Values and Informal Education: From Indigenous Africa to 21ˢᵗ Century Vermillion

Mejai B.M. Avoseh,
University of South Dakota, USA.

Abstract: Values cut through every human activity and are integral to human existence because human beings are 'valuing animals'. Values motivate most adults to engage in any learning activity. Values in informal education are foundations for lifelong learning as a basis for participatory democracy, equity and social justice. This paper uses literature to do a conceptual analysis of values and informal education as imperatives for participatory democracy and social justice.

Introduction

The current debate on lifelong and experiential learning within the larger context of adult education has, in my view, allowed a little more flexibility, and by implication; allowed some 'outside' views into the main and recognized discourse in the field. Although informal education is context-dependent, the values inherent in it sometimes transcend religio-cultural and geo-racial boundaries. Value is generally significant in education especially so in adult education. Indeed values provide the motivation for most adults to engage in any learning activity. Values can be intrinsic or extrinsic and have ways of influencing learning in different contexts and at different levels. Values in informal education and as used in this paper are foundations for lifelong learning especially in the liberal and non-vocations domains. Informal education is the most pervasive accomplice of other forms of formalized and non-formalized education. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) put it more poignantly "informal learning is by far the most prevalent form of adult learning" (p. 35).This paper uses both literature and the author's experiences to analyze values and informal education across an indigenous African and a Midwestern United States' setting. The Gu (Egun) and Yoruba of West Africa are used as prototypes of indigenous Africa while Vermillion (in spite of its size and location) is used as a prototype of the West and globalization. The paper argues that the values inherent in informal education have universal appeal that can be used to foster democratic participation, equity, and 'liberty and justice' for all irrespective racial, economic, sexual, gender and political differences.

Indigenous African Values

Value as used here means African traditional cultural values in the historico-anthropological and especially sub-Saharan Africa. These values were the foundation for indigenous African society and education. In traditional African societies, the whole gamut of education was located in and defined by sets of values that reflect the community's aims and objectives in a lifelong process of education. These core values influence especially the education of adults even at the level of 'higher education' of secret cults and societies. These values inculcate in the individual the elements of true citizenship and the need to project the good names of the family and the community. Between the **Gu** and **Yoruba**, these values are enveloped in the concepts *wadagbe, medagbe, Iwa* and *Omoluabi* respectively. These values regulate education, life and living in those societies. The values define those who have been truly

'educated' and 'graduated'. These same values guide and determine individuals who aspire to become revered ancestors irrespective of gender or socio-economic status.

Central to traditional African value system is the emphasis on life and living in the community. All other values are subsumed under the priority of life and the importance of others. Various scholars of African traditional thought including Busia (1972), Wiredu (1980), Datta (1984), Nyerere (1974), Msimuko (1987), Salia-Bao (1989), Ocitti (1994) Avoseh (2001, 2007) have all emphasized how these traditional values combine to form a comprehensive system of life in local communities and society in general. The individual is primarily a member of her/his immediate and extended family, the local community and her/his society. The individual is only an individual because she/he belongs to the groups that affirm identity. An individual is thus a person because of other persons. These values also link the living and the dead. Busia (1972) explains that an individual's family includes the dead, the living and the unborn. Consequently, the good, happiness or adversity of the individual is a function of the good, happiness or adversity of the community and vice versa. The values thus define citizenship, rights and obligations. The values have spiritual dimensions that make them foundations for equity because of the link with ancestors. Violating the values is **èèwò, osu** (forbidden behavior) that incurs the wrath of the ancestors and divinities in addition to community-imposed punishment. The idea of **èèwò, osu** (forbidden behavior) and the spiritual dimension to punishment is an instance of equality before the law because the divinities and ancestors are incorruptible judges.

Traditional values subsist in what the Yoruba and the Gu call *Iwa* and *Wadagbe* (character) which includes honesty, tolerance, truthfulness, humility, integrity, honor, self-control, patience, industry and empathy among others. Opoku (1985, p. 71) adds the "values of cooperation, harmony, generosity, mutual helpfulness, human life, respect for older people…" to the core values that fostered participatory development in traditional Africa. The values aim at developing the body and the soul. Because of the holistic nature of the traditional society, it is impossible to separate education from life and vice versa. Thus, these lifelong values are, like education, inseparable from life. Although the values are emphasized in 'formal' and vocational aspects of indigenous African education, they are more embedded in informal education that bestrides every aspect of life in a community. The same values define and regulate social justice, equity and active citizenship.

