

Chapter #6

THE REALITIES OF TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS AT THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Teaching adult learners, though challenging, can also be exciting and fulfilling when the right teaching methods are applied. This chapter discusses the issue of lifelong adult education in Botswana's institutions of higher learning. It goes on to examine the challenges and the nature of the teaching and learning process in adult education, while also examining the experiences of adult learners and the teachers of adult learners. The chapter further discusses the methods which can be used to enhance the teaching of adults. A qualitative research approach was used in this research. With the use of semi-structured interview questions, ten teachers of adult learners were interviewed, while twenty adult learners were interviewed through the focus group discussions. Adult learners come to class with a wealth of knowledge, life experience, and some challenges too. The teachers of adult learners should therefore, embrace and apply the right teaching methodologies in order to overcome the challenges of teaching adult learners so as to facilitate effective teaching and learning in an adult education class.

Keywords: adult learners, teaching, lifelong learning, challenges, higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adult education has gained prominence in the 21st century and Africa as a continent has not been left out in this quest for the acquisition of knowledge. Contemporary higher education in Africa has witnessed a tremendous increase in student enrolment over the years and the adult learners are not left out in this endeavor to acquire knowledge and qualifications at the higher education level. More and more adult learners are embracing education at a higher level, which is quite demanding on the teachers of adults and the learners themselves. Even though, the adult educators have some basic skills of teaching adult learners, because, they teach some regular students who are young adults, they still have the need to master the right approaches for teaching and handling much older adult students. The institutions of higher learning have the important responsibility to focus on the different ways of teaching the different ages of the students they enroll. This is very crucial to ensure the attainment of desirable learning outcomes in the teaching and learning process.

Adult learners in the context of this chapter are a diverse group of learners whose ages range from 25 years and above. They typically comprise of people with a wide range of abilities, educational and life experiences, and diverse cultural backgrounds. Adult education here refers to a field of educational practice in higher education which is organized to address the learning needs of persons whose cultural, socio-economic and political roles define them as adult students, mature and nontraditional. Adult education helps to promote learning in adulthood and empowers adults to live a successful life. It therefore, contributes immensely towards increasing competence and a sense of personal

fulfillment in the lives of adults and their relationship with other people. Most adults would prefer to pursue their academic studies on a part-time basis, while maintaining alternative instructional delivery systems, such as online learning, blended and distance learning or learning by correspondence (Jarvis, 1995; Maruatona, 2006).

This chapter focuses on examining the methods of teaching adults in two selected tertiary institutions in Botswana. It examines the experiences of adult learners, the challenges faced by teachers of adult learners and the approaches to be used in order to encourage and attain effective teaching and learning in an adult education class. It discusses adult lifelong education aimed at acquiring degree qualifications for continuous professional development. The need for education and the quest for an improved standard of living associated with being educated, have driven adults to continuously upgrade and improve themselves. In the context of this chapter, lifelong education covers the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and even informal learning activities. Adult lifelong learning enables adult learners to acquire that extra and relevant knowledge geared towards the improvement of their professional qualifications. Consequently, the adult learners develop positive attitudes and skills needed for progress and self-fulfillment in all aspects of life (Hall, 2001; Gouthro, 2007).

1.1. Adult Basic Education and Lifelong Education

Basic education is not limited to children. The goals of the Jomtien conference (1990) and Dakar conference (2000) emphasized the provision of basic education to children, youth and adults. In promoting Basic Education for All (EFA), the goals of the Jomtien conference addressed the need for a reduction in the adult illiteracy rate to about one-half of its 1990 level by the year 2000. Emphasis was laid on the promotion of female literacy, in order to reduce the current disparity between the male and female illiteracy rates. The Dakar goals called for a 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy by the year 2015. This is geared towards alleviating the disparity between male and female literacy rates, and the encouragement of equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults (Jomtien, 1990; Dakar, 2000).

