

THE ADULT EDUCATOR – BORN OR MADE?

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Abstract

The discourse looks into who an adult educator is and what is expected of him. Many people in the industry hardly recognize that they even fall into the category of an adult educator. Several studies also indicate that many are not fully aware of what is involved in being an adult educator. Majority did not believe that they needed extra training to handle adult learners. This erroneous belief has tremendous impact on the way adult education is practiced. Several recommendations were made and the necessity to train adult educators appropriately was re-emphasized.

Key words: method, adult educator, facilitator, adult learner

Introduction

The rapid change in societies as well as rapid technological advancement threatens to make man obsolete, along with other serious threats like depletion of natural resources, population explosion, atomic warfare and environmental pollution, among others. The adult educator, in the modern society is then faced with the awesome challenge of creating a crash course in re-arming the present adult population with the necessary competencies needed to function adequately in the present condition of perpetual change. He makes his work easier by working towards making the adult a self-directed learner so that the learner can continue to learn on his own throughout his life.

Important elements in the practice of adult education include the why – the objective of adult education; the what – which is the content; the where – which deals with the meeting place as well as the how (one of the most definitive in the educational process) which has to do with the delivery technique (Schugurensky, 2007). This is the aspect that mostly concerns the adult educator.

Appellation

There is often controversy in describing the person who helps the adult to learn. One of the difficulties in describing a professional adult educator is the fact that so many people are now working with adult learners in different capacities. We usually try to run away from 'self-fulfilling' labels like teacher, tutor, trainer, and instructor among others, which all arrogate a position of authority to the teacher. Corder (2002) also recognizes appellations like master or mistress, but they all do not portray what should be happening in the teaching/learning process in adult education. These array of often confusing terms for the adult educator mostly imply that the learner is a passive object being acted upon (which is contrary to the tenets of adult learning, according to humanists) and this probably contributes to the uncertainty of what appellation is appropriate in the field. Various terms are popularly utilized in Nigeria to describe a person who works in an educational capacity with adults. Thus, a person who finds himself working with adults, especially without prior training need to seek appropriate training either in institutions or in the short term, and when necessary, update the knowledge as often as needed.

The term adult educator itself may be deemed ambiguous as it does not immediately bring to mind a clear picture of the task involved in what the adult educator really does, not, for example, like saying someone is a lawyer, doctor, engineer etc. This is also because many people work in different capacities to help adults learn which means that the position of one educator may be quite different from another's. It however shows the vast number of opportunities that abound for people in this field.

Who is the adult educator?

There is hardly any consensus yet on what to call the person who helps the adult to learn. The adult educator is generally anyone who is involved in the business of helping adults learn. These would then include Adult education teachers, Literacy leaders, Supervisors, Group leaders, Training officers, Religious laymen, Business executives, and Lecturers, among others. This broad sweep is typical and probably explains why many do not even realize they should be classified as adult educators. This also includes generally, people who are also involved in planning and operating many programs with adult educational content. The adult educator has the

administrative role, teaching role, consultant and professional roles as well as other miscellaneous roles.

If the adult educator is one who has the responsibility of helping the adult to learn then it is not surprising that many people unknowingly fall into this. They may be unaware of the defined role that they are playing. Corder (2002) recognizes three categories of adult educators - those who work directly with adult learners, those who direct the programs, and those at the professional leadership level (who generally help in furthering the development of the field). Many people also find themselves professionally responsible for adult learners without having had any training directly related to adult education. Incidentally, a number of people working in the field have also arrived there "through the back door." This last phrase is often used in adult education circles to refer to the many people who find themselves professionally responsible for adult learners without having had any training directly related to adult education.

