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Professional Development of Adult Learners through Open and Distance Learning

Vimbi P. Mahlangu

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Abstract

The concept of human knowledge is a human construct, and therefore, researching experience from the point of view of those who are living it following a social constructivist paradigm will likely reveal valuable information. Topics covered in this review suggest that the topic "professional development of adult learners" might focus on (a) the choice of learning, in other words, why adults opt for open and distance learning, (b) professional development, (c) learning as adult learners, (d) professional practice, (e) quality assurance, (f) performance in distance education programs, and (g) challenges facing adult students. Approaches that deal with flexible learning are referred to as online or distance learning (ODL). Other examples of flexible learning options available to adult ODL learners are learning from work and employer engagement, part-time study, web-based or blended learning, time driven programs at students' pace, contact sessions, workshops and seminars.

Keywords: open and distance learning, professional development, adult learner, professional practice, quality assurance, distance education programs

1. Introduction

Through open distance learning (ODL), adult learners can increase access to learning opportunities irrespective of geographical challenges because the flexibility of time, pace and place of study is assured; teaching and learning are individualised; they are free to select their own learning environment, and they can take responsibility for their own learning at their own pace. Adult learners have a duty to take greater responsibility for ensuring that their own skills or needs are met, and they often share in the costs of investment [24, 48].

Open and distance learning (ODL) is relatively new in the field of education. It gained eminence only in the past 25 years [27]. Open learning is a philosophy, and distance learning is a methodology in education. Openness and remaining learner-centric is a basic philosophy of ODL.

Quality assurance in ODL ought to be decentralised from central administration to citizens, employers, and communities in order for them to play a leading role in determining services that will meet their needs competently [24].

Adults learn better in a non-threatening environment, and their individual learning style needs are met [47]. These positive experiences occur when: (1) previous experience is valued and utilized, (2) there are opportunities to have control over the learning process, (3) adequate time is allocated for integration of new knowledge to take place, (4) there is enough opportunity to practice and apply what has been learned, (5) there is a clear focus on relevant challenges and practical applications of key concepts, and (6) there is feedback to assess progress towards their goals. Skills play an important role in creating a fairer society by promoting social inclusion and mobility [24].

2. Methods

The literature review included here promotes an understanding of the subject area and the criticisms that have been made on the topic [26].

3. The choice of learning opting for open and distance learning

In this research paper, age is not taken into consideration for adult learners who choose open and distance learning. Adult learners list reasons such as personal enrichment, improving pay for their current job, a desire to change careers, preparing for a new job within their field, earning a required credential, interacting with other students and networking, returning to complete a degree, the availability of tuition assistance, and renewing a certification [17]. The labeling of adults learners chronologically and categorizing them according to age is no longer relevant in the ODL environment because of the high demand for higher education worldwide [1]. Young people are pursuing their studies through ODL for various reasons such as the shortage of space at contact universities and availability of technology [36].

The word "practice" itself has multiple meanings depending on the context. People develop skills through practice, though repetition alone is not sufficient as learning requires varied practice in different settings and with increasing complexity [58]. Modules that ODL institutions provide must enable students to use theory and apply it to practical situations.

There are seven attributes of blended learning environments that support self-regulation. The attributes are important because students choose ODL because they are able to monitor and control their own learning by looking at the attributes. These attributes are as follows:

(1) Authenticity, which refers to the contextual situation in which support is provided;

(2) Personalisation, which indicates the relatedness of the support to the learners' individual preference, to make learning more identifiable as belonging to them as learners;

(3) Learner control, which refers to the amount of control learners have over the support provided;

(4) Scaffolding, which describes the temporal structure provided to help learners complete the tasks;

(5) Interaction, which indicates the amount of social interaction evoked by the support;

(6) Reflection cues, which trigger thought or consideration on the learner's part about his or her own approach to the task; and finally,

(7) Calibration cues, which help the learners form a sensible and practical idea of what can be achieved; calibration issues occur as the result of an instructional design model that makes it possible to describe learning environments on course levels) [59].

