

# **ADULT EDUCATION DELIVERY IN NIGERIA: CONCERNS FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**BY**

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## **Abstract**

Literacy is inarguably vital for the social and economic welfare of individuals and society (Davidson, 2010). Thus, many countries have reinforced their political commitment and developed policies for increasing literacy across their population. For example, prior to the World Education Forum in Dakar 2000, Nigeria government in preparation for the forum announced the transformation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) to Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. President Obasanjo (1999) in Aderinoye (2005) gave the explanatory notes to this that UPE now UBE has gone beyond basic primary and will as from then include the first 6 years of primary, first three years of junior secondary and adult literacy. As central as literacy is to the overall development of man and nation, Nigeria is faced with the challenge of learning environment towards adult education delivery and observable progress in literacy programmes. The objectives of this paper therefore, are to examine the significance of learning environment as it affects effective facilitation and learning among adult learners. In this approach, the paper reviews some vital concepts as (1) literacy (2) learning environment (3) effects of learning environment on adult learners (4) recommendation. The paper concludes with a plea to the government to create conducive environment for effective facilitation and learning.

## **Introduction**

Literacy is inarguably vital for social and economic welfare of individuals and society. Thus, many countries have reinforced their political commitment and developed policies for increasing literacy across their population. One of such commitment is the National Literacy Action Plan (2010-2014), based on the Need, Assessment Report, which provided the government, donors and all other literacy actors with a common vision, guiding principles and national strategies for literacy programmes. The vision and targets envisaged in the action plan were integrated into the recent National Education Strategies Plan II (NESP II) for 2010-2014 (Purcell-Gate Tierney, 2009).

Literacy involves a continuum of learning that enables individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in the community and wider society (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2008). Literacy equips the individual to develop the attitude of critical and logical thinking, which will help him solve all his economic,

political and cultural problems (FME/UNESCO, 2003). Studies by Oxenham (2004) and Burchfield, Hua and Rocha (2002) point to the positive outcomes of female literacy programmes in the developing countries. According to these studies, literate women tend to marry at a later age and have fewer children when compared with illiterate women. They tend to be more mobile and participative more actively in making decision about family and households matters. They are less vulnerable to spouse and are less likely to experience domestic violence compared with illiterate females. Furthermore, literacy help develop human capabilities, broadens earning opportunities, improves personal wellbeing and promotes greater social and political participation. Literacy also facilitates a healthy, equitable and democratic environment and contributes towards improving livelihood productivity and thus helps in reducing poverty, particularly when accompanied by broader anti-poverty effort (UNESCO, 2007; Okeke, 2002).

Despite the strong political commitment and appropriate policies for making the literacy drive successful in most African countries, Nigeria inclusive, many still suffer heavily from illiteracy (Kester & Okemakinde, 2008; Adepoju, 2006) this is because though several studies have been carried out in Nigeria to explore factors affecting adult learners learning outcomes, these previous studied have mainly focused on government and learners' related factors rather than on the learning environment and its effects on learning.

### **Literacy Conceptualized**

Literacy is a continued process that requires sustained learning and practice. Thus, all policies and programmes should be designed to encourage sustained participation and celebrate progressive achievement (Omolewa, 2002).

There are serious challenges in how literacy is defined and measured (UIL, 2013). In other words, defining literacy has been problematic and fluctuating. There are no standard universal definitions of literacy that capture all its facets. Indeed, there are different contradictory understandings of the concept of literacy (UNESCO, 2006). Wagner (2001) submitted that literacy is a word with many different definitions and meanings. In support of the above statement,

Akinpelu (2002) maintained that:

The concept of literacy is slippery on which so many has been and continues to be written. In spite of the volumes already written, the meanings and connotations will continue to change with time and circumstances. Peoples' notion on what it means to be literate and

illiterate is influence by cultural values and cultural experiences.

