

**LEARNER PROFILE AND CHARACTERISTICS: VALUES AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ADULT AT A DISTANCE.**

BY

**DR. KOFI POKU QUAN-BAFFOUR
INSTITUTE FOR CURRICULUM AND LEARNING DEVELOPMENT
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

ABSTRACT

A crucial concern that arises for educational practitioners in distance Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) environment at the University of South Africa is why adult learners decide to enroll for particular courses. This problem is useful before and during designing educational courses for Adult learners support systems that the educators can put in place before learning commences. The concern also has implications for the kind of teaching strategies and outcomes of specific knowledge and skills that different courses aim to impart to different adult learners working to achieve different aspirations in different physical, economic, and cultural situations. The aim of this article is first to highlight the general reasons that create the impetus for adults to enroll for programmes with particular skills and then secondly, the article outlines the distinct characteristics of learners' profiles in Adults who participate in ABET programmes at the University of South Africa and their implications for distance teaching. The article argues that knowledge of the learner profiles makes it easy for distance educators to plan and design for adult learners and makes much easier for the adult learners themselves to identify, understand and consolidate their knowledge of specific and critical skills for their survival.

Introduction

To understand the profile of adult learners in a way that helps in designing and planning learning materials suitable for them, it is important to know the reasons that motivate adult learners to join Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programme at UNISA. Adult learners approach the learning process with the desire to acquire specific knowledge and skills in mind. In the process, they are also motivated to develop critical skills that are appropriate for the kinds of jobs that they are doing in real life. Adult Basic Education and Training has much value for the individual. It offers easy access to every adult who seeks or requires knowledge and skills. Kaye and Harry (1982:9) believe that adult education should encompass education for, and by groups involved. Through the provision of basic education and training for adults, individuals can acquire practical skills (eg. sewing, knitting, painting, building, sculpting, typing, reading or writing) which may enable them to earn a living and become fully independent adult citizens of their respective communities and nations.

Adjustment to Socio-Economic Condition

Basic education and training for adults assists individuals to adjust to marital, parental, vocational or socio-economic and political responsibilities. For Hely (1962:11) these adjustments involve aspects of

education which cannot have any real meaning until the individual is an adult and a mature member of society. This fact is important because most of the things people need to understand in the contemporary modern world are those which can fully grasp. Adult basic education enables adults to understand the world and its changes and challenges in order to adjust well to them. Since education is a process of adjustment of each individual to the world around him or her, adult learners are motivated to enroll in ABET programmes in order to remain potential change agents.

Intellectual Curiosity, Freedom and leisure

Other adult learners enroll in ABET programmes because they are motivated by the desire to sharpen their intellectual curiosity which is part of enhancing their freedom to make choices in the world of work and pleasure. Adult Basic Education and Training has value in creating that atmosphere of intellectual curiosity, social freedom and tolerance. It also stimulates in adults the demand and ability to take part in the development of the cultural life of their day. ABET programmes also make adults confident in whatever task they have to perform, and this helps them to break down the barrier of psychological fear - which makes some adults too powerless and impotent to discharge their duties to the full.

RETRAINING AND CHANGE OF CAREER

ABET has value in assisting individuals to change their circumstances, status or professions. Many adults find themselves in professions and careers that no longer pay well or are less lucrative on the job market. Others are losing jobs because automation does away with the demand for unskilled labour and replaces it with skilled technologists. Sharing this sentiment, Hely (1962:75) notes that "today no one is more helpless than the mass production factory worker who sees automation dispense with his services on the conveyor belt". Technology is bound to move in the direction of automation, for one of its principles is that manpower should never be dissipated by being used to do what machines can do because manpower is too costly and too precious. ABET programmes help men and women to understand the factors behind the instability of vocational life. The adult learners are also assisted in acquiring attitudes and values based on flexibility and willingness to change. This makes provision for the retraining of adults, a fact which takes into account their needs, abilities and interests and also adapt to the new type of vocational opportunities which are opening up. In this way, adult basics education and training could be seen by many as a road to an improvement in financial status. As a vocational education it may assist, adults to diversify their skills, know more and perhaps earn more.

Provision of Education and Training Opportunities

Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) provides educational opportunities for individual adults who for various reasons have failed to obtain, or missed, formal schooling. Indeed, part of ABET's work deals with remedial education whereby adults "polish" or add to what they learnt some time before. It offers adults opportunities to learn new skills or broaden their interest and keep their intellectual faculties alert and flexible. ABET thus includes a wide range of activities by which men and women attempt to satisfy their thirst for knowledge and skills. Thus abet as part of the general lifelong education has a supplementary role to play in keeping professionals up to date in their various careers. For Grattan (1971:11) adult's learning profiles contain educational desires they want to satisfy and these include the need to educate the whole man/woman who prepares to take up in new occupations and challenges to ensure social mobility, direct social change and take control of one's.

