

Key Concepts in Adult Education Contexts

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Abstract

During the post-modern times, a shift has taken place in adult education theories and practices throughout the world that have become more learner-centred now. Moreover, education has become a lifelong activity due to an increase in the significance of adult education. Furthermore, several key concepts are given focus for meeting the educational needs and goals of adult learners. The current paper focuses on three such concepts, transformative learning, andragogy and professional development. Transformative learning theory plays a key role in adult education as it suggests ways to adults to make meaning of their lives. The notion of andragogy is commonly known as the process which helps in engaging the adult learners with the actual structure of the learning process and experience. Lastly, like transformative learning, professional development helps adult educators transform their theory and practice of teaching and learning through reflecting on their assumptions and expectations and by revising them.

Keywords: Adult education, adult education contexts, transformative learning, andragogy, professional development

Introduction

Current trends and goals in education have brought a revolution in adult education teaching and learning. Throughout the world there has been a shift in the educational theories and practices towards becoming learner-centred during the post-modern age. Learning is considered to be a lifelong activity which can be taken up at any time in one's life. Adult education provides the adult learners with a chance to grow in their life, achieve their goals and give meaning to their lives. In the fast moving times of today, adult education is the only solution to the problems as it develops in the adult learners the critical consciousness which is so vital to

help them face situations and use their prior knowledge and experience to learn how to succeed in all the challenges. In the current adult education contexts world over, a number of key concepts are being focused to meet the educational needs of adult learners. The current paper focuses on three key concepts in adult education: Transformative learning (TL), Andragogy, and Professional Development (PD) of teachers of adult learners.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory holds a significant place in adult education as it suggests ways to adults to make meaning of their lives. Transformative, also known as Transformational learning theory was first ‘articulated’ by Jack Mezirow in 1978 which has held prominence since the late 1980s (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Mezirow put forth his theory in 1981 which was based on Habermas’ three domains of learning: the technical (empirical knowledge governed by technical rules), the practical (social norms), and the emancipatory (self-knowledge and self-reflection). In his Transformative learning theory, Mezirow describes the three learning processes as the ‘instrumental learning (learning to control the environment), dialogic learning (understanding what others mean in communication), and self-reflective learning understanding ourselves’. According to Mezirow, emancipatory learning can be applied both to instrumental and dialogic learning (Cranton, 1994).

Mezirow’s work has been a result of the influence of two great theorists: Freire and Habermas. Freire has also been observed to signify adult learning as ‘a transformative process’ and his influence can be seen on both Mezirow’s theory and thinking (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). According to Freire, education has a liberating effect and to achieve this liberation, there is the need for one’s consciousness to be transformed. Both Mezirow’s and Freire’s theories lay emphasis on the important place ‘mental constructs’ and ‘inner meaning’ hold in giving shape to the nature of learning taking place in an adult’s life. It has been observed that ‘change’ is key to the theories of both Freire and Mezirow. The ‘change’ they emphasise is the one brought about by ‘critical reflection’ on the origin and nature of the ‘submerged assumptions, biases, beliefs, and values’ of the adult learners. The process does not end with the acquisition of ‘change’ in consciousness, the next stage is putting the change into action. Mezirow and Freire hold different views on social action. Mezirow believes that putting change into action can range from tasks

like ‘making a decision’ or ‘change in behaviour’, which lead to ‘personal transformation’. Whereas, Freire opines that ‘social action’ is embedded in ‘critical reflection’ and ‘emancipation’. Further, Freire gives the name ‘praxis’ to the continuous critical reflection where a person acts according to one’s understanding of the world and then critically reflects on the actions done (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In short, Mezirow and Freire have given very clear and firm concepts related to the theory of transformative learning.

Unlike andragogy and self-directed learning which focus on ‘adult learner characteristics’, transformational learning lays more stress on ‘the cognitive process of learning’. Transformational learning theory comprises important components like ‘experience, development and critical reflection’ (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Mezirow considers adult learning a transformative process which constitutes the key acts of ‘examining, questioning, validating, and revising’ the perceptions by an adult learner (Cranton, 1994). Learning brings change but it has been observed that all change is not transformative. In this regard what is needed to convert change into transformation is critical reflection. In order for transformative learning to take place in adult education, the role of the educator, the learner, professional development of the educator, and rational and affective learning decisions have to be considered. According to Cranton (1994), as a result of transformative learning, an adult learners’ meaning perspectives become more ‘inclusive, differentiated, open and integrated’. The strong point about transformative learning approach is the development of critical judgement/thinking within an adult learner which helps transform an adult through learning.

