Understanding Adult Learning in Higher Education from African Philosophy of Education and Transformative Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper exposes perspectives that advocate for learning that builds on two main aspects, that: adult learning involves meaning- making processes that acknowledge the dialectical relationship between the self and society within the experiences of learning and; adult learning is transformative and emancipatory at both individual and community level. Within the African philosophy of education and transformative strands, adult learning is informal, non-formal and formal. This context calls for innovative teaching and learning that are sensitive to diverse ways of learning. While it is essential to orient adult learners to think critically and act reflectively as they prepare for work, it is also vital to ensure that what they learn fosters their personal and societal transformation. Overall, this implies that adult learning ought to include the spiritual, biological, intellectual and the emotional dimensions of learning.

***Keywords**: adult learning, higher education, spirituality, transformative education, whole learning*

Introduction

Scholars propose that professional preparations combined with critical thinking, creativity and reflection ought to be the benchmark of adult learning in higher education (Cranton, 1996; Dirkx, 1998; Raikou & Karalis, 2016; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). For that reason, teaching and learning to facilitate the acquisition of these competencies should be emphasized in higher learning (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Increasingly, there are scholarly works that

critique the traditional training approaches (Coulter, 2018; Kinyota, Mwakabenga &Kavenuke,2019) that confine adult learning in formal education settings and limit it to rational ways of knowing (Merriam et al., 2007). Instead, scholars suggest a paradigm shift in adult learning or trainings to include andragogy that embraces multiple ways of knowing and doing (Archibald, 2008; Merriam et al., 2007; Tisdell, 2003; Waghid, Waghid & Waghid, 2018). The need for paradigm shift resonates the adult learning theorizations that premise adult education within the whole person learning that includes the spiritual, biological, intellectual and emotional dimensions (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Zinn, 1997).

The purpose of this paper is to describe how adult learning in higher education is conceptualized by the African philosophy of education (APE) and transformative theory perspectives. Specifically, the paper intends to discuss the philosophical underpinnings guiding APE and transformative teaching. The paper starts by underlining the main arguments advanced by each perspective, their similarities and differences and why these strands are chosen over others. This is then followed by implications the two perspectives bring to pedagogy in higher and adult education. The paper concludes by discussing the ways through which the African philosophy of education and transformative perspectives might be practised and implemented in higher and adult education.

The African philosophy of education

Africa is a continent whose education has largely been shaped by policies and practices embedded in the western philosophies (Odora Hopper, 1998; Viriri & Mungwini, 2010). These philosophies in turn have led to knowledge indoctrination and brainwashing of the African people, thereby calling for decolonization of the minds (Odora Hoppers, 1998; Oelofsen, 2015; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). It is within the confines of brainwashing and the need to revitalize the African indigenous knowledge and culture that marked the birth of Africa Philosophy of Education (APE). According to Waghid (2018), APE is a way of thinking that emphasizes reflective imagination to harmonize the interests of an individual and that of the community. This implies that individuals have responsibility to prioritize the interest of the community as they would prioritize theirs. Wiredu (1989) further sees APE as employing both global and local dimensions to create knowledge that in turn is used to solve problems facing the African continent. Assie-Lumumba (2005), describes APE as an endeavour to cultivate a self-determining, free and decent citizenry, which integrates aspects of others' cultures with ones' own culture. Assie-Lumumba further sees the African philosophy of education being embedded in two aspects. One is that which regards Africans as free and co-belonging individuals, and the other one regards Africans as individuals who recognize the

importance of remaining in relations with one another despite their differences in terms of history and culture. The foregoing aspects reflect a widely celebrated philosophy of life and beliefs in Africa known as *ubuntu* (co-existence) (Nabudere, 2005). *Ubuntu* denotes an Africans' life styles where sharing, togetherness and a feeling of familyhood are at the core of social interactions (Brock-Utne, 2016). This philosophy emphasizes the observance of moral norms and values such as generosity, kindness, courtesy and caring for others. Such a philosophy suggests that education must have a moral purpose and that educators of adult learners must implement andragogy and classroom instructions shaped by the philosophy of *ubuntu* (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). In summary, the uniqueness of APE centres on the following features: it draws from contemporary living experiences; it is open-ended and; acknowledges the existence of multiple realities (Waghid et al., 2018; Wiredu, 1989).

