

Rethinking creativity and innovation in community education: a practical approach

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Abstract

The need to reinvent the approach to teaching and learning in community education cannot be overemphasized. Being education in the non-formal mode, community education seeks to address the immediate needs of the recipients at the personal, group and community levels. This education targets the felt and shared needs of the community, through a collaborative approach that seeks to involve all stakeholders. Sadly however, it has been observed that community education is slipping gradually into the pattern, mode and focus of formal school education, with its attendant shortcomings and incapacity in tackling immediate problem, such as crime, corruption, unemployment, restiveness, ethnic Chauvinism, etc. This paper argues that through adopting creative approaches to the theory and practice of community education, some of these problems could be mitigated planning, conceptualization; such innovation should cover implementation and evaluation processes, hence rendering itself more relevant and responsive to the immediate needs and aspirations of contemporary Nigerian society.

Key words: Creativity, innovation, community education, non-formal education, planning, implementation, evaluation.

1. Introduction

The reality of the increasing complexity of the 21st century classroom is no longer novel. It is a stark reality which presents a plethora of challenges for all players and stakeholders in the educational industry. From planners of curriculum, the administrators of educational institutions, the teachers, the learners

to the beneficiary industries (may be the society at large), the imperative of a responsive, relevant and

adequate educational system has never been so dire. These challenges, occasioned by the wider and more engulfing, changes in the dynamics of society, including socio-political and economic demands, technological explosions and light-speed innovations in science and technology have meant

that the enterprise of education must reinvent itself in a manner that it can cope with these dizzying changes. The implication of this is that the

curriculum or educational programmes of yesterday can no longer solve today's problems; the teaching methods, the mental capital of the teachers or instructors, the instructional delivery mechanisms and indeed the administrative approaches to conducting this enterprise of education of the previous years may not be able to solve today's problems, nor produce people who are living in the present time. The rate of technological innovations and the explosion of the global knowledge economy demands institutions and people who not only get armed with the soft skills required to live in and function within this milieu, but also who are prepared to attune themselves to the challenges that may crop up tomorrow. This paper focuses on creativity and innovation in community education, dwelling, as it were, on the planning, content, delivery and evaluation process, proposing a practical guide on how to innovate in this sector of education.

2. Meaning of creativity and innovation

Within the context of education, creativity is an often contentious term to "define". However, the ordinary meaning of creativity as adduced by Wikipedia (2008) refers to the use of imagination or original ideas to create something. This definition further stresses that creativity has to do with inventiveness. The online Thesaurus of Meanings (2008) suggests that creativity is a phenomenon whereby something new and somehow valuable is formed, stating that the item so created may be intangible or a physical object. Also, Naiman, (2023) views creativity as the process of turning things that are imagined into physical ideas. She notes that it (creativity) ...is characterized by the ability to

perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and to generate solutions.

This second definition has raised a salient quality of creativity which will provide much relevance to the focus of this discourse. It talks about the created item being capable of being tangible or otherwise, meaning therefore that creativity in teaching and learning is cogent. This agrees with Franken (2010) who defines creativity as "the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others". If this definition does not describe aptly the act of finding better ways to carry out teaching and learning, then nothing else does.

But perhaps, the explanation proffered by the Business Dictionary (2018) captures it more appropriately. It says that "creativity refers to a mental characteristic that allows a person to thrive outside the -box, which results in innovative or different approaches to a particular task". This means that creativity leads to innovation, bringing us to the second explanation of the concept of innovation. From our last definition of creativity, one can conclude that innovation comes as a result of creativity. We can say that innovation is the outcome of creative thinking. According to Wikipedia (2018), it may simply be defined as "a new idea, device or method". It may be viewed as the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, unarticulated needs or existing needs. What this highlights is the fact therefore that when we talk about creativity and innovation in community education, we are referring to the process of "thinking outside the box", which results in the production of new solutions, better approaches to new and unanticipated problems or more satisfying

solutions to existing problem, in community education. Also, Popova, (2023) sees innovation as the implementation of a new or significantly improved product, service or process that creates

value. In this context therefore, the innovative teacher aims to implement whatever creative products he/she has been able to come up with in adding value to community education. What, briefly then is community education?

3. Concept of community education

Taken literally, community education may just be explained away as any or that education, which takes place in the community. This explanation, however, could generate such questions as to whether any other education takes place outside the community, especially if we conceive of community in the geographical sense. Going beyond this point, therefore, community education also often called community-based education has been defined as “an organization's programme to promote learning and social development work with individuals and groups in their communities using a range of formal and informal methods”, (Wikipedia, 2018). In this sense, community education is seen as a wide range of activities by different kinds of people geared towards imparting in members of a given community a sense of responsibility and capacity for solving shared problems arising from the fact of living together or sharing common experiences.