So the question remains who is the adult educator? Especially in Nigeria they are found to be field workers, Program planners, directors and managers, coordinators, professional teachers in training institutions and Researchers among others. Those recognized as adult educators are often put into categories: adult Basic Educator, adult Continuing Educator, Change Agent, Facilitator, Mentor, or Resource Person, among others. The more widely acceptable appellation nowadays is that of **facilitator** as a description of what the adult educator does. Facile (the French word for easy) describes the adult educator's role as that of one who smoothes the way to learning for the adult. He acts as a catalyst in ensuring that learning occurs. He also should be a reservoir of experience from where the adult learner can tap as needed.

The adult educator in Nigeria

A typical problem in Nigeria is that adult educators hardly want to be recognized as such because of the low level of esteem accorded the title. In the first place adult education itself is derogatively seen as that type of education for lazy or unintelligent people who are doing in the evening what they should have done in the daytime. Adult education itself does not enjoy much popularity and many people simply see it as consisting largely of Literacy Education. In addressing the status of adult

education and the opinion it enjoys in the society, Popoola (1998) says that only Literacy teachers see themselves as adult educators in Nigeria. Anyanwu (1997) adds that because of the low esteem accorded to the term adult educator, those in the field do not want to be called or seen as such.

The role of the adult educator is generally seen as simply successfully operating educational activities for matured individuals, measuring success by the attendance and enthusiasm level – it should be more than this though. The primary assignment of the adult educator should be to help the learner satisfy their needs and achieve their goals. The roles of the adult educator, according to Knowles cited in Bakare (1999) are:

- to help the learner diagnose their need (diagnostic)
- planning with the learner a sequence of events to reach their goal (planning)
- creating conditions that will make them want to learn (motivating)
- selecting the most effective method and technique (methodology)
- providing human and material resources to help achieve their aims (resources)
- helping the learners to measure the outcomes of their learning (evaluative)

According to Maslow, gratification of one level frees the man for the next level. So the adult educator is to help the learner with what is needed to fulfil each rung of the ladder in a quest to become all he can be.

In his book, Palmer (2007) posits that we teach who we are, as the human heart is the source of good teaching. He sees the teacher as the connector of reality to the subject matter and his students. Good teachers join the self, subject and student in the fabric of life, as they possess the capacity for connectedness. He sees the characteristics of the teacher as;

- creating conditions that will help students learn
- clear sense of identity with the culture
- humble integrity
- an educated heart – that will remain open to learning
- authentic respect for the students as complex beings
- aptitude for asking good questions
- willing to take risks

Corder (2002) agrees that it is the human element that pulls it together and that every good class is run by a good teacher. All these suggest that many good attributes of the teacher of children could equally be applied to the adult learning situation successfully.

Functions of the adult educator includes helping the learner diagnose his learning needs, helping to plan, creating conducive condition for learning, motivating, selecting the most effective method and techniques for producing desired learning outcomes, providing the necessary human and material resources to support and helping the learners evaluate their achievement. The adult educator is to help the learner satisfy his needs and achieve his set goals. He is also to help him develop the attitude that learning is a lifelong process and to acquire the skills for self-directed learning. He is therefore, a leader, inspiration, motivator, counsellor, friend, resource person, guide, all wrapped in one (which is not fully portrayed in terms like instructor, trainer etc).

The mission of the adult educator has currently become more complex and versatile, thus he needs more preparation to do a good job. It is no longer tenable to assume as before that the same technique and method used for children can be equally effective for adults. There is a uniqueness that sets the adult learner apart, especially in the learning milieu, as posited by Malcolm Knowles. Therefore, good adult educators do not just happen any more – they get to be so by learning the principles and techniques necessary to become a good adult educator. Many times the situation often meant getting the necessary training and knowledge either through formalized programs or through intensive self-study efforts. The discerning adult educator must view himself as participating in a dialogue with equals when dealing with the adult learner. He should seek to genuinely enter into personal relationships with the learner and not the teacher/pupil prescribed role. Have empathy, be non-judgemental, understanding of intellectual and emotional from learner's perspective.