The premises of African philosophy of education

According Waghid et al. (2018) and Wiredu (1989; 2004) the APE is premised on three theoretical underpinnings that include ethnophilosophy of education, critical African philosophy of education and *ubuntu.* Each of these strands is unpacked in the subsequent paragraphs.

Ethnophilosophy of education is the discourse that advocates for knowing from oral traditions. Learning of this nature draws from sources such as customs, myths, proverbs, artefacts and histories of different African cultures (Waghid et al., 2018). Various scholars argue that knowledge acquired through these methods enables learners to grow mentally, spiritually and morally into adulthood (Assie-Lumumba, 2005; Sifuna, 2016 &Wiredu, 1989). Through oral culture, proverbs, riddles and other traditional means of knowing, learners are taught how to abide by social and cultural values of the African people. The following African proverbs illustrate the foregoing argument: *Knowledge is a baobab tree- no one can embrace it with both hands* and; *it takes a village to raise a child.* These proverbs imply that, firstly, there is no end to what a person can acquire in terms of knowing as there is no limit to how much a person should know. Secondly, to raise a child in the African sense is a responsibility of every member of the community. From ethnophilosophy perspective, the African higher learning and adult education settings are called to diversify their curricula to capture this essential component for adult learners and educators.

Seeing things critically is the second stance that defines the African philosophy of education. To be critical in African sense involves three aspects namely, to be open and reflective about the reasons one offers. It also means to use explanations

that justify a reliance on ones' cultural connections and lastly to show how ones' explanations or reasoning could respond to challenges facing the community at large. The critical African philosophy draws from criticism and lived experiences to address problems that are facing people such as how to deal with pandemic diseases and climate change.

Practicing the African philosophy of education involves the cultivation of *ubuntu*, the third stance. People are taught to live together through mutual respect and co-belonging. Through *ubuntu,* the African philosophy of education emphasizes the importance of co-existence despite multiple differences and disagreements that may exist among cultures in Africa. Practising the philosophy acknowledges the existence of such myriad diversities in terms of beliefs, political and religious affiliations in Africa. Such diversities are not an excuse to disengage with those who consider different from us. Waghid et al (2018) observes that, engaging with others should be made based on the ground that both sides are willing to integrate following their differences. Moreover, crimes against humanity, religious conflicts and undemocratic governance in some countries such as Southern Sudan and Libya put a scar to this long-lived and celebrated philosophy of life on the continent. This suggests that there is still a great deal to be done so as to cultivate this philosophy into peoples' lives. Higher education and adult learning are one of the areas where this can be successfully effected.

Drawing from the philosophical underpinnings and the discussion presented above, one may agree with the proposition by Waghid et al (2018) that APE should inform policy and practices of higher education and adult learning in Africa. This is imperative partly because it orients learners to multiple ways of knowing, doing and being. Unlike the western ways of knowing that emphasize on rationality and individuation (Dirkx, 1998; Merriam et al., 2007), APE emphasizes on interrelationships as a core strategy towards learning. As illustrated in the perspectives defining APE, knowing takes place in many forms and is not limited to the rational domain (Assie-Lumumba, 2005; Mutamba, 2012; Sifuna, 2016). It is on this argument that this article opted for APE along transformative theory as theoretical perspectives to guide the thinking.

In summary, one would argue that the African philosophy of education provides a framework of how to respond to major problems facing the continent educationally. However, given the modern schooling that dominates higher education and adult learning, achieving ideas postulated in ethnographical philosophy of education, seeing things critically and *ubuntu* strands may be difficult to realize. This is partly because education has been narrowly conceptualized and equated to passing

examinations and acquiring job market skills (Kumar, 2012; Miller & Nakagawa, 2002; Robison, 2013). This in turn, calls for both policy and practice change in higher education and adult learning in Africa.

Transformative teaching

Teaching for transformation is a core component in adult learning. It draws from the transformative learning theory developed by Mezirow (Mezirow, 2000). Although Mezirow is critiqued for not developing a theory as such (Dirkx, 1998; Malkki, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007), his ideas on cognitive reflection are foundational to understanding transformative teaching in adult learning (Malkki, 2010). The current thinking has extended on reflection and cognition proposed by Mezirow to include other aspects of emotion, social and spirituality to adult learning (Dirkx, 1998; Formenti & West, 2018; Malkki, 2010; Tisdell, 2003). This thinking suggests that the new conceptualization of adult learning is advocating for multiple perspectives to transformative learning such as spirituality. In the ensuing subsection, the paper unpacks spirituality in relation to adult learning and higher education.