3.1. Professional development

Transformative learning theory offers clarification of adult learners' experiences of fundamental change in their perspective or frame of reference that can occur as the result of being involved in educational or academic work [32]. "Learning can be seen as an experience of critical questioning of beliefs and assumptions, as the adult learner examines the frame from which he or she has been viewing the world. Adult learners have developed a comprehensible body of knowledge such as associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses in their frame of reference that defines their life world" [64]. The theory of transformative learning, because of its support of constructivist philosophy of learning, can assist adult learners to build from their experiences and construct knowledge and meaning [64]. Theory of transformative learning is a useful tool through which to understand the ODL experiences of adult learners [32].

There is a tendency for professional development activities to focus on technology and not on pedagogy. *Pedagogy* can be defined as the "essential dialogue" between the activities of teaching and learning and "how we think and talk about, plan and structure those activities. Pedagogy involves a way of knowing as well as a way of doing" [8]. Adult learners bring to their environment a wealth of experiences, and it is the responsibility of the professional development provider to "build upon these experiences for positive transfer of learning… [this being said, these]…experiences can also be a barrier, because many of them have had poor and ineffectual learning experiences" as well [19].

Adult learning theorists are of the view that "good practices for teaching adults need not reflect those for teaching children because of different prior experiences and motivations. Seminal ideas of andragogy (the method and practice of teaching adult learners) serve as a shared foundation for the variety of adult learning theories in education. Adult learning ought to involve learners from the planning stages; to incorporate the life experiences that learners bring; to put more emphasis on subjects that are relevant for learners' professional or

personal life; and to adopt a problem oriented method that will enable adult learners to use new concepts immediately" [4, 9]. Providing quality services to adult learners implies that the adult education programs ought to have the capacity to do so [50].

Learners in various professional education settings are not only expected to act professionally but are also expected to become professionals. In addition to acquiring on-the-job knowledge, skills, and abilities relevant to the discipline, learners in advanced professional training need also adopt the professional values and behaviors that society associates with being a professional. Rather than being explicitly taught, however, much of what is learned is often acquired tacitly through observation of role models and enculturation in professional practice settings, often termed the "hidden curriculum" [37].

3.2. Learning as adult learners

Theories are there to provide people with a description to make sense of complex practices and phenomena and can provide a viewpoint that reduces intricacies while enabling generalisability. Currently, a single theory exclusive to the field of ODL is unavailable [15]. Reflection is very important in transformative learning. We know that people's beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions—personal frames of reference—mediate their educational experiences when they are learning as an adult student or as a teacher [38]. The popularity of ODL stems from its flexibility and openness in entry and admission requirements, program structure, and flexible learner support (when, where and how to study) [27].

There are six basic principles and eight design elements of andragogy. In order to teach adult learners successfully, the focus of learning has to be learner-centred. These principles comprise self-directed learning, previous experience, willingness to learn, orientation to learning, purpose for learning, and intrinsic motivation to learn. There are eight design elements of andragogy that occur before, during, and after the learning experience, namely "preparing the learners, setting the climate, mutual planning, diagnosis of learning needs, formulation of learning objectives, learning plan design, learning plan execution, and evaluation" [49].

Philosophies of constructivism for instructional design that focus on knowledge construction for ODL mode can be facilitated by: (a) creating learning environments that offer several illustrations of reality, (b) focusing on knowledge construction and not reproduction, (c) providing real world case-based learning environments, (d) fostering reflective practice, (e) enabling context and content dependent knowledge construction, and (f) supporting collaborative construction of knowledge through shared intervention. Social presence is a potentially significant factor in improving instructional effectiveness in both traditional and communication technology mediated distance classes [18, 25].

3.3. Professional practice

In practice, educators and practitioners working with adult learners could use the principles of adult learning to integrate andragogical design elements into their curriculum to improve learning outcomes. Adult learners need advance information about a training or learning experience in order to evaluate its relevance; they learn best when they have the opportunity to control or have input into the goals and purposes of a learning experience; they prefer a

problem-solving approach and they learn best when new learning is couched in real-life context [49]. Dewey thought that a worthwhile educational experience should be grounded in a process of reflective inquiry [23].

