TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR ADULT LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING-LEARNING TRANSACTION

J.C. Ihejirika

Department of Adult and Non-Formal Education, University of Port Harcourt,
NIGERIA.

ihejirikajohn@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Adult learners are persons above school age who did not have the opportunity of attending formal school early or might have attended but have educational deficiencies to remedy; hence they voluntarily opt to participate in various learning situations. As they go to learning centres, adults do not leave behind their varied experiences, personal and community problems and needs which they hope to solve with the knowledge and skills acquired through participation in educational programmes. They also possess common learning characteristics, which to some extent; determine the teaching strategies adopted by the instructors to enable learners derive maximum satisfaction of their expectations. This study examined the implications of such learning characteristics of adult learners and analyzed the appropriate teaching styles and strategies the instructor should employ in each case. Recommendations are made based on the observations of Malcolm Knowles, (1978) a pioneer in the study of adult learning.

Keywords: Implications, Learning characteristics, Adult learners, teaching strategies, Instructors, Teaching-Learning transaction

INTRODUCTION

An adult learner may be one who has once dropped or stepped aside from the formal school system. He may also be described as a person who has once dropped out of the first level of formal education and has reverted to illiteracy with passage of time. Both Aderinoye (2004) and Okoroma (2012) describe an adult learner as a person above school age who missed the opportunity of acquiring formal education at an earlier age and who are not discouraged by that circumstance but still desire to remedy it. From his own perspective, Nzeneri (2008) defined an adult learner as anyone who consciously or unconsciously, formally, informally or non-formally engages himself or herself in any adult educational programme(s) with an intent to solve life problems. In the economic sense, adult learners are people who engage themselves in one form of adult education programme or the other to improve their productivity, knowledge or skills.

It is currently observed that many adult learners – men, women and youths demonstrate strong desire for more or continuing education, hence many are returning to colleges and university campuses for more knowledge. Corroborating this view, Apps (1979) in Nzeneri (2008) suggested that research findings like those of Markus (1976) and others tend to show that the reasons (or educational needs) of these returnees to the campuses involve: to improve their difficult financial times, employment opportunities, self esteem, for professional advancement, prestige or to satisfy family expectations, etc.

Adult learners as a special group, have some common traits. For example, they are mature enough to be aware or conscious of their education inadequacies and consequently decide on their own to start learning. Their attendance at literacy classes is based on cogent or specific

goals which generate an inner force that motivates them for literacy education to start with. But due to preoccupations, for example, in the farm, in the home, at working places, in the church or other social engagements, etc., adult learners are usually unable to devote full time to learning (Klevnis 1972 in Nzeneri 2008 and Ihejirika, 2000). Moreover, their voluntary appearance to the "educational doors", according to Aderinoye (2004) is a great advantage, in that the would-be learners are motivated, at least initially. It must be noted that they are there for a purpose, whether to obtain a certificate or acquire a special knowledge and skill so as to obtain a job or become self-employed. The challenge therefore, is to find out why the adult learner is there (what is his purpose?) and to establish a learning situation which meets his purpose as to keep him there till completion of programme.

Consequently, the thrust of this paper was to examine the implications of learning characteristics adult learners display in learning situations and analyze appropriate teaching strategies the instructor can utilize as occasions demand to satisfy the learning expectations of adult learners he is privileged to teach.

LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Many educators are fond of comparing learning characteristics of adult learners and youth learners. This paper concerns itself with the learning characteristics of adult learners only.

Ab initio, adult learners prefer being self-directed even in learning situations; typically not dependent on others for direction. This is true because at maturity stage, the self-concept of the adult moves towards self-directing and he desires more responsibility. As he manages his life, he tries to resist control and prefers freedom and independence (Ukpong 2000). His learning is no longer that of full-time learner and his self-fulfillment lies on his performance as a worker or producer, a parent and an independent being.

Adults often have a problem centred approach to learning. They want to solve personal problems such as economic, social and political problems. As posited by Aderinoye (2004), most adult learners have clear views about what they want to achieve from attending adult education classes and where they consider irrelevant the content of instruction, they are likely to quit participation. Supporting above view, Oyedeji (1980) revealed that adult learners have specific results in mind for participation in education and will drop out if education does not lead to those results because their participation is usually voluntary.

Another striking learning characteristic of adult learners is that they accept responsibility for their own learning especially if learning is perceived as timely and appropriate for their current lives. For this reason, learning activities must usually be initiated by the adult learners themselves or by a special someone, e.g. the employer.

It is also adult learners' characteristic to require immediate reward or gratification from any learning activity they engage in and not education activity that prepares them for an often unclear future benefits or accept postponed application of what is being learned. In other words, adult learners expect to put their learning experience into immediate practical use.

Of truth is the fact that adult learners are often skeptical about new information and prefer to try it out before accepting it. Support for this came from Ihejirika (2000) when he posited that adult learners possess a more fixed and rigid personality which accounts for why they sometimes find new ideas and challenging experience disturbing and conflicting with their wish to keep things at status quo. Perhaps this can account for why adult learners find it difficult to change their attitudes, established values, beliefs and opinion; and hence do not want to learn things that would uproot their ideas especially their cultural traits.