Reflective learning, which is an important component of transformational learning theory, has become one of the goals of adult education in the post-modern societies. The main aim behind adult teaching is not to memorise the content but to transform adult learners into independent thinkers who using both their prior knowledge and newly acquired knowledge make a critical reflection of everything. Adults along with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills need to focus on the integration of ‘new experiences’ with their ‘prior learning’ (Cranton, 1994). Adults can learn how to integrate their new experiences and prior learning through the process of critical reflection and transformative learning. The theory of critical reflection was first introduced and defined by John Dewey in 1933 who considered it to be an active, consistent and

careful consideration of any knowledge belief which leads to further conclusions supported and justified by the grounds it is based on and the conclusions it leads to (Cranton, 1994; Florez, 2001). Following Dewey's footsteps many other theorists and psychologists like Boyd, Fales, Boud, Keogh, Walker and Mezirow, put forth their own definitions of critical reflection/thinking based on Dewey's definition (Cranton, 1994). Critical reflection consists of three key processes: content reflection (examination of the problem), process reflection (checking of the strategies to be used for solving the problem), and lastly premise reflection (questioning the problem).

Andragogy

The term *andragogy* is commonly contented as the process which helps in engaging the adult learners with the actual structure of the learning process and experience. The term andragogy was originally used by a German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833. Later on, andragogy was developed into a theory of adult education by Malcolm Knowels in early 1970s in the United States of America. Knowels also put forth the concept of the difference between the way adults and children learn. Like all the novice ideas, it also caused a lot of controversy and faced critique. Since day one of its introduction, educators have been putting forth their own respective assumptions of andragogy. Anyhow, they all have consensus on one thing that andragogy focuses on adult learners only (Knowels, 1980; Knowels; Holton & Swanson, 2011; Loughlin, 1993). Brookfield (1986) argues that Knowels describes andragogy as just another model like the pedagogical model of assumptions related to learners. Knowels stresses on andragogy being no more than 'a set of assumptions'. In this regard, Knowels has put forth four assumptions of andragogy regarding: concept of the learner (need to know), role of learners' experience (foundation), readiness to learn and orientation to learning (self-concept). However, according to Merriam & Caffarella (1999), a fifth assumption regarding motivation to learn was added afterwards. Further, according to Wikipedia, there is also a sixth assumption of adult learning; 'being problem-centred rather than content-oriented' (orientation).

The theory of andragogy has helped adult educators distinguish adult education from other 'areas of education, especially childhood schooling' (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Andragogy stresses on the collaboration between the adult learner and the adult educator. Knowels (1980) believes that the adult educator plays the role of a facilitator in the teaching

learning process. In adult education the educator has to bear the responsibility of assisting the learner to diagnose their own learning needs, define their learning objectives, put their learning strategies into practice, and finally evaluate the outcomes of the whole learning process. Andragogy helps a learner base the present learning on the prior knowledge and experience and adopt a problem-centred approach. This stance helps the learners construct their knowledge on the foundation of their prior knowledge and apply their learning to their present needs and roles in the society (Loughlin, 1993). Andragogy not only helps an adult to become a self-directed learner but also helps develop their critical and reflective thinking. By using participatory and experiential learning methods, adults learn to value their experience and use it as a resource for learning.

Professional Development

Like adult learners, adult educators are also learners who need to develop and grow professionally, engage in critical reflection, and revise their present teaching practice to become more independent and autonomous educators. Cranton (1996), considers professional development as transformative learning as according to her, it helps educators transform through reflecting on their assumptions and expectations and by revising them whether they fail or prove to be faulty. Theorists and educationists like Brookfield, Boud, Walker, Tennant and Pogson all hold consensus on the key role critical reflection plays in assisting the adult educators to learn from experience. An educator can become a better teacher by ‘questioning and thinking critically’ about their own teaching practice. Moreover, professional development can take place even without participating in a formal or informal professional training programme.

There exists a confusion regarding the adult educators’ professional development as it is widely viewed as the development and increase in the technical knowledge of the educator which is only related to the subject they teach or the teaching methodologies they apply. However, traditional professional development programmes focus on developing and improving the technical skills and teaching new techniques. Little attention is paid to the other side of the picture which is concerned with the emancipatory learning and development of critical reflection which helps an educator develop as a practitioner as a result of transformative learning. Learning through transforming the perspectives helps the educators learn about teaching while teaching

and reconstruct and acquire knowledge based on prior experience and knowledge (Cranton, 1996). Educators' professional development takes place more effectively through the congruence of educators' teaching practice with the professional development programme design and activities.

Nowadays, adult educators are expected to learn to assist the learners in developing critical thinking and reflection. In the present day adult education contexts, an adult learner has to play the dual role of both an educator and a facilitator whose duty is not only to impart the content knowledge and help learners learn the content but to help them become critical thinkers as well (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Knowels et al., 2011). Cranton (1994) states that along with workshops, seminars, conferences and courses, the professional development now also includes 'self-directed' activities for educators. This perspective helps educators in developing new insights, stimulating critical reflection, and enhancing the development of an educator's 'theory of practice'. Such a professional development helps educators shift from questioning meaning schemes to becoming competent enough to putting their meaning perspective into a description on being educators. In this way, professional development leads educators to transform into lifelong learners by becoming 'critically self-reflective'. Hence, learning becomes a mean and process of growth and development for both the learner and educator-learner. Thus, an educator-learner becomes a role model of learning for the adult learners.

