

Peter A. BETIANG
Federal College of Education, Obudu
Cross River State/ Nigeria

S. I. AKPAMA
University Of Calabar
Calabar/Nigeria.

Psycho-Andragogical Implications of Ageing: Focus On Later Years Learning In Nigeria

Abstract.

Learning remains a complex process involving an equally complex set of mental, social, and physiological interchanges. If this is true for young learners, then this process is more complex, cumbersome and often frightening for adult learners who ordinarily enter the learning encounter with a vast wealth of experience. This is made more troublesome by the fact that adult learners usually have pre-determined purpose(s) and goals for engaging in the learning programmes, while at the same time grappling with the challenges of physiological changes. This paper problematizes the reality of chronological ageing against the imperative of “necessary” learning among older learners in Nigeria, while arguing for a proper forensic configuration of the actual physical and psychological environment, with a view to making adult learning beneficial, rewarding and interesting to both the instructors and the learners.

Keywords: *Psycho-Social; Andragogy; Mental Health; Social Capital; Learning Environment; Achievement*

1- Introduction

Humans begin learning at birth and generally continue this process throughout life, but how much is learned and the value of that knowledge varies greatly from one individual to the next.

Historically, the perception of adult learning and its value has varied greatly among individuals and groups. In the past, many people considered formal education and learning beyond age fifty of little value to society given the limited life span to use such knowledge. Many life individuals might have considered such pursuit of knowledge as self-centered at best and viewed work beyond age sixty or sixty-five as unwarranted unless financial considerations dictated otherwise. Other critics of adult learning may cite various reasons such as illness, genetic longevity, environment, ethnic differences, and individual habits as limiting their chances of a career and thus restricting the need for learning. Many of these attitudes are linked to a study by Moody (as cited in Lowy and O'Connor, 1986) suggesting that older adults perceive learning from the vantage point of approximately how much time is left to live. Although never exact, this perspective of time dramatically influences the educational goals of the older adult.

Regardless of these popular attitudes, more recently people have come to view aging differently and have tended to classify learning in that same context. There appears to be an ongoing shift regarding the issue of adult learning that can be dated back to the first mass literacy campaigns 80s and the 90s. Similarly, for instance, In the United States, some legislation promoted the growing notion that higher education was available for the common citizen and not just the wealthy aristocrat. Subsequently, out of that setting came a generation of adults forming different views as to who could learn and when such learning was appropriate. This sadly is the residual outcome that failed to play out in the case of Nigeria. Elsewhere, generations have begun taking a lifelong approach to learning resulting in an important cultural change that has increased economic productivity while improving the quality of life as well. There are also, increasingly, older adults are seeking formal educational opportunities echoed in the demographic that reports in the United States, 33 percent of post secondary students are 25 years or older (King, Anderson and Corrigan 2003).

Changing demographics have a lot to do with continuous lifelong learning by adults. Increased life expectancy during the last half of the 20th century is believed to be higher than any increases from recorded history until 1900 (Swain, 1995). Consequently, until recently the assumption has been that people who live longer will most likely have more leisure time but not, necessarily, longer working careers. Although more lenient immigration standards may offset the problem somewhat, the idea that people will continue to work and learn as they grow older seems important from an economic standpoint. An even more apparent demand for adult education is supported by research that suggests a twenty year old today can expect to make six to seven job changes over the course of a working career (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980). Often, these vocational changes lead to additional

adult learning out of necessity.

Clark and Caffarella (1999) explain that adult learning can be defined in numerous ways, but that a widely accepted definition refers to those learners as having completed mandatory public schooling, usually around age eighteen. While that may be a common convention among educational theorists, there are various definitions in use and this manuscript will refer to the adult learner as (at a minimum) having finished some form of schooling in addition to having gained experience in the work force prior to engaging in additional education. Consequently, the focus here is on the adult that has had life experiences and has often been referred to as non-traditional student in the educational setting. The age range for this type of student is extremely wide and, for the most part, includes adults over age twenty five.

