

The adult learning environment

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Abstract

This article examines some aspects of a learning environment for adults. The main purpose of the write-up was to have an insight into some of the distinguishing factors of the adult learning from that of children. Central to the discourse are the characteristics of adult learners which dictate that their learning environment must also be unique, which environment must be deliberately created by planners and facilitators of their learning programmes. In general terms, the characteristics of adult learners have been categorized in terms of sociological, psychological and physiological. The paper, therefore, has made reference to the behaviourist, humanist and constructivist theories which assert that learning is usually stimulated by the environment and the consequences thereof. All in all, the article has attempted to provide the ideal adult learning environment.

Introduction

The general practice of adult education reflects the difference between children and adults. This difference lies on the premise that children are learning to be independent social beings, whereas adults have assumed independent decision-making roles in society. Implicit within the practice of adult education is the principle that adult learners are different from children and that there ought to be a separate environment suitable for learning of adults. However, as much as many adults engage in various learning activities, central to their effective learning is having a conducive learning environment. In other words, approaches employed in the learning of adults should be different from those in teaching children in order to enhance the adult learners' participation and interest throughout the learning process.

For a long time, adult education programmes have been dominated by the use of inappropriate learning environments as well as methods (Kweka, 1995). This trend compelled adult education scholars like Rogers (1967) to contend that the inappropriate application of adult education has rendered the field ineffective. One of the issues raised was the use of teaching as opposed to facilitation. It has been contested that the use of teaching in adult education is domineering and presupposes that the person to be taught is an empty vessel. An adult has an array of experience and it is on this experience that learning of new ideas can be built. Facilitation is advanced as being ideal in the practice of adult education. The assumption being that adult learners are self-directed learners, they are focused and they can only learn what they feel is important to their needs.

Therefore, the role of planners and facilitators of adult learning programmes is to create optimal learning environments where learners are allowed to assume responsibility for their learning. Most importantly, the role of the educator is to facilitate learning by engaging the learners in dialogue.

From this perspective, adult education can only be effective in providing solutions to the needs of learners and society as a whole if its tenets are adhered to. With regard to effective learning, a conducive learning environment becomes cardinal. It is therefore the interest of this article to set out a discussion on the adult learning environment. The adult learning environment is fundamental to all adult education processes and programmes. This is so because adult education, like any other educational programme, has a context in which it operates. Therefore, in order to attain the overall objective of adult education the environment plays a critical role.

Understanding of concepts

Courtney (1989) thinks that the value of a definition lies in its *precision* and *ability* to illuminate. These qualities depend on how well the concept is known. In view of this, this article provides definitions of concepts as they will be applied. Concepts pertinent to this work and require operation definitions include, who an adult is, the meaning of learning and the learning environment.

Who is an adult?

The concept 'adult' has posed definitional challenges in various societies particularly in Africa where adulthood is not determined by age alone but includes other social, political and economic roles an individual may be playing in society. These roles differ from one community to another or from one society to another. It is however not in the interest of this work to enter into debate on the meaning of adulthood. Adulthood in this article is defined in the African and Zambian contexts in particular.

In Africa, adults are basically perceived to be people of 18 years or older, having self-directing images of themselves, and able to relate stories, proverbs and legends from the collective memory of the community for the purpose of informing, educating and socializing the young (Fasokun, et al, 2005). Additionally, Kamwengo (1988)

explains that adults should be capable of performing a range of social and economic roles, from helping to run a home, contribution to food production or income generation to participating in community affairs. In Zambia, as recorded by Luchembe (2009), an adult is defined in relation to age and social role. At the age of 18, one qualifies to participate in government elections. Such an important civil action denotes the stage of adulthood. Secondly, one must be socially responsible for themselves and/or other people. For example, a married person in Zambia will be considered an adult because they will have attained a culturally acceptable age and many a time they may shoulder some responsibility. This is the definition adopted by this article.

Issues related to the meaning of learning

The concept learning has been defined differently by different scholars. It has been defined as a relatively permanent change in behaviour or knowledge. It includes observable activity and internal processes such as thinking, attitudes and emotions (RHEF, 2007). Further, Langley (1996) defines learning as the improvement of performance in some environment through the acquisition of knowledge resulting from experience in that environment. It has also been defined as the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skills. Learning helps an individual move from being a novice to being an expert (Bower, 1975).