The adult learner

An adult thinks and acts differently from a child and should be treated as such even if there are elements of andragogy in the pedagogy. The adult is regarded as such because of age, responsibility, maturity, etc. Adults have these attributes, are above

the age of compulsory schooling, experienced, work, have financial, domestic and family responsibilities, are reasonably independent, able to make their own judgement, among others. The adult learner therefore brings to the classroom knowledge, experience and commitment. They may initially overcompensate out of anxiety and nervousness in an unfamiliar or formal setting, especially when they re-enter learning. They may not be able to participate until they feel valued, at ease, relaxed etc. If the adult is truly going to be a self-directing learner, he is going to wind up doing a lot of the learning on his own which leaves room for a lot of Informal learning also, either self-taught, reading manuals or imitating etc. Some adults had good experience at school and they are glad to keep on learning but for many whose experience was fraught with puberty, bullying, examination and peer pressure; the damage thus created can only be repaired by adult education.

The adult educator must help the adult to learn by determining through discussion rather than tests, the learner's needs and interests; involving them in discussions about modifying goals etc. He should also allow for periodic review of goals and objectives, and provide access to resources and materials, must always acknowledge the accumulation of experience of the adult as a resource for learning through collaboration, while allowing for individual differences, cognitive and learning style, physiology, culture and personality. On the whole, if one listens to the learners, they will teach what one needs to know to optimize their learning opportunities. The typical adult learner would like to integrate learning into their life work and experience. They are self directing and wish to be responsible for their lives and decisions; they also have experience which they prefer to integrate into the learning activity. Typical problems faced by adult learners include - time constraints, family problems, financial inadequacies, environmental problems, psychological stress as well as physical and physiological challenges, etc. The Nigerian situation is further exacerbated by the low dignity accorded to adult education

Adult educators and methods

Generally adult educators all tend to use the Lecture mostly as was revealed in a study in by Bakare (1999). It turns out many do not know about other methods which is another reason why specific training is advocated. Though instinctively adult educators use some other methods, they may not be able to identify these methods.

They often use methods like Discussion or an adaptation of Buzz, Counselling etc or a combination of all at times but the more prominent method is ostensibly the Lecture method. Because the adult class is often heterogeneous, it is often advisable to use mixed methods in order to give everyone a chance to learn, as they all learn differently. There are those who learn better in groups and some alone. The target is always to try and give a good lesson. The Lecture then is the most tested and reliable way of getting information across to a large group of people fast. However, an overdependence on it is not advisable. Adult educators need to stop being the sage on stage and more of the guide on the side. Corder (2002) advocates Lecturette instead. Explanation too is probably an extension of the Lecture but different from Discussion. Demonstrations are popular in skill-based subjects like a practical Lecture. It is important to remember to let the adult practicalize, experience or DO in order to learn. Other learner-centred methods like Simulation, Role-Play, Games as categorised by Okenimkpe (2003) are also appropriate. It is also impossible to shy away from computerised education for the adult learner nowadays as the latest method of teaching/learning in adult education.

In adult education, the amount of teacher control, teaching, should not outweigh the amount of student control. Lecturing should be eschewed as the Lecture method tends to make the learner dependent on the adult educator and it also de-emphasises dialogue. The atmosphere must be relaxed and humour can be used as a learning stimulus. There must be respect for the learners and flexibility in the procedure. The organization must ensure there is good classroom arrangement and enthusiasm must be encouraged and nervousness dispelled. Students' contribution must not be outrightly rejected, tact is important. Inter-student discussion must be allowed and the facilitator must be aware of and note students' reaction. The system of evaluation also plays an important role. There must be organised presentation of ideas. Learners must be treated as equals and there should be constant expression of approval of their work.

The fact that self-directed learning is encouraged does not mean that the adult educator will abdicate his role entirely. Appropriate training for teachers, group leaders, supervisors etc is vital because the effective adult educator makes the job

look easy. Ideally the teacher should use different types of communication in the class

- discussion (in face-to-face or via mail)
- argument (making a case for a particular viewpoint)
- inquiry teaching (student constructed response to posed questions)
- brainstorming (generating ideas without attempting to critique them)

The adult educator also needs to learn how to teach the same thing over and over without seeming to be repetitive which is crucial to the adult's memory. Adults learn in different ways or styles, nonetheless, the adult educator must appeal to the entire gamut. The adult learner will always need help and so the job of the adult educator is never totally redundant.

