

## ***EDUCATING RITA: THE NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS IN FURTHER EDUCATION***

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b> <b>Received:</b> 29 May 2018 <b>Accepted:</b> 2 July 2018</p>	<p><i>This article proposes to address issues that arise when dealing with adult learners and their expectations, additionally the role of lecturers in further education colleges in relation to these challenges. The mature pupils who enter into adult education are from varying backgrounds, and cultures. They belong to different age groups; each person carrying his/her personal strength and weaknesses along with their expectations. The following characteristics will help us to better comprehend this large group of mature students.</i></p>
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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

There are various criteria for defining who is an adult in any society. It is regarded as a status. Essentially the term “adult” consists of “ideals and values” (Rogers, A. 1996:34). In the context of adult education, the term reflects the mental maturity rather than the physical development. For example; a person may have to be a certain age for buying or selling alcohol, voting, obtaining a driving licence and so on. UNESCO stated its recognition of adults in 1976: “Adults are those people whom their own society deems to be adult. An adult is both self-recognising and recognised by others” (Rogers, A.1996:34). In general, an adult is perceived as having the mental ability to make responsible decisions and in turn be responsible for them.

Adults, because of their experience enter the environment with much clearer expectations, knowing what they want to achieve and more able to focus on their subject.

- Adults are used to acting on their own initiative. This behaviour could cause conflict of interest in the educational institution where they may have to learn other ways.
- Adult learning which takes place outside the educational institutions may not reflect the educational theories at hand, however, their learning experiences have been drawn from their practice, through trial, error and success.

- Adults may find new ways of learning to be a stressful experience for them; due to ingrained habits.
- Adults tend to undervalue their own abilities. They do not wish to look unintelligent. Thus adults who have suffered from inequality and prejudices in their life may have a negative effect on their learning.
- Adults tend to be impatient: they desire to achieve their goal in a short period of time, but the learning process requires a long term investment, attention, and available resources that would contribute to fulfil the set objectives.
- Adults usually undertake part time study, because of the various responsibilities and commitments. They carry on their shoulders; they cannot dedicate as much time as full time students or students without family or work responsibilities.

## 2. IN STATE OF BEING A PUPIL

Adult students return to further education with varying expectations in their minds. These expectations are rooted in their life experiences as well as early schooling. Adult learners expect their teachers to know their subject. They would like to be “in statu pupillari” with the teacher should “throwing knowledge” at them. They are more likely to appreciate the teacher who admits lack of knowledge. Adults expect teachers to show more enthusiasm in their subject and show more effort in teaching it. Furthermore, what adults expect from the teacher is that to be a competent deliverer and be good at applying different teaching methods within group work practice. A structured lesson is well recognised and respected by adults, and they also demand ‘knowledge’ in return for their investment (money and time). Adults are ready to work hard, sacrificing leisure time more readily. They expect clear guidance in their learning process. Adults are keen to hear about their progress which teachers should frequently review. Adults want the lectures they attend to be informative with little time wasted, they also expect respect and will reject any form of demeaning behaviour.

## 3. LIFELONG LEARNING

It’s been said that learning is a lifelong activity that influences our mental and physical progress. The statement that any definition of education reflects the idea that early education is sufficient enough to provide all the learning needed throughout life is farcical: Sir Richard Livingstone commented on the dangers of long term learning projects in a short time: “behave like people who would try to give their children in a week all the food they require for a year: a method which might seem to save time and trouble but would not improve digestion, efficiency or health.” (cited in Rogers 1980:11; Rogers, A. 1996:37)

It’s also important to bear in mind that the motivation behind the adult learners’ expectations. Following common motives cited by Daines *et al* (1993) such as to follow up an existing interest, to learn or develop a skill, to learn or develop ideas, to create something, to satisfy curiosity, to save money, to discover “If I can”, to gain the approval of others, to obtain a qualification, to ‘access’ some further learning opportunity, to meet like-minded people, to make social contact, to gain social self-confidence, to enhance self-esteem.