One must acknowledge the criticism of the common value system in traditional African life as undermining individualism and imposing group identity on all. On the contrary to this criticism, individuality is emphasized through character. In fact, most deities in traditional Africa were individuals who excelled in character as active citizens. The traditional values enjoin the individual to put self always in the 'skin of others' in order to feel the way they feel. As Gaba (1975, p. 11) puts it, "the individual is aware of the existence of others and, therefore, leads a life that should make it possible for others too…to live…the individual believes that the ontological balance is impaired when his/her activities negate the existence of others". The values of informal education in traditional Africa thus underline equity and social justice by insisting that individual "activities must simultaneously promote existence in its individual and corporate dimensions" (p. 11). The idea of the importance of socially 'derived valuations' is not just a traditional African perspective. Lindeman (1961, pp. 100-101) uses objectivity to drive the imperative of symmetry between individual and collective values. As he put it, "objectivity is lost the moment individual conduct is conceived as something separate from social conduct. Values arise out of the social process".

Values in Vermillion

In most modern societies, the values enumerated above are 'obsolete' and are too 'slow' to keep pace with globalization and reality. To use Nietzsche's words, these values have been "tans-valued" by the values of technology coupled with the propensity of the strong to vanquish the weak. In most western and indeed urban communities, these values tend to run against the logic of economic globalization that mostly validates individual conduct in terms of economic returns. It is therefore unusual to find these 'traditional' values in place in most modern societies. Vermillion is a small town in the Midwest of the United States. Vermillion fits the prototype of a rural, agricultural and university town. In Vermillion, there are values akin to those of traditional African society. The understanding and application of these values in Vermillion may not necessarily be the same as in traditional Africa but they are nonetheless evidence of robust informal education. These values still define character and living in Vermillion and are central to other forms of formal education in the community. The values of honesty, tolerance, fellow feeling, truthfulness, humility, integrity, honor, self-control, patience, industry and generosity are unambiguously present in informal education in Vermillion. Many adult educators including John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Eduard Lindeman, Peter Jarvis, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Julius Nyerere and other educators have underlined the impact of informal community education on the general educational system. Vermillion is a predominant Caucasian community that has these values on 'display' in everyday interactions. The example of Vermillion is an instance that establishes these values as transcending race, ethnicity and socio-economic barriers, and makes them universalizable. In spite of the expose to the realities of globalization, Vermillion exhibits the basic values that underlie the pursuit of democratic involvement, participatory development, equity and social justice. The rural nature of Vermillion does not take away from the effect of these values on community education. Hamilton and Cunningham (1989) argued that 'community-based education operates on the assumption that a given community, whether urban or rural, has the potential to solve many of its problems by relying on its own resources and by mobilizing community action for problem resolution" (p. 439). They further identified 'community development and popular education' "integrated with relevant existing social movements" (p. 446) as the pillars of any adult education program that is aimed at community transformation. The notable social movements in Vermillion include student organizations, *United Vermillion Way (UWV),* the *Eagles Club*, *Odd fellows Lodge*, and *Prairie Bowling League*. The churches and religious organizations have minimized denominational differences and have become social movements. There are several joint efforts in addition to different forms of community-dialogue. All efforts focus on caring for everyone in the community and within the scope of the values that sustain social justice. The *UWV* motto puts it as "giving together to build a community". For social justice to become 'actuality' it must be located in social action that relates reflection to action in line with Freire's 1970 'praxis', a precursor to the ability for critical thinking. Again, Hamilton and Cunningham (1989, p. 445) underline the interface of criticality and social action insisting that "the reality of community development…in mobilizing grass-roots participation offer a potent force for community-based learning that leads to critical consciousness and social action".