Deducing from the foregoing definitions, this work regards learning as a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes to enable someone live efficiently and effectively in his or her own environment.

Issues related to the learning environment

In adult learning, the learning environment is used to refer to the social, cultural, political and economic context in which adult education is conducted (Nafukho, et al, 2005). It is an environment that stimulates and arouses in people the desire to learn. Adult learners as opposed to children are focused and often sure of what they want out of an educational process. Therefore, there should be a distinctive learning environment for adult learning capable of motivating adults to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies for their survival in their respective environments (Fasokun, et al, 2005).

Aspects of the Learning Environment

The success of any adult education programme depends largely on the learning environment. The learning environment has a remarkable potential to impact either positively or negatively on the education programme (RHEF, 2007). As many adults return to or engage in learning, positive learning environments are key to success. It is important to initiate a pleasant learning environment for adult learners so as to outweigh uncertainties that could be there. If the environment is not pleasant, learning is unlikely to occur. 'Undesirable learning environments tend to produce negative attitudes towards learning, leading to, possibly, failure (Langa in Doveton, 1991:18).'

For Dewey (1916), he argues that because there is interaction that takes place between the learner and the environment, experiences of the environment do certainly affect the learner either positively or negatively. Additionally, Ornstein and Hunkins (1998) say that the role of the facilitator in adult learning involves shaping the learners' real experience from the environment, and knowing what surroundings tend to promote experiences that lead to growth and learning. The reasons adults engage in learning include: preparing for promotions; updating employment skills; changing careers; and lifelong learning to obtain new knowledge. Tisdell (1995:4) suggests that:

...a learning environment needs to attend to inclusivity at three levels and these levels are that: the environment should reflect the diversity of those present in the learning activity itself in the curriculum...; attend to the wider and immediate institutional contexts in which the participants work and live; and in some way reflect the ever changing needs of an increasingly diverse society.

From these reasons, it is evident that adults will only engage in a learning activity if and when there is absolute need to do so. Therefore, the environment in which they learn must promote learning. To create this optimal learning environment, the facilitator stands out to be the major aspect of the adult learning process. He or she is the greatest influence in creating a productive adult learning atmosphere. This is the obvious truth, but it carries with it profound implications. It means that the facilitator should understand the adult learners in terms of their needs, interests and aspirations. The facilitator should also have a broader and deeper understanding of the subject matter at hand and methods and techniques of executing the course material. It is the understanding of these

fundamental aspects of adult learning that equips the facilitator to effectively create a productive adult learning environment (Knowles, 1980).

In terms of methods, dialogue is pivotal to the success of adult learning programmes. For Freire (1972) dialogue takes the centre stage of all adult learning processes. He argues that it is through dialogue that people's world views are transformed. They acquire new ways of perceiving the world and actions which are beneficial to one self and humanity as a whole. By nature or design the adult learning environment is liberating, where individuals engage in dialogue and begin to realise the creative powers of their own words. Therefore, dialogue is an important aspect of the adult learning environment.

The adult learning environment

The adult learning environment demands that the learning atmosphere should be conducive for adult learning. According to Knowles (1980), the environment should be one in which adults feel at ease. It needs mentioning that central to the adult learning environment, are adult learning theories which shapes the learning environment. Over and above, the basic elements of the adult learning environment include: social, emotional, physical and cognitive parameters.

Aspects of the adult learning theories

Some of the central learning theories which have shaped the field of adult education include; behaviourist, humanistic, and constructivist theories. According to Munsaka (2011) behavioural learning theories explain learning from the perspective of observable behaviour. He further explains that, these theorists assert that learning can be stimulated from the environment and the consequences thereof. If the consequences are pleasant or gratifying, the adult learner would likely to learn the behaviour that led to those consequences. Similarly, if the consequences were unpleasant or punishing, the adult learner would likely not repeat the behaviour that led to those consequences.

In addition, Fasokun et al. (2005) explains that this theory applies the reductionist approach to the understanding of how learning occurs. They believe that learning is a complex activity that can be understood only by studying behaviour that can be observed and measured. The overall implication of this thinking on adult learning is that, the educator should be cognisance of the fact that all behaviour is a learned response to stimulus in the environment. This leaves the learning environment critical to adult learning.