Transformative teaching and learning through spirituality

Teaching for transformation holds that people live to make stories and through stories they make sense of the world (Formenti & West, 2018; Merriam et al., 2007; Tisdell, 2003). Spirituality is one of the core aspects through which people make stories and experience the world. Whether individually or collectively, it is an important part of human experience. Tisdell (2003) and Merriam et al. (2007) argue that teaching for spirituality is a required component in higher and adult education given diversity and pluralistic nature of this learning context. They further maintain that teaching and learning anchored on spirituality equips learners with insights about the nature of human beings in their context. Teaching for spirituality, therefore, calls for the need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all things, to create space for people to bring new ways of discovering and sharing reality (Dirkx, 1998; Merriam et al., 2007; Tisdell, 2003).

However, attending to spirituality in adult learning raises questions and doubts to some educators working in formal higher learning contexts. To clear those doubts Tisdell (2003) noted that, teaching for spirituality does not mean pushing a religious agenda. "It does suggest focusing on a broader social aspect in sharing stories and feelings that put a flesh-and-blood face on the world of ideas." "It also means drawing in the important ways people construct knowledge through image, symbol, art, music, ritual gesture and celebration that engage passion that connects deeply with their cultural lives" (p. 204).

Learning that is mindful to spirituality demands teaching that adheres to whole learning approaches. It calls for teaching and learning that draws on the body, souls and minds of the learners. To understand teaching with a focus on holistic nature of the learner compels educators to know how adult learners understand knowledge and how they construct new knowledge. The awareness on how adult learners understand and construct knowledge suggests for pedagogical practices and learning approaches that go beyond the traditional learning that confines learning to cognitive and rational domains.

Knowledge construction that goes beyond rationality is what Tisdell (2003) and Merriam et al. (2007) described as learning that brings all four faces (beings) of a learner into play: the personal, the political, historical and sacred face. Therefore, developing new ideas rooted in ones' context-culture, history, personal experience and spirituality makes adult learning more passionate and transformative (Dirkx, 1998).

Based on this understanding, it is important that curricula of adult learning in higher education are planned and implemented in such a way that adult learners are given chance of being and doing as they engage in constructing knowledge. Being and doing call for multiple approaches to teaching and learning because knowledge construction is a multifaceted process that takes many forms and occurs in many contexts. As Tisdell put it, "knowledge construction occurs in many places such as in working place, relationships, in therapeutic contexts, in somatic learning contexts-Tai Chi, exercises programs or yoga" (p. ix).

It is on this understanding that transformative teaching with a focus on multiple perspectives emphasizes two aspects; Firstly*,* acknowledging indigenous ways of learning. Meaning that the process of constructing knowledge is spiritually and culturally embedded. In this sense, methods such as oral tradition, music, storytelling and visual art become essential avenues in creating knowledge.

The second aspect focus on wholeness and interconnectedness of all things, transformative teaching emphasizes knowledge creation that acknowledges dialectical relationship between the self and others (Dirkx, 2008; Formenti & West, 2018). According to Tisdell (2003), the emphasis on individual-communal interconnectedness has practical implications towards transformative adult learning. In summary, Merriam et al. (2007) are of the view that there is a spiritual side to human learning despite the persistence of rationality in adult learning classrooms today. Therefore, bringing spirituality to higher and adult education classrooms will orient learners to many ways of knowing and eventually connect them to everyday life experiences. Drawing on APE and transformative teaching perspectives as discussed above, the review of the literature for this paper was guided by two

questions: a) What are the current trends dominating teaching and learning of adult learning in higher education? b) How can it be done differently?

