



Readings in Education for the Special Target Groups (An Introductory Text for Students of Education).

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Chapter Seven

Psychology of the Adult Learner

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Introduction:

Literacy for all by the year 2015 could be only a reality if a number of issues are raised as the majority of the disadvantaged groups are adult. We need to understand their ways of learning since learning is human being's primary mode of adaptation. If we don't learn we may not survive, and we certainly won't prosper. Learning is complex and multifaceted, and should not be equated with formal education; all human activity has a learning dimension. People learn, continually, informally and formally, in many different settings: in workplaces, in families, through leisure activities, through community activities, and in political action (Mamman, 2006). Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. In this context, adult learners who are most vulnerable in the society termed as the special target groups are persons whose psychology of learning need to be understood if they are to succeed and attain literacy by the year 2015.

This chapter explains the following group of persons being members of the target groups:

Those who have not acquired sufficient basic education to qualify them for white-collar employment that is to say those who did not complete primary school education;

Those who have not obtained a basic vocational qualification for employment (unqualified workers);

The unemployed especially younger ones (up to twenty five years);

Illiterate and functionally illiterate persons;

Prisoners or those in confined homes;

Migrants, refugees, nomads and other migrants;

Members of other nationalities or the minorities who could not receive formal education for reasons of deprivation;

Drop-outs, ejected, failures and those forcefully withdrawn due to lack of financial support, Women who due to past circumstances were not able to obtain a sufficiently high level of education etc.

Any individual that either missed the opportunity of being educated at the initial stage of their lives. Mamman (2006)

Categories of Adult Learner:

There are different categories of adult learners, although no one category is mutually exclusive or all-encompassing. However, the purpose of suggesting -some differences as to why people engage in learning is to highlight some implications for the entire teaching-learning process. Houle completed a classic study of adults and why they engage in learning more than 40 years ago (Houle, 1961). He determined that there were at least three distinct types of learners: distinct in the reasons ascertained for undertaking some educational endeavour. Within each category there will no doubt be differences based on such variables as age, sex, level of educational attainment, and other similar characteristics.

However, the three categories provide a means for understanding something about the nature and actions of those people who actively engage in formal learning activities. A fourth category is added to reflect current research findings on learning outside the educational opportunities.

Goal-Oriented

A very visible type of learner is one who has some particular goal in mind as a basis for undertaking some learning activity or activities. Such a goal might be the desire to obtain a driver's license, a polytechnic diploma, or a University degree. Very often such goals are related to one's occupation. The point is that the learner can justify or tie each learning endeavor to a distinct purpose felt necessary or important.

Activity-Oriented

The activity-oriented learner is one who engages in some educational endeavour because of a plain love for going or doing. Because of loneliness, because of a boring day, because of wanting to be with others, or various other similar reasons, certain people seem to thrive on social contact or involvement.

Learning-Oriented

This category is an interesting one to think about but its learners are more difficult to describe. Here is where can be found the truly continuing or lifelong learner. People in this category enjoy learning for its own sake, they typically read a lot, they make use of the community library, the museum, the Internet, or other, similar resources, and they often seem to have an interest in a never-ending number of subjects.

Self-Directed Learner

Not in one of Houle's originally conceived categories, the self-directed learner described earlier is now recognised by educators and trainers of adults as a highly active participant in the total domain of adult learning. No doubt, this type of learner has always been around, but because programs, agencies, and enrollees are something visible or countable, the self-directed learner was not always fully recognized or easily recognizable. Suffice to say at this point, however, the self-reliant, autonomous, and independent learner now has the attention of adult education professionals.

Certainly there is considerable overlap in all four categories described above. It is highly probable that learners move through each category, depending upon their needs, their state of development, or the availability of learning resources. In addition, it is just as probable that many more categories will emerge as the learner becomes better understood.

Other types of Disadvantaged learners:

The disadvantaged adult presents a continual and plaguing problem within the society: a problem that deserves special mention because of its pervasiveness and impact economically and socially. Many of the country's unemployed are in the jobless situation because of a lack of proper training.

Most poor people and many minority people in the villages are unable to read well enough to compete adequately with the literate majority. In a country that ranks the fifth among oil producing nations, the educational deficiencies are difficult to understand.

