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**EXPLORING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN IMPROVING THE
QUALITY OF TRAINING OF NIGERIAN ADULT EDUCATORS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Abstract

The need to improve the quality of training received by prospective adult educators in Nigeria is very urgent, as the current training received may not make them efficient to satisfactorily serve their clients after graduation. This is because less importance is attached to learning by doing in their programme despite its importance in teaching and learning. It is against this fact that this paper advocates for exploring of experiential learning in order to improve the quality of training received by the Nigerian adult educators so as to acquire the competence in addressing the problems of their clients in the 21st century. The paper clarifies and establishes the link among concepts of adult education, adult educators, training and experiential learning. In addition, it x-rays prospects and challenges of the 21st century Nigerian adults and youths. It also overviews the current training received by students of Adult Education in Nigeria with a view to establishing the gaps that needs to be filled. The paper finally examines how experiential learning can be explored to improve the quality of training received by adult educators.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the rapid pace and complexity of economic, technological and cultural changes require women and men to adapt and re-adapt throughout their lives in the context of globalization. In this era where production structure is shifting towards

greater knowledge in manufacturing and agricultural growth for national, and regional incomes. The ability to create, manage, disseminate and innovate in knowledge production comes into play. (UNESCO, 2010). Similarly, Nigerian adults and youths are faced with a number of challenges that must be addressed if the country should move forward. Some of these problems include illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, low quality of life, maternal mortality, environmental degradation, industrial dispute, HIV/AIDS, corruption, political marginalization, leadership and followership problem, insecurity of lives and property, ethnic and religious crisis, among others. These situations have called for urgent attention in addressing the multitude of problems confronting adults and youths.

Adult education as an intervention has what it takes to groom and produce Nigerian adults and youths that will be able to withstand and face the challenges of the 21st century Nigeria. Adult education thus according to UNESCO (1997) becomes more than a right; it is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is a powerful concept for fostering ecologically sustainable development, for promoting democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development, and for building a world in which violence and conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace based on justice. The adult educator in the modern society is faced with awesome challenges of possessing the capabilities required to function adequately in the present condition of change (Bakare, 2011). The provision of relevant, useful, functional, effective and efficient adult and non-formal education programmes for the new generation in Nigeria depends on knowledge, skills, and societal commitment on the part of adult educators. The quality of adult learning programmes according to Youngman and Singh (2005) is influenced by the availability of competent personnel to develop, organize, promote, teach and evaluate modes of learning for adults. The initial and continuing training for adult educators is therefore of considerable importance. Adult educators are key agents in the implementation of adult learning, but their training needs are often neglected. The issue of training therefore deserves greater emphasis and attention. It is important to note that those who educate adults require a particular range of competencies to be effective. These competencies are based on a defined body of knowledge, skills and values, which include such elements as adult psychology, teaching strategies, programme planning, research methods, social and political analysis, sensitivity, empathy and tolerance. It is necessary to ensure that training meets a variety of needs, ranging from university based training to attending workshops that strengthen the skills of social activists.

The nature of training of adult educators requires that real life situations and experiences presented to them. Unfortunately, less importance is attached to practical experiences and real life situations of learning in the training of adult educators. Mpfungu and Youngman (2004) found out that Anglophone African adult educators' training programme is made up of 14 percent practical work at the Bachelor level, 1 to 2 percent at the Masters level and 0 percent of practical work at the PhD level. If the training

received by this calibre of adult educators is almost theoretical, then, meeting the needs of the 21st century Nigerian adults and youths may be very difficult. It is in the light of this that the paper advocates for exploration of experiential learning in improving the quality of training of Nigerian adult educators with a view to preparing them adequately to serve their clients satisfactorily.

Conceptual Clarification

The paper clarifies the under-listed concepts and draws their relationship as presented below:

- (1) Adult Education
- (2) The Adult Educator
- (3) Training and,
- (4) Experiential Learning

Adult Education: Adult education is often interchangeably used with “non-formal education”. Although, non-formal education is an umbrella term that accommodates all forms of education that is provided outside the formal system irrespective of the clients either adults or children, thus adult education becomes an important part of non-formal education because it is provided outside the formal school system for adults and under-served. Interestingly, adult education according to UNESCO (1997) denotes the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society. Adult education sees learning as a lifelong affair and the content of adult learning will vary according to the economic, social, environmental and cultural context, and the needs of the people in the societies in which they take place.