Methodology

This paper employed integrative literature review to locate journal articles, books and book chapters, which have theorized adult learning in higher education from the lenses of APE and/or transformative learning. Integrative literature review is a method that involves a comprehensive search of the literature to synthetize and interpret the quality of each of the studies reviewed in order to develop new frameworks and understanding about the topic (Aburn, Gott & Hoare, 2016; Coulter & Mandell, 2018; Toronto & Remington, 2020). A notable strength of this method is that, it provides readers with opportunity to authenticate the reviewers' assertions concerning the topic, and if necessary replicate the same review procedures with the aim of drawing similar conclusions (Toronto & Remington, 2020, p. 2). The empirical literatures reviewed for this paper were those published between 2005-2019. However, empirical studies prior 2005 and other theoretical perspectives besides APE and transformative perspective are cited to show how adult learning has evolved and been theorized over time. The reviewed literature for this paper was retrieved from the databases of the University of Victoria library, Web of Science, Google Scholar and ERIC.

In order to retrieve articles for this review, I used 'Boolean search technique' to devise search strings relevant to my topic. The Boolean search string technique is the retrieval model for information that combines expression of terms with the operators AND, OR and NOT (Aliyu, 2017). Thus, the retrieval of journal articles, books and book chapters for this paper included the following concepts and operators: First, "Transformative learning" AND adult education OR higher education*. Second, "The African philosophy of education" AND higher education OR adult learning* AND teacher education. Third, "Transformative theory" AND higher education AND adult learning*.

In addition, electronic citation tracking, which is a technique to locate key scholars and their contributions in the field (Bakkalbas, Bauer, Glover & Wang, 2006), was used as an additional criterion of whether or not to consider the article for review. Importantly, citation tracking offered insights about how many times the article has been cited and who has cited that article. Google Scholar Scopus and Web of Science official homepages were the major resources employed for citation tracking in this review. The search yielded more than 200 relevant journal articles, books and book chapters. After thorough refinements, scanning of the abstracts and removal of duplicates, 20 articles were picked for the detailed final review.

Findings and Discussion

The discourse of adult learning in higher education

With reference to APE, Waghid et al. (2018) described how knowledge is constructed in higher education and the roles played by education to address problems facing Africa. African philosophy of education (APE) sees higher education as a social and political context where new ideas and change should be cultivated to reflect on the African conditions and ways of learning. Importantly, the APE strives to enact *ubuntu.* In that sense, doing the African philosophy of education focuses on maintaining an interrelationship between the cultivation of education and the achievement of *ubuntu* living. While Waghid et al. have delimited higher education to theorizing learning in the African philosophy of education sense, Tisdell (2003) makes reference to adult learning in higher education contexts to describe learning and transformative teaching for spirituality. She argues that attending to spirituality means honouring various dimensions through which learners construct knowledge. It also involves paying attention to affective, spirituality or symbolic as well as cognitive aspects.

Although APE and transformative teaching take different stances to theorize teaching and learning, they are similar in various aspects. Firstly, they both acknowledge learning as a multifaceted psychological and social construct that calls for different approaches when doing it. As such confining learning to mental process alone is insufficient and denies learners opportunity to learn from other realms of knowing. Along that belief, they advocate for andragogy that combines rationality (the mind) and other dimensions of learning such as the body as well as the spirit if learning is to make sense and be relevant to the learners. Secondly, they acknowledge traditional ways of learning. For example, the use of proverbs, stories, music, image, symbol and rituals. By employing culturally relevant sources of knowledge, it justifies the need to have curricula and pedagogical approaches that are consistent with multiple ways of knowing.

Thirdly, they advocate for a liberatory agenda. Both African philosophy of education and transformative teaching see higher and adult education as social contexts through which individual and social transformation should originate. They also see education playing a liberatory role at two levels -the individual and the society. The liberatory role reflects three elements emphasized by both perspectives namely, wholeness and interconnectedness of all things, the communal nature of knowledge production and the dialectical relationship between the individual and the community (Dirkx, 2008; Malkki, 2010; Formenti &West, 2018).