Motivation guides adults and contributes to their relationship with the teachers and their course. However, adults may vary in their response to group activities and other methods of teaching. The level of motivation will not be high at all times. They may feel that they are not getting what the course should provide. It is possible that adults may find themselves in a situation of not being able to achieve what they are set out to do, because of lack of direction, unachievable objectives, and an ‘unfriendly environment’, also poor management of the institution, unhelpful teachers and other members of staff, and shortage in resources.

It's been stated that whether learning take place throughout one's life or at certain periods is irrelevant. Some writers may draw lines between various stages of the learning process, however, adult teaching remains no different than teaching to younger pupils.

Some regard adult education as a unit of the whole education system. Educating pupils at primary, secondary, further and higher levels may require the need to employ various teaching and learning techniques. The needs of the primary schools students and the students at the further education institutions are certainly different. As the researchers have pointed out, the learning process of adults and younger students need to remain the same, but, the question arises are there any similarities between teaching adults and younger students?

When we look at adult learners what we see is that they bear no resemblance to their school days. They all vary in their experiences which may be relevant for their study, and motivation. Most of them have been away from the formal education environment for quite some time. If that be the case - and usually is - is it possible to treat all adults the same and use one form of strategy to teach them all?

The educationalists have no immediate response to the question of how adults are to be taught. It's been suggested that formal and non-formal teaching methods could be used at different times and stages. One should bear in mind that adults are distinctive: comprising a group who left their education at an early age and had no opportunity to improve their study skills for learning.

Adults regard the learning activity as self-improving, interesting and meaningful for their very existence especially if they like the subject and its delivery method. Adults may have a wide range of knowledge and experiences but feel incompetent as students; if they receive attention and their maturity is respected, than their motivation goes up and are more likely achieve a successful result.

### **3.1. In Search of a Second Chance**

Economic and social changes took place during the 1980s and early 1990s; as a result policy makers and governments have had to modify their views on education. Stagnation and increasing unemployment led adults to better themselves by gaining qualifications and training which would eventually assist them to find jobs. Thus, Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) gave financial assistance to the FE colleges. FEFC funding entails the flexibility in entry requirements, access courses to be funded as well as modularisation, and open learning. Changes in funding of post-compulsory education brought adult learning centre stage in FE and in higher education (HE). In 1994 about 80 per cent of universities and colleges developed modular schemes, and about 85 per cent of them either introduced or planned to introduce credit accumulation and transfer schemes (CATs); more than 65 per cent of them were designed as two-semester structures, and about 70 per cent of them are work based along with other forms of learning (Robertson, 1994; McGivney, 1996:4).

Further and higher education institutions have co-operated in giving a 'second chance' to adults. In 1993, 10.000 students enrolled on access courses (McNair, 1993; McGivney, 1996) 20 per cent of the further education colleges provided degree or sub-degree courses which were supported by HEFC. One of the reasons was for FE opening its doors to adult learners that FEFC obliged FEs to expand their education programmes, otherwise they may have lost funding. Expansion became a target to be met by FE colleges. The colleges which failed to meet their set targets were financially penalised. Thus, colleges became eager to attract adult candidates for FE institutions. It's worth noting the following comment from a study:"There's a lot of competition from sixth form colleges for our traditional students, and

colleges have recognised that the growth area is in the adult market.” (Utley, 1995; McGivney, 1996)

Economic development of the country caused an increase in adult population seeking further education. According to the FEFCE Chief Inspector’s Report 1994-95, three-quarters of the students in education sector are adults, most of whom are attending part time courses.

Major problems caused for FE and HE is the withdrawal of students from courses due to financial, social and personal problems. Retention of students itself is not the problem but outside pressure (i.e. FEFC) on the institutions pushes the issue on to the top of their agenda: “A lot of us in FE are fighting against a tradition that has almost encouraged drop-out. We used to plan programmes on the assumption that some would close” (representative from FE, McGivney, 1996). “Up to five years ago no one in my institution had any idea of retention or drop out rates” (representative from FE, McGivney, 1996) “FE managers have not addressed the problem, but have developed procedures for coping with its effects; sanctioning initial over-enrolment, and instituting reviews of class sizes when drop-out has taken its toll” (Mansell and Parkin, 1990; McGivney, 1996). The comments above found their echo in the Richwood study. (Richwood, 1993:1-2, McGivney, 1996:13).

