Unity in Diversity: *Ubuntu* in the Classroom to Promote Learning among Adults from Diverse Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT Millions of adults in South Africa are illiterate because they did not attend school during childhood. To equip them with literacy skills to enable them contribute to the development of the country the government of 1994 made basic education available. The adults who attend basic education classes come from diverse backgrounds with wealth of experiences. Such experiences could enhance learning during classroom interactions. The present study is based on experiences of the author, focuses on the application of *Ubuntu* (sharing, love, respect, cooperation and support) as a teaching strategy to elicit experiences, support and cooperation among learners. As an adult educator for over three decades the author sees learning as a social activity and when classroom interaction is based on the precepts of *ubuntu* it may not only promote peer support but also encourage the practice of *ubuntu* and promote social cohesion in a country polarized by apartheid, racism, ethnicity and xenophobia.

INTRODUCTION

Illiteracy is a hindrance to socio-economic and political development in African countries. Quan-Baffour (2012) attested that in the contemporary world of information explosion education is the tool for survival and this is why basic education is an important topic for study. In South Africa, millions of adults cannot read and write, not even in their home languages because they did not get the opportunity to attend school during childhood. McKay (2011) affirms that at the time of launching the *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign in 2007 there were about 4.7 million total illiterate adults (that is, who have never been to school) and another 4.9 million who were functionally illiterate (that is, they dropped out of school before grade 7). This makes a total of 9.6 million illiterate adults out the country's population of nearly 50 million. Illiteracy statistics reflect the apartheid era patterns of "racial" disadvantage and although sex differentiation is not as skewed in 2001 women represented 60% of the unschooled (McKay 2011).

Illiteracy is a stumbling block to development and as Aitchison and Alidou (2008) intimate, "it has several social implications such as low productivity and lower incomes which has some linkage with HIV/AIDS and, therefore, has effect on all national development efforts."

Although, political freedom has been won most adults cannot enjoy it because they do not know their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a free country due to illiteracy. There are lots of adults who are defrauded of huge sums of money at banks and automatic machines (ATM) on daily basis on account of illiteracy.

Under the 1996 South African constitution, education is a right and not a privilege for the few any more. In line with this constitutional obligation and to empower adults to access written information which will enable them contribute effectively to the socio- economic development of the country the majority government that came into power in 1994 made basic education available and accessible to all illiterate adults. The ABET policy document (1997) which was in response to the demand for basic knowledge and skills for millions of adults, envisaged a literate South Africa within which all its citizens have acquired basic education and training that enable them to be effective participants in socio-economic and political processes and to contribute to the reconstruction, development and social transformation (Department of Education 1997). In pursuing this policy the directorate of adult basic education and training opened adult learning centres in all communities in the country where adults are taught basic education including literacy, numeracy, family planning, HIV AIDS awareness and skills for livelihoods. The main rationale for this study is to share the experiences of the author and throw some light on the appropriate strategy for teaching a class of adult learners from diverse backgrounds to ensure maximum learning.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. The concept *Ubuntu* which is a Zulu word means humanism or humanness. It is a philosophy and way of life that has for many centuries sustained the African communities in Southern Africa in particular and in Africa as a whole (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005). Broodryk (1997) affirms that *Ubuntu* is the whole complex of traditional behaviour which has been developed by the human race and is successfully learned by each generation. *Ubuntu* cultural norms have been orally transferred from generation to generation over a long time and was not produced as a literature or written form. As an indigenous cultural norm *Ubuntu* focuses on people's allegiances and relations with each other. The holistic description of *ubuntu* means 'humanity towards others'; 'I am, because we are'; 'a person becomes human through other persons'. It also means 'a person is a person because of other persons'. *Ubuntuism* is a belief in universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity (*Ubuntu*-ideology: Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia 2014). The concept *ubuntu* as a philosophy portrays an African world view of unity, respect, care and love for fellow human beings no matter where they come from. No man is an island unto himself; each one of us is part of the ocean or the land; goes the saying. There is no single person who is self- sufficient in everything in this world; in one way or the other one may need the support of others. As humans we lead gregarious lives where we are in one way or the other either dependent on or connected to others. This is an affirmation of the fact that one is a human being because of being with other human beings. Human life is defined in terms of our relationship with others hence the need to cooperate, share, love, respect and have compassion for others. In deed without others we cease to be human! Louw (2006) asserts that *Ubuntu* inspires us to expose ourselves to others; to encounter the difference of their humanness, so as to inform and enrich our own.