Implications for adult learning and higher education

The African philosophy of education and transformative teaching for education and learning are considered responsible in the service of developing a person holistically. In other words, adult learning embedded in APE and teaching for transformative purpose aims to transform a person morally and spiritually in order to make him or her a responsible member of the community (Merriam et al., 2007). In my view, while it is essential to equip adult learners with the required job- market skills, it is more important to capitalize on skills that foster the development of person as a whole (Formenti & West, 2018). In other words, adult learning ought to uplift the status of both the individual and the community by solving problems such as; poverty, injustice and any other inequalities. It is from this backdrop that teaching and learning in higher and adult education must pay attention to interconnectedness of the self and the community, a value that is deep-rooted in the *ubuntu* philosophy of life- *I am because we are* (Marx & Delport, 2017*)*. Moreover, educators should create learning environment that will empower learners with necessary competencies to transform the community in a more positive manner. However, as noted earlier, transforming the community has to start with the individual who acknowledges the need to connect with others in the course of creating a fair and just society. This involves changing ones' taken-for granted assumptions through interacting and connecting with others (Dirkx, 2008; Formenti & West, 2018; Malkki, 2010). Another implication that cuts across APE and transformative teaching is that, learning is primarily informal and it involves contemporary living experience and open to multiple interpretations. As Tisdell (2003) put it, educators in higher and adult education should create space for learners to construct knowledge that connect them to their heritage and culture. However, Merriam, et al. (2007) observe that, drawing from oral traditions and ways of learning that connect learners to their social and cultural values doesn't mean that formal education has no place in the African philosophy of education and transformative teaching perspectives. What is required is to balance between informal and formal education in order to bring more meaningful learning.

Furthermore, there is an emphasis on interconnectedness and co-existence in both perspectives. This implies that teaching and learning take place in a social context. As such, the role of a teacher or educator is to facilitate learning in a dialogic manner. Learning in this respect is collaborative and it leads in a teacher-students co-learning process. Collaborative learning is theorized by Vygotsky (1978), Freire (2005) and Archibald (2008) as a critical component in higher and adult learning (indeed in other learning contexts as well) because human beings never develop ideas in isolation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Scholars argue that higher and adult education are formalized learning contexts that honour abstract and immaterial learning over concrete and material learning (Merriam et al., 2007; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). In other words, learning in this context falls under Aristotelian model whereby learning is defined step by step. However, learning that is advocated in non-western education, takes an iterative process and progresses in a spiral model (Archibald, 2008; Tisdell, 2003; Waghid et al., 2018). A spiral model as opposed to Aristotelian model calls for patience and involves many repetitions before a skill is mastered. Therefore, it is not easy to implement and practise African philosophy of education and transformative teaching given the nature and curricula of adult learning put in place in African higher learning institutions. Although structural policies such as teaching for standardized tests, marketization of education and the job market requirements may limit the whole - person adult learning and teaching. As a result, achievement of learning rooted in the lager vision is constrained. Based on this understanding, teaching for transformative purpose is an important component to be incorporated in adult learning and higher education. Tisdell (2003) illustrates this argument by asserting that despite some challenges facing the integration of spirituality in higher and adult education, it is still doable by forging new understanding and relationship between educators and learners. Tisdell proposes the following guidelines on how to go about doing transformative teaching for spirituality: a) interacting with others from a different culture for a considerable period of time; b) developing personal relationship with others; c) being open to cultural diversities and; d) collaborating with other educators in working to promote transformative adult learning.

On the other hand, Waghid et al opine that doing African philosophy of education does not end with just a mere identification of the problem but rather it involves reflection, clarifications, justification or validation of the problems educationally. Therefore, to practise and implement African philosophy of education in adult learning and higher learning institutions, educators need to create learning environment that fosters free flow of critical ideas to enable learners explore problems facing the people of Africa and suggest remedies.

In summary, this review paper has explored how the African philosophy of education and transformative teaching theorize adult learning in higher education. Ideally, both perspectives emphasize the need to pay attention to multiple ways of knowing and multiple contexts of learning. While the need to acquire job market skills and passing standardized tests dominate the current adult learning and teaching practices, both APE and transformative teaching perspectives suggest alternative approaches of doing adult learning differently. They capitalize on acknowledging various

ways of how adult learners construct knowledge. This awareness necessitates the need to plan for teaching and learning activities that embrace affective, somatic, spiritual as well as cognitive dimensions of learning.

Teaching and learning of this nature is vital to the whole development of a person and is central to the creation of emancipatory learning environment, which carries the main agenda of adult education. Nonetheless, it is important to make it clear that drawing on the African philosophy of education and spirituality does not suggest in any way that one should abandon the analytical reading and writing work that is part of adult learning and higher education. Instead, teaching for transformation and doing the African philosophy of education should be used by adult learning educators as a framework to combine different realms of knowing to enhance more meaningful teaching and learning in the course of preparing adult learners in higher learning institutions for professional life.

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