In the context of this chapter, adult basic education is education designed to teach adults the basics, foundations or essentials. It is a form of education designed to meet adults' basic learning needs for human fulfillment and fundamental educational development. Adult basic education may include: learning how to read and write, recognizing the importance of documents such as maps and catalogues, making simple compilations and arithmetic. On the other hand, adult lifelong learning goes beyond basic education. It involves: going to college at an adult age, returning to college to finish or complete a degree, working toward a university degree, being involved in continuous professional development and taking classes as an adult for the sake of keeping oneself busy (Collins, 1991; Ozuah, 2005). This study is centred around adult lifelong learning at a higher education level. It hinges on the realities of teaching and learning in adult classes in a country in Africa.

2. BACKGROUND/THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Adult Learning Theory (Principles)

The general belief is that adults learn differently from children. There are propositions concerning adult learning which have influenced the art of teaching and learning in higher education (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009). Adult learning theories are essential in understanding how adults learn and the educational implications thereof. Adult learners are

self-directed, problem oriented, internally motivated and independent learners (Knowles, 1984; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007).

Andragogy is simply the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles 1984). Although andragogy has been criticized by some teachers, it is still very useful in the field of adult education. Many university teachers acknowledge that they have seen the characteristics of adult learning principles being manifested by their learners. The theory of Andragogy was based on six main principles, namely:

- a) Self-concept: adult learners are self-directed, independent and autonomous
- b) Experience: Adults learn by drawing from their previous experiences
- c) Readiness: Adults are ready to learn what they feel they need to learn
- d) Orientation to learning: Adults believe their learning should be problem-centred, task-oriented and life-long/focused
- e) Internal motivation: Adults are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated
- f) Need to know: Adults are interested in knowing the value of learning and the need for them to learn (Caffarella et al, 2007; Forest and Peterson, 2006).

The theory of Andragogy has, to a large extent, influenced teaching and learning, especially in higher education. Many types of learning used at a higher education level, such as experiential learning, student autonomy, discussions and self – directed learning, are derived from the principles of adult learning. The principles of adult learning emphasize that adult learners like planning and carrying out their own learning experiences, that they would like to contribute to the learning experience as much as they deem it fit; that they enjoy being involved in assessing their own personal goals against their goals of learning; and that they want an environment of respect , recognition and freedom when they learn.

Andragogy has become popular among educators and researchers worldwide, being adopted by some European countries such as Germany, England, Poland, France, Finland, Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Hungary and Yugoslavia. Interestingly, the andragogical approach has been recognized and adopted in disciplines such as education, medicine, management, criminal justice education, among others (Savicevic, 1991; Bolton, 2006; Bedi, 2004; and Birzer, 2004). The experiential learning principles derived from andragogical approach to teaching, makes it very useful to adult learners in various fields of study at the higher education level. Andragogy improves the interaction between the learners and facilitators, as they work together as partners, establishing trust and rapport to enhance self-awareness in the learners.

Emphasizing on the importance of andragogical theory to teachers and trainers of adult learners, Merriam (2001) states that, Andragogy contributes to the understanding of how adults learn, the context and process of learning. It is a theory of adult education, technology of adult learning and method of adult education. Bedi (2004) asserts that, Andragogy helps educators to understand their learners more and be able to encourage learners to realize their innate potentials. Although Andragogy has been criticized by some theorists, it remains a guiding principle in the teaching of adult learners. Andragogy has a profound influence on the teaching of adult learners in many parts of the world (Cretchely and Castle, 2001) as evidenced by the inclusion of adult education in the curricular of many countries .

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to carry out this research. It involved the use of interpretive methodologies to discuss the phenomenon of teaching adult learners. The use of a qualitative research approach made it possible for the participants to explain and give their own interpretations of the phenomenon from their own subjective position. (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Weirisma, 2009) posit that qualitative research gives opportunities for exploratory and descriptive research that assumes the value of context and setting, and allows the researcher to experience a deeper understanding of the participants. Similarly, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) state that qualitative research gives room for the participants to freely express themselves and interpret the phenomenon under investigation. The question of how easy it is to teach adult learners in Botswana can best be researched by the use of a qualitative approach, which allows for an in-depth and detailed description of events. Structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis were utilized as data collection instruments.

