

CONSCIENTIZATION: A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ADULT LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In recent years, adult education has assumed an indispensable role in capacity building and human resource development in Nigeria. This is premised on the fact that adults constitute the country's working population and labour force. Consequently, the need for transformative adult learning becomes more imperative for all categories of adults to maximize their potentials and make meaningful contributions to themselves and society at large. This study explores the role of conscientization in facilitating transformative adult learning in Nigeria. The paper carefully examined Paulo Freirean's notion of 'conscientization' and its use in contemporary adult learning settings to actualize personal, social, and political transformation among adult learners. The paper x-rayed concepts of conscientization and transformative adult learning, respectively. It delved deeper into the discussion of Mezirow's transformation theory as an anchor for the research. The paper also explored the application of conscientization in various adult education settings, such as adult literacy programmes, community development and empowerment, workplace learning and organizational development, social movement and political education, health education, public education, and participatory action research. Lastly, the paper discussed conscientization-orientated strategies and curriculum for transformative adult learning. The paper argues that conscientization not only leads to positive change in individuals but also raises a wider culture of active involvement in communal responsibilities and advocates the need to uphold the notion in all adult learning situations.

Keywords: Conscientization, catalyst, transformative learning, adult education.

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Introduction

The dynamism of modern organization has necessitated the unavoidable role of adult education in fostering lifelong learning and communal involvement in all facets of life, including social, political, and technological ventures. In order to achieve efficiency and maximum output, adult education ideas and techniques are applied in all human endeavours involving adults. Paulo Freire popularized the concept of conscientization in adult learning, which appears to hold greater significance in enabling individuals to critically interact with their surroundings (Jayed, 2024). Conscientization is a process of developing critical consciousness and understanding of one's social and political context, leading to empowerment and transformative action. It places one in a better position to recognise and act upon the oppressive forces at play in one's environment. Freire (cited in Jayed, 2024) asserted that education should transcend mere knowledge transmission to an emancipatory device. Conscientization as an approach exposes learners to critical thinking, re-consideration of the status quo, and mutual action against general repression. It nurtures transformative learning in individuals as they reflect on their experiences and what led to those lived experiences; they tend to refute unpalatable leading principles while advocating for personal and societal liberation.

Conscientization, in this regard becomes a veritable tool for fostering critical consciousness and empowerment among adult learners in Nigeria. Adults are found as learners in various traditional settings within the country including: adult literacy programme, community development projects, workplace learning, crusade, political education, and health education. In the aforementioned learning settings, conscientization illumines the awareness of social and political realities which enables adult learners have in-depth understanding of their environment as well as their capacity to transform it. This knowledge equips them to take a stand against oppression by analysing and challenging unjust structures and consequently work towards a more just and equitable society.

In addition to Friere, other researchers (Mclaren, 2015; Kinglo, 2017) attested to the key principles of conscientization to include (a) critical consciousness (b) reflection and action (c) empowerment, and (d) dialogue and participation. Critical consciousness is a basic principle of conscientization. It entails critical thinking, in which one reflects on laid-down ideologies, analyzes them, and questions dominant societal norms and power structures. It entails self-awareness of one's predispositions, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), privileges, and positions. Critical awareness enables one to acknowledge the connection between an individual's experiences and those of wider societal structures. Reflection and action, as an important constituent of conscientization, enables individuals to have a re-think on their societal involvements and take cognizance of aspects of their experiences that need modification and probable solutions to identified issues. This principle encourages individuals to challenge societal injustices and transform their own realities. Gadotti (2016) and Brookfield (2017) defined the elements of reflection and action as critical reflection, action research, and praxis. In this regard, one examines one's lived experiences in society, identifies and addresses social problems (re-think, find out, take action), and consequently leads to social change.