Aside from this, the humanist theory of learning focuses on explaining the behavioural difference of human beings from animals. This theory stipulates that humans are unique in the animal classification or category and that the natural human tendency is to strive towards happiness, love, creativity, goodness and fulfilment (Morist and Maisto, 1999; In Fasokun et al. 2005). The value of self-fulfilment is eminent among adult learners. For them taking part in learning is constantly driven by the desire to achieved self-fulfilment. Some of the major values in humanist thinking are; human potential, free will, human drive and self- directedness.

The implication of this theory to adult learning is that, adult learning should be based freedom of choice; the learning environment should be threatening; learners experience is at the core of learning and self-actualisation; participation should at the centre of adult learning; and self-concept and self-esteem should be considered in designing learning programmes (Knowles, 1980).

The social aspect of the learning environment

Implicit in the social parameter are the facilitator and adult learner who are the main players. The social aspect involves interactions, firstly between the facilitator and the learners and secondly interactions among the learners themselves. The interactions reflect a variety of group dynamics based on social status, profession, occupation to mention a few. This aspect is also concerned with learner involvement in the learning process and the methods employed in adult learning.

There is no doubt that the educator is the greatest influence in creating a productive adult learning environment. In this regard the educator should first and foremost be knowledgeable regarding the subject to be presented to learners and also must be competent and adequately prepared to handle adult learners. This is in view of the fact that adult learners tend to respect the educator who has knowledge about the subject matter to be presented to them (Brookfield, 1990). It is also espoused that a poorly prepared educator faces considerable amount of difficulties in providing a successful learning programme. Therefore, the first impression given to adult learners can have either a positive or negative impact on their learning (Ngoma, 2008). In this respect a successful learning

programme centres largely on how well the educator knows his/her participants and able to use various techniques in stimulating and creating the environment necessary for adult learning.

Broadly speaking, the underlying core of adult learning at any level is the need for educators to understand their learners. The educator should know the learner's capacities, backgrounds, motivations and personal characteristics. Devoid this, there is little the educator can do to create a productive learning environment. Understanding the adult learner guides the overall process of the adult learning endeavour (Rogers, 1992).

In general terms, the characteristics of adult learners are categorised in terms of sociological, psychological and physiological dimensions. Sociological characteristics of adult learners refer to social differences existing among learners (Ngoma, 2008). Adult learners differ in terms of, ethnicity, marital status, educational background, family size, interests, life styles, incomes, status, occupations, values, beliefs, attitudes, motives and in gender.

This view is supported by Fasokun et al. (2005) who records that the social differences among adult learners are evidenced by their diversities in terms of age, experience, interest, intelligence, aptitude, attitude, motivation, language, tradition, gender, personality, employment and socio-economic status. Adult learners have varying educational levels and different orientations to learning.

The social differences among the adult learners are capable of breeding a negative atmosphere on the adult learning environment. For instance, as many learners come to class, they come with their social-economic status and expect to be treated according to the demands of their status. If one is director or manager he/she may tend to bring that status to class. Such learners may expect superior treatment above others due to the respect they command and if treatment is not forthcoming they are likely to be frustrated and frustrate others.

Therefore, social classes should never be ignored in adult learning. Social class is simply the differentiation of people in a given community based on wealth, power and prestige. It is a form of stratification in which people are ranked into categories on the basis of their status in that particular community (Grandreams, 1996 in Mpofu and Indabawa, 2006).

Considering the apparent diversities in the sociological dimension, Fasokun, et al. (2005) likeness a productive adult learning environment to the unity that often exists in situations where Africans come together to undertake a task in a group. This is premised on the understanding that among the African cultures one does not put luggage on his head with one finger only rather there is always help from others. According to Asante and Asante (1990) the unity exhibited in many African cultures refer to commonalities among the people. It is this unity that Fasokun, et al. (2005) regards essential in creating a productive adult learning environment.

It is therefore incumbent upon the educator to ensure that all learners are treated equally regardless of one's socio-economic status. Educators ought to be conscious of the fact that adult learners bring with them multiple perspectives to any learning situation and these perspectives with the use of various techniques should be used to advantage the adult learning environment and not otherwise (Tisdell, 1995). They have an array of experience acquired throughout their lives, which they bring to class. To some learning may not make sense until it is related to their life experiences (Stewart, 2001).