Bok (1990) has noted the importance of the adult learning by asserting post-industrial society must necessarily continue to upgrade their skills by constant re-sharpening. Therefore, the effect of aging, considered here as psychological environment on the adult learner and implications for educators will be examined in that context.

2- Physiological effects of Aging on Learning

As one ages chronologically, not only are physical changes taking place such as reduced vision and hearing ability, but other age related factors can impact cognitive function well. Factors such as impaired blood circulation, decreased neurotransmitters, depression, stress, and chronic illness can all have an effect on the ability of the individual to learn (Merriam 2001).

In 1927 Edward L. Thorndike reported that the ability to learn declined very slowly and very slightly at about 1% per year after age twenty-five. Until then, adult educators had mostly operated under the notion that “you can’t teach old dogs new tricks”. But later studies by Lorge, (2000) revealed that the decline was that of speed of learning, not intellectual power, and that even this was minimized by continual use of the intellect (Knowles, 1980). Therefore, to say that one’s ability to learn peaks at a young age and then tapers off slowly is generally true for most individuals, but it is also too simplistic and ultimately deficient in describing how aging affects the complex process of learning. Most theorist believe that intelligence consists of several factors. These factors can be separated into primary mental abilities and secondary mental abilities (Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields, 2002). A common subset of the primary mental abilities is made up of numeric facility, word fluency, verbal meaning, inductive reasoning, and spatial orientation.

Using a longitudinal study over a period of several decades, Schale (1994) noted that scores on primary mental abilities improved gradually until about age forty at which time the abilities tend to stabilize until approximately age sixty. The decreases are small until the mid seventies at which time scores are usually measurably lower than they were in the mid twenties. Therefore, when a composite measure of mental abilities is used, learning ability does not decrease until the fourth or fifth decade for

most individuals. The significance of this seminal study seems to be that noticeable mental decline in the primary abilities does not generally occur until later in life.

Additionally, it should be noted that research pertaining to the secondary mental abilities usually focuses on two things; fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence (Cavanaugh, et al 2002). Younger people perform at a higher level where rote memorization that is part of fluid intelligence is measured, whereas older, more experienced people make up for this in what is called crystallized intelligence, through better developed verbal abilities and judgment (Merriam, 2001).

The good news here is that research supports the notion of lifelong learning in healthy individuals at least well into their seventies. While one can stop the aging process, there are some things that have been associated with increased retention of mental processes: education; exercise; absence of chronic diseases and illness and otherwise stimulating activities to the brain have all been shown to help the cognitive process (Merriam 2001). While older adults are not as quick to learn as are younger people, they can often make up for this through a wealth of experiences that tend to support superior reasoning and judgment abilities if given time to think and reflect on the learning activity.

3- Experiential Aspects of Aging on Learning.

Adult learners have already been partly educated through life experiences. The concept of the experienced adult engaged in learning is an interesting and popular concept in adult education where it is generally accepted that adults have more experiences, different kinds of experiences and that these experience are organized differently (Long, 1983), adults derive much of their self identity from their past experiences. In that respect, they are much different from children who tend to view themselves largely from external sources. Because of this factor, adult learners place a great deal of value on their experience and if they cannot use those experiences, or, if those experiences are rejected, it may feel similar to being rejected as an individual. Related to this is the fear of failure that an adult learner may bring to the classroom where they might fear further rejection from their peer group (Kennedy, 2003) or their instructor. While it may be true that adults often have a highly specialized or even expert knowledge base via extensive past learning activity, some researchers speculate that slowing of new information may occur because of a large knowledge base (Sternberg & Berg, eds 1992). Additionally, adults may or may not bring experiences with them that are related to their current learning. Not all experiences are of equal value to the task at hand. Finally, not only can experiences be unequal in value, in some cases those experiences might actually be detrimental to their learning. Kennedy (2003) notes this phenomenon and indicates, "past experiences can also be a handicap in acquiring new learning. "This type of handicap could occur from past habits or old ways of thinking about some important issue. A preconceived way of thinking and doing something is not always easily changed, especially when it has been previously backed up by some perceived expert advice. It could be added then, that adults are more skeptical about accepting new information, especially if it appears to contradict what they

already believe.