Adult learners face numerous situational hurdles, including finances, family life, health, work conflict, and transportation [45]. They enroll voluntarily in educational programs and are usually part-time students who have to balance education with other life tasks like work and family, which means that they are often more at risk of dropping out from education and training [52]. Gaining independence and confidence can help to develop self-directedness in learning [34]. "Mezirow (1991) distinguished between three types of reflection on experience, only one of which, premise reflection, can lead to transformative learning [38]. Content reflection is thinking about the actual experience itself; process reflection is thinking how to deal with the experience; and premise reflection involves examining long held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about the experience or challenges. Premise reflection, or critical reflection on assumptions, can be about assumptions ODL learners hold about the self (narrative), the cultural systems in which they live (systemic), their workplace (organisational), their ethical decision making (moral-ethical), or feelings and dispositions" [38].

However, "when frames of reference are shaken by new, sometimes unexpected incidents, a myriad of emotions can lead to critical assessment of those personal assumptions and understandings. Critical reflection on assumptions, or premise reflection, is not just thinking about an experience or about how to manage the experience; instead, it necessitates that adult learners ought to reflect on long-held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about their experience and challenges in ODL" [5, 14].

When developing adult learners in an ODL environment, learning should rest on the following pillars of knowledge:

- **Learning to know** (acquiring the tools of understanding)

Learning to know depends on the power of concentration, memory and thought. Acquiring knowledge is a never-ending process and can be interwoven with the experience of work [29].

- **Learning to do** (to be able to react creatively to one's environment)

Learning must change and can no longer be regarded as the simple transmission of knowledge for routine practice. Adult learners must be able to communicate, work with others, and manage and resolve conflicts in their own life environment [29].

- **Learning to live together** (to participate and cooperate with other people in all human activities)

In ODL, adult learners must know the diversity of the human race and be aware of the similarities between, and the interdependence of all humans. Dialogue and debate are one of the tools that must be encouraged in ODL [29].

- **Learning to be independent**

Adult learners should be able to solve their own problems, make their own decisions and shoulder their own responsibilities [29].

3.4. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is that part of a quality management system providing assurance that quality requirements will be met. It includes those entire planned or systematic activities essential to provide enough evidence that the service will meet the required needs [2]. Quality assurance tools should not be constructed and handled by staff who are far removed from core activities which implies that, in ODL, teachers and other workers who have not been engaged and involved in the construction of these tools cannot easily relate to or implement them [16]. "A quality culture is nothing if it isn't owned by the people who live it" [30].

Quality ought to be emphasised and accomplished for good quality education to be achieved. Quality assurance is the most important tool to enable a cycle of equal opportunity, fair competition and just rewards in ODL. For quality programs to take place in ODL, quality assurance must concentrate on the mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the anticipated quality is delivered [40]. In making judgements, where there is substantial ambiguity and uncertainty, different outcomes will be achieved by adult learners because they tend to be more reliant on the information provided to them by ODL institutions [3]. "Efficacy and outcome expectations are assumed to be the influence of development both of interests and of goals, although contextual influences might also play part in ODL [55]. Goals are often an implicit element of the career choice and decision-making process, with plans, decisions, aspirations, and behavioural choices all involving goal mechanisms" [7].

There are various reasons to do quality assurance in ODL. Quality assurance in ODL can assist students' mobility from one institution to another and can help maintain accountability for public resources [33]. Quality assurance can advance the quality of higher education provided through ODL. It can also be used to support the transfer of authority between the state and institutions. ODL institutions can rely on quality assurance to inform their funding choices and to update students and employers. In grading institutions, quality assurance can encourage competition within and between organizations. Quality assurance can assist with international comparisons and with a quality check on new (and sometimes private) institutions. For example, in European countries, including the United States, any formal decisions that are taken must be based on external quality assurance activity which is determined by explicit published criteria that can be used consistently [20].

