PAULO FREIRE’S HUMANISM 
AND THE CHALLENGES OF 21ST CENTURY 
ADULT EDUCATION

Historical Antecedents

Adult education derives its essence from its social context and social issues drive (or ought to drive) its focus and paradigm shifts. The history of adult education, which is often associated with Western Europe—mostly Prussia—, was located in issues related to empowerment. The Prussian society associated with the beginning history of adult education was one in which the working class was said to be at the mercy of corrupt and inept politicians. The struggle for the empowerment of workers was responsible in part for the founding of radical socialist movements of the time that sought to use education to empower workers to face the challenges of the time (Peterson 1962). The radical social movements identified adult education as a way to equipping workers to capture the powers inherent in the democratic process. Peterson further informs that as far back as 1848 the radical groups had decided that for adult education to be effective in achieving the objective of empowering workers, it must be established as a political project. According to Peterson (1962), the groups reasoned that it needed to educate its members to capture political power. “It was to provide such an educated elite that the adult education movement within the working class, not for the working class, arose” (p. 247). Hence, Peterson concluded that the “purely political motive behind adult education was most clearly seen, perhaps in Prussia…” (p. 247).

Beginning with Prussia, the spread and larger history of adult education especially in Europe and North America has been associated with a diversity of social movements with the common aim of helping the beneficiaries of adult education overcome challenges of all forms especially those couched in forms of inequity and lack of access to opportunities. In their chapter titled The History of Adult and Continuing Education, Stubblefield and Keane (1989) linked the history of adult education in the United States to socio-

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1 Artykuł ten był po raz pierwszy przedstawiony i wydrukowany w pokonferencyjnej publikacji Komisji ds. Edukacji Dorosłych za Granicą (Commission on International Adult Education, CIAE) przy Amerykańskim Stowarzyszeniu Edukacji Dorośli (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, AAACE) w Cleveland, Ohio, USA w listopadzie 2009, pod tytułem „Wkład Paulo Freire i wyzwania edukacji dorosłych w XXI wieku”.

political factors. Central to their discussion was the role of social movements in using adult education to build ‘an independent society’. They listed the Chautauqua Institution, women and other social organizations “who envisioned an alternative America in which their grievances would be redressed” (p. 30).

At the level of research and practice of adult education, the overarching objective of adult educators has been the empowerment of adult education clients to address entrenched and new forms of inequity and exclusion. Prior to Freire, several adult educators have recommended and applied adult education to address challenges in society. W.F. Grundtvig used adult education to address the plight of poor (and mostly rural) farmers of Denmark of his time. Authors in Jarvis (2001) provide concrete examples including Moses Coady’s ‘Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia that he used to galvanize human development in Canada and Myles Horton and his ‘Highlander’ efforts of using adult education to bring social change into the lives of poor farmers especially in southern United States. Other examples include Ettore Gelpi’s insertion of adult education into challenges in the labor market especially in relation to migrant workers. Julius Nyerere’s anchoring development efforts in Tanzania to adult education also falls within the purview of adult education and social transformation.

Freire’s conscientization falls into the group above because his work had its roots in the socio-political situations of the poor clients of adult education in Brazil of his time. From the initial challenges that gave birth to adult education in Prussia to its 21st century context, adult education has had to face new forms of challenges within little spans of time. The ability and commitment of different generations of adult educators have wrought transformations in adult education. In addition, their efforts have helped to ensure that adult education remains recourse for all strata of society in addressing existing and unforeseen problems of their communities and in making life more abundant. Paulo Freire’s humanistic ideas, framed in the concept conscientization, belong to this category.