Empowerment is another key principle of consciousness that enables individuals to be mindful of their social environment, capable of self-directed change, as well as take control of their lives and communities. According to Stargargarg (2018) and Badura (2019), empowerment entails self-efficacy, communal action, community engagement, capacity building, and societal revolution. People's collective action against underlying forces typically stems from their comprehension that those in authority are the cause of their discomfort. Their revolution is a demand for equity and fairness in recognition of the worth and dignity of every member of society. Dialogue and participation are yet other key principles of conscientization that uphold cooperative learning and representative involvement. Bachtiger (2018) and Fung (2018) opine that dialogue encourages exchange of ideas, engenders mutual understanding, tolerates divergent views, and encourages personal development. Similarly, participation entails inclusiveness, responsibility, representation, approachability, sustainability, and social fairness.

Conscientization can foster critical consciousness and empowerment among adult learners in all adult learning settings in Nigeria through the instrumentality of andragogical facilitators. For instance, in a literacy programme for rural Nigerian women, a critical consciousness session can be designed by the facilitator such as 'Analyzing Traditional Gender Roles' Group may discuss: (a) community's gender roles? (b) How the roles affect their lives and opportunities? (c) If the positions are equitable, why/why not? As they explore the questions, the group critiques their community's gender roles. They may argue that the roles have

limited their potentials and exacerbated inequity as they describe how they are affected. These women may question the established norms and power systems that maintain these gender roles. Consequently, they address how cultural norms and expectations marginalise women, realizing that power creates and maintains these conventions. Critical consciousness empowers participants to confront and modify these conventions, improving their lives and community. They envisage alternate solutions and create gender equality policies. Facilitators encourage adult learners to challenge and change their reality by encouraging critical consciousness and promoting constructive social change.

Conscientization in adult education entails the inclusion of real-life challenges into the learning process to actualize transformative adult learning. Taylor (2017) noted that transformative adult learning entails a major change in the manner in which individuals observe, comprehend, and experience themselves and their world. This change is characterized by an alteration in viewpoint, a shift in meaning-making, and an increase in awareness. In this regard, one's point of view shifts from a limited to a holistic perspective, meaning making changes from individualistic to broader consideration while consciousness shifts from naive to critical awareness. Transformative adult learning demands the recognition of divergent viewpoints, assimilation of new visions, understandings, and practices, as well as improved empathy and communal accountability.

Conscientization is an essential aspect of community development, workplace education, and social movements. It gives workers the power to look at their working conditions, fight for better welfare, and bring attention to groups of people who are often left out of social life. In health education, conscientisation makes adult learners more aware of health problems that are caused by health disparities, especially in rural areas. This gives people a sense of responsibility over their community. However, inherent benefits of this phenomenon seem not to be present in most adult learning settings in Nigeria. Most adult literacy centers still uphold traditional teaching strategies in facilitating adult learners as most of them are unqualified retired primary school teachers with no knowledge of andragogy. Ignorance among the rural people help to breed political apathy while social activist degenerate to praise singers, consequently the populace seems to be comfortable suffering and smiling. It's against this back drop that this study sought to explore conscientization as a catalyst for transformative adult learning in Nigeria with a view of reawakening the consciousness of adult learners as agents of change.

Theoretical Review

Mezirow's Transformation Theory (1978, 1991)

Jack Mezirow introduced transformation theory, also known as transformative learning theory, in 1978 and further elaborated it in 1991. The theory postulates that adult learning is basically about changing one's perspectives through critical thinking. The theory emphasizes the importance of overcoming challenges, as it prompts individuals to reevaluate their long-standing beliefs, customs, and values. This transformative process empowers one to accept novel viewpoints, which results in individual and societal change. Three basic elements of transformative learning theory include (a) critical reflection (b) discourse and dialogue, as well as (c) action and transformation. Mezirow asserts that the transformation process commences with critical reflection. When adults encounter problems that challenge their orientation, they often question the rationality of their ingrained beliefs through critical reflection, thereby acknowledging the influence of social, cultural, and political factors on

these beliefs. This is in line with conscientization, where individuals are critically conscious of the oppressive system and the underlying forces influencing their situations. Similarly, rational discourse expedites transformation by involving learners in dialogue about their novel viewpoints. This is in tandem with Freire's notion that dialogue deepens people's perception of social injustice and discerns means of collective opposition. Furthermore, the theory's core elements of action and transformation highlight the primary goal of transformative learning, which involves fostering a fresh perspective and altering perceptions to effect change. Paulo Freire's praxis parallels this, incorporating both action and critical reflection to challenge and alter prevailing conditions. When learners apply new viewpoints to bring about change in their individual and communal lives, the significance of the transformation manifests itself.