Training of adult educators

Most of the adult educators currently in the field have had very little specific training related to the adult as learner. Those who did had acquired the initial and additional training/knowledge through formalized programs or through intensive self-study efforts. One very common means of obtaining help in working with the adult learner is through short-term Workshops, often for two or three weeks and sometimes for graduate credit. These Workshops provide a concentrated exposure to some aspect of adult education. The largest share of such Workshops is usually concentrated on the improvement of skills, such as in selecting appropriate methods and materials for the adult learner, designing instructional settings for adults, and developing more effective communication skills in working with the independently inclined adult person. Others are through Seminars and Conferences. Very few adult educators actually possess specific certificates in adult education from formalized institutions. Most certificates are simply in the field of education and teacher training, which, at best qualifies people to teach the young. Also, those with these diplomas, assume that there are equipped enough to also work with adults. Unfortunately, they then inappropriately transfer what they know about teaching children to 'teaching' adults too.

Teachers for children are trained and undergo rigorous on-the-job practicum experiences, supervisors provide feedback that should lead to the improvement of their teaching skills and elimination of what they are doing wrong. They also monitor the progress of student teachers over a course of two lots of practicum. This is not a readily seen conduct in the adult education world. Adult educators too should be trained properly. After all, it's been said that the only way to get rid of bad teachers is to make good ones especially since teaching skills learnt in the classroom may not automatically translate positively into the teaching situation. There are currently also a whole slew of gadgets out there that could help transform the teaching/learning experience for the adult learner. The adult educator must therefore be adequately trained to help the adult to learn optimally.

It is often difficult to distinguish between a teacher who simply has the adult as student and a teacher who is trained specifically to facilitate learning for the adult as student. Because the field of adult education is in an evolving stage compared to most other professions, probably the largest share of adult education teachers or trainers have had very little specific training related to the adult as learner. Hopefully, as the field matures, as it gains better financial support, and as adult teacher-training programs are more fully developed, this situation can be reversed. We also do not seem to be giving enough attention to the value of Informal Adult education. If we see adult education as largely planned, we are not giving what is learned inadvertently the recognition it deserves.

Training is also appropriate for volunteer and other pseudo-professional adult educators. It is suggested that even teachers of youth should be exposed to some level of adult education as andragogy itself is now seen as a continuum rather than being specifically applicable to adults only. They should also try to belong to adult education associations to keep abreast of new developments in the field.

Qualities of the adult educator

Teaching itself is the wide and extensive range of professional duties performed by teachers. At the core of a teacher's role is the intention of promoting learning for the learner. The adult educator often sees a huge part of his duty as that of teaching.

The adult educator must remove himself from the tendency to teach and focus more on helping the adult to learn and become more self-directing.

Qualities of a good teacher include a set of "core qualities" that are rather obvious in good teachers. Others are a set of specific skills that are developed by good teachers like knowledge, good communication skills and respect. Many of the good qualities are developed over time by the adult educator, like patience and preparedness. Other good teacher attributes include hard work and a genuine interest in helping the adult learner. As a teacher, one will likely, at some point, take on the role of communicator, disciplinarian, conveyor of information, educator, classroom manager, counsellor, member of many teams and groups, decision-maker, role-model, and surrogate parent. A teacher's day does not necessarily end when class does because he will be involved in after school activities like: meetings, committees, assisting students, grading homework, assignments, and projects, and calling parents. This means that the teacher will often be juggling many tasks and be required to have the skills and understanding to deal with a variety of situations. In the case of adult learners the teacher's presence is required even more because of the peculiar situation of the adult learner, who is ambivalent as well as busy with other responsibilities among others.