The Challenges

One of the key questions that came up at the 2006 conference of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE) in Bamberg, Germany was “who owns adult education”? At one of the open round-table sessions populated by a broad spectrum of adult educators from across the globe – including adult education hall of famers, practitioners, researchers, students and other stakeholders – the question of the ownership of adult education dominated the dialogue; which in my understanding, was inclusive. The question of ownership implies questions of content, of who is an adult educator, who participates, of what constitutes research in addition to questions of format, methods and objectives.
Although the question of participation may be a sub-set of that of ownership, it is one of the fundamental and contested areas of 21st century adult education. The 2008 Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) held in Edinburgh was devoted to answering the question: “Whither adult education in the learning paradigm”? The learning paradigm is that defined by 21st century globalization. In an introduction to the conference proceedings, Crowther (2008) uses the example of the United Kingdom (UK) to paint a picture of fundamental challenges facing adult education. Among the challenges was the fact that “lifelong learning has had major implications for adult education and adult educators” (p. 3). He further noted the decline in adult participation, in non-vocational education and in liberal adult education. It is pertinent to mention the fact that lifelong learning is not ‘new’ to adult education but has been rejuvenated in the 21st century as a response to the globalization-induced challenges confronting adult education and its context. The challenges posed by participation in adult education go beyond the UK and indeed beyond the European Union. The question of participation generates different levels of challenges in the 21st century. There is the challenge of who participates and why? The challenge of who does not participate and why? These questions connect us to the challenges of access, motivation and barriers. Most surveys cited by Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner (2007, pp. 62–63) return ‘career – job-related’ (economic) reasons (that dovetail with the need criterion of adult education and create ‘goal-oriented learners) as the major reason most adults participate in adult learning especially in America. The push towards vocational education is in line with the dictates of what Jarvis (2006, p. 11) refers to as “global capitalism” resulting from ‘global pressures’ “to produce new commodities as cheaply and efficiently as possible”. The fact that economic globalization dictates and directs profitable areas of participation also implies that it constructs barriers in the way of those who may wish to do otherwise. Thus, “the the direction that participation and learning in adult education is heading within the context of globalization is encompassed by economic logic and individual survival” (Avoseh 2008, p. 56). The challenges imposed by participation and related issues have combined to distract adult education from what Finger and Asun (2001) refer to as its “project of emancipation and social change” (Finger & Asun, 2001, p. 124). The mission of empowerment and transformation has been part of the history and focus of adult education since its initial history and through the ages.

At the broader social level, many of problems that portend danger to humanity subsist in injustice and inequity. The problems manifest at different levels and forms within these spheres. The dangers of the subordination of women, of environmental pollution and degradation, of extreme wealth and poverty, of threat of pandemics, of religious and racial intolerance, of demonic terrorism, of the suffocation of the democratic process and pronounced attacks on human rights are challenges for adult education because they drive the
context of the adult learner. These challenges tend to polarize today’s society aptly along the “oppressor and oppressed” classification that Freire uses to establish his links between inept and oppressive political systems and educational practices and policies that are anti-students. Most other challenges confronting adult education in the 21st century are correctly described as ancillaries of those that continually keep the adult learner at the fringe of society. By implication, today’s adult learner is more of a passive consumer of marketable skills floated by ‘experts’ mostly in forms of what Finger & Asun (2001, p. 127) call “tools of adult education – self-help kits…” The average adult learner has very little or no say in the types of adult education programs because more often than not economic concerns dictate what adult learners need. These same economic parameters are most likely responsible for Giroux’s (1985, p. xi) depiction of American schools as “a device for economic and cultural reproduction”. As a result of the propriety of economic considerations, those aspects of adult education that ought to help adults be active participants in their world including liberal adult education, adult education and the democratic process and a host of other learner-related and empowering aspects; are trivialized by challenges beyond adult learners’ control. The core challenges of adult education in the 21st century including those mentioned above all revolve around the logic of empowering adult learners through vocational education. No doubt, the vocational dimension of adult education is necessary but should it be at the expense of the core essence of the adult learner as a rational thinking being? The adult learner’s ability for critical thinking is challenged more often in the age of globalization because of rapid changes in all facets of life. In addition to acquiring vocational and other skills, 21st century adult learners need adult education programs that will challenge them to develop and expand their abilities for critical thinking. The greatest challenge for 21st century adult education is that it has (almost) derailed from commitment to the socio-political life of adult learners. It is this need to re-invest adult education in the humanizing project that Freire’s humanistic ideas of adult education especially his process of Conscientization seems to have a new meaning and import for 21st century adult education.

The thrust of Freire’s Conscientization

The context is an important factor in adult education, from program conceptualization, planning, design and evaluation. The context and epoch of individual researchers also influence the focus of their research, ideas and theories and models of adult education. Freire’s world, especially Brazil of his time, was immersed in challenges similar to the ones mentioned above. The core of the challenge was inequity manifested in economic hardships and political oppression. He was particularly influenced by his works with the labor unions and his subsequent contact with peasants and plantation workers in Recife, a northeast port city of Brazil. Based on his direct contact with the
marginalized and his observations, Freire concluded that most peasants and Brazilians who live in penury (he calls them the oppressed) were ignorant of reality, of the true causes of their poverty and oppressive conditions. He further contends that the state of ignorance and the ‘de-humanizing’ educational system combine to create and sustain a culture of silence. However, he also establishes ‘liberating’ education (popular education) – whose objective is to unveil reality and create productive knowledge – as the panacea to the contradictions and injustice in the socio-political system. His idea of using education to humanize, to liberate and to empower is couched in “Conscientization”.