Mezirow's Transformation Theory provides undoubted basis for understanding the pressing need for transformative adult learning in Nigeria, particularly among rural dwellers. In a nation contending with significant poverty, gender disparity, and limited access to formal education, adult learning serves not only as a developmental device but also a device for liberation. For instance, most Nigerian women, especially in rural areas, experience deeply rooted socio-cultural restrictions that hinder their economic engagement and personal autonomy. Transformation theory in this regard, offers a leeway for these women to question the ideas and societal institutions that keep them on the outside. When individuals start to examine and reinterpret their lived experiences, they gain the power to take on new roles, fight against systems that hold them back, and make a real difference in the development of their communities.

Conscientization as a catalyst for transformative adult learning

A catalyst in science is a substance that quickens the rate of chemical reaction but remains unchanged at the end of the reaction. It engenders change by reducing the energy barrier needed for the reaction to take place, empowering the transformation of substances at a quicker rate or under slighter conditions. In other words, it facilitates change by enabling transformations that might otherwise take longer or not occur at all to occur at a very fast rate. In the context of this study, conscientization functions as a catalyst, enhancing and broadening the learning process. In other words, individuals' development of critical consciousness makes them recognize the social, political, and economic inconsistencies in society. This critical awareness enables them to rethink their experiences, query the underlying forces, and finally take action to redress the anomalies. Conscientization therefore acts as a catalyst for transformative adult learning by: reducing obstacles to critical awareness, facilitating transformation, stimulating action and social revolution, as well as maintaining ongoing learning and transformation.

Conscientization empowers learners to overcome mental and emotional barriers that hinder them from questioning underlying assumptions. It instigates adult learners to reconsider the social mores and power dynamics responsible for injustice, resulting in a wider comprehension of domination and relegation. The process of dialogue and critical reflection paves the way for the re-examination of previously held beliefs, resulting in a change in their worldview. Conscientization quickens the rate at which individuals move from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness. They no longer resign to fate in the face of difficulties, but rise to action in opposing previously unquestioned traditions that shape both individual and communal lives. In addition, conscientization energizes learners to take action.

Social revolution occurs when the people concerned are critically aware of the social injustices perpetrated by the powers that be. Just as a catalyst continuously accelerates reaction without consuming itself, conscientization does not serve as a one-time transformation tool. Once people have developed critical consciousness, they continue to relate their viewpoints to new circumstances, broaden their understanding, and take new forms of action. Individuals and communities undergo lifelong transformation through conscientization.

Practical Applications of Conscientization in Adult Education

Various adult learning settings can practically apply conscientization, enabling participants to cultivate critical consciousness and acquire skills for personal development and shared social change. This section focuses on the application of conscientization to the adult literacy programme, community development and empowerment, workplace learning and organizational development, social movement and political education, health education, popular education, and participatory action research.

Adult Literacy Programmes

Paulo Freire's 1970 adult literacy campaign in Brazil exemplified the application of conscientization to adult literacy programmes. He argued for the use of education as an emancipatory tool among the marginalized and oppressed. Contrary to the conventional literacy programmes characterized with methodical reading and writing, conscientization integrates real-life issues into literacy programmes enabling adult learners to challenge dominant forces with their newly acquired skills. Its' approach to adult literacy allows learners to work in collaboration with their facilitators to generate both theme and content of their learning from their lived experiences. Experiences related to poverty, inequality, and injustice can be used to create learning content that challenges pre-determined texts. In this regard, literacy extends beyond a technical skill to a means of critical social engagement and transformation (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber, 2022).