Historically and culturally, the term is impossible to define in isolation from specific time, place and culture. Illiteracy can only be understood in relation to a culture's definition of literacy because of the lack of certain set of characteristics. According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary online, literacy is "the quality or state of being literate". Literacy, according to this same sources, derives from Middle English and Latin terms meaning "marked with letters". Two definitions are provided: "able to read and write," and "versed in literature or creative writing or having knowledge or competence – computer – literate, politically-literate".

In the traditional paradigm, this is the way literacy is generally conceptualized. However, in the contemporary paradigm, literacy is increasingly perceived as not only involving the competency in reading and writing, but goes beyond this to include the critical and effective use of these in people's lives, and the use of language (oral and written) for all purposes. This perception involves critical thinking about what one reads as well as expanding the term to encompass oral form of literacy.

Hiebert (1991) takes an explicitly constructivist perspective to the definition of literacy. For some time now, a new perspective on literacy, and the learning processes through which literacy is acquired, has been emerging. The new perspective does not consist of old ideas with a new name, but rather it represents a profound shift from a text-driven definition of literacy to a view of literacy as active transformation of texts. In this old view, meaning was assumed to reside primarily within text, whereas, in the new view, meaning is created through an interaction of reader and text.

McCaffery et al (2007) submits that:

Literacy has several layers. Literacy is rooted in the skills of reading and writing. These skills are used by individuals to accomplish tasks in their daily lives. These tasks are part of their literacy practices, socially and culturally rooted in the communities in which they live and work. Literacy can be a means for critical reflection on the world as a necessary part of becoming capable of creating change.

Literacy perceived as an inter-active and broad-based continuous learning process throughout life rather than as a product of a specific educational intervention, is in line with the critical literacy theories and in part with the social practice theories. This perspective often coincides with a human rights approach to literacy as opposed to a merely technically utility

approach. This also means that literacy is understood as essential for human development and for improving people's quality of life (Torres 2006). A human rights perspective on literacy implies taking careful into account learners' own specific needs and interests. It comes close to the ideas to the transformative approach influenced by Freier because it means that literacy is seen as essential in defending and demanding respect for rights, and as being a right that expands people's freedom.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, according to the American National Institute for Literacy, defines literacy as 'an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at level of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society'. This is a broader view of literacy than just an individual's ability to read, the more traditional concept of literacy. As information and technology have gone beyond reading and literacy has come to include the skills listed in the current definition.

This definition is important as it looks at literacy, at least to some extent, from a more contextualized perspective. The definition of 'literate', then, depends on the skills needed within a particular environment. In academia, the definition of literacy has also evolved from an exclusive focus on reading and writing to encompass a more inclusive and expansive perspective. Some of that work has come from researchers involved in exploring literacy among diverse population and across cultural, political, socioeconomic boundaries. In the introduction to their edited volume, Dubin and Kuhlman (1992) discuss the changing definition of literacy has taken on meanings that go beyond the simple definition of 'reading and writing'; it has come to mean competence, knowledge and skills which accounts for common expressions such as "computer literacy", "civic literacy", "health literacy" "agricultural literacy" and a score of other usages in which literacy stands for know-how.

### **Concept of Adult Learner**

Adult learners are considered distinct from child learners due primarily to the work of Malcolm Knowles, who developed the principle of Andragogy. Ever since, adult learners have been viewed by different nations and defined differently and various terms have also been used to mean "adult learners". An adult learner (North America) or mature learner (UK) (sometimes also called adult student, returning adult, adult returner and student) is a person who is 18 years and up who is involved in forms of learning. According to WorldWideLearn.com, which cites research by educational journal Recruitment & Retention in Higher Education, the averages adult learner is a 35 years old, married, middle-class Caucasian mother.