Connected to experience, Merriam (2001) explains that adults are more interested in learning things that have an immediate relevance on their job or personal life. This is mainly because adult learning is ideally meant to be problem centred, meaning that adults will participate in learning if and when they have identified a gap in their day-to-day life. This entails that adults may only engage in a learning activity if they can use what they learn as soon as they learn it, as opposed to banking the acquired knowledge for future use.

It is also expected that a productive adult learning environment should consider the motivational trends of the learners. Adult learners are motivated to learn when they are involved in setting the learning objectives. Addressing the diversity of learners by involving them in the selection and setting of an appropriate curriculum and course content is a critical aspect of inclusiveness. Although "...many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that 'minorities' often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values and customs" (Ross and Gordon, 1993:53). This means that all the knowledge base and interests of all groups in the learning group will be represented and included in the curriculum.

The primary goal of inclusive learning environments is to equalise power between teachers and learners and among learners in the learning setting. Additionally and most important, power relations between and among learners are likely to change as the environment becomes more inclusive. People are bound to be free to participate in the discussions and other activities of the group (Vella, 1997).

On the other hand, the physiological dimension borders largely on the physical needs of the learners. There is no doubt that many adult learners particularly in Africa find it difficult to fulfil their basic physiological needs. Fasokun, et al. (2005) records that basic physiological needs include water, shelter and food. It follows therefore that as long as these needs remain unmet, an adult learner will whilst be concerned with means of meeting them. This has a negative effect on their concentration and learning is ultimately affected.

The psychological dimension focuses on the processes of reasoning, thinking and decision making. Cross (1981) indicates that at the core of this dimension are attitudes and perceptions of the learners. These have the ability to shape the learning environment and entire learning process either negatively or positively.

The social aspect of the learning environment involves interactions among learners themselves and the educator with learners. The interaction existing among learners displays various group dynamics. Based on social status, ethnicity, occupation and profession, learners tend to interact as such. It should be mentioned that such tendencies if not well handled breeds a very unhealthy learning environment. As noted that adults come to class for various reasons, others want to upgrade their qualifications in pursuit of a better job, pay raise, promotion and others come to pass time (Fasokun, et al., 2005). It is among these who come to pass time that they tend to show off to others, look down on other learners thereby creating an acrimonious learning environment for others. If the facilitator is not bold, strong and courageous to deal with such learners, the learning environment may not be productive as such learners are capable of intimidating even the facilitator and ultimately take over the learning process.

Therefore, the social interaction existing between the facilitator and learners should strictly be based on the learning process only and not anything beyond. It is said that familiarity brings content. In an event the facilitator and the learner's begin to relate beyond the parameters of their roles, respect may be lost, and for learners who are very sensitive to moral issue they are likely to doubt the morality of the facilitator and get discouraged to continue attending lessons. It is therefore expected that the facilitator always maintains his/her jurisdictions in terms social interactions with the learners especially that the responsibility of ensuring an effective learning process occur lie within him/her self.

In terms of methods, the adult learning environment should accommodate a variety of interactive methods. Such as brain storming, group discussions, role playing and simulations. Embedded in these methods is dialogue which takes the centre stage. Freire (1972) believes that every person should be given a chance to name the world using their own words. In addition Nyerere (1970) argued that a person can be built a house but cannot be given freedom. The implication of this is that genuine freedom should be defined by the people themselves using their own words. Through dialogue individuals define their own world and destinies. It is also through dialogue that possible answers on particular burning issues are generated. Emphasis should be made that dialogue is not an academic exercise rather a tool for emancipating the masses from shackles of oppression. In this regard the adult learning environment is dialogic in both philosophy and practice.

The emotional aspect of the learning environment

Related to the social aspect of the adult learning environment is the emotional aspect. It is concerned with the learner's self-esteem. An individual's self-esteem determines what one can and how far he can go in life. It is true to say that individuals with low self-esteem can achieve little or nothing at all. Freire (1972) regards self-esteem as human potential. He believes that every human being has the potential to transform their lives. The only limitation has been lack of education for conscious raising or education for liberation. Often times the poor have received education which has domesticated them and they are unable to think beyond the ambits of that education.

On the other hand, others have been denied any education at all. Consequently these individuals are illiterate and fall in the intransitive conscious bracket. According to Freire (1972) these are individuals with low self-esteem about themselves, they do not believe that their lives can change for the better.

