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The Theory and Practice of Andragogy in Adult Education

Chris Olusola Omoregie

Adult Education as a discipline co - exists with other educational fields such as Educational Management, Guidance and Counseling and Special Education. These courses are professional courses residing in most faculties of Education. In Nigeria, Adult Education in higher institutions has its peculiar characteristics that it is misunderstood by the society and candidates who later find themselves in the field. Andragogy remains the most popular idea in the field of adult education and its understanding would give the discipline the deserved professional coloration. What are the basis for referring to Andragogy as a theory when other scholars argue that its practices fall short of the claim that it is a theory? There are gaps between Andragogy as a theory and practice which include the nature of the adult learner as different from some assumptions of Malcolm Knowles. For example, there are some subjects of study which may not allow much involvement of the learner and the varied learning situations. Yet, the conditions for the practices of Andragogy include individuality, freedom, and self actualization. In a knowledge economy, it is high time Adult Education evolved more ideas on teaching and learning of its clientele based on changing social and cultural factors rather than mere age of learners.

Adult Education

The discipline of Adult Education as a subset in the genre of other specializations in Faculties of Education prides itself on its practice of deploying Andragogy in its teaching and learning process. It differs from pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children. Based on humanistic theory of personality that human thoughts, feelings and beliefs are important factors in learning, Andragogy assumes self concept; role of experience; readiness to learn; orientation to learning; internal motivation and need to know as justification for its distinct method of helping adults learn.¹ As lofty as Andragogy is and even with the extended strides of influences it has made even on every other system of education by its emphasis on knowledge transfer, there are no strict means by which it can be practiced and measured as such. This creates a problem of how it ought to be practiced.

Adult Education in Nigerian Higher Institutions

The rating of Adult Education in Nigerian higher institutions is such that many students come to the Department not as their first choice course but accept it just to have University education. This wrong notion, approach and lack of knowledge of these students is not unconnected with the level of awareness of the course among

members of the society who misinterpret it as education for the aged. Lecturers in most Departments of Adult Education have now seen it as a burden to introduce and attract their students to the discipline if only for the fact that the discipline should survive for their own sustenance.

While one may pardon the new students for lack of knowledge of the discipline one remains shocked at the responses professional adult educators give on the highly priced idea of Andragogy in Adult Education. Andragogy is almost synonymous to the discipline of Adult education but it is not practiced the same way by professionals. The preliminary interview of lecturers for this study was to ask them how they have been practicing Andragogy in their field. The answers ranged from, "it is not practicable" to simply "an involvement of students in the teaching and learning process in the classroom".

Is Andragogy a theory?

There is no consensus in literature as to whether andragogy is a theory. Some authors are satisfied to say it is a principle or an assumption. A theory refers to a formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or of ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event or more generally an opinion². Andragogy qualifies by this definition as a theory because it has assumptions which can be considered as rules. It is also an idea which is suggested to explain the reality of adult learning. Theory can also be an assumption or system of assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedure based on limited knowledge, devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behaviour of a specified set of phenomena.³ In this description of a theory the rules of procedure for practice are emphasized. This element could be the reason Mintzberg proposed that a theory is the how several things are related and the why of an observable event.⁴ Andragogical assumptions could be a justification for a different method for adult learning but falls short of other relationships in adult learners apart from age. Theory is then a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained.

Andragogy has been mired in controversy in the academic adult education literature since Knowles popularized the idea. Critics have questioned Knowles' assumption on Andragogy that adults and children learn differently and thus should be taught differently. They argue that Andragogy falls short of a learning theory because it provides little insight into the process of adult learning. Adult educators have argued that Andragogy is more useful as a guide for teaching, although they claim that the assumptions on which Andragogy teaching model is based are not universally true.⁵

Andragogy further loses admirers for promoting the illusion of a generic adult learner. Andragogy ignores the relationship between self and society by de-contextualizing the learning process and describing the individual in psychological

terms separate from social, political, economic and historical contexts. Consequently, Andragogy does not account for structural systems of privilege and oppression based on race, gender, and class that influence learning and does not consider how culture affects a person's development and ways of learning.

Since Andragogy prides itself as neutral while upholding mainstream values, it omits a critical analysis of commonsense assumptions about cultural, socio-political and institutional constraints on learning thus it is critiqued for sustaining hegemonic social arrangements and for supporting exploitative structures and conservative agendas.

The Gap between the Theory and Practice of Andragogy

Concerns regarding the link between theory and practice are not new and efforts to address this problem have taken several forms. What is needed is a shift in how we engage the interplay between theory and practice, with an emphasis placed on developing initiatives that target opportunities to develop, test, and refine theories⁶. A theory's value rests on its ability to provide an accurate account of the factors that regulate people's behaviour. Rothman⁷ interpreting Lewin's⁸ dictum 'nothing is more practical than a good theory' sees all as resting on the assumption that good theories are available to address practical problems. This assumption raises a question of what practical problems Andragogy is solving in educational practices. Andragogy does not apply to all adults in all situations. Knowles ignored the socio historical context of learning – including differences in culture and gender⁹

Conditions for the Practices of Andragogy

Andragogy has been applied in many teaching and learning situations ranging from workers training and educational programmes to children and teenage classes. For example, Avoseh's experience in grade 12 where he used andragogical approach was to tap into the children's worldview and inchoate experiences to achieve effective teaching¹⁰.

This experiment and indeed the promotion of learners' centredness prove that the biological age of learners do not matter for the use of Andragogy.

The general idea from Knowles principles of Andragogy is that there is need to involve learners in the learning process. But then in participation, there are questions of how this can be done. Is it only allowing them to share their opinion on particular subjects? Involvement of learners should start from knowing and taking their interest into consideration in planning the learning programme and in what and how they want to learn. Their individuality, freedom, self actualization, and sitting arrangement are essential aspects which professionals and practitioners of Adult Education should use to strengthen andragogical principles. Andragogy also needs to be assessed or

evaluated as a teaching and learning process. A rigorous empirical testing is needed to validate the guidelines of Andragogy especially among adult learners.

Conclusions

Andragogical method is no longer peculiar to Adult Education practice though it was Knowles, a professor of Adult education that popularized it. Before its promotion in Adult Education it had existed in many other forms. Academic adult educators are turning the contents of their research agenda toward emerging issues of adult learning, but practitioners continue to claim that Andragogy remains useful as a guiding set of assumptions about adult learners and continue to practice andragogical methods in their teaching and learning experiences.

Instead of promoting Andragogy as the only theory in Adult Education which pushes professionals into dogmatizing and indoctrinating other professionals with it, there is urgent need to avail the discipline of more ideas from other disciplines, or rather evolve other neologisms - newly coined words or phrases that are just emerging into mainstream use. Adult education needs more neologisms for its practices.

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(Footnotes)

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