3.5. Open and distance learning environment

Content planning and delivery should more holistically include student needs, interests, and perspectives. There should be an emphasis on adult learners sharing the responsibility for their own learning [66]. Adult learners rely on quality assurance to make decisions about their learning. They are expected to take financial decisions, reorganise their home and/or occupational life, negotiate with family members, and limit their social activities [12].

There are dimensions of cross-cultural values involved in ODL, for example: (a) "the power distance" (the extent to which power, prestige, and wealth are unequally distributed in a culture); (b) the uncertainty avoidance (the value placed on risk and ambiguity in a culture); (c) the individualism-collectivism (the individualistic cultures stress the individual's goals while the

collectivist cultures emphasise group goals); and (d) the masculinity/femininity (the masculine traits include strength, assertiveness, and competitiveness while the feminine traits include affection, compassion, and emotionality)" [28]. Adult development ideas give a better understanding of how adult learners learn differently from younger learners, by offering insight into the professional development of adult learners in ways that will serve their career needs [63].

3.6. Why adult learners do not continue with open and distance learning

It is well established that adult learners come into higher education with many at risk factors, such as age, working at full or part-time jobs, dependents, and academic unpreparedness, to name a few. These characteristics have proven to be barriers to success for some adult learners [21]. There is a clear consensus in literature that dropping out, especially in ODL, is a puzzling phenomenon. The dropout phenomenon is similar to automobile accidents, in that it has a single symptom, but many possible causes [35]. It is essential for ODL institutions to be able to identify reasons for students dropping out, for example, late application to the institution, finding it difficult to make friends, finding it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course, not satisfied with the quality of teaching, not satisfied with their course timetable, and lastly difficult financial or family circumstances, as well as programme/course related reasons –"workload" and "difficulty" [61, 65].

Some of these problems have an impact on the students' behaviour, attitudes, confidence, learning styles and motivation.

There are also epistemological challenges with some brought about by the perception that the content is difficult [56]. Throughout the process of developing study material, it should be taken into consideration that adult learners often feel exposed because of the powerless position they occupy in the educational discourse. When adult learners are thrown into distance learning environments, they may feel lonely, insecure and isolated from the education system. Most of these adult learners enroll in ODL institutions with expectations from past schooling. In ODL, adult learners view their role as directed by the teacher [51].

There are different challenges experienced by ODL learners, namely institutional, situational, and student support challenges.

3.6.1. Institutional challenges

These are difficulties that students may experience with the institution, such as admission requirements, course pacing, and inadequate support services. Some of the institutional challenges include: (a) quality assurance plans are often too general and not favourable to ODL environments; (b) academics tend to have a "passive resistance" to getting involved; (c) some teaching staff that facilitates ODL programmes has not been given sufficient special training on the delivery of open and distance learning practices; (d) time constraints for academics seem to be a challenge that must be overcome along with the development of a common institutional approach to ODL; (e) shortage of tools and technologies that enable scalability; (f) lack of financial sustainability models; (g) lack of committed and qualified cadre of quality assurors and experts with the relevant ODL qualification. It is commonly known that full-time

staff often has been trained in the conventional education system; (h) limited appreciation of principles of ODL; (i) shortage of infrastructure and human capital in ODL institutions; and (j) lack of transformation of ODL policies and procedures to accommodate the growing number of learners. The growing number of learners at ODL institutions has placed more pressure on ODL institutions to provide more services, especially learner support [19, 39, 44, 46].

3.6.2. Situational challenges

Adult learners' main challenge lies in situational factors that are beyond their control, such as obtaining employment, caring for a child, health crises, financial difficulties, legal dilemmas, personal or family interferences, and transport problems. Furthermore, adult learners are expected to deal with institutional challenges such as the level of difficulty of content that is being taught, situation, class attendance, and even re-admission policies.