“The thrust of many of the initiatives since the 1988 and 1992 Acts has been to construct an image of the student as a “rational economic person” exercising market power in terms of both courses and institutions. Thus discipline areas like engineering have virtually disappeared in some places and all vice-chancellors are now aware of the body count in their lecture rooms.

Institutions have come up against other imperatives in the form of the retrenchment on public spending and the accompanying performance and efficiency audits. They will have to teach more with less, without wastage, and retention and completion rates will become crucial measures of institutional fitness” (McGivney, 1996:13).

On one hand while the FE institutions are under pressure from the external bodies, on the other hand they are also trying hard to expand and attract new comers. There’s a lack of data which reflects the real picture of the retention rate. However, continuously monitoring students’ progress and establishing a cordial relationship between students and tutors may reduce the drop-out rate, but, the role of institution in taking the initial step is crucial; to give support and keep the mature students within the fold may prove to be an expansive venture, but the long term benefit will be reaped by the economy and society. (McGivney: 180)

There is no one method to teach adults. What is important is to be flexible in employing methods to suit the needs of adult learners. Adult education is described by some “as an activity in which all the participants” (Rogers: 170) “alternate between the roles of student, teacher and person” (Roger, A.:170, Thomson, 1980:67).

It’s been suggested that adults tend to perform better in the social sciences and its related areas rather than in the physical and natural sciences (McGivney: 146-7). Writers like Mason raise the question of age its relations with the learning process. Mason further asserts that failing to assist adults to understand scientific terms is a causal factor of the problem. Following comments made by a number of staff in one higher education institution sums up the route that teachers should take: “We had to rethink our teaching methods and modes of assessment. Listening to and taking notes from a 50-minute lecture, essay-writing techniques academic research, and making presentations to an audience were all skills which the average A-level entrant has begun to develop by the time he or she reaches higher education. For a middle aged car worker or a 20-year-old secretary who has left school with minimal qualifications such activities must appear completely foreign (Lee, 1991; McGivney: 147)

#### **4. SOS: STOP DROP-OUT RATES!**

Mansell and Parkins (1990) suggestions have been included into the proposals prepared by the Further Education Unit (FEU) to support colleges reducing drop-out rates:

- monitoring students' perception of their classroom experiences and ongoing support
- checking that the pace of teaching and learning is appropriate for individual learners
- providing students with course objectives, activities and work schedules in advance
- identifying preferred learning methods where alternatives may be appropriate (e.g. more structured lessons or more informal group work)
- organising time for students to discuss their work, and ensuring that part time students also receive tutorial support
- providing learning enhancement through workshop activities. (McGivney: 147-8)

#### **5. CONCLUSION: TEACHERS VS ADULTS**

It is also important that the teachers should help adult learners to build confidence (Munn, MacDonald and Lowden, 1992; McGivney: 1996). Weil (1986) and McNair (1993) put emphasis on "negotiation", and managing their own learning pace. Thus, they are encouraged to become "independent learners".

The teachers of adult learners should be able to manipulate ideas; try to plan group activities, make good use of teaching resources, and visual aids. They should also be able to set an ongoing assessment which would help students to understand the topic well. They should not allow students to compete amongst themselves, and always make sure hard working students to be praised. Teachers should be clear of what they are talking about, and always summarise the topic at the end of the lecture.

Teachers should also be more supportive of the adults in guiding provision- if they can afford -. Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) and many others state the need for study skills: "It may take students months to learn how to organise themselves and their work so that they are using their time efficiently and getting the most out of study (ibid.) but Munn et al study showed that the teachers had the idea that adult learners already know of study skills. Munn et al study also further mentions the importance of continuous assessment which adults regard as a core element of their study.

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