Community Development and Empowerment

It is pertinent to note that conscientization is a core feature of community development. Community development initiatives stem from communal discomfort. It entails a situation in which community members meet to deliberate on their social, economic, political, and cultural issues, identify their problems, and collectively take action towards a solution. Sharma (2021) observed that conscientization fosters transformative outcomes in community settings by raising awareness about social injustice and instigating individuals to confront oppressive conditions in their communities.

In rural communities, conscientization more often than not emanates from community-based organizations (CBOs). During their meetings, critical issues bothering communal members are deliberated on, including infrastructure and social amenities. Expressions of discomfort about the root causes of these problems, as well as feelings of exclusion and marginalization due to the perpetuation of inequality by local power dynamics, motivate them to take collective action, such as lobbying for policy changes, organizing protests, or forming cooperatives. It's worth noting that community development is participatory in its approach to collective problem-solving, as communal members' exhibit willing commitment to a just

course. Ledwith (2016) affirmed that such an approach engenders critical reflection in addition to building a sense of community ownership and responsibility.

Workplace Learning and Organizational Development

Conventional workplace learning, also known as human resource development basically emphasizes optimal productivity of the labour force with less emphasis on workers' welfare. Conversely, a conscientization-oriented approach to workplace education empowers workers to critically evaluate their working conditions and advocate for improved welfare. Brookfield (2019) asserts that conscientization challenges hierarchical and inequitable practices, enabling employees to critically evaluate their roles and the broader administrative values, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and justifiable work environment.

In an academic environment, conscientization comes into play when workers, through their respective unions, deliberate on labour rights, staff security, and wage inequalities. Harris, (2024) and Brookfield, (2023) confirmed that conscientization through discussion in academic settings develops both practical competencies and political awareness, empowering individuals toward collective action. Conscientization enhances team spirit and communal action as workers perceive themselves as means of transformation both in and outside work environs.

Social Movements and Political Education

Conscientization plays a crucial role in increasing the awareness of marginalized social groups about their plight, leading them to take action through social movements. A typical example is the trending women's liberation crusades, born out of the discomfort of a patriarchal society. Similarly, human rights movements emerged as a result of critical reflection on the violation of human rights and the marginalization of human worth and dignity, prompting collective action to protect these rights. Conscientization-oriented political education actualizes a comprehensive awareness of systemic oppression in relation to the rights, privileges, duties, and obligations of the populace.

Environmental degradation may prevent individuals from advocating for justifiable and unbiased policies without critical reflection on their plight. On the other hand, their engagement in dialogue may open their eyes to the connection between their demeaning environment and social inequality, which then spurs them to joint action through environmental justice movements. Darder (2018) asserted that consciousness-orientated political education plays a vital role in empowering individuals as well as the establishment of social movements against systemic oppression.

Health Education

Health education applies conscientization to raise adult learners' awareness of health challenges linked to health disparities across the board. Dube and Wilson (2022) observed the use of conscientization in HIV/AIDS awareness programmes in South Africa, where adult learners critically surveyed the public humiliations and financial hurdles associated with the illness. Conscientization can enhance health literacy, particularly in rural settings. We can enable rural communities to critically reflect on health issues such as airborne and waterborne diseases, female genital mutilation, and unhealthy reproductive lifestyles in relation to

government unresponsiveness. As a result, they may resort to Freire's "praxis"—reflection and action—and campaign for improved access to healthcare and civic support.

Popular Education and Participatory Action Research

Conscientization can be applied to popular education and participatory action research to democratize learning and capacity building in underprivileged communities. This context emphasizes the dialogical educational process, where facilitators and learners collaborate in producing knowledge through critical review and reflection. Communal members are actively involved in the research process, in the sense that they are the ones to dictate the problems as they affect them and then analyze and address the problems jointly with the researchers. This engenders a sense of ownership among communal members and paves the way for them to seek change in policy and social reformation. Calderón (2024) affirmed that participatory research and popular education empower communities to engage in radical systemic change, and not just academic inquiry.