As Colin (1980) in Anyanwu (2002) puts it, “community education is a process of commitment to the education and leisure of all ages through local participation in setting priorities, sharing resources and the study of circumstances”. He explains further that community education transcends all levels of education and concerns itself with everything that

affects the wellbeing of all citizens within a given community.

Also, Minzey and Le Trate in Anyanwu (2002) look at community education as “a philosophical concept which serves the entire community by providing for

all educational needs of all its members”. The duo emphasize that the main thrust of this kind of education is “the recognition of the basic tenets of citizen involvement, sharing of decision making and total community participation in education enterprise”. Put together, these definitions help us to highlight the fact that community education has as its classroom the whole community, the environment as a laboratory and the members of the community as learners. In essence, it involves marshalling all the resources of a community to help its members be better equipped to deal with their problems. Against this background therefore, one may ask why it is necessary to innovate and be creative in conducting community education.

4. Reasons for innovating in community education

Various scholars have proffered various reasons of why innovation in education generally is important to the creation of smart learning environments. As a matter of fact, there can be as many reasons as there are scholars interested in the science of teaching and learning. An expansive review of literature on this subject, however, has produced a loose framework of the justification for innovation in education. Amongst other things, innovation serves to satisfy the following.

- **Creating and expanding access to one another:** This operates at two distinct levels; the individual community members and the community (group) level. If innovation is viewed as applying newer solutions to existing or unanticipated problems, it must be understood that collaboration and

social networks are a necessity, and very valuable. This is so because just like Eloranta (2013) observes, innovation is a social process, explained of course by many theories of social networks. Scholars like Eckenhofer (2011), Daly et al., (2009) acknowledge that external and

internal relationships play a crucial role in the success of an organization. Also, educational scholars like James et al., (2002), Carmichael et al (2006) still highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships and social interaction for school improvement, and for the enhancement of learning experiences.

- **Unlimited access to ideas:** With the creation of a web of social networks, there is bound to be an unlimited array of opportunities to exchange ideas between and among individuals, groups and community of learners. Because innovation and creativity entail creating a new body of knowledge, it implies moving outside the normal perspective of seeing and dealing with problems and challenges. Thus, engaging in what Vygotsky in Smolucha (1992) refers to as higher order reasoning activities. Here, he classifies reasoning, indicating that new ideas are born from old ones, especially through the process of mental reordering.

Beyond the creation of access to new ideas, creativity and innovation in all spheres and activities of the learning process helps to engender a spirit of community among the groups of communities, who by the process of cross border interaction, create new fields of shared knowledge and experience streams from which all stakeholders can freely tap from and into. This process has a multiplier effect of progressive perfectibility where the community education centres, facilitators and programmes get better by the day.

It is common sense to argue that educational centres need to as a rule strive to improve themselves by any means available comparing what others are doing in their own space with what they are doing in their learning space with a view to

Imbibing those salutary aspects of the educational practices, and provide another dimension and rationale for innovation and creativity in all activities involved in the educational programmes or projects. It might become pertinent at this point to enquire into what exactly is to be innovated, or put differently, what are the areas to innovate? We would turn attention to this question in the next section.

5. Areas of innovation in community education

Community education has been described appropriately as education beyond the classroom (Amirize, 2007), which seeks to equip its recipient with functional and useable skills - both soft and hard which enhance their capacity to solve the problems of daily livelihood while bracing up for the challenges of tomorrow. This form of education, therefore, is that which does not necessarily dwell on curriculum or scheme of work or syllabus but draws its content, process and methods from the context of the given community within which the programme or project is to be implemented. This means that no two projects or programmes can be said to be the same, since the needs and challenges of the participant beneficiaries may not be the same. Traditionally, there are three major areas of common ground for any given project or programme, these include programme planning, programme implementation and programme evaluation.

- **Programme planning:** This is an umbrella phase for every activity ranging from needs assessment, community mobilization,

consultation, prioritization, etc that ensures that a project or programme is properly thought through from conception to fruition. It is a painstaking process of ensuring that the "architectural" design for the programme of community education is firmly in place and

actually represents the intention(s) of the programme initiator(s), the aspirations of the beneficiary "community" or target audience.

