Definitions of Adult Education

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Definitions of Adult Education: Clearing some Misconceptions.

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Abstract
This paper is articulated in the interest of new entrants into the profession of adult education, to colleagues – educators and non-educators, who may wish to share in this all-embracing and encompassing discipline which seems to be confusing to many people, also for the advancement of knowledge in this area of study. The paper explains why the concept of adult education seems confusing, reviews some definitions of adult education by different authors, proposes some definitions, highlighted andragogy as conceived by Malcolm Knowles and pointed out that it should not be viewed as being in sharp contrast with pedagogy in the interest of life long education and development. It also discusses the goals, purposes and coverage of adult education.

Introduction
Adult education is defined differently by different people in different cultures and societies. It has no single universal definition. This is because it embraces a lot of activities and addresses myriads of problems which may be individual, societal and national. The choice of programmes of adult education for each individual, society and/or culture is derived from particular needs of such individual, society or culture at a particular period of time. Knowles (1997) observed that adult education emerged in response to specific needs and solution of particular problems during particular period of an individual and societal life. Merriam and Brockett (2007) noted in a similar vein that during the colonial period in America, adult education had a moral and religious imperative while as a nation it was more focused on developing leaders and good citizens. Similarly in different countries and nations which programmes of adult education varies depending on the needs it is meant to respond to and the problem which it is meant to solve at a particular time. Odokara (1974) see adult education as being related to the needs of adults in terms of their ambitions, their interests, and their broadening world of experience and to the new responsibilities which a change society imposes.

Merriam and Brockett (2007) in considering the nature of the concept likened it to the proverbial elephant described by five blind men whose definitions depends on which part of the elephant they touched and how they experienced the phenomena. To some scholars (Kelly and Perkett, (N.D), Hall Quest (1927), Verner(1964); Braimoh and Biao (1988); Merriam and Brockett, 2007) adult education is complicated, difficult to define and impossible to articulate, hence, they noted that it encompasses lots of activities and methods which are used to educate adults.

The difficulty in the definition of the term adult education seems to rest on the word ‘adult’. According to Kagan and Meidow (n.d). The word adult is difficult to define because “it varies from one society to another, and has changed over time. The boundaries that determine who is considered an adult can depend on actions (i.e legal age to fight a war, drive a car, drink, vote), activities (i.e., age that one can begin to work), and/or responsibilities (i.e, marriage age, age to begin supporting family).”In corroboration with this view Braimoh and Biao (1988) finds
the word ‘adult’ a vague concept and noted that although the Nigerian constitution views a person who is 18 years as an adult, it is not acceptable in many cultures and communities in Nigeria. In a similar vein, Kelly and Perkett (n.d.), noted that although adulthood can be defined using developmental terms of experiences and attitude, different societies associate adulthood with different characteristics. For example, they noted that while White American Associate adulthood with self-sufficiency and independence, that is, the ability to have one’s opinions and “stand on one’s feet,” the Japanese associate adulthood with the “ability to sacrifice or submerge one’s own desires” hence they do not consider those who “stick to” personal opinions, or who place first priority on satisfying their own desires as adults. This would not seem confusing to us since even in Nigeria, different communities associate adulthood with acquiring different characteristics and/or different parameters ranging from chronological, biological, social, psychological, historical and political. The legal and chronological definition of maturity always seems more attractive for defining adulthood because they lend themselves to population and demographic analysis. One can therefore deduce that definition of adulthood differs considering the societal and cultural milieu which it sprang up hence there exists different parameters for defining adulthood.

**Adult Education Definitions**

Over the years so many definitions have been proposed by different authors for the term adult education. It becomes pertinent at this point that some of these definitions be reviewed:

Lindeman (1926) “Education is life – not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living …. The whole of life is learning; therefore, educations can have no ending. This new venture is called adult education – not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits”.

Bryson (1936) “… all the activities with an educational purpose that are carried on by people, engaged in the ordinary business of life”.

Verner (1962) “Adult Education is the action of an external educational agent in purposefully ordering behavior into planned systematic experiences that can result in learning for those for whom such an activity is supplemental to their primary role in society, and which involves some continuity in an exchange relationship between the agent and the learner so that the educational process is under constant supervision and direction.

Verner (1964) “… the term adult education is used to designate all those educational activities that are designed specifically for adults.

Knowles (1980) “One problem contributing to the confusion is that the term adult education’ is used with at least three different meanings. In its broadest sense, the term describes a set of organized activities carried on by a wide variety of institutions for the accomplishment of specific educational objectives ….. A third meaning combines all these processes and activities into the idea of a movement or field of social practice. In this sense, adult education brings together into a discrete social system all the individuals, institutions and associations concerned with the education of adults and perceives them as working towards common goals of improving the methods and materials of adult learning, extending the opportunities for adults to learn, and advancing the general level of our culture”.

