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Kitto Derrick Wintergreen

Wandering About: An Experiment in Walking and Learning

I

I teach communication design and weaving at the *Nagenda International Academy of Art and Design* (NIAAD), which is a privately-owned school of Art and Design in Uganda, East Africa. At the moment NIAAD, which has about 90 full-time students, offers only diploma and certificate courses, it does not have degree-awarding powers.

Uganda, which was a British Colony between 1900 and 1962, has a population of 35 million people and a GDP per capita of around 650 US Dollars. Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world. The education sector is large and highly commercialised. There are at least six tertiary-level art and design schools in the country.

Together with Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, I form the Kampala Working Group of the *Another Roadmap School*. We met in the context of 'Decolonizing Art Education' which was a 2-year curriculum and staff development project that Emma facilitated together with Carmen Moersch, Rangoato Hlasane and George Shire at NIAAD (2014 -2016).

My experience of participating in the Decolonizing Art Education project led me to question the approach we were taking to design education at NIAAD. I began to see that many of our students never seemed to acquire a firm grasp of the concept of design or of the purpose of a design education. I became concerned about the quality of the work they were producing, and, as a result, about their future employment prospects. Therefore, during the second semester of the 2015/2016 academic year, I began to experiment informally with the content and delivery of my classes.

II

One morning in March 2016, I asked my design students to meet me not in our classroom but on the main road half a kilometer from the NIAAD campus. Once they had assembled, I told them that we were going for a walk. We

walked up the road away from Namulanda in direction of Lutembe Beach. As we walked, I pointed out the many possible sources of inspiration around us from flowers and plants to the people we passed and the activities that we saw them doing.

My aim was to encourage my students to look critically at their surroundings, to pay more attention to the community in which they lived, and to try to get them to identify both instances of local design activity and opportunities for their own design intervention. I also wanted to begin to make them aware of wider debates about what constitutes 'African Design'. As we walked, we talked about what we were seeing, and took notes and photographs that we later discussed in class.

During the first *walking lecture*, the students responded in ways that they thought would please me. They enthusiastically pointed at the very first things they saw, saying, 'Oh! I can use that in my work!' But on subsequent walks, their comments and responses began to change. They discussed the objects that they saw in ever greater detail. They debated how particular objects were made, how they were used, and how aspects of their form or construction might be incorporated into their own work.

One object that was the source of considerable discussion was an *ekimeeza*, which is a Luganda word used to describe a rough platform used in the artisanal production of bricks. One day we saw an *ekimeeza* which had been made using a naturally forming tripod of young tree branches as its base. [IMAGE 1] The students had never really looked closely at *ekimeeza* before or noticed how many of them there were in the neighbourhood. They started to discuss the variations in construction and design, and how they might explore or experiment with *ekimeeza* in their coursework. [IMAGE 2]

One of the places that we visited that semester during our walking lectures was the *Nazareth Community Kindergarten*. It is a small institution, with just three classrooms, three teachers, and no offices. [IMAGE 3.] I had been to this kindergarten before, and initially thought that my students could design visual educational materials for the pupils. But when I came back there with my class



Image 1a und 1b: Two examples of ekimeeza. Photo taken using phone camera by Ahwera Alex 2016

in May 2016, my students quickly pointed out that there were numerous possibilities for them to intervene in the design and use of the space. So with the agreement of the head teacher, some of the students began to make regular visits to the school, and to tailor their semester's coursework for possible application in the kindergarten.

Some students chose to try to enhance the quality of the environment for the children by creating a garden in the playground and painting the exterior walls. Others designed storybooks for use in class. One student, on her own initiative, decided to attend weaving classes so that she could learn how to use offcuts of old clothes to create a series of toys and learning aides. [IMAGE 4.] I was surprised and inspired by how the experience of taking my students out of the classroom to look closely at the world seemed to motivate them to develop design projects under their own initiative and with real-world practical applications in mind. And, excitingly, this approach also seemed to foster a organic interdisciplinarity, because in order to complete their coursework, students took themselves into other classes and other disciplines without any prompting.

III

By the end of the semester in June 2017, I was pleased by the impact that the walking lectures were starting to have on my students' work. But in planning the next semester I realised I would have to make some changes. By taking the classes outside, we had not fulfilled the course requirement to read and discuss texts for nearly a whole semester. This could not happen again. And so I decided that during our next set of walking lectures, we would read and discuss texts as we walked.

I had also been concerned by the storybooks that the students had created during the previous semester for the pupils at the kindergarten. I was happy with the quality of their books' designs, but worried by the fact that the stories they contained had simply been cut and pasted from other books. My students were not putting things in their own words. Therefore, I decided that for the upcoming publication design module, the students'



Image 2: The ekimeeza inspired installation. by Benjamin Eletu, 2018.

brief would be to use their own thoughts, questions and ideas about everyday life, about studying, and about the future to create their publications' content.