In light of this, the adult learning environment should be one that foster's and maintains each person's positive self-esteem. This can be done through effective communication characterized by constructive feedback between the educator and the learners. In addition empathy can also play an important role in maintaining respect and trust.

The learning environment should also encourage learner involvement in the learning process. The educator should acknowledge the learners contributions and value individual differences. It should foster and ensure respect among all participants and above all maintain confidentiality and authenticity (RHEF, 2007).

The physical aspect of the learning environment

As opposed to other forms of education, adult education values the principle of flexibility. With respect to the physical environment, flexibility in terms of venue is worth consideration. Learning can occur in a building or outside under some shelter. Within the physical environment learning should be made effective by making the learners feel comfortable to learn (RHEF, 2007). Considerations should be made in terms of; the room temperature which has to accommodate all the learners. The learning environment has to be free from any form of distraction such as noise which has potential to divert learner's attention. The size of the room should be adequate to accommodate all the learners and leaving enough space for ventilation, the sitting arrangement should be done with a lot of caution. For instance, married men and women should not be made to seat suggestively next to individuals who are not their spouses. In terms of seats, they should be comfortable nonetheless they should not take learners to sleep.

Most important in the learning of adults is the physical environment. When learning inside a building, factors such as vision and hearing are extremely important to consider. Draves (1984:9) states that "before teaching in an unfamiliar room, check the visibility from various parts of the room. In particular, check for glare. Make sure there is enough...light." in line with vision, a facilitator should ensure to use the correct font in written texts. Also important to consider is to avoid using light colour pens or markers. Additionally, the lighting must be bright enough to avoid learners from straining their eyes or struggling to see written texts. This leads to the factor of considering what time of the day and season the learning activity takes place.

For hearing, as people grow old, their acuity of hearing also diminishes. "As men age, they tend to lose high frequency hearing. Women, on the other hand, lose hearing at low frequencies. Thus, older male students will hear male instructor's best and older female students will hear female instructors best (Cross, 1981:156)". Therefore an instructor needs to position him or herself strategically and speak audibly to ensure that everyone can hear what he or she is saying clearly. Other than that, the facilitator must speak slowly so that the listeners have time to comprehend whatever is being said. Most important is to make sure that the room is free from outside noise and other distractions. For instance, it may not be prudent to place an adult learner's class near industries where there is a lot of noise from machinery or near an extremely busy high way. In the case that multi- media gadgets such as radios or microphones, the speaker or facilitator must ensure that they can be heard everywhere.

Further, the learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable. Long lectures or lessons are not ideal for adult participants rather short breaks are encouraged in case of long periods of learning. This is in conformity with the global assessment which shows that sitting for long periods in the learning process in the absence of practice rate high on the irritation scale (Zamke, 1984).

The cognitive aspect of the learning environment

There is a general assertion that the principles of cognitive learning are attributed to the works of Jean Piaget. Piaget perceives cognitive development as occurring in distinct stages of thinking that determine how human beings deal with the environment (Munsaka, 2011).

Adult learners are constantly making linkages between their actions and consequences thereof. Each time adults are confronted by a situation that they do not understand, they tap into their cognition and draw out some knowledge to help them understand the unfamiliar phenomena that they are confronted with (Sigelman and Rider, 2006; in Munsaka, 2011). Similarly in the learning process they relate what they learn with their previous experience or the current job, business and daily their activities.

In view of this, RHEF (2007) submitted that at the centre of the adult learning environment there ought to be learner involvement in the activities of the learning process, particularly participation in decision making. In this aspect the educator may be required to help the learner's link prior knowledge to experience by providing supplementary information. Further, the adult learning environment should cater for a range of experience and knowledge. It should also provide opportunities for practice based on the fact that adult's learn better when they do (Knowles, 1980).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide the ideal adult learning environment. It has been observed that many agencies are currently involved in the provision of adult education and yet misapplying the adult education principles. A case in point is the mushrooming of motivational speakers who bundle people in some place and begin to share their thoughts on a particular issue contrary to the provisions of adult education principles. The ideal adult learning environment should accommodate the social, physical, emotional and cognitive elements. For any successful adult learning process a productive learning environment is central. Devoid this there is little the educator can do to ensure the desired learning by the learners is attained. Over and above the learning environment should be able to stimulating the desire for adults to learn.

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