SITUATING LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS AND TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING-LEARNING TRANSACTION

Teaching behaviour or style could be defined as the way in which a teacher or a leader of learning activity consistently conducts himself or herself so as to create a characteristic relationship between himself and his students (learners). An effective teacher/instructor of adults must be perceptive enough to recognize the various learning characteristics of the class of adults he is teaching and use his teaching strategies as a complement to the learning characteristics of adult learners. A teaching strategy, according to Paiko (1997) for instance, takes the form of arranging learners into small tutorial groups for debate or quiz; they are specific means by which general objectives are accomplished. Below is a discuss of some learning characteristics and analysis of relevant teaching strategies for each characteristic.

Adult Learners have years of Experience and a Wealth of Knowledge

In this case the teacher/instructor should be aware of this and use the adult learners as resources for him and for other students. To maximize the use of their experience and wisdom to facilitate their learning, Kawawa (1971) advised that instructors should learn even from those they are teaching through constant discussions and by instructor's constant willingness to think about the experiences and ideas of those who are seeking to learn from him. In addition, the instructor should use open-ended questions to draw out learners' knowledge and experiences and provide many opportunities for dialogue among learners.

Adult expect to be treated as adults and not as children

As revealed in Ihejirika (2012), Nigerian adults like to be accorded some measure of respect and so prefer to be addressed by their surnames like Chief Amadi, Mrs. Eke, Elder Nwosu, etc. instead of being called by their first names just like children or what obtains in developed countries where adults are called by their first names – John, Michelle, Rhoda, etc. So, even in learning situations, no adult learner is ready to have his ego or personality debased by anybody not even the instructor. The instructor therefore should treat questions and comments from the learners with respect, acknowledge contributions learners make to the class, and should not expect them to necessarily agree with his opinion and plan for the course most of the time.

Another implication of this learning characteristic, according to Omolewa (1985) is for the instructor to acknowledge the degree of maturity of the adult learner who has a dignity to keep and a respect to preserve. Therefore, the views and opinions of the adult learner on all issues must be listened to, respected and carefully considered in every learning situation.

Adults often have a Problem Centred Approach to Learning

This suggests that as adults decide to participate in learning programmes, they have problems which they hope will be solved as a result of the learning they are undertaking. Here the problem-solving instructional games approach is indicated. According to Blakely (1981), by this approach, learners are confronted with a set of problems real or imagined which relate to the learners' situation. The instructional device is to involve the learners in an analysis of the problem and exploring alternative solutions. To Ihejirika (2007), this technique is particularly effective when the learners provide a real problem in which they all have some knowledge of and ability to solve. Moreover, the instructor should show immediately how the new knowledge or skills can be applied to current problems or situations. In addition, he should use participatory techniques such as case studies, assignment, role play, problem-solving groups, etc. (Ibe, 2008).

Adults always feel Self-Directed

The relevant teaching strategy for this learning characteristic is to encourage active participation of learners in the learning experience by giving them the opportunity to exercise their maturity of purpose. This is to be accomplished by being allowed to select content of instruction, choose leaders, and determine the time, place and length of class meeting (Houle, 1976). According to Ihejirika (2012:224).

> By being so involved, adult literacy learners put their respective situations in mind so that those who are occupied at a particular time or place see to it that the time or length of class meeting does not conflict with the time they attend their normal work.

Still, under the guidance of the instructor, each learner proceeds at his own pace to reflect his individuality without competing with another person. In other words, the instructor should engage the learners in designing and planning the learning process and expect them to want more than one medium for learning and to want control over the learning pace and start/stop times.

Adults have increased Variation in Learning Styles (individual differences among people increase with age)

The appropriate teaching strategy is for the instructor to use a variety of teaching materials and methods to take into account differences in learning styles, time, types and place of learning. Lending credence to this strategy, Ihejirika (2007) postulated that the use of several methods instead of reliance on one has, among others, the following values:

   a. It broadens the range of achievable objectives;
   b. It stimulates the interest of both leaders and learners;
   c. It encourages participation; and
   d. It takes account of differential responses of individuals to various approaches.

Reaching a Goal is another Learning Characteristic of Adult Learners

It is undisputable that adult learners value their time and they aim at reaching the goals set. The goals may range from economic to self-improvement and self-actualization. Scholars such as Aderinoye (2004), Oyedeji (1980) and Ukpong (2000) agree that whether reaching a goal or getting a reward, learning is most effective when the reward or reinforcement follows immediately upon the completion of a task. In a learning situation, drive or motivation to learn varies in strength directly in proportion to the nearness of the goal which means that a goal that is far-fetched would not be as effective as a short-range goal which, as soon as it is reached would bring an immediate reward. Therefore, the adult instructor should motivate and encourage the learners by explaining the benefits and advantages to be derived from completing a course or programme of learning or training. In addition, whatever learning episode the learners engage in should be divided into finish able units, topics, or projects because it is their urge to achieve something within a short time. Also, the instructor should, atimes, use his personal experiences to calm down the quick-quick desire of the learners to reach their goals. It is not out of place for him (the instructor) to direct the learners to establishments where recruitment exercise is in progress in order to certify the curiosity of those unemployed among them.