Value of ABET for the Community

In order to realize these varied reasons and motivations which adult learners yearn to fulfill, the value of the ABET programmes for the community of would-be adult learners is determined by the extent to which the programme designers understand the kind of learners that the educators are dealing

with. ABET educators recognize that adult learners have prior life experiences and this is the first step towards understanding the learners profiles and needs. The National Department of Education (South Africa government) policy document of ABET (1997:19) clearly states that "recognition will be given to prior learning experiences which learners have obtained through formal, non-formal and informal learning and or experience" Adult learners come to the teaching/learning situation with a wealth of experiences accumulated over the years from their economic and social life. Such experiences are recognised by the facilitator. Knowles (1990) supports the above argument when he notes that "the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience and that experience is the adult learner's living textbook".

Experience from Economic Life

Many participants in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes are working adults. They may be employees of state departments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's), Community Based Organisations (CBOs) or self-employed adults. During their economic - working - lives adult learners are exposed to many things which could influence their lives in general and their learning situation in particular. Participants on Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes integrate these

experiences gained from their working lives into the new skills and knowledge being taught. Such prior knowledge or experience assists adults to understand new learning matter much faster. New knowledge and skills acquired at a faster rate by adults enhance the performance of their chosen careers.

Experience from Social Life

Being community members, leaders, parents or married people, adult learners come into contact with a variety of people, situations and unique experiences. For example, through participation in cultural activities such as marriage, religion, settling of disputes and voluntary community services, adults acquire a wealth of relevant knowledge and skills informally. In adult learning situations educators need to analyse the unique socio-economic experiences of learners and to draw from such experiences in order to make learning more relevant and participatory. They should also arrange learning activities in such ways that would give adult learners the fullest opportunity for participation and good chance to practice what they have learnt in order to improve their socio-economic lives. Since adult learners come from diverse backgrounds, making use of their prior experiences during the didactic encounter could benefit the whole learning group. Adult learners are usually motivated and are eager to participate in learning activities that are related to their life experiences.

Concurring with this viewpoint Fraser and Loubser et al (1990:57) aptly say, "Adult learners in particular benefit when everyday life experiences are simulated during instruction". In other words, from these various reasons outlined above as to why adults enroll for the ABET programme, educators in the Distance education system at UNISA have been able to identify different types of adult learners.

Slow Versus Fast Adult Learners

Some adult learners are slow in learning. Tasks or comprehend whatever learning they are taught. Other adult learners are fast learners and can easily comprehend or quickly complete whatever learning tasks may be assigned to them. These two groups of adult learners influence one another in the didactic situation. The slow learners, for instance, can hold the whole group/class back while the fast learners could also put undue pressure on the slow learners. In most cases slow learners are left behind. To hold these two groups in check, the adult educator, facilitator or tutor should make sure that neither of the two groups of learners dominates the didactic activities (ie class or group discussions). The adult educator, facilitator or tutor should employ teaching techniques and the study guide package. This innovation on the part of the distance ABET educators has meant that in a small but big way UNISA has

that would offer adult learners the freedom to choose the pace of learning that suits them best.

Planning for slow and for fast learners at the same time influence the outcomes of the learning process. Educators have to adapt their learning material in order to cater for the varied groups of adult learners. It is very possible that if these differences in the adult learners' capabilities are not taken into consideration a great number of the potentially adult beneficiaries would not be able to acquire specific skills that are related to what they do at their work places or homes. In this sense, the outcomes of the learning process that are supposed to be learner-centred would not be realized. The effort would be a waste of time and resources. To prevent this from happening distance educators at UNISA in the ABET programme have put in place approaches such as the multimedia mode of delivery so as to reach a wide spectrum of adult learners and impart necessary survival skills from a distance. Because the educators in the ABET programme realize that they work with slow adult learners, they have put in place, countrywide, some distance education learning centres where adult learners often visit in order to have face - to - face - tutorials to augment the knowledge that the learners access through teleconferencing, the internet, attempted to bridge the gap between the slow learners and the fast learners.