The Adult Educator: Adult educators work in a wide variety of organizational and social contexts as they organize, teach and support adults in their learning activities. Adult educators according to Biao (2005) are the persons trained to facilitate learning within the non-formal learning environment. In the words of Dighe (2005) the terms such as “adult educator”, “facilitator”, “literacy instructor,” grassroots worker,” “extension worker” and “volunteer instructor” are used to describe the functions of adult education. Basically, two broader categories of adult educators can be identified: professional adult educators and general adult educators. Professional adult educators are those who received initial and continuous training in the art and science of helping adults to learn while general adult educators are those who find themselves in helping adults without receiving training in facilitating adult learning. The importance of trained and skilled adult educators in influencing their client’s socio-economic status and achievement cannot be over-emphasized.

Training: The training of adult educators has generally been seen as a strategy for the improvement of the quality of education, a mechanism for the professional development

of educators, or a means of institutional development. It is also seen as a way to prepare educators to implement changes as they evolve. Training is regarded as a means for preparing, conforming, updating or re-centralizing and creating a space of autonomy for educators and a means of consolidating collective professionalism (Messina & Enriquez, 2005). Training of adult educators involves equipping them with competencies that prepare them to deliver in their efforts to help meeting the needs of their clients and the larger society satisfactorily. The nature of training of adult educators requires that real life situations and experiences are presented to them.

Experiential Learning: Experiential learning means learning from experience or learning by doing. This process immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or ways of thinking (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Experiential learning could be field-based experiences and classroom-based learning where opportunities are given to learners to experience situations and reflect on them with the view to solving problems. Kenny (2008) defines experiential learning as the process of creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses. The most prevalent understanding of experiential learning is based on reflection. The learner supposedly reflects on life experience, interprets, and stores these concepts that can be presented, expressed, and transferred to new situations. Experiences lead to learning if the participants understands what happened, sees patterns of observations, generalizes from those observations and understands how to use the generalization in a new situation. The expectation is that where prospective adult educators are trained in this manner they will be well equipped to meet the ever changing needs of their clients in the 21st century.

Overview of Training Programmes of Adult Educators in Nigeria

There are three main categories of adult educators who are trained in the art of helping adults to learn. These are: Those who work directly with adult learners, those who direct the programmes, and those at the professional leadership level (who generally help in furthering the development of the field) Coder (2002). The training of the three levels of adult educators identified above in Nigeria takes place in institutional settings (such as universities, polytechnics, institutes, colleges of education, educational centres, etc), either as initial training or continuing education and on-the job training through workshop, conferences, seminars, and so on.

The training programme contents of all Department of Adult Education in Nigerian universities are identical in that they all have core or compulsory courses and elective course. Some differences may be noticed around the core and elective courses (Biao, 2005). It is important to note that the nature of training of adult educators requires that real life situations and experience are presented to them. Unfortunately, some Nigerian institutions of higher learning where adult and non-formal education degree programmes are offered have less time devoted to practical experience for their students.

Hassan (2007) substantiated that Nigerian adult education university students undergo numerous class sessions secluded out-of town settings without the benefit of practice among the common people, for whom the knowledge disseminated is meant in the final analysis. He described this as the Ivory Tower concept of Education. Wringer and Carlson (2010) found that most college faculty teach by lecturing because few of them learned how to teach otherwise. The experience of the writers as teachers of adult education and their interactions with some colleagues in the Nigerian Universities showed that teaching in most of the Faculties of education is done in the traditional lecture method approach to teaching and learning. Emphasis in teaching is always on mastering of information and instruction in a 'banking' manner where learning is compartmentalized. Where this happens, learning does not reflect the real world and meaningful learning cannot take place. Certainly, if the training received by prospective adult educators is mostly theoretical and banking in nature, then, meeting the needs of their clients may be very difficult. This situation therefore, calls for concern if the prospective adult educators should deliver. It is on this note that experiential learning is explored to further improve the quality of training received by Nigerian prospective adult educators.

Need For Experiential Learning In Adult Education Management

In this approach to learning, teachers play the role of facilitators in the learning process. They help students to experience in a personal and immediate way the phenomena in their field of specialization. They assist in deducing the implications of the students' concepts in designing new "experiments" to test these implications through practical real-life experience (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

To bridge the gap in learning styles, adult educators must respond to pragmatic demands for relevance and the application of knowledge, while encouraging the reflective examination of experience that is necessary to refine old theories and to build new ones. In encouraging reflective observation, the teacher is often seen as an interpreter of action, which is however, a critical role in the learning process. In most cases, experiential learning can exist without a teacher and relates solely to the meaningful process of the individuals direct experience. However, through the gaining of knowledge an inherent process that occurs naturally, a genuine learning experience requires certain elements (Hin, 1999). According to Kolb (1984), knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences. Kolb states from an experience, the learner must have four abilities, namely:

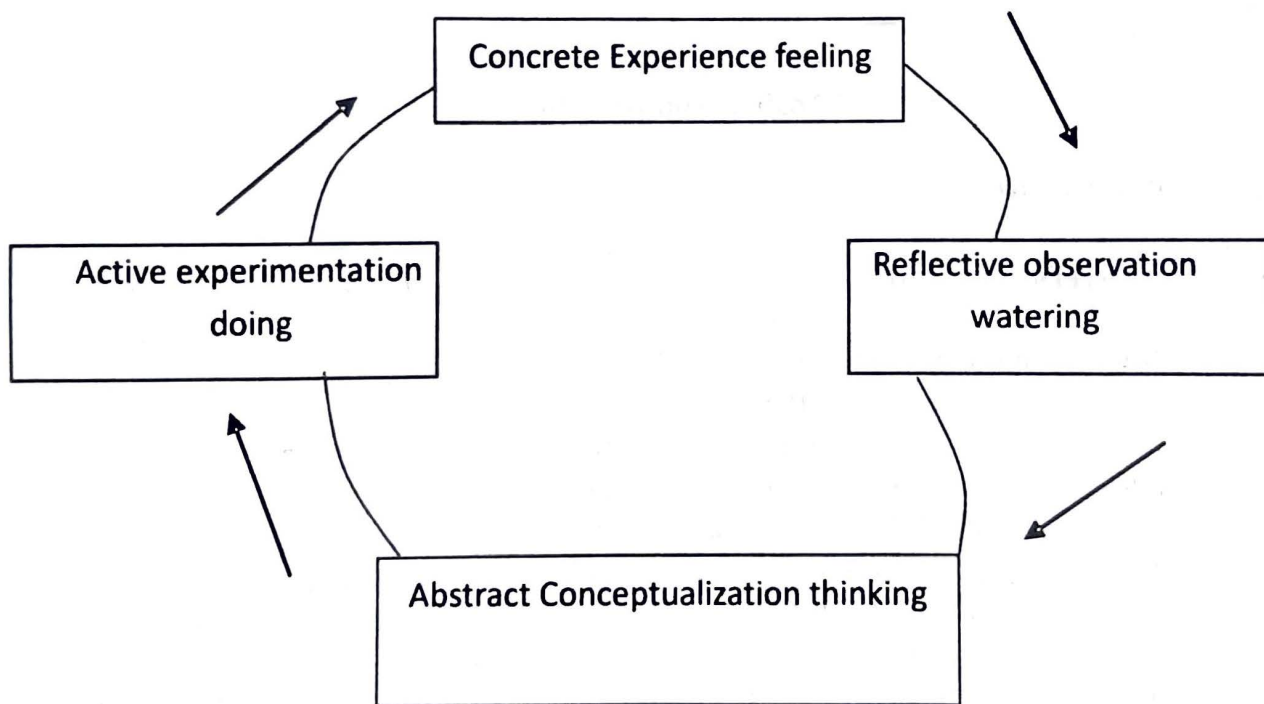
- The learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience;
- The learner must be able to reflect on the experience;
- The learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and
- The learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

Most adult educators understand the important role experience plays in the learning process especially the role of emotion and feelings in learning from experiential learning (Moon, 2004). Therefore, adult educators should ensure that they reflect on

learners' experiences using analytical skills, in order to gain better understanding of the new knowledge.

Strategical approach in the use of experiential learning for the training of adult educators

Learning remains significant in the process of training. Learning according to Kolb and Kolb (2005) is best facilitated by a process that draws out the learners beliefs and ideals about an issue so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas. To improve learning in a training session especially among adult learners, the primary focus should be on engaging learners in a process that best enhances their training. This process is based on experiential learning theory. It is a theory that gives experience a central role in human learning and development (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's experiential learning theory model identifies four modes of grasping experience. These modes are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimental modes. These four modes are also represented in Kolb's experiential learning cycle, as shown in the diagram.



