

An African Tree of Knowledge
Report by Larry Olds

I had the privilege of visiting Uganda in the year 2000 for the second time since the 1960s. I had been in East and Southern Africa with my two college aged sons in 1996 and at that time made contact with the African Development Education Network headquartered in Harare. That contact led to Peter Lubwama from Kampala attending our North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education (NAAPAE) Commonfire Conference I worked on organizing in Tucson. On the car journey home to Minnesota and on to an International Council for Adult Education Executive meeting in Toronto we cooked up the project described below.

The Tree of Knowledge⁺ was an extraordinary success – as was the whole Mural Making and Popular Environmental Adult Education Workshop. The idea for the Tree of Knowledge activity came from Darlene Clover, who heads the Learning Through Environmental Action Programme (LEAP) that NAAPAE's coordinates for the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE).

The weeklong workshop, a collaboration between NAAPAE and the African Development Education Network (ADEN), took place at the Uganda Catholic Social Training Center in Kampala, Uganda in January 2000. The 17 participants from development education projects around Uganda were joined by four participants from Kenya, and one from Zimbabwe. Three members of the training staff at the Uganda Catholic Social Training Center, Christine Luutu, Denis Mubangizi, and Peter Lubwama facilitated the workshop along with the two NAAPAE participants from North America, Larry Olds wearing his environmental adult educator hat and muralist Marilyn Lindstrom of Neighborhood Safe Art in Minneapolis.

The first activity of the week following a circle of introductions was the creation of the Tree of Knowledge. The creation began with the roots. Participants were asked cut roots for the tree from the orange construction paper that we provided. (The colors of the paper were simply determined by the supplies we happened to have on hand.) Participants were asked specifically to “cut roots for the tree from the orange paper and write a word or two identifying things that you learned from your family that are valuable to you in your life and work today.” Participants taped the roots at the bottom of the large easel paper that had been prepared on the wall, gathering to briefly share what had been placed before going on to the next step.

Knowledge from formal schooling valuable in your life and work today” was the bark of the tree. We chose purple paper. The third step was the blue branches, things learned “from the rest of nature”; and the fourth, the green leaves “things you learned from self-directed or non-formal learning.” The final two steps for the opening activity were to add pink buds of expectations “a word or two identifying what skill and knowledge you would like to take away from the workshop” and golden nurturing raindrops of “knowledge or skills you can share with the other participants during the workshop.” The final step of creating the tree would come at the end of the workshop when participants would return to add the multi-colored fruits of the workshop “knowledge gained from the workshop.” We would end the workshop by ritually harvesting those fruits, reading out the words describing what was learned, placing the fruits in baskets, and taking them to the ceremonial dedication of the mural.

The result of the first six steps was astounding visually as well as rich in content. We didn't foresee that the tree would be a wonderful collectively made piece of art whose presence on the wall would give us pleasure to see and would enrich our environment throughout the week's activity. Of course other walls of the main meeting room filled up with rich creations of the participants as they posted the drawings they made in the step by step creation of mural: collective spirit drawings; drawings of images from the rest of nature – an animal important to each participant, a plant important to each participant, images found in an hour long walkabout in the rest of nature that show three or four stages of transformation; the Bio-communications wall with each participant's photo, drawings, and biographical information; a river of time showing local, national, and global issues and naming the moment in time when the participants became aware; and composition drawings of the mural that emerged after the long and rich discussions that led to the selection of the theme for the mural, I Am Part Of The Environment: I Learn and Care, and the title, Knowledge of Transformation.

In the dining hall by the end of Wednesday the first images for the mural were traced with faint blue lines on the wall that had been primed to be ready on the eve of the workshop. Painting might have started that evening but it was our part of Kampala's turn for “electricity shedding” - every other night power was turned off from 7 to 9 p.m. Painting began in earnest the next morning as half of the participants took up the brushes. The other half continued their discussions and began reflections on the popular environmental adult education methodologies that we had been using in the workshop. At morning tea break those of us who had been in the main meeting room in the discussions got our first glimpse of the extraordinary progress made in the first two hours of the morning. The painting group handed off the brushes and the bright red protective aprons and the collective creative process continued that day and the next.

One might think that what appeared in such a short time was miraculous as by mid-afternoon Friday all but the final touches on the mural were complete. None of the participants had painted before. Not all of the participants were confident enough to take on a

⁺ Full color images of the Tree of Knowledge and the mural, Knowledge of Transformation, are available as JPEG files. To receive them as email attachments contact lolds@mn.rr.com.

^{*} A full description of the activity is in *The Nature of Transformation: Environmental Adult Education*, Second Edition by Darlene E. Clover, Shirley Follen, and Budd Hall. New Concept, Toronto, 2000. page 38.

community mural in their own community, although three of four expressed the determination to do so. All seemed to feel the sense of achievement from the project. The real miracle of the process was the joy and sense of accomplishment of the participants. Fortunately for us that joy is in our memories, and it is captured in the photos and video that document the workshop.