Courtney (1989) “Adult Education is an intervention into the ordinary business of life – an intervention whose immediate goal is change, in knowledge or in competence. An adult educator is one, essentially, who is skilled at making such interventions”.
Houle (1996) “Adult education is the process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge or sensitiveness, or it is any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men and women improve in these ways.

Kelly & Perkett (n.d) Adult education will be defined as all segments of the culture which includes the education of adults, including, but not confined to, access to public libraries, study groups, business education for the purpose of social and economic development and education at the primary and secondary level, such as elementary math, composition, etc.

Merriam & Brockett (2007) “Adult education is virtually any activity for adults designed to bring about learning which according to them include the work of aerobics instructor, nurse, private consultant, literacy worker and community activist.”

Okediran and Sarumi (2001) Adult education should be seen as the provision of resources and support for self directed learning irrespective of age. Adult education should be distinguished from schooling within the overall concept of lifelong learning. The emphasis should be in the cultivation of total man whose educational need goes beyond cognitive knowledge, but to other areas of human endeavour.

UNESCO (1976) “… the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behavior in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in a balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development…”

Discussion of the Definitions

Generally one can see that the definitions proposed by different authors as highlighted in this paper depend on their viewpoint, varying cultures and societies where they belong and develop. Adult education embraces and encompasses a lot of educational activities and programmes. It is not just literacy- teaching illiterate adults how to read write and compute, or just community development. It is not just what goes-on in old peoples home. It is educational purpose carried out by adults or planned for adults to acquire positive change which will enable them to be useful to themselves and their societies. According to Usher and Bryant (1989) the idea which is common to all notions of adult education is that some concept of adult undergirds the definition and the activity is intentional. It is the adapting and improving behavior of those who are referred to as adults in the societies which they belong.

Adult education is all planned and systematic activities (whether formal, informal or non-formal) designed to bring about learning for those (whether literates, illiterates or out of school children) who are considered adults in the society which they belong to enable them acquire positive knowledge, skills and attitude for satisfying their individual, institutional and/or societal needs. Adult education is education for life. It essentially advocates that education should be life-long and terminates with life. It emphasizes that education should be available and fairly distributed to everyone young and old, rich and poor and to all human race. It is designed to enable one develop competency in one’s professional area of life. It is education that gets one prepared for employment and is also provided during employment. It is education that enables one to catch up with time and get ahead which means that it makes it possible for one to continue
updating ones knowledge, attitude and skill for positive family and community life and also for preservation and enhancement of people’s way of life. According to Kelly and Perkett (n.d) “Indeed the field has become so encompassing that it would not be wrong to refer to it as culture. Lindeman, (1926) while opposing the concept of andragogy pointed out what are inclusive and not inclusive in adult education as follows:

Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogy formulae – all these have no place in adult education … small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous, who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts; who are not led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern guest for life’s meaning (Lindemen, 1926, pp. 10-11).

Adult education programmes are not geared only towards academics and examination. It appreciates the fact that there is more to education than academics and that success in attitude is achieved by developing skills that cannot be measured. It believes in the essential educability of all men which means that every individual has a unique talent and can advance at a natural pace without negative stigma of failure. Reed and Loughran (1984) pointed out that many groups of youth as well as adults learn more effectively in non-formal out-of school settings. They identified vocational training, as common vehicles for such learning. This line of thought and direction enhances positive self-esteem which instills a love to learn that stays with an individual throughout lifetime. Education is therefore a lifetime experience which is not limited to the youthful years.

According to Grathan (1959) in Akinpelu (2002), Adult education is no field for pessimists – about the potentialities of man. Akinpelu (2002) in corroboration with the view stated that an adult educator must believe in the equality of man, since basic to adult education is the respect for the freedom, dignity and self esteem of the learner. The teaching – learning relationship cannot be one of authoritarian or of superior – teacher and inferior – learner. The adult illiterate may not “know book” or “sabi grammer”, but he does “know his inside” (p.5).

Malcolm Knowles Andragogy
The modern adult education hinges on Malcolm Knowles Andragogy “which is the antithesis of pedagogy (Kelly & Perket, n.d). They noted that:

Whereas pedagogy is the instruction of dependent personality (the child), andragogy is the instruction of a non-dependent personality (the adult). Adult learners are considered to have more experience, a greater interest in life – centered topics. Whereas children are commonly referred to as “students” who are “taught” adults are more commonly referred to as “learners” who are “facilitated”.