In designing the programme for community education, the facilitator needs to break with the traditionally established programme designs, which progress clinically from needs identification to evaluation in a clockwork manner, rather, the designer needs to find ways of "thinking outside the box". Since no two programmes are likely to be the same in content and area of concern. As a rule, the design should explore dialectical approaches that ensure a maximum involvement of the participants at every stage of the programme. This can be achieved through the use of what Merenyi et al., (2006) refers to as constructive pedagogy, which is based on the assumption that knowledge is developed by the individual by actively participating in the cognitive process. Beyond this, the programme should be flexible, self evaluating and all inclusive in terms of resources, time and share needs.

- **Programme implementation:** The critical stage of any programme is its implementation. For community education programmes, this is the defining stage between success and failure. It has been argued (and rightly so) that Nigeria does not lack lofty plans, but rather the will to implement such plans. For community education, the innovative and creative facilitator will have to attempt to seek out and adopt techniques that either break with, or are a mixture of traditional delivery methods and the didactic approaches that engender greater inclusion, flexibility and

participation. Reasoning along this line, Ratiq (2017) point out that innovative teaching should discourage traditional organization of learning such as frontal class work while promoting independent and collaborative learning. They should recognize differences in the participants,

for instance gender, linguistic, interests, ethnic background, etc.

While recognizing such differences facilitators are required to be familiar with and dexterous in various approaches and techniques of delivery which emphasize a problem-centred rather than content centred- instructions, while at the same time ensuring that learners move at a pace that is comfortable for them and their needs.

As a practical illustration of innovative and creative learning, Merenyi et al., (2006) outlined the following procedure which he terms phases of constructive education. He identifies these to include:

- Arousing interest of the participants
- Forming groups (bearing in mind the earlier discussed diversities)
- Team development (along interests, etc)
- Choosing a theme
- Further breaking the theme into sub-themes
- Elaboration of the sub-theme
- Member engagement and problem-solving
- Preparation of joint reports by sub-groups
- The report of the group about the sub-themes to the entire work group. It is to be noted that the general focus of this approach down plays the dominant and pre-eminent role of the teacher in the learning process.

- **Programme evaluation:** Traditionally, evaluation focuses on learning outcomes, based on the earlier stated objectives. However, innovative learning in community education should be such that all components of the entire programme,

including context needs identification, human and material resources are continually evaluated, from programme onset up to completion and follow-up activities. Merenyi et al., (2006), has suggested that evaluation should be designed in such a way that in addition to the above, these processes can be adopted.

- The sub groups evaluate the reports about the sub-themes
- The entire group evaluates the report
- The facilitator evaluates the reports and the projects of the groups
- The facilitator and the participants conduct an overview of the results of the work from planning to implementation.

The evaluation activities outline here by Merenyi represents a general framework of evaluation for just any programme, be it educational or otherwise. However, the innovative community educator is required to domesticate, situationalize and operationalize some or all of these processes to reflect the peculiarities of the evaluated programme. For instance, if one is to evaluate a programme on good citizenship carried out among a certain community group, it is not enough for the facilitator to go away feeling fulfilled when according to him, the participants have demonstrated an understanding of the concepts involved in good citizenship.

Evaluating such a programme will rather involve assessing or measuring the impact of such a

programme on behaviour modification, change in attitude and practical demonstration of a shift in the pattern(s) of behaviour. In this way, such evaluation addresses key concerns which include "relevancy, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, the overall

progress in relation to the stated objectives and sustainability of the evaluation efforts" (Paiko, 2015).

6. Summary

Creativity and innovation are key activities that define the abilities of the 21st century "teacher" whether within the formal classroom setting or in the informal or non-formal context. This has become more imperative for community educators whose work is not to teach for the future but teaching for the immediate. This is because community education addresses the problems of day-to-day livelihood rather than teaching for the future. This makes the corpus of this form of education more challenging, dynamic and practical. Bringing creativity and innovation to bear therefore on planning, implementation and evaluation of each programme is not only necessary but almost the only way to go in ensuring responsive, participatory and practical community education programmes.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that there is no end to the nature of problems or issues that can be addressed through a well-planned and delivered community education programme. Whether these concerns are in the area of waste disposal, bush burning, cultural practices or in anti-corruption war, they can be practically addressed in a manner that is impactful, relevant and sustainable. Contemporary pedagogy requires instructors who do not only have to think outside the box, but ones who can really think without the box. The speed with which emerging technologies are impacting human

activity in the world of work and play require teachers with the requisite adaptive and innovative skills to keep teaching and learning interesting, engaging and relevant to all stake holders.

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