This research was informed by the adult learners that the author taught at the post graduate level in two institutions of higher learning in Botswana. The time period covered by the study is from 2009 – 2014, a time during which I experienced the difficulties of being an adult learner myself, and a tutor and teacher of adult learners. Due to time and financial constraints this research was limited to the institutions in the capital city of Botswana, which is Gaborone, where I currently reside and have worked in the past ten years.

A total of ten lecturers of adult learners were interviewed. The interview questions centred around their experiences in teaching adult learners , the challenges of being a teacher of adults, and the approaches to be used to encourage effective teaching and learning in an adult education class. Through the use of focus group interviews, twenty adult learners were interviewed. The focus group interviews focused on the challenges and advantages of being an adult learner. The essence of the focus group interviews was to find out from adult learners, how challenging and worthwhile it is to acquire qualifications as adult learners. Most of the adult learners combine work and study, along with other personal and community commitments. As such, it was of great importance to get a sense of their own views, as regards the issue of adult teaching and learning.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study have been recorded in three sub-sections. In sub-section one, the experiences of adult learners are discussed. Sub-section two focuses on the challenges of teaching adult learners at a higher education level, while sub-section three discusses the approaches to be used to encourage effective teaching and learning in an adult education class.

4.1. Being an Adult Learner

In Botswana, adult learners constitute a substantial proportion of students at tertiary level. These learners enroll in institutions of higher learning for different reasons. They are inspired either by the acquisition of qualifications that will help them boost their socio-economic status, improve their chances of getting well-paid jobs in the labor market, to get promoted to better positions while on the job, or simply to acquire more knowledge.

How does it feel to be an adult learner? What are the ups and downs experienced by adult learners? From the perspectives of adult learners that I interviewed during this study,

the need to acquire more qualifications as adult learners emanate from the premise that, the more highly educated one is, the better the chances of getting better paying jobs. In this day and age of economic meltdowns, people want to earn higher education qualifications either as part of continuous professional development to keep them on the job or to get very good jobs to guarantee them the earning of higher incomes. Furthermore, the adult learners interviewed, indicated that being an adult learner is quite encouraging. Factors such as being mature, experienced and focused, along with the capacity to effectively comprehend subject matter, were highlighted as reasons why being an adult learner is rewarding. The respondents noted that as adult learners, they are driven to take their studies seriously, since they are responsible for paying their own fees and they have a clear understanding of why they have chosen to pursue further qualifications. They are not forced to seek further education in most cases, so, they are focus driven. It is therefore, their ultimate desire to work hard and achieve. This is a different scenario from young learners, some of whom are still too young to decipher what exactly they will gain from higher education qualifications. It is even worse with young learners, who do not know the consequences of not taking their studies seriously or care about the effects of low academic achievements at a higher education level.

Adult learning also comes with a number of challenges for the adult learner. When asked about the challenges involved in adult learning, the adult learners expressed the view that, it is not easy to be an adult learner. Adult learning involves making a lot of sacrifices in terms of time management, in order to grapple with other commitments, which the adult learner has. Most adult learners are employed as full-time staff in their respective places of work. The result is that majority struggle as they combine work, family responsibilities and their studies. Assignments and examinations are part of their study obligations on the academic front, while on the social side of things; many have the usual social activities which include attending weddings, meetings, school plays or special events for their children. The responses revealed that it is inevitable that these activities will at times clash with their hours of study and other academic obligations. As one of them stated, "I live in my home village, work and attend lectures, it is very tiring to combine school, work and social obligations."

Apart from time-management and clashing of events, other challenges of life affect adult learners as they struggle to make ends meet. Health problems, financial problems and a limited attention span, due to high stress levels, can be a severe source of hindrance to effective learning by adult learners. The demands from various activities which some adult learners engage in, make them too exhausted to effectively put in their best in their studies.