Adult learners are a very diverse group (typically ages 25 and older) with a wide range

of abilities, educational and cultural backgrounds, responsibilities and job experiences according to Nebraska Institute for the study of Adult literacy. According to Lakin (2009), Adult learners may have the following circumstances:

- Started on a more traditional path and “stopped” with intentions to return, but work, family financial need or lack of previous success did not permit them to do so.
- Performed poorly in high school
- Are anxious about returning to school because of a long gap in education, or
- Need refresher or remedial courses to prepare them for college-level work.

In the US, adult learners fall into the category of nontraditional students, whom the National Centre for Education Statistics defines as meeting at least one of the following seven criteria:

- delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school).
- attends part time for at least part of the academic year
- works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid).
- has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others).
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents)
- does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with GED or other high school).

In UK, a student is normally classified as a mature student if he or she is an (undergraduate) student who is at least 25+ years old at the start of his or her course, or in the Irish case on the first of January of the year of entry, and usually having been away from school for at least two years. The normal entry requirements for school-leavers wishing to start an undergraduate degree are often not applied to mature students. Adult learners seem to be overtaking traditional college students in the range of 18-22 in the higher education arena. However, it has been observed that many adult learners often return to school to:

- develop skills to stay competitive in the workplace
- improve their employability
- prepare them for a career change; and
- increase their earning power

According to the National Centre for Education Statistics reports on adults’ reasons for

participating in formal, work- related courses:

- 92 percent of the adults surveyed indicated they participated in courses to maintain or improve skills and knowledge they already had;
- 77 percent indicated they participated to learn new skills or knowledge;
- 19 percent wanted to acquire skills and knowledge to help change jobs or career fields
- 33 percent participated to get or keep a certificate or licence.

One important area about adult learners that has been discussed extensively is the barriers that adult learners face. Studies in the UK have explored the ways in which classed, gendered and relational positioning can conflict with adult learners' education trajectory; often contributing to their withdrawal from academia, some of these barriers include:

- career, family and financial responsibilities;
- rigid schedules and limited time;
- tight budget (debt) and lack of money
- poor academic preparedness and self-confidence
- lack of information and services.

From the above observations by researchers and educators, it is obvious that adult learners are faced with diverse challenge but they could be successful if the needed services for adult learners are made available. These services include:

- accelerated class option;
- financial aid package;
- flexible class schedules;
- education awareness campaigns that promote available educational services;
- child care services;
- course credit for life experiences, since many adults have job experiences and knowledge;
- distance learning options; and
- academic and career services; and
- transportation options.

## **Dimensions of Literacy**

For centuries, the view prevailed that literacy was a simple, learned cognitive skill. One learned to read and write just as one learned to make baskets. Street (1985) referred to this view of literacy as autonomous literacy.

Theorists like Grieves (2010) have argued that literacy is a primary determinant of technological advancement. In the strongest formulations of this viewpoint, literacy is seen as having a profound impact on the intellectual powers of individuals and societies. The individual who becomes literate undergoes a transformation. According to such theorists, literacy societies (that is, collectivities of literate individuals) have an immense intellectual and cognitive advantage and use this advantage to “develop” socially, politically, intellectually, politically, and militarily. Conversely, individuals and societies with limited or no literacy are largely condemned to simple and traditional lifestyles and cultural systems. In essence, “civilization” is based on literacy.

In the last two decades, the term literacy has come to be commonly used as a statement of, or measure of competence to do a given task or work in a given field. For example, people are said to be “computer literate” or “computer illiterate” depending on their ability to use a computer. Other areas of technical competence are treated in the same way.

A similar usage is that of workplace literacy. In modern industry, more and more demands are made on workers to understand and manipulate symbols and abstract ideas in the form of reports, instructions, graphs, and instrumentation. The viability of industry has come to depend upon a “literate workforce,” that is, a work force able to handle this “discourse” in an effective and efficient manner. Typically, such proficiency has required in-house training.