The smooth chemistry between the different social movements within the community has helped to foster different forms of community education aimed at social action and social justice. The functioning together aligns with the social logic that individualism can be celebrated with consideration for the interests of the community-the core of social justice. It has also afforded the university and research the opportunity to be meaningful in the lives of ordinary

people in the community. Some of the community service-learning programs include *The Welcome Table, Jewish Seder Meal,* and the *Empty Bowl* that students' associations organize and use to support the economically weak in the community and to draw attention to forms of injustice related to inequity. There are also vocational and leisure related adult education programs offered to members of the community through grant monies and donation of professional skills by instructors. These efforts are largely due to the common values that sustain a sense of equity and social justice. The affect of these values in Vermillion also include the unwritten but evident understanding of citizenship along the lines of belonging and participation akin to that of traditional Africa. Within this understanding, "citizenship is always a matter of belonging to a community… the citizen is always a co-citizen, somebody who lives with others" (Korsgaard, 2001, p. 10).

The values were synonymous with education and active citizenship in indigenous Africa that is often assumed 'authoritarian'. The same values are inherent in informal education in a 21st century western community with democratic imperatives. Democratic values are cherished values in adult education if learners are to have a stake at almost all stages of 'helping adults learn'. The cherished values of adult education therefore dovetail with those of informal education in both traditional African society and contemporary western society.

The influence of socio-cultural factors on the adult learner and adult education is becoming accentuated as the discipline and practice of adult education grapple with the tide of globalization and what Lindeman (1961, p.75) refers to as "an age of specialism" in adult education. Since these values transcend race and ethnicity and focus on 'humanizing' the individual they are valuable tool for adult education in an age where rapid changes are eroding the fabrics of what makes human beings 'human'. The import of the discourse of values in traditional African and small-town American community is that the values inherent in informal learning are necessary checkmates on the ferocity of change and the decline of humanity. These values are *sine qua non* for popular community education that aims to challenge inequity and social injustice in all ramifications.

Values, Adult Education and Social Justice

The place of values in adult education is well put by Akinpelu's (2002, p. 29) assertion that "value is the very foundation on which adult education rests" especially in terms of the core values that motivate the adult to learn. Akinpelu further establishes the values associated with the adult educator to include faith in humanity and the "belief in the principles of social justice" (p. 34). The history of adult education points to adult education being rooted in values entrenched in improving human conditions. Even dating back to the efforts of St. Augustine of Kent in 597 A.D. through the efforts of the society for promoting of church knowledge (S.P.C.K.), adult education was about rescuing the poor from religious and moral perdition. It is clear from Kelly's (1962) account that the founding and operations of Mechanic Institute and the Workers Education Association in the United Kingdom were rooted in the values of social justice. The Chautauqua movement that started in upstate New York under the aegis of religion is another example of the social justice related values that formed the history of adult education.

Several adult educators emphasized the value of social justice especially through informal education. As far back as 1844, N.F. Grundtvig established the *Folk high school* as an institution of enlightenment for the Danes. He focused especially on marginalized Danish farmers of his time insisting that vernacular should be used for adult education. His insistence on Danish language was to democratize the learning process and make adult learning a participatory

group effort. The etymology of his key concept *folkelighed* in adult education revolves around equity. Nabudere (2003, p. 17) explains that the concept is split into two words: "*folk* – meaning the people and *lighed* – meaning equality".

Julius Nyerere's education for self-reliance couched in his *Ujamaa* is based on the values of equity and social justice. Nyerere (1967, p. 262-263) lists the eight core principles of the *Ujamaa* that include the following:

- the fundamental equality of all human beings, and
- the right to freedom of expression, of movement, of religious belief, of association within the context of the law.

His 1976 speech entitled 'adult education and development' is famously referred to as the 'Declaration of Dar-es-Salaam' by adult educators because of its poignant message of the social justice and equity roles of adult education in society (Hall & Kidd 1978). Eduard Lindeman's (1961) humanistic adult education, Malcolm Knowles' (1973) reference to the adult learner as a neglected species and his later emphasis on Andragogy including Freire's (1970) social action through critical awareness; all underline the values of social justice and equity as the basis of adult education. The adult educators cited above and several others all combine to provide what Cunningham & Ohliger (1989, p. viii) refer to as "renewed inspiration to join with others to nondogmatically reassert the personal and social necessity for vigorous and fundamental-certainly radical-transformation".