In this day of the 'digital natives', adult learners face challenges of adapting to the use of new technology. Some of the adult learners that I interviewed expressed their views on the difficulties they face in getting used to the introduction of new instructional technology. New technology comes with new demands and some adults are 'techno-phobic'. The 21st century adult learner has these issues to contend with, and attempts must be made to establish solutions to the problems; if the adult learner is to succeed in the academic goal he/she is aiming at. This, in itself, is not an easy nut to crack. One of the interviewees said, "I do not like technology, but I am forced by circumstances to use it, so, it is not easy at all."

4.2. Teaching Adult Learners: Really Challenging?

Teaching Adult learners can be very interesting and quite challenging at the same time. Adult learners bringing a wealth of knowledge and information to the class which enhances the process of teaching and learning. In most cases where adult learners take their

academic work seriously, they bring in different forms of learning to the classroom and their teachers can learn from them, they can make the teaching and learning environments very lively. The teacher of adult learners therefore, should be prepared psychologically, to face the advantages and disadvantages of teaching adult learners. The first step should be to have a very good understanding of the adult learners and, consequently, direct teaching to their needs.

Findings from the study indicate that, one of the major challenges experienced by the teacher of adult learners is the frustration caused by adult learners not having enough time to attend to school work because of the many commitments they are faced with. The teachers of the adult learners that were interviewed indicated that lack of time on the part of most adult learners, is a major constraint. In cases where the adults are expected to attend classes regularly, one finds it difficult to have a full class attendance. They miss classes and expect the teachers to understand and bear with them. Some adult learners insist that since they are adult learners, class attendance should not be made compulsory for them. This is a very big challenge and it is quite a concern.

Adult learners also have the tendency of not meeting deadlines for the submission of their assignments. The respondents indicated that most of their adult learners have the tendency of asking for extended deadline dates because they are unable to meet the stipulated deadlines. While this is a common problem experienced in teaching adult learners, some adult learners do take their assignments seriously. It depends on the goal and target of the adult learner. What exactly does the adult learner need the knowledge and qualifications to be earned from the institution of higher learning for? Is the adult studying to improve his/her standard of living or studying simply to gain recognition in the society? These of course, are some of the pertinent questions which address the seriousness or lack of commitment on the part of the adult learner. Studies have shown that adult learners are mostly self-directed and they prefer a learning environment that is practical and relevant to their academic needs and desires. The self-directed learning of the adult tends to be systematic and independent, with minimal focus on the instructor or the classroom. The self-directed learner chooses the mode of learning that suits him or her. Where these attributes are lacking, the learners lose interest and sometimes withdraw from the institution (Weimer, 2003; Merriam, 2001). It is therefore necessary, that the teacher of the adult learners, know the salient characteristics of their learners and how to address the situations.

Due to the fact that adult learners come to class with a wealth of life experience and knowledge, it could be a plus or a minus for the teacher of adults. A plus, because it would be easy to teach them, as they comprehend the subject matter well and contribute meaningfully during the teaching and learning process. Most adults like to be appreciated and respected by their teachers. They see themselves as equal to their teachers. If their teachers understand them from this perspective and accord them the respect and recognition that they seek, then all will be fine. On the other hand, if the teachers try to exert too much authority over the adult learners, problems often do arise.

Some adult learners have attitude problems and they bring this to the teaching and learning environment. While some adult learners get sponsorship to pursue their studies, majority of them pay their own fees and have other financial commitments to meet. These social and personal problems take their toll on adult learners and negatively affect the way they handle the teaching and learning process. They want value for their money and time, and the teachers are the direct victims of their discomfort and complaints.

Despite all the challenges and complexities associated with the teaching of adult learners; one cannot deny the fact that the maturity, sense of responsibility and focus found in some adult learners, enhance teaching and learning. In this day of the use of technology

in teaching and learning, some adult learners struggle to embrace the introduction of new technology. While some take long to master the use of modern technology, others are techno-phobic. At the university where I teach, new technology teaching aids such as Blackboard and Turn-it-in are used to enhance teaching and learning. While some adult learners are happy and eager to embrace new technologies some complain that they do not like technology.