Introvert versus Extrovert Learners

In adult teaching/learning situations some of the participants may be introverts (shy, withdrawn or lacking confidence) while others could be extroverts (bold, open and reaching out to colleagues and facilitators more easily). The facilitator of an adult teaching/learning programme should therefore employ a variety of appropriate teaching media, teaching styles, methods or approaches to accommodate this fact. Textbooks, video, audio, charts, pictures, role play and demonstrations are some of the media and methods of teaching which when used effectively could accommodate all participants (introverts and extroverts alike) in the teaching/learning transaction. The adult methods and strategies. Individual teaching where attention is focused method of teaching in order to accommodate both the timid and the bold learner.

Supporting this viewpoint Fraser and Loubser et al (1990:59) have this to say:

"The individualizing method of teaching is therefore an attempt not only to coax the learner into active participation but also to give recognition to the unique individual's character of each learner".

Providing a variety of learning and teaching material to the adult learners opens up the potential that is locked in those learners who are shy. They then are able to read on their own, interact with their peers and participate in group discussions that

are guided by the tutor. Introverted learners are easily drawn 'out of themselves' by being given practical tasks related to their chosen fields of interest to complete either as a project done by an individual or collaboratively with other learners.

Determined Versus Less Determined Learners

Among participants in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes are learners who are very much determined either to improve their knowledge and skills or to make up what they lost out on during their youth. There are also participants who have little determination and are uncertain or unsure of themselves. Such adult learners could drop out when and wherever any hindrance comes their way. Adult learners who are determined to learn have confidence and high motivation (ie they have urgent learning needs to fulfill) and may therefore withstand the hindrances and frustrations associated with learning efforts. In sustaining adult learners' interest, motivation and determination, the facilitator/adult educator should seek to find out the motives of individual learners and try to address such concerns individually as much as possible.

Further, in order to encourage learners who are unsure of their work to complete their tasks and realize their outcomes, UNISA ABET tutors literally "walk the talk" with the

Thorough planning as a basic tenet in ABET programmes is crucial because no instructional task could be effectively executed without a laid-down plan which serves a guide for programme implementation. Curzon (1990:131) for instance argues that: "if you don't know where you are going, it is difficult to select a suitable means for getting there". This means that planning for effective teaching in ABET programmes should include at least the formulation and selection of appropriate teaching methods, approaches or strategies and selection of appropriate teaching media.

Conclusion

This article has argued that it is important for distance educators to understand and not to underestimate the profile and characteristics of their adult learners. Adult learners bring to the learning experience a wealth of information and previous knowledge that can be updated, critiqued and improved upon in the new courses that the learners take through the ABET programme that is run from UNISA. Knowledge of the learner profile and characteristics has worked well for teaching adult learners at a distance because the programme designers and planners have been able to assess the kind of support system that they had to put in place for effective learning to take place.

One such innovation that the ABET programme has put in place due to and understanding of the adult

learner profile and characteristics has been the introduction of a multimedia delivery approach to the learning process. The ABET project has transformed the lives of adult learners by bringing in or making use of teaching/instructing through audio and video cassettes, radio, television, internet and the conventional face-to face 'talk and chalk' method. Since the ABET programme was inaugurated, many adult learners have passed through its mode of distance education and it is not an exaggeration to say that many of these adult learners have acquired new skills to adjust to the changing demands in their lives. To the extent that more adult learners are enrolling with the ABET programme at UNISA, this is evidence that the programme is realizing its outcomes both for the learners and those who designed it. This is the important reason why the South African government of is solidly behind the programme of encouraging literacy, life and economic skills amongst the country's diverse populations who were previously disadvantaged by apartheid's segregationist policies since 1948.

References

Clark, LH and Starr, I S 1996. *Secondary and Middle School Teaching Methods*. 7th Edition. New Jersey; Prentice - Hall.

Curzon, LB 1990: *Teaching in Further Education: An Outline of Principles and*

practice. London; Cassell Educational Ltd.

Department of National Education. 1997. *Government Policy Document on ABET*. Pretoria. Government Printers.

Fraser, WJ& Loubser, CP. 1990. *Didactics for the undergraduate student*. Durban: Butterworths.

Grattan, CH. 1971. *In quest of knowledge; a historical perspective on adult education*. New York: Arno Press and New York Times.

Hely, ASM. 1962. *New trends in adult education; from, Elsinore to Montreal*. Paris: Unesco Press.

Kaye, A & Harry, K. 1982. *Using the media for adult basis education*. London: Croom Helm.

Knowles, MS. 1990. *Modern practice of adult education from pedagogy to andragogy*. cambridge: prentice Hall Regents.