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CRITICAL STUDY OF THE ADULT LEARNING PROCESS IN IRANIAN INFORMAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

What is adult education and what possible principles of such a system of education can be defined? Can there be a systematic and fully organized an informal structure of education so that it can function as a foundation of information society? It seems that in our rapidly growing age of information the creation of such a system of adult education and training of the productive and creative learners can pave the way for the establishment of an information based society. This approach of education can help the learners to be self-directed and self-initiated in the process of learning and foster the sense of belonging and responsibility. This essay is an attempt to bring into light the features of the adult education in Iranian informal system of education and suggest some practical solutions of the existing problems.

Keywords: *Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Facilitators, Knowledge, Adult Education*

INTRODUCTION

We are in the beginning of the age of information technology and rapidly growing global competition. Along with this worldwide growing competition the idea of teaching and education also needs to be approached in a different way. The rapidly growing power of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) connects us to the global information networks and leads us to create information society. Such information and the knowledge-based society of the global age need to be built upon a different foundation—the foundation of continuing education or lifelong learning by the permanent investment on the creativity and the intellectual capacity of the people. Today the formal and traditional schools and universities can no longer be the sole source of information and knowledge because huge amount of knowledge and information can also be achieved and distributed by the mass medias, digital and interactive televisions and information super highway – internet. Such extension and the popularization of lifelong learning help us to equip ourselves to cope with the enormous social changes and the rapid transformation of the global society we are faced with. This approach of education helps the learners to be self-directed and self-initiated in the process of learning and foster the sense of belonging and responsibility.

By taking this model of education the instructors are not only teachers but also the facilitators of learning process who know the learners' needs and their capacity of mind and design learning activities which are appropriately related to those needs. By knowing and applying the different learning styles and being fully aware of the capacities of learners the facilitators of learning will employ all possible means to prepare us for the new age in which the gateway to success will be the continuous education through a dynamic lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning or Adult Learning in Iranian System of Education

Lifelong learning or adult learning program in modern Iranian system of education is broadly defined as an informal learning system that is pursued throughout the life of an individual; it is a learning process that is dynamic, flexible and easily available at different stages of life. Such a dynamic process of learning begins at any stage of life and continues through a constant building of skills and experiences through the life of an individual. By adult learning I refer to all the informal universities or all forms of informal governmental and nongovernmental systems of education.

This newly established informal universities or the informal system of education in Iran which encompasses both governmental educational organizations (GEOs) and nongovernmental educational organizations (NGEOs) paves the way for a lifelong learning process whereby learners acquire attitudes,

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knowledge, values, skills and experiences from all the possible resources available in their learning environment.

Whereas the great amount of these resources are provided by the governmental organizations such as the various cultural houses affiliated to the Ministry of Culture and Guidance and the municipalities and the Technical and Vocational Training Organizations (TVTO) affiliated to the Ministry of Labor and Social affairs, the private and nongovernmental organizations also play a significant role in training and fulfilling the educational needs of the learning society. The nongovernmental system of education also includes a very big area of social sciences, humanities, computer science, technological training, language institutes, and various fields of activities in art, sport, and cultural affairs.

The only difference between GEOs and NGEOs is that the one is financially supported by the government whereas the other is a self-founded system of education. This means that the clients of the NGEOs have the further responsibility of financing their own continuing process of training with no financial support from the government. Apart from this slight difference the clients of both GEOs and NGEOs are engaged in self-motivated and voluntary pursuit of knowledge for both personal and professional purposes. As such this modern view of education becomes the inseparable part of life which continues at all times and all places; it becomes a continuous lifelong process sometimes going on from cradle to the grave and it is constantly directed to enhance personal knowledge, skills and experiences, active citizenship and the higher possibility of employability.

Of the informal universities or the informal system of education, the Technical and Vocational Training Organization (TVTO) is the largest organization which publicly undertakes the technical and vocational trainings. This system of education which organizes its training activities in public and private sections, deals with the training and increasing the knowledge and practical skills of the jobseekers, the students of the universities and the higher educational systems.

This system also is deeply concerned with increasing the efficiency of the labor forces which are needed by different parts of the Industry, Agriculture, Service, Culture, and Art affaires nationwide (TVTO in Short View, 2011).

Throughout the country there are now a plenty of centers at private and governmental sectors which are increasingly developed under the jurisdiction of TVTO in accordance with the Article 111 of the Labor Law and with the official permit of TVTO. At present, more than 70 percent of the training activities of TVTO are performed by private section (TVTO in Short View, 2011).

In 2010, of the total 15147 active centers nationwide, 1953 centers are active for men and 11243 for women and the rest are dual functional. Of these centers, 85 percent of the total active centers are in service fields, 12 percent in industrial and the remaining 13 percent in agricultural field in 2010 (TVTO in Short View, 2011).

Characteristics of Lifelong Learning in Iranian Model of Informal Education

Before I start to explain my understanding of the nature of Iranian model of lifelong learning, I should emphasize as emphatically as I can that here I am not concerned with any formal system of education as it is being carried out in our formal schools and universities for the simple reason that I have seen a plenty number of students who get college training or university degree without being authentically educated. And if I am questioned about the criterion of the authenticity of a system of education, I would say that education, whatever it is, it is not a head full of facts but learning and understanding where to find it. An authentic system of education should also help the students develop the common sense. The educators' primary concern is to guide the students to learn how to live in a real life situation. It should be a thousand time better to have common sense without an education than to have education without common sense.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To extract the key elements of Iranian model of informal system of education both in GEOs and NGEOs, I took a few samples of TVTO in various rural and urban adult learning environments in the fields of service, agriculture and industry and carefully examined the quality of learning process, the structure of the learning system, the role of the facilitators and the outcome of the learning process, what I have

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experienced during this brief study, were some significant results which I take as the considerable characteristics of the Iranian model of adult education. Some of the significant which I have experienced are these:

1. The first characteristic of informal model of education is that it is highly self-motivated process of learning. In any field of learning known as adult learning system both in its GEOs and in its NGEOs the very first significant sight I perceived in Iranian system of education is the heavy emphasis on the eagerness of the learners to be engaged in the learning process and take the responsibility for their own development. Thus, throughout the whole learning process the instructors function as the facilitators not the dominant figures of the learning environment who showers the knowledge from which the learners passively receive (Flaxton, 1966).