At around this time Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and I were trying to decide upon the Kampala Working Group's contribution to the *Another Roadmap School's* Intertwining Hi/stories research project. We ultimately agreed that we would experiment with strategies for integrating critical perspectives on the history of art and design in Uganda into a contemporary Ugandan art and design curriculum. We decided to do this because history and theory courses in Ugandan art and design schools are generally of questionable relevance: the curricula tend to be wholly Eurocentric, and the available teaching materials are frequently decades out of date. We wanted to try to find ways to make local histories of art and design more accessible to NIAAD's students and hence more widely known. This research proposal fit well with my desire to engage my students in wider debates about what constitutes the Africanness of 'African Design' and 'African Art' in the forthcoming semester and could also provide the written materials that my students and I needed to read together and discuss. My idea was that their responses to the historical material would form the basis of the semester's publication design project.

IV

But before we tackled any historical material, I began to initiate discussions about learning during our walking lectures. I asked the students to voice their questions



Image 3. Nazareth Community Kindergarten

and concerns about the education they were receiving about the challenges that they were facing, and their thoughts about their future.

Schools in Uganda do not encourage pupils to speak their minds, so it was not surprising that it took the students a while to open up. But once they realised it was safe to talk, the comments came thick and fast: almost half of the students confessed that they could not see the relevance of their course and saw no connection between what they were learning at NIAAD and any possible future design career. Some observed that their teachers were underprepared and under-resourced, while others confessed that they did not know why they are studying design at all.

I decided that we should continue this conversation back in the classroom. But the students seemed more constrained, and again were reluctant to speak. So instead we agreed that we would collectively formulate questions on the topic of their education (e.g. ‘Does this course address your work prospects?’) and the students would write their responses on pieces of paper and post them on a collective bulletin board, which was a bit more anonymous. The students then decided to pose these same questions to NIAAD students on other courses, and they then used their responses to create a series of small publications that addressed their thoughts and feelings about education and learning. [IMAGE 5 & 6]

This project generated some controversy within NIAAD. It was the first time that the students had ever publicly voiced their opinions about the education that we were giving them. It was quite confronting for some of my colleagues to appear to be seen inviting my students to question their role and their competence. But I felt that this project had a very positive effect on my students. Speaking publicly about their educational experiences had been empowering, and thereafter they became more engaged and more confident in the classroom.



Image 4. Prototypes of toys and learning aides by Nanyombi Jesca 2016

V

The final task of the semester was to introduce the students to a few key aspects of the history of art and design education in Uganda.

Since 2012, Emma, my partner in the Kampala Working Group of the *Another Roadmap School*, has been researching the impact of colonialism on the development of formal visual arts and design education in Uganda. Early in 2017, she began introducing me to the work she had been doing on the writings and teachings of a British woman named Margaret Trowell, who founded the first European-style school of art and design in the Uganda in the 1930s when it was still a British colony. The art school that she founded still bears her name, and is still the most influential art school in the region. (I in fact also studied there.) In September 2017, she (Emma) sent me a selection of essays and articles that Trowell had written about teaching art to Africans between 1934 and 1960 with a view to me introducing aspects of this material to my students.

English is not my first language, and to be honest it is not taught in Uganda at all well. And so I found it difficult to understand both what Trowell was writing about, and Emma’s critical readings of Trowell’s ideas. In an attempt to make both of these things more accessible, Emma created a reader for me during the Christmas holidays - selecting what she thought were the relevant extracts from Trowell’s writings and providing a set of questions or prompts for each extract. The reader improved my understanding of Trowell’s writings and Emma’s critique of them. By going through it, I was also able to start making useful links between what Trowell was doing with her students in mid-twentieth century and the kinds of issues we are facing in art and design education in Uganda today.

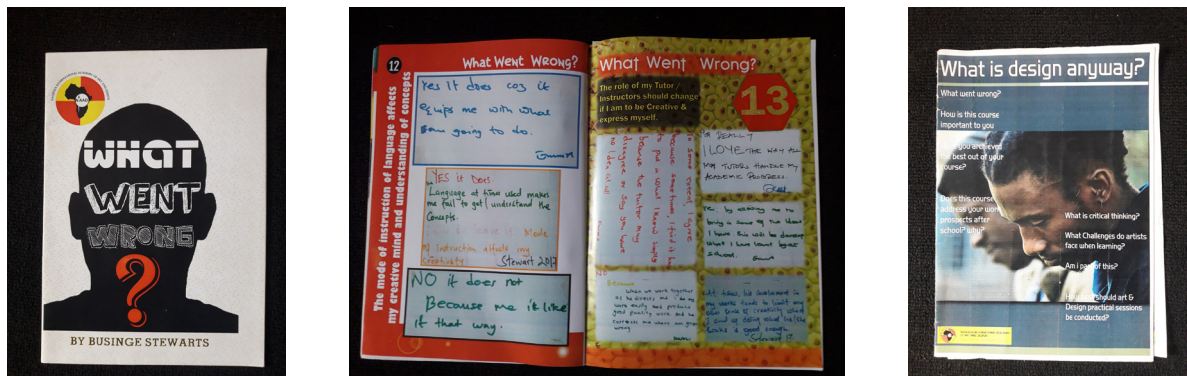


Image 5 & 6. The education publications. by Businge Stewarts and Acou Mark

In February 2018, my students and I began reading texts by Trowell aloud while we walked together around Namulanda. They were engaged by what they read and heard, but it was clear from their responses and subsequent discussion that their comprehension was both partial and superficial. They would seize on and debate Trowell’s use of particular words (e.g. ‘primitive’) but were unable to follow the structure of her arguments or to detect her subtexts.