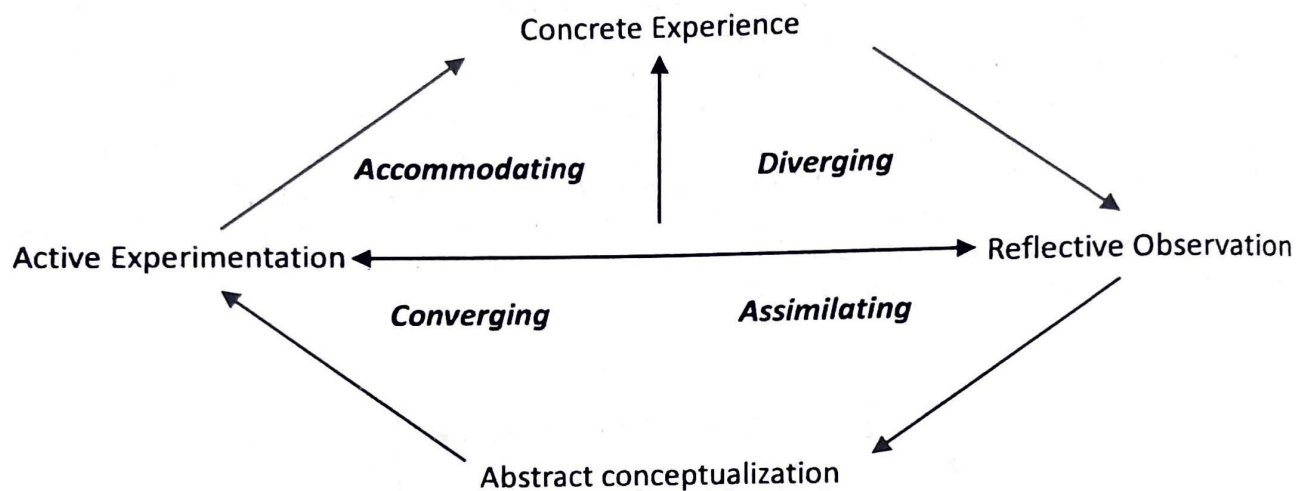
Source: Kolb and Fry (1975)

While Kolb and Fry (1975) stated that the learning process can begin at any one of the four modes within the cycle, Smith (2001) states that:

The learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the second step which is to understand the effects in the particular

instance so that if the same circumstances it would be possible to anticipate what would follow from the action. In this pattern, the third step would be to understand the general principle under which the particular instance falls.

A suitable strategy for experiential learning involves “adapting and adopting” teaching strategies and techniques to align with the learning style or intelligence level of the student. Thus, based on the preferences four learning styles becomes readily apparent which according to Kolb and Kolb (2005) are illustrated as follows:



Source: Kolb & Kolb (2005)

- a. **Converging** – Abstract conceptualization and Abstract experimentation are dominant learning style abilities. Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at finding pragmatic mythologies of working with ideas and theories and are inclined to be good at problem solving.
- b. **Diverging**- Concrete experience and reflective observation are dominant learning style abilities. Learning that prefers this style tend to perform well in situations that call for generation of ideas (Brainstorming)
- c. **Assimilating**- abstract conceptualization and reflective observation are dominant learning abilities. Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at understanding and organizing a range of information.
- d. **Accommodating**-Concrete Experimentation and Abstract Experimentation are dominant learning abilities. Learners that prefer this style tend to excel at hands on learning activities and enjoy completing new experiences and complex tasks (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

Prospects and challenges for Nigerian Adults and Youths in the 21st Century

The prospects and challenges of the new generation of Nigerian adults and youths run into volumes. Nzeneri (2010) acknowledged that the new Nigerian generation is characterized by an upsurge of information technology which dictates the pace of

development and technological transfer. Communication and infrastructural facilities such as telephones, fax and computer networking are tools that are turning our world into a global village, where classrooms may no longer play prominent roles as major access to education. Onyenemezu (2012) adds that inventions in technology have removed certain barriers in space and time as people can communicate, travel, market goods and services some kilometers away from where they are within minutes. The internet has been beneficial in mobilizing people globally at the grassroots to take a common stand on global issues of common concern.

Conclusion

Experiential learning process particularly in the training of adult educators in Nigeria, will serve their clients satisfactorily. The practicality of exploration of experiential learning in the training of adult educators in Nigeria lies in the competence of trainers in the art and science of experiential learning.

Recommendations

It is on this note that the following recommendations are offered on how best trainers of adult educators can be successful in exploring experiential learning as suggested by Wurdinger (2005):

- Trainers should use a major project or field experience to guide learning over the entire course. Having one major task to work on all semester motivates students to keep moving forward them a clear goal to focus on, and becomes the “driving force behind everything the student does in the class... when students know what they are aiming towards, they understand that each class has purpose because it provides a stepping-stone towards overall aim.”
- Trainers should use a combination of projects, classroom activities, and external experience to key course interesting and engaging while adding value to the overall process.
- Trainers should tie everything together. The class readings and lecturers should be directly related experiential activities. The readings and class activities should all be thought of as resources that will help the students complete their major project.
- Trainers should ensure activities are challenging, yet manageable. When students are given the responsibility of devising their own projects, the instructor must then make sure they are to complete them.
- Trainers should clear expectations for students. This could include assessment criteria, or examples of completed projects and activities from previous courses.
- Trainers should allow students the necessary time to “identify, clarify, and keep focused on their problems.

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