Unlike the old and traditional system of education in which the learners are highly conditioned to be the receivers of the pre-established package of knowledge which is mostly irrelevant to the dynamic growth and development of the real capacities of the individuals, the self-motivated system of education directs the learners attention to develop the sense of responsibility and be prepared,

- To develop personal skills and experience
- To develop the professional skills of independent learning
- To upgrade job skills and experience
- To be engaged in community
- To participate in social networking
- To start business and
- To discover new ways of life (Pathways, 2012)

2. Because the adults possess a richer experience of life, they bring, in many ways, a great deal of background experiences and learning experiences to the oncoming learning processes. To let this happen the instructors are always ready to connect the previous learning experiences and the new learning experiences. Thus, it becomes the instructor's foremost duty to monitor each and every individual learner to find out:

- What they already know about the subject
- What they are capable and willing to learn and
- What did they actually learn and add to their already acquired experiences (Jannette, 2009).

3. In TVTO informal model of learning the self-directed and self-initiated learning become the most effective and lasting way of learning. The essential feature of this way of learning is that the learning process is closely related to the learner's anticipations and activities in the real life situations. This makes the facilitator also become aware of the learner's needs and motivations and consciously design the learning process so that they are meaningfully and logically related and relevant to the needs and the living situation of the learners. Thus, the subject-centered method of education gives way to the problem-centered environment so that every individual learner distinctively becomes aware what is in it for me (WIFM) in the long run?

Unlike the formal system of education (schools and universities) which are concerned only with the "knowing about" type of education in which the instructors are the sole source of knowledge and dictate facts to the students who are considered to be responsible only to memorize and aimlessly repeat, the TVTO system of education both in GEOs and NGEOs forms is concerned with the following types of knowing:

a. Knowing Why

The learners are conducted to be practical and connect their knowledge with day to day experience of life and try to solve their problems. For the learners of TVTO knowledge is knowledge if only it can be practically used.

b. Knowing to Change (Gardener, 1997)

The learners get ready to enlarge and enrich their experiences to be productive and get transformed and transform the society in which they live.

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c. Knowing Where

The learner learn the appropriate place in which knowledge can be looked for and the right sources that can be used including libraries, encyclopedias, web search etc.

4. In lifelong system of education the well paid, carefully chosen and well experienced instructors are qualitatively different from the so called teachers of formal system of education. The well qualified instructors of the lifelong program are not the dominant figures of the learning situation or the sole source of knowledge; they are only the facilitators and the guide to sources of knowledge. Unlike the traditional system of education in which the instructors are the product of initial training who are occasionally exposed to ad hoc in-service training, a considerable number of the carefully trained instructors of TVTO themselves are lifelong learners.

Having said all these, the informal GEOs and NGEOS in Iran have not been fully developed to that qualified level to provide the learning environment to guide the learners in all stages of learning process. There can still be found many training environments, in which the learners need,

- To learn and enlarge their experiences independently
- To learn and apply their experiences in the true life situation
- To learn in groups and from each other
- To learn to have access to learning opportunities
- To learn to be actively engaged in the learning process (Hallak, 1998).

The NHEOS of Iranian system of lifelong education are still in their early stages and need to be fully flourished. They are in dire need of getting involved in the learning process. It seems that first of all a new system of teacher training center is needed to enrich the mind of the instructors themselves and give them the insight to think of themselves as the global citizens of the global society. In an ideal state the instructors would be the main vehicles to act as facilitators and create the opportunities for the learners,

- To create a fully curious and hungry minds (Only hungry minds can be educated)
- To develop and create creative and analytic minds
- To be fully involved in the learning process and to be active contributors to the environment
- To live together and practice tolerance and mutual respect
- To develop the sense of responsibility and promote their global awareness
- To feel and consider themselves the citizens of the world
- To learn how to make the world a better place

Conclusion

To achieve an ideal learning society of autonomous, participative and productive learners we shall need to acquire a radical change in our traditional view of education as it is still going on in our formal schools and universities. To do so we shall need to reengineer and reconstruct the whole system of education in a way that our educators themselves can be the genuine models of lifelong learners to manage the transformation of the whole learning society. These committed educators will fully be aware that for the creation of productive learning society and committed global citizens certain requirements should be taken into consideration:

1. The educators themselves should have a constant access to learning opportunities. Only the globally minded educators can pave the way for the creation of global citizens.
2. They should also become aware of the fact that no individual learner can learn everything there is to learn. The students' mind is much like the stomach; it is not how much you put into it that counts, but how much it digests.
3. The educators should create an individual-centered learning environment and take into consideration that all the learners do not have the same interests and abilities. In any learning environment nothing grieves a learner more than to study the wrong lesson and learn something he or she wasn't supposed to.
4. And finally the educator should think of themselves as tutors only and let the learners seek information, interpret the information and be a responsible information consumer.

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