A comparison of participation in adult education and learning across two ‘worlds’

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

This paper examines participation in adult education in two very different contexts and uses the comparison to answer some of the questions on participation and the role of adult educators. Western and indigenous African contexts and the role of adult educators combine to provide the core of the comparison.

Introduction

The comparison of participation in adult education in two very different contexts focuses on factors that impact participation including the role of the adult educator. The first context is the Western context spanning the initial history of adult education and up to the transformations that have defined its understanding in the 21st century. The second context is the indigenous African context. The focus on participation and learning, the context as well as the role of adult educators provide the core of the comparison in the two worlds examined in this paper.

Several factors affect participation in any educational activity especially in adult education. In addition to other factors, the adult learner’s context, the role of the adult educator, the goals to be accomplished and the quality of motivation all combine to define and determine the quality of participation. Differences in context often affect the definition of most concepts in adult education. Indeed, adult education in most cases is context dependent. The context, largely, determines its meaning, utility, methodology, participation and the role of the adult educator.

The initial history of adult education in the West points to a solid link between struggles for equity and social justice and adult education and learning. In its inchoate stage in the West, adult education was more of a social, liberal, empowering, life-defining and community-oriented education and less of the vocational or the ‘bread and butter’ type. Adult education in the modern, post-modern and globalization era is a mix bag of several items with no recognized copyright owner. A diversity of interests – academic, corporate, governments, religious, non-governmental organizations, and even charlatans all compete for ownership of adult education. In the struggle for ownership of adult education, the learners seem to have been forgotten and hence the rise of the ‘individualized, self-directed, and autonomous forms of learning’ that have effectively sidetracked adult educators (those who are prepared academically and professionally for the field). The picture of the current context of adult education sketched above provides us an understanding of the context and, by implication, of the factors that are affecting participation. In our present context, the larger community imposes barriers to participation. One major barrier discussed in this comparison is the extreme commercialization of adult education.

Indigenous or traditional Africa is used in this paper mostly to refer to pre-colonial Africa although some reference may apply to contemporary Africa where communities are still guided by some form of traditional education. Adult education in indigenous Africa had
social, moral, religious, economic and vocational roots as in most of its Western beginnings. It is pertinent to mention the fact that because indigenous African education was a continuum it is difficult to discern adult education from other forms of education in a very neat way as in the West. Adult education is mostly distinguished from other ‘levels’ of education through its institutions and personnel. The community had a suffocating control of education generally and especially adult education. The interface between adult education and the community imposes participation and learning as what Freire would call ‘existential necessity’. Although participation and learning were imperative within the context of traditional Africa, it was devoid of commercialization. The influence of the context on adult education and vice versa made adult education accessible to all.

**Participation - a contested concept**

Participation generally involves sharing or taking part in something. Applied to adult education, it means enrolment and involvement in an adult education program or class. Jarvis (1990) defines participation in adult education simply as ‘the attendance at adult education courses’ (pp.259). A survey of available literature however reveals that participation – generally – and especially in adult education is not as simple as Jarvis’s definition. According to Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007, pp.78) ‘participation is one of the more thoroughly studied areas in adult education’. Participation is complex, contested and weaves into issues of context, barrier, learning, motivation, enrolment, retention/attrition, ideology and social stratification. An analysis and understanding of some of the renderings of the concept provide a better basis for the comparison in this paper.

As Long (1991) noted, the nature of adult education as a voluntary, need-oriented endeavor imposes a need to understand the undercurrents of why adults participate in any form of learning in spite their regular social commitments. The earliest study of participation recorded is in the 1930s with dissertations written on participation in adult education in the 1940s (Long, 1991, pp.77). Long also indicates that the initial efforts in the study of participation have revolved around ‘motive’. He further identified several models of participation, including Boshier’s ‘factor analysis of motives for participation’, Lorge’s model of ‘human wants’, and Miller’s ‘model of field theory’ (pp.78). Courtenay (1989) reviewed ‘participation characteristics of older adults’ in the United States and Canada. In addition to looking at motivations for adults’ participation, he also identified several barriers to participation. Citing other sources, he lists barriers to participation to include, among others, ‘lack of interest’, ‘being too old, having poor health, lack of time and costs’ (pp.528). Other barriers include ‘socioeconomic condition’ and ‘location of the educational opportunity’ (pp.528).