Street (1985) makes a clear distinction between autonomous and ideological notions of literacy. In his analysis, autonomous literacy refers primarily to literacy as a set of cognitive skills and abilities and their generic use. In contrast, ideological literacy refers to the social conceptions and uses of literacy. In this view, literacy is a part of the defining framework of society. Literacy is what society does with literacy, and society is, to some extent, what literacy brings to it. This is a constructivist or phenomenological perspective. A social system is defined in part by literacy, one of its constituent parts and subsystems.

The ideological view of literacy is meant to focus attention on the nature and function of literacy in a social system. Literacy is an integral feature of the system. Literacy is understood and used in myriad ways in the function of the social system. Literacy is a measure of social position, a metric of job eligibility, a tool for job performance, a device for exercising influence, and a medium for interpreting the world.

## **Learning Environment and Adult Learners' Learning Outcome**

Much of the early work in adult learning focused on intelligence, and whether intelligence decline with age (Merriam, 1993). Attention has long been shifted from the above observation to real learning environment as it affects adult learners. Students learn by connecting experience with reflection (Gillen, 2005), the environment where the connection between experience and reflection take place cannot be over emphasized. This is why Merriam and Caffarella, 1999 submits that the physical and psycho-social conditions of adults impact how adult learn. And by extension determine learning outcome. In support of the above, Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda observe that environmental factors exerted significant influence in the socialization and academic experiences of the learners, environmental factors therefore should always be considered in adult learning activities. This again shows the connection between learning environment and learning outcome.

According to Egle (2007), there are a number of elements that can influence how people come to learn effectively. The environment in which learning occurs is fundamentally important. Poor environments reduce the ability of participants to concentrate and “switch off” the brain, thus reducing learning. He stressed the incorporation of five elements, known as SPECH, into learning environment.

- S = The social environment which includes among others, the welcome signs, introductory activities, outside socializing opportunities and group activities because adult learners are social creatures and have a need to belong within a social setting.
- P = Physical environment which must be comfortable to be able to learn effectively. This involves ventilation, equipment, light, noise, room temperature and room size
- E = Emotional environment: It is important to foster and maintain each person's self esteem by encouraging involvement, acknowledge contributions, foster and expect respect, maintain confidentiality, be authentic and provide constructive feedback.
- C = Cognitive environment: Adults needs to feel that why they are learning is relevant and beneficial. There is need to encourage involvement and participative decision making, describe “What's in it for them”, link the prior knowledge and experience, provide practice opportunities and provide supplementary information.
- H = The Holistic Environment: Recognises and incorporates the range of differences and needs of each individual in each of the elements of the learning environment. As such, use a range of examples, use inclusive language, recognize individual and cultural differences and provide for individual learning preference.



Going by the above, there exists a strong attachment and connection between learning environment and learning outcome. The success or otherwise of adult learners therefore, depend to a very large extent on the environment where the learning take place.

To further comment on learning environment and learning outcome (Hamran, 1998, in McRobbie and Tobin, 1995; Tobin and McRobbie, 1996) investigated the relationship between psychosocial learning environment factors and learning in science classroom because most teacher and researchers would like to know more about the factors which may facilitate or prevent learners' deep involvement in learning and came to conclusion that there existed a strong and significant relationship between learning environment and its component and general outcome of adult learners.

### **Recommendations**

From the submission above, the following recommendations are made.

- i. enabling environment for learning in literacy centres must be utmost priority.
- ii. serious emphasis must be placed on physical learning environment and other things at the learning centres like reading and writing materials should equally be made available to encourage adult learners' active participation.
- iii. literacy planners, organizers, administrators, and managers must accord high priority of learning environment in the design of literacy programmes.

### **Conclusion**

The main emphasis in this paper was that a significant correlation existed between learning environment and learning outcome. Most of the research works and studies examined for this paper also revealed the pivotal role of learning environment in determining learning outcome. It is therefore imperative for learning environment to be put into serious consideration while planning for adult learners as the learning environment will to a large extent determine the outcome of adult learners.

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