To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form. In the African world view, a human being is a being in relation to other humans.

The *ubuntu* respect for the particularities of the beliefs and practices of others is especially emphasized by a striking, yet (to my mind) lesser- known translation of ' *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'* - a human being is human being through the otherness of other human beings. In other words, if we are to be human then we need to recognize the genuine otherness of our fellow citizens, acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs; all of which constitute the [South] African society (Louw 2006). The individual is not just a social being but a being inseparable from the community. Individuals are born into the community and they are physically, spiritually, emotionally attached to the community and will always remain part of that community till death. This does not mean community members may not travel out of their area. Even if they do they always have a bond between them and their communities. Venter (2004) makes it clear that the African community, like the Bhuddist community, shares the earth with the unborn, the living, and the spirits of the dead, the earth, mountain and sky. Whatever, happens to the individual happens to the community and whatever happens to the community happens to the individual. Thus, the individual and community are inseparable because of the lifelong bond between them.

One must however admit the fact that in view of the influence of colonialism, Western education and its values the cardinal feature of *ubuntu* (that is, communalism) seems to be eroded and less visible in many African cities as compared to rural communities where African identity and culture are still very much admired, encouraged and practiced. This has been some of the consequences of formal education which overtly and covertly sought to 'create Europeans in African skins'. Right from the primary school the learner was taught that everything African was barbaric and fetish hence most educated Africans who have absorbed European values pour scorn on their own [African] cultural norms. As Wiredu (2005) affirms, colonialism was not only a political imposition but also a cultural one. Africans' religious and systems of education were gravely affected, or even perhaps infected.

Although compassion, warmth, understanding, caring, sharing, humanness et cetera are underscored by all the major world views, ideologies and religions of the world, I would neverthe

-less like to suggest that *ubuntu* serves as a *distinctly African rationale* for these ways of relating to others (Louw 2006).

TEACHING ADULTS AND THE NEED FOR INNOVATIVE ANDRAGOGIC PRACTICE

In 1995 when the adult basic education courses and classes started in the various communities there was paucity of trained adult education teachers in the country. To get the programme running the organizers got anyone who was available on board. Thus, primary school teachers and high school certificate holders who lacked adult teaching methods were employed to teach adults. In view of the fact that the methods and strategies for teaching adults significantly differ from those implemented in children's learning situations most of the 'untrained' adult teachers could not motivate their learners. The adult learners might have been taught like children where much of the classroom interaction was teacher-centred or based on educator domination, an approach to teaching which is not suitable for adult teaching and learning. Citing Nyerere (1976) Quan-Baffour (2001) affirmed that the type of teaching which induces a slave mentality or a sense of importance is not education at all...; it is indeed an attack on the minds of men. Adult learners might feel insulted and resent the teaching approach which does not provide them with the opportunity to express themselves as adults when the educator implements the *'banking'* system of teaching and merely deposits information into their heads for them to absorb. The effect of such teaching approach is de-motivation of learners which can show itself in ineffective learning and huge dropout rate. Minton (1991) affirmed that the effectiveness of teaching method depends on its suitability for promoting the intended learning; proper control and management of the learning process; sufficient skill in using the methodology and proper use of feedback.

The urgent need to get more qualified adult educators to teach adults as adults motivated the University of South Africa to start certificate, diploma and later on Honours' Bachelor of Education courses in adult education to improve teaching and learning in basic education programmes. The University's courses equipped participants with adult teaching methods and principles to enable them teach in a manner that can enhance and maximize learning. Freire (1978) posited that in an adult learning situation the teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught through dialogue with the learners who in turn also teach while they are taught. In such a teaching environment no one knows it all and no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something and we are all ignorant of something (Freire 1978).