Many community members also face the continuing problem of school dropout, violence among young people, and a growing number of elderly poor and alarm bells need to go off for caring individuals. Finally, a look at the villages, corners, alleyways, under bridges, overheads and shelters of many communities is a reminder of the misery existing below the glittering facade that is often displayed as the Nigerian way of life. However, the point is that a large task remains if the educational resources of this country are to be harnessed for more viable utilisation in solving some of these problems. The opportunities for the educational field and for educators and trainers of adults are immense. Hopefully, such opportunities will not be overlooked in the near future.

Understanding how adults learn and how they use knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Skills and knowledge that make up the competency include:

- understanding of learning styles
- understanding of how the end user will solve problems
- ability to facilitate self-directed learning
- appreciation of the diverse experiences of adult learners.

Why Adults participate in literacy programmes?

Why do some adults participate in continuing education programmes and others don't?

What are the barriers to participation?

What encourages people to attend?

Why do some adults drop out and others complete a programme?

Are the reasons for participation and persistence different for different types of people?

What can adult educator do to encourage participation and persistence in their educational programmes?

These questions have perplexed adult educators for many years.

Many studies on adult involvement and perseverance in educational programmes have tried to answer these questions. A number of authors have identified factors that act as barriers or encouragers to adult participation. Johnstone and Rivera used terms such as situational barriers (time, money, child care, transportation, weather), institutional barriers (factors pertaining to the educational service provider), socio-demographic barriers (age, sex, race, income, educational level, and geographical location), and dispositional factors (self-esteem, group participation) in describing adult responses.

Burgess (1971) identified several characteristics of adults who choose to participate in the learning experience: ·

- (1) they want to know;
- (2) they've established personal, social, or religious goals;
- (3) they're engaged in some activity;
- (4) they need to meet a formal, work-related requirement; and
- (5) they simply want to escape.

Courtney (1989) linked the desire to improve one's ability to serve the community, the need to make new friends, intellectual recreation, professional advancement (either job related or inner-directed), an abhorrence of television, the joy of learning, an introduction or supplementation of understanding, and escape to adult participation.

Other authors have identified specific factors related to participation such as involvement with a formal organization that encourages adult participation, broad and diverse leisure activities, and high levels of income. Situational barriers participation, such as child care, shift or overtime work, lack of transportation, poor health, and lack of time or money are more a problem for low socio-economic adults and the elderly, than the average middle-class adult. Institutional barriers (inconvenient class schedules, full-time study and part-time study, restrictive locations) often

exclude or discourage certain groups of learners such as the poor, the uneducated, and the foreign born. In addition, adults living in certain geographical areas, especially those in small towns and rural areas, are less likely to participate in educational activities.

"Laws" of learning: Professor Edward L. Thorndike one of the pioneers in educational psychology, postulated several "laws" of learning. These laws represent Thorndike's work and its application to the adult learning process in literacy for all.

Law of Readiness: Adults learn best when they are ready to learn. If adult learners accept the purpose of the learning activity, the learning objective is clear, and the knowledge or skill being learned is relevant, then they approach learning with eagerness. People will not learn if they see no reason for learning. While motivation is an individual's responsibility, instructor can encourage a readiness to learn.

Law of Exercise: Things most often repeated are best retained. This law is the basis of all practice and drill in learning activities. The instructor can implement the law of exercise by providing opportunities for practice or by repeating learning activities that strengthen skills. This activity is especially effective when accompanied by constructive feedback.

Law of Effect: Learning is strengthened when accompanied by positive feedback that generates a satisfying feeling; learning is weakened when associated with an unpleasant feeling. An experience that produces feelings of frustration, defeat, hostility, or confusion will hamper learning. An adult should be corrected when a mistake has been made, but the correction should be positive, instructive, and reinforcing.

Law of Intensity: The adult learner will gain more from the learning activity if it is structured as an intense learning experience. The greater the intensity of the experience and personal involvement, the more likely it is that the learner will achieve the learning objective. An exciting learning experience will be more valuable than a routine or boring

experience. Opportunity for direct involvement will produce a greater learning experience than will mere observation. The instructor should structure learning activities that incorporate the law of intensity.