A detailed study of participation in adult education that emerged from the ones cited by Long above is Cross’s (1981) *Chain of Response* (COR) model. Her model was the outcome of her analysis and critique of previous models of participation on one hand and her study of adult learners as lifelong learners. In spite of her model, she admits the complexity and contentious nature of participation. She insists that, the question why adults participate ‘will probably never be answered by any simple formula. Motives differ for different groups of learners, at different stages of life, and most individuals have not one but multiple reasons for learning’ (1981, pp.97). Merriam *et al.* (2007) in their chapter entitled ‘adult learners: who participates and why?’ did a fine analysis of participation almost from all its ramifications and including several schools of thought on the concept. Their subtitle that ‘problematised’ participation especially underlines the fact that participation is a contested concept. In spite of the complex and contested nature of the concept participation, it must have a minimum level of universal application in adult education. It is in this respect that Kjell Rubenson’s reference to the social context is
instructive. Rubenson also (1989) concludes, 'participation has to be understood in relation to the processes that govern the social construction of attitudes toward adult education and in relation to the social functions that adult education is allocated in society' (pp.65). The analysis of participation above mostly applies to the Western context that is linear and is attuned to putting things in compartments. The analysis above is not easy to apply to the traditional African perspective because of the interconnectedness of everything to everything else. In the traditional African sense, education and indeed the whole of life, is about participation.

**Participation as kinship**

Participation is what defines an individual as a member of the community and validates the individual's existence through belonging and relating. Because of the fact that education (including adult education) is as complex as the web of complex relationships that give meaning to life in traditional African societies it is often difficult to discern different levels of education. The holistic approach to life does not allow separation between life and educational participation. Salia-Bao put it better with the assertion, 'indigenous education in Africa was largely undifferentiated from other spheres of human activity' (1989, pp.86). Because education is a definition of an individual's life, it derives its essence in part from the individual's actions in the community.

Learning in traditional African education dovetails with observation, application and participation. Because learning is living and living is active participation in the life of the community; no individual can be 'educated' without participation across board. Learning through action allows the learner to 'study' all disciplines available in the community – based content. Furthermore, traditional African education emphasizes peer-group learning, which is premised on active participation. The combination of learning in action and peer-group learning are summed up in active citizenship. Kinship and family relations become variables in the educational process and combine to establish participation as a synonym for kinship and life. Participation is therefore not a thing of choice but an existential imperative. 'To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community' (Mbiti, 1969, pp.2) – emphasis added.

In spite of the complexity of traditional African education as a continuum that connects to every other aspect of life, there are a few distinguishing factors of adult education and learning. The content, format and institutions that administer adult education are the distinguishing characteristics of adult education. Although the age of the learner is a factor, age is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for qualification in adult education. An adult with a questionable character, one who has failed in her/his (especially his) obligation to kin and community is not regarded as an 'adult' in matters of depth and focus. On the contrary, a young person who has been very active as a citizen is often invited to take up adult responsibilities including adult education. The Yoruba proverb bi ọmodé ba mọ ọwọ wè à bà àgbà jeun (a child that knows how to wash his/her hands will eat with elders). Washing hands implies active participation in the life of the community in addition to being of excellent character- the ultimate evidence of education. An individual’s qualification to become a revered ancestor after death is measured by the quality of such individual's participation in the life of the community. In order for an individual to excel in participation and to be truly human such an individual has to be educated in the ways of the community and no one can be so educated without active involvement in the community. The interface of education and community presents a revolving door that makes participation and learning – especially in adult education – an inescapable imperative. Although our analysis so far points to the liberal concerns of traditional
education, most of the facts apply to vocational education that runs parallel to the informal and ubiquitous lifelong learning. Barriers to participation in adult education and learning are mostly individual rather than socioeconomic. A universal barrier typically accommodated by the entire community would be any health-related impairment. Apart from the above, a failed character is the only barrier, usually self-imposed, to participation in adult education and learning. In terms of vocational, specialized, and formal adult education, the only character-related barrier would be laziness. The barrier to participation in other forms of adult education and learning is a failed character in terms of failing to meet one's obligation to kin, family and community and in terms of violating community taboos (èèwò). Otherwise, participation in adult education and learning in traditional Africa is a social obligation that is not negotiable for any citizen of a community.

Participation in a globalized context

The analysis of participation as a contested concept reveals the fact that participation in adult education and learning, especially from a Western perspective cannot be discussed in abstraction. The Western thought pattern is linear and highlights the individual along democratic values. In spite the emphasis on the individual, participation in adult education and learning is not entirely within an individual's control. A diversity of factors and interests combine to define content, format, objective, access and participation.

The initial history of adult education in the West (mostly informal and without specialists) slanted more toward the liberal, lifelong learning concerns. The foundation of adult education in Britain for instance is traced back to the efforts of St. Augustine and his apostolate in Kent. The focus of adult education then was to empower Christians with religious and moral values necessary for their spiritual salvation. Even with the society for promoting church knowledge (S.P.C.K.) and the charity schools, the focus was on adult education for religious and cultural purposes. In what were mostly religious adult education and the education of children of the poor, participation was voluntary and encouraged as a catalyst for social justice. N. F. Grundtvig's ministry in Denmark falls within the liberal concerns of adult education that sought both religious and cultural empowerment of adult learners. Grundtvig's insistence on the use of vernacular (instead of Latin) was to make adult education a cooperative and dialogic exercise. His insistence on the use of Danish language was to open up access and enlarge participation. Again, participation is aimed at expanding opportunity for Danish farmers and giving them cultural pride. Participation is also linked to social justice and life-defining issues. Overall, participation in adult education and learning at these initial stages of the history of adult education was focused on the individual in the community. Individual participation is encouraged with visions of the corporate good. The notion of participation linked to social justice continued up to and including the formation of the mechanic institute and workers' education where a sense of community, empowerment and learning for living permeated adult education. However, recent developments associated with the postmodern world have redefined almost every facet of human endeavor and especially adult education.