Conclusion

Social justice, equity, participatory democracy and the ideals of liberty will remain a mirage if we continue to live in separate worlds. Separate worlds of mainstream and periphery communities, of women and men, of believers and infidels, of minority and majority, of correct sexual orientation and 'unusual' sexual orientation, of white and black etcetera. In spite of differences arising from the beauty of diversity, there are universal values inherent in informal education across historical and racial boundaries that can maximize the dividends of participatory democracy and the related benefits of equity and social justice. The values of informal education in most communities align with the historical values of adult education as a process of social action for equity and social justice. There cannot be social justice and equity unless humanity recognizes the uniqueness and right to equity of every individual. As Spicer (1998, p. 183) puts it "our identity as members of the human race in a global community requires us to cross borders of race, class, nationality, culture, sexual orientation, and a myriad of community differences". Inequity and other forms of injustice are sustained in today's world by a sense of value that aligns with an African saying that *in the jungle the logic of the lion is always the most valid.*

References:

Akinpelu, J. A. (2002). *Philosophy & adult education*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden

Avoseh, M.B.M (2007). The symmetrical relationship between learning and communities in traditional Africa. Proceedings of SCUTREA, The Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland, pp.33-40.

Avoseh, Mejai B.M. (2001). Learning to be active citizens: lessons of traditional Africa for lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 20*(6), 479-486.

Busia, Kofi A. (1972). The African world-view: A comparative approach. In S.H. Irvin
    & J.T. Sanders (Eds.), *Cultural Adaptations within Modern Africa* (pp.79-80). New York:
    Teachers College Press.

Cunningham, P. & Ohliger, J. (1989). Introduction. In *Radical Thinking in Adult*
    Education. (Occasional Paper 1) Syracuse University, NY: Kellog Project Center for the
    Study of Citizenship. (Occasional Paper Series).

Datta, A. (1984) *Education and Society: A Sociology of African Education,* London &
    Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gaba, C. R. (1975). The African traditional way of nation-building; *Orita- Ibadan*
    Journal of Religious Studies, *9*(1), pp. 3-22.

Hall, B. & Kidd, J. (Eds.). (1978). *Adult learning: A design for action.* Oxford:
    Pergamon.

Hamilton, E. and Cunningham, P. M. (1989). Community-based adult education. In
    Merriam, S.B. & Cunningham, P.M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing*
    Education (pp.439-450). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kelly, T. (1962). *A history of adult education in Great Britain.* London: Liverpool UP.

Korsgaard, O. (2001). Why has citizenship become such a vogue word? In Korsgaard, O;
    Walters, S. & Andersen, R. (Eds.), *Learning for democratic citizenship* (pp. 9-14).
    Copenhagen: DPU-repro.

Lindeman Eduard C. (1961). *The Meaning of Adult Education* (4th. ed.). Oklahoma:
    Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education.

Merriam Sharan, Caffarella Rosemary & Baumgartner (2007). *Learning in adulthood* 3rd ed., San
    Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ocitti J. P. (1994). An Introduction to Indigenous Education in East African.
    Supplement to *Adult Education and Development*, No.42.

Opoku, K. A. (1985). Moral values and development. In *Education, Culture and*
    Development in Africa-Proceeding of Professors of World Peace Academy- (pp. 65-72).
    New York: The Professors of World Peace Academy.

Nabudere, D. W. (2003). Grundtvig's folkelighed in the age of globalization. *Journal of*
    World Education, 33(2), 17-23.

Nyerere, J.K. (1967). *Freedom and unity/Uhuru na Umaja* . London: Oxford UP.

Nyerere J. K. (1974). *Man and Development.* London: Oxford UP.

Spicer, C. (1998). Introduction: Learning from the Danes. In Warren, C. (Ed.),
    Democracy is Born in Conversations (pp. 171-214). Nyack, NY: Circumstantial
    Productions.

Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.