Adult learners have far more experiences than children and are thus not dependent on the instructor or any learning encounter. The pedagogical model places the student in a submissive role requiring obedience to the teachers instruction. It does not make enough provision to the developmental changes in an adult and as a result makes it difficult for an adult to cope. Knowles (1980) notes that andragogy is a learning theory designed to address the particular needs of adults and is rooted on the premise that there are significant differences in learning
characteristics between children and adults. As conceived by him it is predicated on four basic assumptions about the learners ability, need and desire to take responsibility of learning (p.44 - 45). The assumptions are as follows:

(a) The self concept of an adult learner moves from dependency to independency or self directedness.

(b) They accumulate a reservoir of experience that can be used as a basis on which to build learning.

(c) Their readiness to learn becomes increasingly associated with the developmental tasks of their social roles.

(d) Their time and curricular perspective change from postponed to immediacy of application and from subject – centered to performance centered.

Knowles andragogy made it clear that there is significance difference between a child learner and an adult learner. Andragogy as opposed to pedagogy is a learning theory designed to address the particular needs of adult learners.

Compared to children, adults have special needs and requirements for learning. The Knowles andragogy have marked implication for adult learning and if applied correctly, a skilled and dedicated facilitator can make positive impact on the learners. Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding the characteristics of an adult learner and as a result designing meaningful experiences for him. In addition there is need for educators to consider the culture, physiology learning styles and personality of learners while developing learning programmes for them. The instructor should understand that his work is that of a change agent. It is worthy of note that adult education is relevant to the lifelong education of children and youths. This is because the discipline cuts across different age boundaries.

Adult education is expected to accelerate the adult traits and potentialities latent in children and youths. it is also needed for individuals to remedy their deficiencies in youthful age and to enhance their adulthood age. In consonant with this idea, Anowor (1987) noted that the content of adult education needs to be re-examined in order not to neglect the education of the child which it is supposed to take care of. Integration of pedagogy and andragogy is therefore imperative for accelerating development and achieving all round and lifelong education in individuals.

Goals, Purposes and Coverage of Adult Education

As the definitions of adult education differ but are interrelated, interwoven and overlapping, so do the purposes and goals of the subject. As Shown by literature, goals and purposes delineate coverage. The goals and purposes of adult education are catalogued differently by varying writers as follows:

Apps (1985); Career development, personal development, remedial cultural criticism and social action.

Beder (1989); Facilitate change, enhance personal growth, promote productivity, support and maintain social order.

Rachal (1988); Liberal, occupational, self-help, compensatory

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982); Cultivation of intellect, personal and social development, individual and self actualization, social transformation, organizational effectiveness.

Liveright (1968); Vocational, occupational and professional competencies, self realization, personal and family growth and also civic and social responsibilities.
Grathan (1955); Liberal, vocational, informational and recreational
Bryson (1936); Liberal, occupational, relational, remedial, and political.
International Women in Science and Engineering (IWSE, n.d)

Personal growth and development for self actualization, social improvement for enhancement of ones career, organizational effectiveness, intellectual growth and social transformation.

In the Nigeria context and as recognized in the section six of the National Policy on Education (2004 p.24) the subject is identified as mass literacy, Adult and Non-formal education. According to the document adult education covers functional literacy and continuing education for adults and youths; functional and remedial education for young people and out of school children who did not complete secondary school, and need to improve their basic knowledge and skills; in-service, on-the-job, vocational and also professional training for different categories of workers and professionals for constant updating and improvement of their knowledge and skills; aesthetic cultural and civic education for public enlightenment.

Adult education increases and improves the quality of human resources (in all areas of life) which is the most precious of all resources of mankind through constant training and retraining. Adult education makes it possible for every individual to start or continue his education in adult life. It equips individuals with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which enable them live productive life. It involves education for social economic and political development which makes it possible for citizens to identify themselves with the general aims of the nation. It teaches democracy, social justice and patriotism which creates conducive atmosphere for nation building and cultural appreciation. It includes continuing education at all levels, liberal education for self fulfillment, distance and on-line educational programmes and also extension and community education for development of livelihood skills which addresses illiteracy and poverty. Short term training workshop, seminars, conferences, programs and projects that bring about awareness, socio-political, cultural and aesthetic enrichment are all in the scope of adult education. It then becomes obvious that in this rapidly changing world, one surely needs one kind of adult education or the other in order to survive.

Conclusion

Adult education has a very wide scope. It is education for life and development. It is education that cuts across all ages; for children and adults. Adult learners are different from traditional college students. Many of them have responsibilities which include families and jobs. If the concept is understood by educators and correct meaning proffered, suitable adult education programmes can be designed and learning facilitated for people of all ages and different social status in different culture and environment.

In the light of the present global challenges and perpetual changes in all facets of life, adult education seems the best remedy. Viewing learning and indeed education as a lifelong endeavour provides basis for accommodating changes and realizing the millennium development and education for all goals for sustainable development.
References