The concept globalization has shown its affect on education but especially so in adult education. Globalization has cast a huge shadow of doubt on who owns adult education. The question of ownership has also affected the recognition of bona fide adult educators amidst the huge population of individuals masquerading as adult educators. The issues (problems?) of definition, ownership and professionalism have combined to confuse adult learners and create a neo-class of a neglected species. Whereas UNESCO (especially through CONFITEA.V) established adult education as a right and as a sine qua non for participatory development in the 21st century, economic globalization seems to have the upper hand in defining the parameters of practice, practitioner and participation in 21st...
The economic context of 21st century adult education combines with rapid changes in social and political spheres to revalidate my elementary understanding of capitalism as 'work and eat'. Today's capitalist orientation slants almost everything, including citizenship and democratic responsibilities toward the economic dimension. Adult education is under pressure to focus on skills that individuals need to meet up with their economic citizenship expectations. Mojab (2001) highlights the power of economic globalization and the 'extraordinary demands' that the capitalist economy makes on adult education. Furthermore, 'The changing economy calls for the reorganization of adult education into a training enterprise fully responsive to the requirements of the market' (pp.23). Adult education and learning today is loudly applauded on the 'bread and butter stage' (Lindeman, 1961, pp.64) at the expense of the 'cultural ends…what is euphemistically called the "higher life"' (pp.64-65). Finger and Asún (2001) in their analysis of the 'transformation of adult education' contend that mainstream adult education has strayed away from the 'project of emancipation and social change' (pp.124). They admit the fact that privatization has taken the better of adult education and learning so much so that 'learning is becoming a private or purely personal issue, thus abandoning all its collective dimensions' (pp.124-125). The authors link the privatization of adult education to 'its individualization in the context of a disenchanted modernity' (pp.125). Economic globalization is a hallmark of the 'disenchanted modernity' for which the individual adult learner needs different forms of 'survival kits'. The apparent transformation of adult education programs to individual economic life vests has created lucrative businesses for 'adult educators' with entrepreneur acumen. Hence, Finger and Asún observed 'the proliferation of "tools" of adult education- self-help kits, computer-based materials for self-education, psychological self-improvement materials, self-test…and individually customized adult education graduate programmes…' (pp.127) as evidence of who and what determines participation in adult education and learning. The direction that participation and learning in adult education is heading within the context of globalization is encompassed by economic logic and individual survival.

Participation in adult education and learning in the age of globalization is premised primarily on the need to compete at the vocational or bread and butter levels. The ability and the means to pay bills and meet financial obligations are paramount and they surpass any liberal or empowering concerns of adult education. Given the facts above, participation in adult education and learning in the world of globalization puts the individual and her/his economic needs at the center. Participation follows Søren Kierkegaard's assertion that 'the individual is the truth and the crowd is the untruth'.

Conclusion
The history of participation in adult education and learning in most communities of the world revolved around the need to make the community better through individual empowerment and education. Participation in adult education and learning in traditional African education and indeed in the Western genesis of adult education both point to the unambiguous accent on liberal and lifelong concerns.

In the specific example of traditional Africa, participation was imposed because life was education and vice versa and no one could 'opt out' of education because that would amount to 'opting out of kinship and life'. Although participation was imposed because of the complex mix of the traditional African world, the individual had choices in terms of vocational education. But even within the freedom of choice in terms of vocational education there were hidden elements of compulsion in that an educated and active citizen
is expected to be an individual who has a profession with which to cater for self, kin and family. Participation in adult education and learning is existence and connects to family and kinship – participation is relating.

The initial history of participation in adult education and learning in the West indicate a focus on the liberal and empowering dimensions that combined individual pursuits with group pride and interests. The professionalization of adult education later diversified the discipline and afforded individuals the opportunity to pursue a diversity of areas of interest but still with reference to corporate interest. The age of specialists and the added influence of economic globalization have re-defined adult education and learning and by implication, re-defined participation and learning. In the current scheme of things, most trained adult educators who have not joined the logic of economic re-orientation of adult education and learning are most likely to become onlookers in the field. Globalization intones survival of the fittest in economic terms and therefore compels the adult learner to participate in adult education and learning as a means to acquiring economic life vest.

References