultural racism is implicitly reinforced through advertisements and public norms. For example, in Dhaka, Bangladesh there were often advertisements promoting skin whitening and bleaching. Furthermore ads aimed at the countries consumers more often than not depicted individuals who were very light skinned, dichotomous to dark skinned individuals the researcher encountered walking the streets. In America following the Slave Trade lighter skinned individuals were held in higher regard publically if they could “pass” for European. The U.S. still devalues some individuals because of these ideals today. The researcher noted that psychological affects of these mindsets even permeate global communities of this Diaspora.

Contrary to the aforementioned observations, culture and positive selfethnic identity were celebrated in areas Bangladesh as well. While visiting remote villages, basket weaving, embroidery, and metalworking were some of the culturally grounded activities conducted daily. Though some of these traditions were lost in the city of Dhaka, they still remain prominent in certain areas of the country. Traveling to villages like Rajshahi or Srimongol, there was evidence of artistic tradition being preserved and cultivated within communities. These activities were not necessarily to generate commerce, but were used as functional tools for the community. For instance, one woman had been embroidering a traditional Sari cloth for the past five years. The skill and effort that goes into each piece is reflective of a long tradition of functional artmaking. It is important to note that these traditions, which preserve a rich African ethos, predate the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Site visits reinforced the aforementioned conclusions and set a foundation for future research and implications to be explored.

During visits to several areas in Asia the researcher noted that similar to African Centered schools in America, cultural artifacts showed evidence of cognitive skills integrated with creative efforts. Site visits and fieldwork, which included photography, added richness to the data collected. Certain cultural artifacts, for instance music, weaving, metalworking, and jewelry making provided a way for communities to utilize their inherent talents for functional purposes. For example, in the village of Rajshahi the Mahale Ethnic group, certain individuals take on the task of basket weaving for hours on a daily basis. These skills are highly valued and passed from one generation to the next. Some of these villages are devoid of modern technology, but infinite talent and skill is displayed while creating unique traditional pieces.

The History of Art Based Approaches to Adult Learning

Examining the broader field of adult education is essential to understanding the importance of informal culturally grounded learning experiences. Creativity is critical because it encourages new forms of expression. We must realize that without artistic experiences, and no medium to retain and transfer the experience, the mind cannot develop (Harris, 1989, p. 177) nor can cultures flourish. Artists are often uncomfortable accepting things through the lens of perceived reality, thus abstractions and more imaginative views often emerge in artwork. There are countless examples of philosophers like Locke, DuBois, and Garvey who merge creative efforts with educational practice. Historically art based learning has also been a tool for identity and community development.

Engaging in artmaking can be viewed as a fundamental informal learning experience in adult education, because it reflects socialization and cultural transmissions. In order to combat sociocultural and intellectual racism, curriculum and instruction must integrate both cognitive skills and creative efforts. Creativity can be used as a tool to facilitate culturally grounded

dialogue and activities. As the findings articulate, this art-based approach to learning reinforces curriculum based on accurate historical perspectives. Africentric Culturally Grounded Community Based Programming (Colin 1999) that utilizes art based learning can play a salient role in the re-education of marginalized communities because activities are designed to address cognitive needs and preserve indigenous traditions.

Every social movement is represented by art, even today. The Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and other historical events were depicted by artists entrenched in the interpretation of selfethnic imagery (Colin 1989) and our reality as people of this Diaspora. The cultural transmissions we encounter whether in the form of a painting or basket weaving are reflective of human experiences we all share. From a cultural center, creativity is our inherent duty to strive to leave our communities more beautiful and beneficial than we found them. Relative to the field of adult education, program planners can utilize the extensive history of African Centered adult education to equip educators with the tools to serve marginalized communities. As mentioned before, artmaking is a form of adult education and can play a salient role in fostering liberatory education. For instance Elizabeth Catlett, Samella Lewis and John Biggers organized and inspired the Black Mural Movement of the 1960's and 1970's. This part of the Black Arts Movement holistically transformed public funding for the arts in terms of discussions for public art support (Smethurst, 2005, p. 372). A lot of effort and resources from the Black Arts Movement went to supporting a budding of African Centered ideas.