Adult teaching methodology requires complete learner participation for the achievement of learning outcomes and for this reason educators should conduct their lessons in a manner that involves learners in all aspects of classroom activities. The measure of success of any teaching method is always how far the students achieve their learning goals rather than the performance of the teacher (Minton 1991).

The adult learners who attend classes at the various learning centres in the various communities come from diverse cultural backgrounds with wealth of experiences from social and economic life. This means the experiences from the learners' social and economic lives should be tapped to enhance learning during classroom interactions. Thus, the classroom activities should be based on humanist orientation and trend in education where participants play the centre stage of the interaction. Citing Freire (1974), McKay (2006) asserted that teaching (education) should enable learners to take a critical stance and not just absorbing information that the educator decides to teach them. The teaching of basic education should provide adult learners the opportunity to relate learning to their lived experiences and thereby write themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives (Giroux 2010). The adult educator should allow learners to discuss problems in their lives that relate to the themes under discussion in the classroom. The adult learners should be active- discuss, talk, suggest, give and add own ideas and take ideas outside the class for the betterment of their families or communities (McKay 2006).

UBUNTU: ITS APPLICATION TO ADULT TEACHING

Ubuntu, the indigenous African philosophy, has important implications for adult teaching and learning. Being an adult educator for over three decades the author has learnt the fact that learn-

ing is a social activity. As a social activity when the classroom interaction is based on the precepts of *ubuntu* it may enable learners to support each other for the achievement of learning goals and also encourages them to practice the indigenous philosophy in their communities in various ways to promote social cohesion in a country polarized by *apartheid, racism, ethnicity and xenophobia.* Africans lead communal life where sharing of resources, ideas and information are part of the true African identity and daily practices which is why adult teaching should provide learners with the opportunity to learn together in a cooperative manner for the benefit of the entire learning group. As Bandura (1986) attested many cues that influence behavior at any point in time, none is more common than the actions of others. Adults come to the learning environment with worth of experiences from economic and social lives and as social beings they can engage in learning tasks as part of the normal community things they do together. In using the cooperative method of teaching and learning adults can be put in groups or teams to share experiences and support one another. McKay (1998) asserted that in its essence cooperative learning shares the philosophy of *ubuntu* which teaches that it is only through cooperation with others that the individual realizes his or her potential. In cooperative learning the success of the group is dependent on the success of the individual. Being a social activity the individual's success in learning is the responsibility of the group provided that the individual also takes responsibility for his her own learning. Indeed, it is through the group that the individual gains success and it is through the contributions and participation of the individuals in the group that the group is successful (McKay 1998). And that is the essence of *ubuntu*- brotherhood- which is an essential part of African true identity of communal life where community members assist each other without any financial gains. Louw (2006) points out that, the person possessing *ubuntu* will have characteristics such as being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive, virtuous, and blessed. The application of *ubuntu* to adult learning activities in the classroom will emphasize not only learning as a team work but the need to practice *ubuntu* in the family and the community at large. When adults as parents practice *ubun-*

tu in the learning environment they can instill its values in their children and thus achieve social cohesion in South Africa; a country battered by racism, ethnicity and zehophobia.

CONCLUSION

This study advocates for the application of *ubuntu*, to adult teaching in order to promote learning among adult learners from diverse backgrounds. The study has argued that adult learners come from different backgrounds with wealth of experiences gained from social and economic life and such experiences can enhance learning. Learning is a social activity which should engage all participants in solving practical problems based on their life experiences. The study concludes that to enhance learning among adults educators should base their teaching and all classroom activities on *ubuntu*-humanness orientation; the true African life where people support each other unconditionally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above discussion the study makes the following recommendations for adult educators (facilitators and organizers):

Learning is a social activity and for participants in adult education programs to achieve set learning goals a recognition should be given to African communal life of sharing, support and cooperation and make it the centre of the teaching and learning transaction.

The lived experiences of the adult learners should be tapped as reference points and used as examples or illustrations during the classroom interaction to make learning a participatory activity. Thus, the educator should make teaching more *andragogic* and learner–centered by involving learners in the process to enable them to take responsibility for their own learning.

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