In an attempt to deepen my students’ understanding of Trowell’s writings, I later tried to revisit these texts in a classroom setting. But the students were extremely resistant to this. They did not see that there was anything in Trowell’s texts that needed to be questioned or analysed: they detected very few of the problematics in her representations of Africa and Africans, and they could perceive no connections between the issues that Trowell’s writings raise and the contemporary Ugandan situation. All they wanted to do was to use her texts for practising graphic design.

In my opinion, the students’ response to this task was a reflection of the education they had received: as aforementioned, English is not taught well here, and Ugandan schools focus on learning by rote, doing little to foster their students’ critical and analytical skills or their independent reading habits. On top of which, communication design is perceived here as a purely practical course, and students do not expect ever to have to engage with content.

But the students were nevertheless willing to experiment in attempt to find ways into the historical texts. One of their proposals that we took up in late March 2018 was inviting other students from NIAAD to meet us off-campus an informal after-hours discussion of Trowell’s writings over a meal of roasted groundnuts and maize porridge. The idea, one student explained, was to give those who were not in our class the chance to get involved with what we were doing when we were “wandering about”. The students arranged the entire event themselves creating posters, sending out invitations, and even securing the services of two discussants, who made preparatory

readings of Trowell’s texts and then debated them in front of the audience.

In the end, the event was attended by about a third of NIAAD staff and students, and turned out to be an extremely lively evening of reading and discussion followed by live performance and storytelling. [IMAGE 7] Although for many students it was the first time they had encountered Trowell or read any of her work, they quickly felt able to participate, and this led to lengthy and at times heated discussions about Trowell, her writings and her legacy. There was considerable difference of opinion about the impact of colonialism on Uganda and Ugandan art and design today. Beyond this, what was most significant for me was the number of students who spoke or performed in their indigenous languages not in English - assisted by translations from their classmates. Away from NIAAD and the language constraints of Ugandan formal education, they were freer and much more articulate. This can perhaps be read as an implicit critique of Trowell’s writing and ideas.

Despite this we were still at an impasse. It was clear that the students remained wholly resistant to creating a publication that engaged directly with the work of Margaret Trowell. And we were fast running out of time to complete the semester project. So I decided to expand the brief to allow the students to incorporate texts of their creation on topics of their own choosing. The result was a 70-page collection of articles and photo essays called *What I Think*. The students chose to explore a wide variety of subjects, including education, relationships, history, poverty, technology and even colonialism. It also includes documentation of the students’ own work over the course of the academic year. [IMAGE 8]

Although they do not address the topic directly, it is clear in almost every contribution that the students have reflected on the historical material which we have read together and discussed, and attempted to find ways to respond to it, however lateral. And given how unused they are to doing creative and analytical writing, they have produced an impressive amount of thoughtfully written text.



Image 7. Porridge Night, Activities included performance, storytelling and the reading and discussion of Historical texts

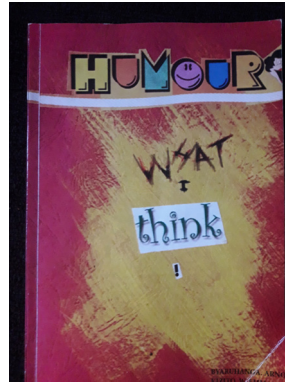


Image 8 . What I think.

VI

At this point, two years into the experiment, I believe that taking my design students out of the classroom has paid off. My students have begun to see that there is more to design than is reflected in most of the dominant Eurocentric discourses to which we have access. They have started to notice and to engage with the design practices of everyday life in Uganda, and are becoming increasingly confident about bringing those practices into the classroom and advocating for them. They are increasingly taking control over their learning and find

ways to make subjects and practices accessible to them by taking additional courses or organising discursive events in their free time. This represents a radical shift in the educational culture at NIAAD.

I am currently planning my approach to the 2018/2019 academic year. I intend to continue the walking lectures, but this year I want to focus more on the issue of language. There are over 40 different languages spoken in Uganda, and I want to see if we can develop and use a common working language without resorting to English.

EXPERIMENTS IN INJECTING CRITICAL READINGS OF THE HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION INTO AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE ON PUBLICATION DESIGN

Working Group: Kampala
Authors: Kitto Derrick Wintergreen,
Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa

<https://another-roadmap.net/intertwining-histories/tools-for-education/learning-units#>