Africentric communities across the globe foster students' cognitive abilities while developing creative spirits. Since before Ancient Kemet, artistic practice has been a way of knowing, understanding, and doing for people of this Diaspora. A true understanding of indigenous culture can be ascertained by examining artistic practice. Due to the impact of sociocultural and intellectual racism, African Centered curriculum and instruction is needed in adult education because it is designed to build positive selfethnic identity (Colin 1989) in addition to sustaining academic rigor. The field research conducted in South Asia emphasizes the benefits of culturally grounded content and strategies; art based pedagogy nurtures critical aspects of identity development. From a cultural center, these activities allow learners to approach tasks visually and kinesthetically, coming up with new questions, and more innovative answers based on indigenous practice.

Benefits of Culturally Grounded Approaches to Learning

When generating conclusions from this study, the researcher was very interested in noting commonalities in communities of the African Diaspora from Asia to America. How can art based practice address the psychological affects of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, and strive to build positive selfethnic identity although displaced worldwide? Africa's history includes a rich cultivation of creativity in a various forms. In Ethiopia and Nubia- completely Negro territory-there is a wealth of stone monuments, such as obelisks, temples and pyramids (Diop, 1955, p. 156). Art was a part of everyday life, and even a system of communication. Diop (1955) states:

As early as 4000 B.C. Egyptian documents indicate that Meroitic Sudan was a prosperous country which maintained commercial ties with Egypt...About that time the Meriotic Sudan probably transmitted to Egypt the twelve hieroglyphs that were the first embryonic alphabet. (Diop, 1955, p. 169)

Many ancient African accomplishments are ignored by Western historians and are therefore absent from mainstream curriculum worldwide. Philosophers like Diop give a more accurate account of history. For example he writes, “It has been determined, in fact, by means of astronomical calculations of mathematical precision, that in 4,241 B.C. a calendar was in used in Egypt” (Diop, 1959, p. 58), quoting this and may other facts often overlooked by Western historians and educators.

As discussed previously, historically the arts have played a salient role in the formation of culture and societal norms in adult learning. From the writing of Bengalese Tagore- the first person of color to win the Nobel Prize-to the Black Arts Movement, the importance of creative practice is clear. Each artist, movement, and community of this Diaspora plays a pivotal role in the reeducation of global communities. Relative to this study, examining historical events and contemporary resources in Asian communities prove that few acknowledge the importance of teaching this culturally grounded education. Due to invisible factors of intellectual racism and the affects of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade there is a necessity for African Centered strategies to be utilized in adult education practice across the globe.

Historically, art based learning was one of the only modes of instruction for people of the African Diaspora. For instance, traditionally, African Ameripeans transmitted learning through Negro spirituals, dance, and other oral traditions. Holmes (1936) discusses the two views and objectives of education after emancipation, which included the following:

One school of thought takes the position that the education of Negroes should differ in no respect whatever from the education of white people, since any social change of a mechanical or cultural nature that affects the American people as a whole likely affects the Negro...the other is that the Negro is doomed to the servant status in his relations with white people, that he has no chance to become a bank director or a railroad president unless a Negro bank or a Negro railroad offers the opportunity. (p. 320)

In opposition of these views, the arts have played the pivotal role of challenging Western mindsets. Historically society did not see a need to prepare people of this Diaspora for anything other that assimilation and servitude. There were no adult education initiatives created for African Ameripeans in the United States until the 1940’s (Reid, 1945, p. 303). That is why organizations like the Highlander Freedom School and movements such as the Harlem Renaissance are critical.

Creativity and art based learning can play a salient role in the re-education of our communities. Change must be confronted in a holistic fashion, addressing not only cognitive needs but spiritual and mental well-being. Art based learning can play a critical part of identity and community development across the globe. The field of adult education must acknowledge the need for culturally grounded educational programming. In a diverse country like Bangladesh where a majority of the fieldwork was conducted, informal learning experiences are practiced daily and valued infinitely. Seeing the value in this practice is powerful tool for adult learners. Educators must learn to utilize authentic lived experiences as teaching strategies. We must continue to advocate for art and Africentrism as modes of anti-racist pedagogy. During this symposium, photographs and artifacts were presented which depict examples of culturally grounded education in Asia. To view artwork completed during fieldwork and past research visit auburnaesthetic.com

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