Determining the trade offs between the size and value of the prior knowledge base and an older adults ability to access information and add to that knowledge base is a challenging agenda for the teacher of an adult learner (Sternberg & Berg, eds 1992). Many teachers may enjoy the challenge that adults bring to the table while others might feel threatened because of the expertise that such a student could use to challenge the instructor. These are both important issues that must be addressed by the instructor when developing a learning environment for the experienced adult learner.

4- Psychological Self-Image of the Adult Learner

Havinghurst (as cited in Knowles, 1980) asserts that people do not simply pass into adulthood and then just coast along to old age. He claims that adulthood has transition points and developmental periods as complete as that of childhood. Other theorists such as Erikson and Levinson also present stage or phase theories sometimes linked to life events and transitions that adults encounter and pass through (Clark and Caffarella, 1999). Kohlberg's (as cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1991) 1973 theory of moral development promotes three stages that individuals pass through from youth to adulthood in relation to moral and ethical judgments influenced by the relationship of the individual to his or her social setting. All of these theorists tend to break development into various stages and recognize that although adults not always fit neatly into each of these categories, by and large each phase has its own challenges and judgments that could be viewed as developmental.

Regardless of which theory is most correct, Knowles (1980) argues for a dramatic change to self-image when one defines him or herself as an adult. The switch is away from being a full time learner to one that takes on other responsibilities and thus creates more of a self-directed personality. People reaching adulthood do not just inherit a chronological progression of aging but also often include taking an attitude that is more self-directed along with a need for others to view them as such. Much of the self-directed image of the adult is mirrored in how they view work. The working role of many people often poses some indications that architectural and environmental variables might influence interaction and learning but exactly how is not known.

However, it is important to stress that the configuration of the psycho-social environment goes a long way towards determining what and how much an adult can learn. It becomes imperative for the adult educator(s) to employ all incentives, techniques and mental facilities to ensure that the adult learners find something useful and worthwhile to learn. Educators have always suggested that teachers in the regular school system should make their teaching-learning environment attractive. This is no less true for adult learners and educators. Their advancing age sort of slows them down in many ways, which invariably, in some cases brings them to the level of younger learners. As such, making the learning milieu attractive enhances in several ways the motivation and capacity to learn among adults.

5- Conclusion

The literature reviewed here supports the idea that adults are very capable of learning well into their seventies which is a good reason to accept lifelong learning as more than just a pleasant mantra.

Likewise, it seems beneficial for operators of the educational setting to be reminded that the differences between the young and the adult learners are somewhat subtle, so it will take effort on the part of the instructor to understand and implement strategies appropriate to the nuances of the adult learner. Even though it takes time and energy to explore for the optimal environment and teaching methodology, the payoff could be well worth the effort if the result is an enjoyable and satisfying learning experience for the learner. While it may be true that adults will learn in spite of the facilitators' shortcomings, operators that choose to ignore learner differences and peculiarity run the inherent risk of failure in their teaching.

REFERENCES

Aslanian, C.B Brickell, H.M (1980) *America in transition: Life changes as reason for adult learning*: New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Bok, D. (1990) *Universities and the future of America*: London: Duke University Press

Canvaugh J.C, Balnchard-Fields, F (2002) *Adult development and aging*: Belmont, CA; Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.

Kenedy, F A (2003). *Social Psychology of learning for adults*. Huston: Booker books.
King, A & Corrigan, R (2003).*Social Learning Context*. United Kingdom: Priority Press.

Knowles, M (1980) *Deschooling society*. London: University Press.

Lorge, S.A (2000). *Learning at the later years*. Florence: Panter Books.

Long, M E, (1983) *Adult learners and their habits*. United Kingdom: Finite Books.

Lowry D & O'Connor, T J (2003) *Adult Education for What? USA*: Prentice Hall.

Meriiem, A & Carafella, G (1973) *Theory of Moral Development*. Huston: Academy Press.

Schale, P.O (1994) *Ageing and Primary Mental abilities*. Oxford: University Press.

Swain, M (1995). *Principles and Practice of Later years learning*. Oakland: Century Press.