Conscientization for Freire is an analysis of literacy and learning as method of human liberation...a process of growing and developing in awareness” (Avoseh 1991, p. 120). The purpose of conscientization is to empower learners to know true reality and to proceed to transform those aspects of reality that contradict the individual’s life as a rational thinking being. Using the challenges listed earlier as the contents of a “mystified reality” Freire argues that the purpose of education that fosters critical thinking is to equip individuals with the intellectual and moral powers to confront and dismantle the structures of inequity and dehumanization. In using education as a liberating process, the teacher and the student (whose intellectual roles are fluid and interchangeable) are engaged in a dialogic and democratic process of creating knowledge. Dialogue is important to conscientization as a process of learning. Freire & Macedo (1995) draw a distinction between dialogue as “a mere technique” (p. 379) or conversation and dialogue as an epistemological process. Dialogue as conversation is devoid of curiosity, empty and shallow. However, dialogue that drives conscientization strives for the “unity between theory and practice”, it is the dialogue capable of dismantling the structure of the culture of silence. Thus, dialogue as a process of dismantling the ‘culture of silence’ must have “an epistemological curiosity…the readiness and eagerness of a conscious body that is open to the task of engaging an object of knowledge” (p. 381). It is dialogue used as a way of knowing that makes education a “globalizing practice…that does not only involve technical knowledge, but also world knowledge” (p. 386). The reference to ‘world knowledge’ is in line with the argument for liberal adult education that fosters the lifelong dimensions that take adult education beyond the limits of vocational or what Lindeman aptly calls “bread and butter stage” (1961, p. 64).

Freire’s analysis and application of conscientization is located in his concern for human suffering and all forms of injustice. He confesses that his motivation for the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (in which he espoused Conscientization as a humanizing process of knowledge); is his “trust in the people …faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which in which it will be easier to love” (Freire 2004, p. 40). He proceeds to enumerate the necessary conditions for true dialogue, one that leads to the ability for
critical thinking and conscientization. These conditions include faith, humility, love, hope and empathy (pp. 90–92). The overriding condition is love. “Love characterizes the humanizing relationship between teacher and taught…it also drives the educator forward in teaching and working for the dismantling of dehumanizing structures” (Mayo 2007, pp. 108–109). Conscientization thus takes education, especially adult education, beyond the rudiments of skills and vocation and includes creation and sustenance of intellectual power and moral incentives that combine the ability for critical thinking with love for humanity.

It is in the area of putting the human face on and intellectual power into adult education as a way of empowering adult learners to interpret the realities of globalization that Freire’s conscientization resonates in 21st century adult education. The picture painted above of challenges to adult education in the era of globalization takes today’s adult learner and her/his context closer to the culture of silence and inequity that motivated Freire’s ideas. Today’s adult education is immersed in a culture of socio-political and economic status symbols that impose silence on those who lack such symbols. The context molds the adult learners’ experiences and values. Thus, the challenges in 21st century adult education are challenges for the adult learner and, by implication, challenges for bonafide adult educators.

This paper is aware of the usual criticisms of Freire’s ideas. Freire has been criticized on his use of language; on the fact that his ideas are utopian and that if such ideas were to make any sense at all, it would be in third world settings. Freire’s use of oppressor and oppressed has also been criticized as arbitrary. This paper has not gone into arguments and counter arguments in terms of such criticisms because none of the criticisms mentioned defeats the argument in this paper. Simply put, the solution to some of the challenges of adult education in the age of globalization includes the need to re-humanize adult education and that Freire’s Conscientization fits into the solution.

**Conclusion**

The benefits of globalization include the ease of access to unlimited information, the interconnectedness of different parts of the globe, the advancement in science and technology among other advantages that are characteristic of the 21st century. The 21st century and its alias – globalization – also carries with it challenges that tend to contradict most of its advantages or make those advantages inaccessible to certain areas of human endeavor and to some populations. Adult education is one area that is confronted by multifarious challenges from the tides of the 21st century. The challenges have not been discussed exhaustibly in this paper. This paper has highlighted a few of the fundamental challenges that the new tide presents to adult education. The paper has argued that because these challenges dominate the context of adult education; they are also, by implication, challenges for adult learners and adult educators. My understanding and subscription to Freire’s ideas and
method have provided the basis for offering Freire’s radical thought, especially his philosophy of conscientization, as one of several possible expeditious ways for adult education to manage the challenges of its 21st century context. I have mentioned what I judge to be fundamental challenges and I have offered Freire’s conscientization as a possible and significant path to solutions with the hope that I can ignite a tiny new spark in the dialogue on the future of adult education in the 21st century.

References


Paulo Freire’s Humanism and the Challenges of 21st Century Adult Education

Keywords: Paulo Freire, adult learners, 21st century

Paulo Freire’s humanistic adult education ideas were woven around his literacy ‘method’ that is synonymous with Conscientization. His ideas were aimed at empowering adult learners through the ability for critical thinking. He focused on critical thinking as a way of using education to rescue learners from decadent educational and political systems and making them truly human. This paper analyzes Freire’s Conscientization and argues that it is more appropriate for addressing most of the challenges that confront 21st century adult education and adult learners. The discussion in this paper uses 21st century synonymously with globalization.