Conscientization-Oriented Instructional Strategies

Friere (1970) advocated the notion of conscientization-oriented instructional strategies, which marked a paradigm shift from the conventional teacher-centred approach to instruction known as the "banking model" of learning to learner-centred collaborative learning. The banking model of education was criticized for the learner's lack of involvement in knowledge production, with the impression that an expert teacher has to deposit knowledge in inexperienced learners. However, a conscientization-oriented instructional approach stresses critical reflection, dialogue, and action, which empower learners to question social standards, realize underlying forces, and be involved in transformative activities. Examples of conscientization-oriented instructional strategies for adult learners are: dialogical learning, problem-posing education, participatory action research, culture circles, critical media analysis, reflective journaling, role playing and simulation, case studies and problem-based learning, storytelling and narrative inquiry, and service learning.

Dialogical learning: This strategy entails a common exchange of views among the facilitator and the learners. In a democratic learning environment, the facilitator encourages adult learners to openly share their lived experiences. Darder (2018) opined that facilitators act as guides rather than specialists, directing learners through the procedure of critical inquiry and reflection. In employing this method, adult learners can discuss current concerns such as social inequality and inequality in healthcare facilities, examining the consequences and potential solutions.

Problem-Posing Education: This strategy exposes adult learners to real-world problems that are connected to their current situations, encouraging critical reflection and deliberation. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional lecture method, where the facilitator presents the entire learning content without any input from the learner. For instance, the facilitator might prompt a discussion on the fundamental causes of poverty and means of alleviation. As the learners discuss and share views of their personal experiences, they also explore ways of addressing the communal problem as it affects them.

Participatory Action Research (PAR): As the name implies, this strategy entails a collaborative educational process between the facilitators and learners. The facilitator and adult learners jointly work to detect, explore, and attend to issues troubling their communities. It denotes Friere's idea of Praxis—linking reflection with action to facilitate transformative learning. For example, collaborative research by adult learners and the

facilitator on food insecurity can lead to the establishment of a communal food garden. This allows them to connect theory to practice, transforming their critical thinking into effective strategies that empower them to effect social change in their communities.

Culture Circles: This programme encourages adult learners to form sub-groups for discussion purposes. Topics of discussion are basically socio-cultural realities in their communities, in which case they share personal experiences and communal challenges. Offshoots of such discussions are usually insights on communal threats and ways of confronting and dealing with such challenges.

Critical Media Analysis: This strategy presents news, advertisements, and other social media information to adult learners for critical analysis. During the analysis process, they may discover concealed administrative organization and political information. This may help them develop a critical awareness of unfairness and misrepresentation.

Reflective Journaling: This strategy encourages adult learners to reflect, analyze, write, and document their personal and communal experiences. For instance, they can be keeping daily, weekly, or monthly journals of their experiences as directed by the facilitator. Such practices no doubt deepen their critical reflection and personal transformation.

Role-Playing and Simulations: This strategy enables learners to act out real-world situations related to their life experiences. This aims at assisting adult learners to perceive issues from divergent viewpoints while evaluating social functions and political structure. Adult education settings such as conflict resolution, leadership training, and civic education can utilize role-play and simulations. Different groups of marginalized communities, local government, and business leaders can simulate town hall meetings on topics related to social justice or inequality.

Case Studies and Problem-Based Learning (PBL): Adult learners analyze real life scenario of social, political and economic challenges case studies and problem-based learning. They are encouraged to collaboratively explore the root causes of the problems and find solutions to them.

Storytelling and Narrative Inquiry: This approach encourages adult learners to share their personal experiences through analytical descriptions. Mutual expression of discomfort in relation to dominant narratives, particularly among the marginalized, is instrumental in challenging social injustice and oppression in society. A women's empowerment workshop can employ this strategy to address issues such as gender-based violence and patriarchy.

Service Learning: This strategy combines community service with critical thinking and learning content, letting adult learners relate class experiences to real-life encounters. This paves the way for adult learners to develop profound awareness and, as a result, motivates them to collectively act towards the improvement of their communities. This strategy can be applied to social work programme in assisting the underprivileged while at the same time re-considering the structural issues influencing their clients.