Levels of learning: Recognised domains of learning include cognitive (understanding), effective (appreciating, valuing), and psychomotor (physical coordination). The instructor is concerned with cognitive and effective skill development. Cognitive levels of learning begin with simple knowledge and proceed through the evaluation of complex materials or events. To illustrate:

Knowledge; Remembering previously learned material

Comprehension: Ability to grasp the meaning of material

Application: Ability to use learned material in new and concrete situations

Analysis: Ability to understand both content and structure and perform critical analysis

Synthesis: Ability to create new material or ideas for prior learning

Evaluation: Combination of other levels of ability so that expert judgment and valuing can be achieved. Merriam & Caffarella (1999).

Effective learning begins by giving attention to something and then proceeding to develop a value-system. To illustrate:

Receiving: Giving attention

Responding: Responding with interest

Valuing: Appreciating value of material or concept

Organization: Organizing and bringing together different values to form a conceptualization

Characterization: Internalizing the values so that they are a characteristic of the individual

Developing learning strategies: To achieve the desired result, the individual must perform certain learning activities. A learning strategy is an organized collection or series of tasks that should enable the trainee to achieve the learning objective. In determining and structuring learning events, the instructor should consider the following guidelines:

Whole-part -whole approach: Broad concepts should be presented first, followed with detailed attention to components. Then all components should again be considered as a whole. For example, first explain several budgeting techniques, such as standard, flexible, continuous, and zero-based. Then address the details of each technique. Finally, illustrate the total concept through a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the budgeting technique.

Known-to-unknown: Adult learners learn best when they progress in a systematic manner from, current knowledge to new knowledge, while relating each new concept or skill to past experience.

Problem- or issue-oriented: Learning will be more effective if the focus is on problems or issues that exercise analytical abilities rather than simple observation.

Trainee-centered: Trainee-centered learning activities ensure that the trainee actively participates, rather than observing the instructor. Such learning events are designed for maximum intensity and direct involvement of the trainee. Merriam & Caffarella, (1999)

Learning activity techniques: Several techniques for conducting learning activities exist. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. A few of the more useful techniques are described below:

Log diary: The trainee maintains a log of activities and observations used for self-analysis and joint review and critique with the preceptor or supervisor.

In-basket exercise: The trainee is routinely assigned items from the preceptor in-basket that requires decisions and /or actions. The trainee makes the decision, completes the action, or refers it to the instructor. The instructor and trainee then jointly critique the trainee actions.

Oral examinations: The preceptor or supervisor periodically conducts an oral examination to determine how effectively the trainee addresses hypothetical or real problems, current issues in healthcare management, or specific subjects, such as finance or marketing.

Management study: The trainee is assigned responsibility for designing and conducting an applied research investigation of a particular problem to learn systematic analysis of problems or opportunities.

Crisis management: The trainee is put under intense pressure by being assigned an existing or hypothetical crisis. Behavior is observed and critique by the preceptor or supervisor.

Management audit: The trainee is assigned the task of designing and conducting a management audit of a function or department. This teaches the trainee how to evaluate efficiency and effectiveness by comparing performance standards with actual performance.

Evaluation: Evaluation of both the trainee and the training program is a major responsibility of the instructor. Evaluation should be integrated and consistent, not simply accomplished only at the conclusion of training. Effective evaluations have several important characteristics.

Evaluation serves a primary purpose in providing information for making decisions about training.

Evaluations should be designed to support program improvement.

Evaluations should be timely.

Evaluations should take into account the overall objectives of the training.

Evaluation must be incorporated into the design of the training and be an integral part of the total experience for both the preceptor or supervisor and trainee, although it is the primary responsibility of the preceptor or supervisor. Evaluations must be conducted in a mutually supportive climate as a collaborative effort between preceptor or supervisor and trainee.

Effective evaluation is descriptive, not value-laden. It is categorized as follows:

Self-evaluation of process and achievement by the trainee.

Evaluation of the progress and specific achievements of the trainee by the instructor.

Evaluation of the training programme graduate by the first-placement supervisor

Evaluation of the overall training by the trainee

Evaluation of the training in general by all parties

Conclusion: Basic knowledge of adult learning concepts is essential to an instructor or supervisor, as is an understanding of characteristics and "laws" of adult learning, an understanding of how to develop learning objectives, and strategies. Evaluation should prove useful to instructor or supervisor in carrying out this important task. Effective learning does not simply occur; it must be planned and nurtured by the preceptor or supervisor who understands the adult learner; and help them become fully literate.

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