Teaching Criticality

Critical theory and philosophy play an important role in power and knowledge and the relationship between the two and how they are practised in adult education contexts. Power relationships are based on cooperation and the domains one works in. In this regard a person is both a dominant and dominated in different situations and conditions. Adult educators cannot teach criticality if we separate theory from practice. In order to teach criticality successfully to the adult learners, educators bear the responsibility of putting their theory to practice. Brookfield (2005) stresses that theory and practice are conjoined processes where 'all practice is theoretically informed', whereas, 'theory always contains practical implications' (p. 352). Hence teaching criticality is not only about how to teach, it is also linked to what we teach as adult learners. Brookfield further contends that 'critical teaching' only begins when teachers succeed

in developing amongst their students the power of ‘critical thinking’ which renders them the power to think critically about the power knowledge relationship and practice within their learning contexts and the society. In this way the adult learners learn to critique the current ideologies prevalent in the dominant meaning system, hence becoming capable to use their reason to ask questions and devise ways to get solution to them and hence evolve as both better learners and better citizens.

Teaching is beyond imparting bookish knowledge and helping learners learn content, it is about teaching critical thinking, developing critical and political consciousness, thus helping adult learners critique themselves and whatever is happening around them. This is real education which develops a learners’ real knowledge and helps them choose between right and wrong; and good and bad, hence providing them with the lens to see clearly what actually keeps power and knowledge relationship in a balance.

Brookfield (2005) puts forth four pedagogical suggestions for teaching critical thinking to adult learners: ‘the importance of teaching a structuralised worldview; the need for abstract, conceptual reasoning; the need for adults to become “uncoupled from the stream of cultural givens” to use Habermas’ (1990, p.162) phrase’; and engaging ‘cohort groups’ in ‘dialogic discussion’ (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 355-357). Erich Fromm (1968) and Angela Davis (1983, 1990) are strong advocates of teaching the adult learners a structuralised worldview, where Fromm opines that adults are ‘better equipped’ because of their experience as compared to children as far as the notion to realise the fact that it is beyond human being’s power to control the force that shapes their lives is concerned. On the other hand, for Davis it is vital to raising the critical consciousness and awareness of their ‘psychological well-being’ that women are taught how their lives are affected and shaped by ‘capitalism’ not due to their individual fate. Secondly, Marcuse (1969) and Habermas (1970) are amongst the renowned theorists who stress that in order to teach adult learners to think critically, there is the need to develop amongst them the responsibility to start focussing on society as a whole and develop a sense of association with others instead of thinking about their particular lives.

The third pedagogical suggestion which is concerned with teaching aspects like privacy and isolation to adult learners is supported by Gramsci (1957) and Marcuse (1969), although the concept has received less attention as privacy is more of a commodity available chiefly to the rich. According to both Gramsci and Marcuse, in order to teach adults to think critically about the society, there is the need to separate them from day to day routine life, hence helping them to escape ‘one-dimensional’ thinking by putting them into isolation. The best possible practical solution to this approach is ‘self-directed’ learning. The fourth pedagogical approach is concerned with teaching critical consciousness through involving ‘cohort groups’ into ‘dialogic discussions’. The two theorists who support this approach the most are Fromm (1976) and Habermas (1998) as they posit that a ‘widespread’ association with ‘dialogic methods’ holds a promise of ‘democracy’ while every participant gets a chance to take part in the discussion/conversation and raise their voice.

According to Florez (2001), as reflective practice is the product of the ‘needs’ and ‘interests’ of the teaching ‘practitioner’, it helps in addressing the needs of the learners. Good reflective practice keeps into focus the ‘input of learners’, co-teachers and others associated with the teaching/learning process. In the present day education contexts, teachers need to feel and bear the responsibility of staying abreast of social and contextual developments taking place in the world. Unlike the traditional teachers, they cannot restrict their teaching and learning process to the four walls of the classroom. They cannot stick to the old ways of ‘abstract reformulation’ and ‘testing of knowledge’. Despite the fact that new technologies are being used in teaching and educational institutions need not exist as physical entities, yet the teacher still holds the centre place in the teaching learning process and the students will also always be human beings (Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008). Teaching and learning is the process that involves the transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner. Since teachers connect to learners, they need to develop their personal ideologies/philosophies and put them into practice in the classroom.

As far as the challenges associated with reflective practice in teaching are concerned, Florez (2001) states that in order for reflective practice to take place, an adult practitioner needs to commit to an on-going ‘self-development’ and the ‘time’ for its accomplishment. There is the need to train the teachers in ‘reflective practice’ and then allow them to have some time to

master the critical reflection process through experiment in the classroom. Mastering the art of critical reflection and reflective practice varies from individual to individual. There are even some teachers who are not willing to make critical reflection a part of their classroom practice and are not ready to revise their teaching ideologies and philosophies.

Conclusion

Education is considered a learning process which prepares an individual for life. It is this very notion which has made it a life-long process as in the post-modern world adults are faced with new challenges every day. Adult education is the best possible means for adults to grow in their life, achieve their goals and give meaning to their existence. In the fast moving times of today, adult education is the only solution to the problems as it develops in the adult learners the critical consciousness which is so vital to help them face situations and use their prior knowledge and experience to learn how to succeed in all the challenges and understand the world in a better way .

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