The last but not the Least Adult Learners' characteristics considered here is that **adults have established values, beliefs and opinions they would like to cling to**. The appropriate teaching strategy is for the instructor to take time to clarify their expectations of the course. He should endeavour to convince them of the need to update or give up obnoxious aspects of

their established values and beliefs which are out-dated in today's society. There should be no application of force. Above all, the instructor should permit debate and the challenge of ideas and in this case, he should be careful to protect minority opinion within the class (Nzeneri, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Adult learners are not under any compulsion; their participation in learning situations is of their own volition after perceiving the need for education or after realizing the need to make up their educational deficiencies. The lots of life experiences adult learners have gained from the home, work place, clubs, meetings, etc. have contributed to their maturation. As they go to learning centres, adults do not leave behind their varied experiences which they interpret differently, sometimes to the disagreement of the instructor's plans and opinions. Adults attend learning sessions with felt-needs and other problems which they look up to the new learning and information derived there from for satisfaction and solution of such needs and problems.

As a matter of fact, the different learning characteristics of adult learners greatly influence the teaching strategies employed by the instructor. Each learning characteristic requires its own teaching strategy, hence instruction designed for adults tends to be more effective if it is learner-centred than if it is instructor or teacher-centred. The instructor must maintain a careful balance between his presentation of new material and its applications, discussion and particularly among learners and modify his teaching styles and strategies to enable him gain the kind of facilitative control that is most effective for adult learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are based on the observations of Malcolm Knowles (1978), a pioneer in the study of adult learning. Based o the principles he enunciated, the following recommended for the teacher of adults.

1. The instructor should make sure the adult students understand why they are being taught. As most of them are there for various reasons of their own; the instructor should make sure that each thing he teaches them is an important part of the learning episode.

2. The instructor should make use of different methods and strategies for students have different learning styles so that if one fails to understand through one method, he can have solace in another.

3. Students should be allowed to experience what they are learning. Any activity that gets the students involved makes the learning experiential, such as small group discussions, experiments, role playing, writing or drawing, something specific – activity of any kind.

4. Adult instructors must honour the life experiences students bring to the classroom by making sure they tap into that wealth of wisdom whenever it is appropriate.

5. Students need strong encouragement. Those who have been out of class for long periods of time would have some degree of apprehension about what it will be like and how well they will do. They should be given time to respond to questions. The instructor should recognize the contributions learners make, even when small. He should give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises. He should always remember that the learners are adults. Speaking to them in the tone of voice one might use with a child is offensive, and the danger can be very difficult to overcome.

6. A relaxed learning environment should be created for adult learners. There should be no imposition of anything by the instructor who should only listen carefully for teaching moments and take advantage of them. Even time of class meeting needs not be forced on them for the convenience of the instructor.

REFERENCES

Aderinoye, R. A. (2004). *Literacy Education in Nigeria.* Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

Apps, J. W. (1979). *Problems in continuing Education.* New York: McGraw-Hill Books.

Blakely, E. J. (1981). Adult Education Principles and Practice In L. Bown and J.T. Okedara (Eds) *An Introduction to the Study of Adult Education.* Ibadan: University Press, 255-274.

Houle, C. (1976). *The Design of Education.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Ltd.

Ibe, A. E. (2008). *Theory and Practice of Adult Education in Nigeria.* Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.

Ihejirka, J. C. (2012). Utilization of Adult and Non-Formal Education Programmes in Combating Rural Poverty in Nigeria. *World Journal of Education, 2*(3), 25-35.

Ihejirika, J. C. (2007). *Fundamentals of Adult Education and Community Development.* Uyo: Abigab Associates Ltd.

Ihejirika, J. C. (2000) *Fundamentals of Adult Education Delivery: A Sociological Perspective.* Owerri: Spingfield Publishers.

Kawawa, R. M. (1971). *An Opening Address delivered at the Third Conference of the African Adult Education* held at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania from 19th to 24th, 11-15.

Knowles, M. S. (1978). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Pedagogy versus Androgogy*. New York: Association Press.

Nzeneri, I. S. (2008). *Handbook on Adult Education Principles and Practices*. (New Edition). Uyo: Abigab Associates Ltd.

Okoroma, N. S. (2012). Adult Literacy College: Importance, Learners' Characteristics and Programme benefits. A Paper Presented at a workshop organized by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) at Le Meridian Hotel, Uyo: Akwa Ibom State on December 6-8.

Omolewa, M. (1985) *Adult Education Practice in Nigeria.* Ibadan: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Ltd.

Oyedeji, L. (1980). *The UPE: Its Implications on Non-Formal Education in Nigeria.* Lagos: Unpublished Manuscript.

Paiko, J. Y. (1997). *Introduction to Adult Education.* Minna: Cosmopolitan Publishing Press Nig. Ltd.

Ukpong, E. M. (2000). *The Psychology of Adult Learning*. Port Harcourt: Double Diamond Publishers.