These adult learners are also expected to deal with dispositional barriers, including educational attitudes, self-efficacy, resilience, and attribution of failure [11, 43]. These arise from each adult learner's particular life circumstances, such as an altered employment situation, a change in marital status, or the arrival of a baby. Traumatic factors and chronic intermittent events such as on-going financial problems, or acute stress due to sudden conflict with family members may affect ODL students in ODL mode. Additionally, self-confidence was found to be a vital requirement for persistence in ODL: if an adult learner is motivated to study but lacks self-confidence, he or she may fail [12].

3.6.3. Student-support challenges

The cost and lack of student support and services, alienation and isolation, and lack of experience in ODL and training all influence adult ODL learners [22, 42]. Work and domestic obligations are expected to hamper ODL learners' achievements far more than would be the case in contact settings, mainly so amid challenging socio-economic circumstances [54]. Their achievement is shaped by a complex, layered, and dynamic set of events. It is the outcome of interaction between personal, institutional, and broader contextual factors. Some of the challenges affecting adult learners in ODL environments include "faceless" teaching, fear of the imminent replacement of face-to-face learning by computers, diffusion of value usually placed on attaining a qualification, faculty culture, lack of independent learning skills and local library resources, lack of formalised agreements to sustain program commitment through difficulties and problems, and high cost of materials [18, 41].

Adult students are expected to make a substantial effort when they start studying. These learners are expected to make financial decisions, reorganise their home and/or occupational life, negotiate with family members, and limit their social life [12]. For adult learners to succeed, more time is required for preparation of assignments and activities. The more technologically advanced the learning systems become, the more they go wrong. Non-educational considerations take precedence over educational priorities. Adult learners are also challenged by their resistance to change and the lack of technological assistance [6].

3.6.4. Reasons why some adult learners embrace open and distance learning

Generally, adult learners are motivated to learn. Unlike their younger peers in residential campus programs, adult learners are often self-motivated, and thrive on intrinsic, rather than extrinsic rewards. Course material must be relevant to the position adult learners see themselves in several years in the future [13]. People become more ready to learn something new when they experience a need to learn and they are able to manage real-life responsibilities and challenges. ODL institutions have an obligation to create conducive conditions by providing tools and procedures for helping adult learners discover their needs to know [62]. In organizing learning programs, ODL institutions should focus on life application categories and sequence them according to the adult learners' readiness to study [57].

Students are able to study at their own pace and receive immediate feedback. Computers can make this type of learning far more interactive and dynamic than studying from books and notes. Open and distance learning allows adult learners to study whenever they have time, which makes it an especially good fit for those learners with work and family obligations [53]. ODL adult learners are presented with the opportunity to think about and decide whether they are ready to commit to distance learning [10].

ODL provides widespread access to training and education resources. It strengthens ties between people, takes the fear out of differences and encourages tolerance [31]. It increases the availability of information resources [60]. Generally, it reduces the cost of traditional training and education while still meeting students' training and education needs.

4. Conclusion

ODL institutions should respect adult learners' multitasking abilities but may initially need to follow a structured, traditional approach to learning. Some ODL adult learners have to focus on obtaining skills required to stay relevant in the job market, and therefore, ODL institutions should ensure that this learner population continues to grow.

Adult learners' orientation to knowledge depends on methods of knowing, such as "What is in it for me?," "What do you think I must know?," "What do I want and need to know and learn?," and "What is of importance for me to know to keep on learning and growing?" If adult learners succeed in open and distance learning, learning can be an effective vehicle for continuous growth and development. In ODL, adult learner success is influenced by personal factors such as intrinsic capacities, as well as issues extraneous to the institution. Adult learners are expected to proceed with their studies according to due dates for the submission of assignments and examination dates. They should be able to act independently and be self-directed.

Adult students need guidance in more interactive classroom settings, and ODL institutions need more formalised training in effective teaching strategies for adult students. In order for

ODL institutions and their programs to be responsive to adult learners, the adult learner's context should be taken into consideration. Adult learners are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In developing adult learners, ODL institutions should provide education and programs to expedite workforce training. For ODL to succeed, a structured process for designing programs, which includes quality assurance, is required. In doing needs analysis with involving stakeholders, ODL staff should try to involve people with appropriate skills and should bear in mind the organisation's constraints.

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