Challenges Facing Conscientization-Based Adult Learning Initiatives in Nigeria

Conscientization- based adult learning initiatives hinged on Paulo Freire's notion of critical consciousness and transformative learning aim to empower marginalized individuals to

reflect on and reshape the realities of their lives. The implementation of Conscientization-based adult learning initiatives in Nigeria contend with so many challenges which include;

1. **Negative Public Perception of Adult Education:** A lot of people especially in the rural areas associate adult learning with uneducated elderly individuals and as such perceive it as unessential. This leads to a negative reputation that hinders participation in adult education programmes.
2. **Insufficient Funding and Policy Backing** – Inadequate financial assistance to adult education programmes by the government culminated to dearth trained facilitators, learning materials, and infrastructure. The Universal Basic Education Act has also failed to give adult education the credit it deserves either.
3. **Limited access and infrastructure-** Most remote areas have no libraries, adult learning centres, or access to the internet. This makes it hard for learners, especially women, to take part on a regular basis. The problem is made worse by the lack of mobile learning systems.
4. **Dearth of Qualified Facilitators** Conscientization-based learning requires skilled facilitators capable of guiding critical reflection and dialogue. Regrettably, Nigeria faces a shortage of trained adult education facilitators, specifically those conversant with Freirean pedagogy.
5. **Conflict Between Learning and Livelihood-** Many adults learners have to balance a lot of things, like farming, caregiving, and other social functions. In the absence of flexible timetables or incentives, quest for survival takes primacy of place before education.
6. **Lack of Integration with Community Development** Adult learning initiatives don't always fit in with bigger development projects. Their influence continued to be limited and unsustainable because they are not connected to health, agriculture, or financial literacy programmes.

The above stated challenges underpin the need for a more inclusive, adequately funded, and community-oriented strategy for adult education in Nigeria. For conscientization to genuinely empower rural populations, it must be integrated within a supportive framework that recognizes lifelong learning as a means of liberation and progression.

Conclusion

Conscientization as an approach to adult learning offers an alternative means of engaging adult learners in the instructional process for transformative learning. It encourages critical thinking as a means of raising awareness of individuals to systemic oppressions, which in turn motivates them to take joint action in challenging dominant forces, thereby creating a fairer and more equitable society. Conscientization serves as a catalyst for facilitating transformative adult learning. The principles of conscientization should guide facilitators of adult learners, encompassing critical consciousness, reflection and action, empowerment, dialogue, and participation in the instructional process. This would bring about a comfortable learning environment for adult learners' critical consciousness and ability to challenge the status quo.

Recommendations

1. The government should allocate more funds to adult education via the Ministry of Education and incorporate conscientization-based learning into national development plans. This can be done by setting up a National Adult Learning and Empowerment Fund for community-led initiatives, especially those that help marginalized groups. This would help in strengthening government commitment to adult learning.
2. There should be instant retooling and reskilling of adult education facilitators in tandem with Freirean pedagogy, critical reflection, and participatory learning. This can be actualized by collaborating with colleges and universities of education to develop certification paths for adult learning facilitators, including bonuses for working in rural areas.
3. Adult education programmes should be integrated into existing community-based organizations (CBO) and faith-based organization (FBO) to endorse its relevance to community development. The local government councils should approve community learning hubs that offer education that is flexible, culturally appropriate, and meets the needs of the community.
4. The use of technology such as mobile platforms and radio broadcast should be maximized for equitable access to learning. Adult learners in rural areas can be provided with subsidized access to gadgets and internet connectivity
5. Adult learning should be combined with practical proficiencies like agriculture, financial literacy and entrepreneurship. This can be done by leveraging on national poverty alleviation initiatives such as N-Power, the Nigeria for Women Project, and the Agricultural Transformation Agenda to ensure relevance and sustainability.
6. Adult education programmes should be effectively monitored to track records of progress and impacts on human empowerment and community development. This can be done by establishing a National Adult Learning Observatory to gather data, publicize best practices, and guide policy modifications.

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