Adult educators must work at having the patience to explain things, stay in control while dealing with everyone like parents, co-workers, students and administrators. They should have a sense of humour because using humour while teaching can be a powerfully effective strategy; they should be fair-minded as it is necessary to evaluate students based on performance, not personal qualities; they need common sense and must have the ability to quickly assess a situation and make an appropriate decision; teachers should have command of a broad range as well as an in-depth knowledge of a variety of subject matter. Teachers should be good managers of time as the most precious resource; they should lead or follow as the situation demands even if clearly a leader in the classroom.

There is little doubt that an adult educator who does not have the required knowledge of the adult learner negatively affects the learning environment. This is because the disadvantaged adult learner may become discouraged if the adult educator fails to

treat him as an adult. This is why a self-motivated, mature adults may refuse to use available services from adult educators or organized adult education programs if they sense that they will be treated like children in the teaching/learning experience. The greatest disservice that can be done to the adult learner is to treat him like a child. The fact that many questions regarding adult learning remain largely unanswered further buttresses the importance of training for adult educators and for them to understand how to facilitate, rather than 'teach' the learning adult. So, are adult educators born or made? Even if it is to be believed that adult educators are born, there is also the need to there is room for them to be 'made' as being a good adult educator requires a certain level of preparedness. Training is always relevant and useful. The reality of the matter is that people still need to have a penchant or at least a nugget that will be fanned into flames by the training which suggests that there must be a natural interest or affinity for the job to begin with.

The bicycle analogy

The simplest analogy of the duty of an adult educator can be illustrated with the scenario of a child learning to ride a bicycle and is being helped by the father. The adult educator is the one holding the bicycle and the adult is the frightened child who is yet unaware of his ability to do it by himself. His cries of 'please don't let go' encapsulates the adult learner's insecurities. The adult educator's work is done when the child's cries of 'don't let go' is welcomed with the awesome power that follows the child discovering that the parent already let go for the last one hundred yards unbeknownst to him. The empowerment comes from the realization that he actually could do it by himself after the parent let go of him which also marks the beginning of independence as well as self-directedness. The adult educator's job is then well done when he can see the adult to the point where he becomes an independent learner. If adult education is truly to be from cradle to the grave then the adult educator cannot possibly keep holding to the adult learner's bicycle for life - this will be a disservice to both. There has to come a point when the adult must fully move to being self directing in his life. The best way of being an adult educator is for the leader to be invisible but help the work along in such a way that when it is completed the learners can look back and say that they did the work themselves.

The current adult educators will certainly need to be skilled at solving various kinds of problems, especially the many problems that emerge because of growth and societal change. Adult education leaders frequently will need to be more social-action or change-agent oriented if they are to help adults become better equipped to solve various societal problems. Finally, educators and trainers of adults must become technologically adept to ensure the programs they offer meet the needs and expectations of learners.

The future adult educator

The awareness of adult education opportunities has hopefully increased; those professionally trained in adult education have also increased, providing a large group of people with an understanding of the adult learner and knowledge of how to develop effective programs for such learners. The field itself is still relatively new. Also, the idea of constantly finding out (as opposed to the erstwhile mere knowing) which translates into lifelong education is a new line of preaching in education today. The new adult educator is not an amateur or a child teacher tossed into the arena at the learning adult but a trained and competent specialist or at least should be or aspire to become one. Training for this job can be obtained in many ways and in many places either through short term courses, Seminars and Workshops, through literature, programs in higher institutions or through experience.

Future adult educators will certainly need to be skilled at solving various kinds of problems, especially the many problems that emerge because of growth and societal change. Adult education leaders frequently will need to be more social-action or change-agent oriented if they are to help adults become better equipped to solve various societal problems. Finally, educators and trainers of adults must become technologically adept to ensure the programs they offer meet the needs and expectations of learners. Future professional adult educators need to be very familiar with technology as this is the trend in the field of education now. They need to be conversant with latest technologies in the field of education in order to best help adult learners in varied ways and in line with the tenet of lifelong education.

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