Streszczenie

Humanizm Paulo Freire a wyzwania edukacji dorosłych w XXI wieku

Autor rozpoczyna od nakreślenia historycznych aspektów edukacji dorosłych, zwracając uwagę na fakt, że była ona zawsze silnie związana z problemami społecznymi. Odwołuje się przy tym do Petersona, który pisał, że radykalne ruchy społeczne określiły edukację dorosłych jako projekt polityczny, jeśli ma ona służyć upewnieniemu pracownikom. Mieli oni być zatem tak wyszkoleni, aby stać się realną siłą polityczną. Tego typu działania widoczne były zwłaszcza pod koniec XIX wieku w Prusach. Następnie autor zwraca uwagę na czynniki społeczno-polityczne wpływające na rozwój edukacji dorosłych w Stanach Zjednoczonych, wzmiankując również o jednej z ważniejszych instytucji edukacji dorosłych, które powstały w USA, tj. Chautauqua. Wymienia także znaczących dla edukacji dorosłych działaczy, którzy podejmowali projekty związane z problemami społecznymi przed Freire, m.in. wymienia W.F. Grundtviga (Dania), Mosesa Coady’ego (Nowa Szkocja), Mylesa Horton (południowe Stany Zjednoczone). Byli to działacze, którzy poprzez edukację próbowały poprawić sytuację społeczną osób biednych i pochodzących z zaniedbanych środowisk. Oprócz tego wymienia także E. Gelpiego, zajmu-
jącego się pracownikami migrującymi oraz J. Nyerere, zajmującego się edukacją dorosłych w Tanzanii. Freire zalicza się również do grupy działaczy społeczno-politycznych, ponieważ jego projekt alfabetyzacji dorosłych w Brasylii oparty został na teorii krytycznej, w której głównym celem jest kształtowanie świadomości i krytycznego myślenia. Autor posługuje się tym pojęciem *conscientization*, na określenie koncepcji Paulo Freire, oznaczającej krytyczną świadomość.

W dalszej części artykułu autor podejmuje istotne zagadnienie, dotyczące tego, kto rządzi edukacją dorosłych, które było w szczególności dyskutowane podczas konferencji Międzynarodowego Towarzystwa Andragogiki Porównawczej w 2006 roku w Niemczech. W tym kontekście pojawiają się pytania kim jest andragog, kto uczestniczy w edukacji dorosłych, jak prowadzone są badania, ustalane cele, metody i formy? Jako największe wyzwania edukacji dorosłych w XXI wieku pozycytuje autor kwestię uczestnictwa, a także określenie na nowo edukacji ustawicznej w relacji do edukacji dorosłych, w kontekście problemów związanych z globalizacją. Do największych zagrożeń współczesnego świata zalicza autor m.in. podporządkowanie kobiet, zanieczyszczenie środowiska, rozwarstwienie społeczne i przepastół ludzkiego cierpienia i przejawów niesprawiedliwości, a także podejmowanie „kultury milczenia”. Cała koncepcja oparta jest na wskazaniach Freire’a dotyczących przyczyn zjawisk zbrojnych, które muszą być zniesione na rzecz miłości, nadziei, pokory i empatii. Stąd też większe zastosowanie w praktyce edukacji dorosłych powinno mieć koncepcja uświadamiania krytycznego według Freire’a.

Autor przypomina, na czym polegała praca Paulo Freire w Brazylii, jak też wskazuje na to, że jego koncepcja edukacji odnosiła się do pojmowania kształtania jako czynnika humanizującego oraz wyzwalamującego. Podstawą edukacji uświadamiającej jest dialog. Freire wraz z Macedo dokonali także rozróżniania pomiędzy dialogiem jako zwykłą rozmową a dialogiem jako procesem epistemologicznym, łączącą teorię z praktyką, pozwalającym na zdemontowanie „kultury milczenia”. Cała koncepcja oparta jest na wskazywaniu dzisiejszego społeczeństwa na uciskającego i uciśkanej, które muszą być zniesione na rzecz miłości, nadziei, pokory i empatii. W dalszej części referatu autor stwierdza, że edukacja dorosłych staje się w obliczu wielu zróżnicowanych wyzwani, spośród których tylko nieliczne zostały poddane dyskusji w tym artykule. Zdaniem autora, przedstawiona koncepcja edukacji według Paulo Freire jest jedną z propozycji, jak sobie z tymi wyzwaniacze poradzić.