4.3. Towards Effective Teaching and Learning for Adults

Teaching adults can be made easier and more worthwhile if the teachers of adults could use the right approaches when teaching adult learners. In this regard, the teachers should find out why the adult learners enrolled for the course of study and their different backgrounds. This will guide them to figure out the expectations of the adult learners and how to help them realize their goals. The idea of establishing a learning contract with the adult learners would help each party understand the expectations from the onset. It is also very important for the teachers of adults to get acquainted with the interests of various students and be able to develop the assessment techniques suitable for the learning styles of the learners. The learning environment should enhance, mutual respect, trust, comfort and collaboration.

Findings from the study indicate that adult learners do not like to be treated like children. Teachers should accord them the respect they deserve, and allow them to be interactive during lessons. When they are involved in the learning process, they should be allowed to own the session, to develop a sense of belonging and confidence. The teacher should help to establish an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, while taking cognizance of individual differences among learners. Adult learners would enjoy a well organized classroom, free from noise and distractions. Teachers used to motivate adult learners to learn, because, they learn effectively when they want to fulfill their inner desires, develop new skill and improve professional competence.

Discussion groups should be used to encourage adults to participate actively during lessons. The use of tutorial groups will go a long way in bringing out the best from the adult learners. Opportunities should be provided for the adult learners to work together and share different ideas in group discussions. Sharing their experiences with one another will contribute effectively in the enhancement of teaching and learning for the adult learners. However, teachers are advised to be cautious when using discussions, to avoid a situation where the discussions will be taken out of the context of the topic at hand. Effectively, the topic should be introduced and facilitated by the teacher as the right time. Allowing adult learners to share the stories of their experiences with their course mates brings the lesson to life and creates a feeling of collegiality amongst them; the quiet students will be encouraged to interact with their course mates.

It is important to direct adult learners to the right resources for effective teaching and learning. The use of modern technology such as the Blackboard, Moodle, ClickUP, among others will help adult learners to access education from any part of the world. Efforts should be made to help them familiarize with the use of modern technology. It is imperative that teachers of adults understand the challenges that the adult learners face and encourage them to forge ahead. They should be positively reinforced whenever they do well, and politely corrected when they are at fault.

Discovery learning should be used to help adult learners develop critical thinking skills. Teaching and learning should be geared towards allowing the adult learner to have a critical reflection of what learning is and the different perceptions of content learned. By creating an atmosphere where the adult learner is appreciated and allowed to take

control of his/her own learning, the teacher develops a relationship of trust, respect and cordiality between him/her and the learners. The teachers should be facilitators of learning and not controllers, in order to encourage effective teaching and learning in an adult education class.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It has been established through this research that teaching adult learners at a higher education level can be both exciting and demanding. The teacher of adults should put into considerations the fact that adult learners come to class with a lot of experiences. They should be provided with the right environment to enable them enjoy the learning and teaching process. This research makes a major contribution to the body of knowledge in the area of teaching adult learners at a higher education level in Botswana. It is a qualitative study and cannot be easily generalized. Perhaps, future researches could be carried out in other parts of the world, to provide a comparative analysis of the realities of teaching adult learners at the higher education level.

6. CONCLUSION

Findings from this study indicate that adult learners engage in lifelong learning for different reasons. The main driving force in enrolling as an adult learner comes from the desire to acquire more advanced qualifications, in order to improve the learner's standard of living. Adult education comes with challenges for the learners and the teachers. The learners have time constraints, financial difficulties, societal and family commitments, and the use of modern technology for learning, as problems to contend with. The teachers of adults have to face the challenges of the overbearing attitudes of some learners.

Teaching adult learners can be very rewarding. The adult learners are focused and well determined. They bring in a wealth of knowledge and life experience to the classroom. All the teacher needs to do is to tap into the positive aspects of adult learners, establish a good rapport, engage them in classroom discussions and bring out the best in them. Teachers of adult learners should give them opportunities of being involved in evaluating the progress of their learning. The challenges of teaching adult learners can be overcome and well managed, by using the right methods to facilitate the teaching and learning processes.

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ADDITIONAL READING

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