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## **Postmodernism and Adult Education**

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### **Abstract**

This postmodern world is characterized by the breakdown of standards in the society. Because there is no clear distinction between right or wrong, it is very hard to pursue the truth. But the advantage is that there can be no clear restriction in the development of any form of adult learning, and there has been a possibility of unlimited development. Problems can be attacked from every angle possible and no one will be confined by one's own conceived ideas. Because this one has turned out to be a world of fragmented culture, it can only be kept organized by a type of collective force and collaborative effort as problems can only be attacked from various angles by all people's expertise. So, what cherished is the diversity, and it is the time of emancipatory education – the traditional concept of authoritarian education has been overturned. However, there is not a unified and effective power to overthrow the old style education of capitalism. Therefore, new ways have to be investigated for mobilizing identity to overcome the inequitable norms of capitalism.

Although postmodernism has been criticized for its lacking on specific techniques or strategies for dealing with postmodernism classroom, the liberal practice of ignoring (traditional) rules and principles can be a way for the solution to the problems.

**Keywords: postmodernism, adult education, emancipatory education**

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## 後現代主義與成人教育

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### 摘要

後現代世界的特徵是社會各種標準的崩解。因為是非之間已經沒有明確的分野，追求真理於是變得非常困難。但是這種情況的好處是成人學習型態的發展也就沒有限制了。問題可以從各種可能的角度來解決，而且沒有人再會受到個人既定思想的侷限。因為這個世界已變成充滿了破碎的文化，它只能利用一種集體的合作來維持秩序；這是由於問題只能夠透過全民的能力由各種方法來解決。因此，歧異會受到重視，並且這也是解放教育的時代 — 權威教育的傳統觀念已被廢除。然而，目前也沒有一種有效的統合力量來推翻老式型態的資本主義制度教育。因此，需要探討新方法以啟動新思潮來壓制資本主義傳統不公正的教育制度。雖然後現代主義被批評為缺乏技巧或策略來應變後現代主義時代的教育，但是有學者提倡一些不受規律或原則限制、非傳統的方法卻可以用之來解決問題。

**關鍵字：** 後現代主義、成人教育、解放教育

## Introduction

For the very first, a brief historical background and definition of adult education are stated here to provide the essential fundamentals for this paper. Stubblefield and Keane (1994) describe that adult education, as a distinct form, emerged during the democracy and industrial revolution. In the early nineteenth-century, the term was first used in England; in the United States, it referred to the late-nineteenth-century educational outreach (by public schools, universities, public libraries, and museums) to adults. “The term adult education was preferred for designating and classifying educational programs for adults (p. 2)” by the 1910s. Bryson (1936, pp. 3-4) defines adult education as “all the activities with an educational purpose that are carried on by people engaged in the ordinary business of life.” Bryson regards adult education as a voluntary learning activity initiated by the adult learners’ self-direction. The motive is out of the desire for personal improvement, and this learning is a kind of liberal education. The purposes of the learning would be remedial, occupational, relational, liberal, and political. Here, the adult education is emphasized as the provision of institutions and the participation of motivated individuals.

Next, a brief description of the characteristics regarding postmodernism is introduced. Rosenau (1992) indicates that postmodernism challenges all the world views. Postmodernism dismisses religions, political science, capitalism, secular humanism, feminism, and modern science as “logocentric, transcendental totalizing meta-narratives that anticipate all questions and provide predetermined answers”

(p. 6). Rosenau emphasizes that “the postmodern goal is not to formulate an alternative set of assumptions but to register the impossibility of establishing any such underpinning for knowledge, to delegitimize all mastercodes” (p. 6).

Now, the theory of postmodernism is to be related to what Lyotard (1984) postulates as the theory of knowledge and learning. Lyotard considers that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter the postmodern age, and the technological transformations (such as computer) have a considerable impact on knowledge. The way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited has also been changed. Lyotard suggests that the nature of knowledge would need to be changed within this context of general transformation, so the knowledge can fit into the new channels.

Therefore, the researcher affirms that in this era of postmodernism, “uncertainty” characterizes today’s world (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The “uncertainty,” coupled with the technological transformations, would make it necessary for us to look into the issue of adult education with new perspectives. In this paper, ‘uncertainty’ will be the focus of arguments and analyses, and solutions for problem will also be explored toward the end of this paper.

Here, uncertainty can be argued as that there is not a set of standards for every aspect of our lives in this postmodern world. As Giroux (1992, p. 39) observes, it is “an age that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics...as the age of postmodernism.” Indeed, it can be argued that in this postmodern age, everything is “democratized.” Because of the instability of the situation created by “people power,” there have been many political crises arising in many countries. Authorities of various kinds have been challenged, and notions of identities are confused among people. Consequently, ethics of old social order can no longer be kept to a certain standard because of the confusion of the relations between individuals and among societies. Before this era of postmodern confusion, the “modern” world was characterized by “the scientific...search for the universal foundations of truth, morality, and aesthetics” (Bagnall, 1995, p. 81). In other words, it can be argued that in this period of human history, there existed a certain “universal rules or laws” that could be

deductive to be utilized to figure out the rules or laws for truth for anything in this human world. But in this postmodern world, things are changed – they are more

diverse, fluid illusionary, and contested. And even the “reality” of the world itself is in doubt. Thus, it can be argued that this has been a rather “tragic” development of human civilization because taking right forms of an action is not so easy – everything is “liberated,” and there is difficulty in identifying oppression.

### **Problems of adult education in the postmodern age**

Of course, there are also problems in the aspect of adult education in this age of postmodernism. The source of the problem can be that, before postmodern age, adult education itself was an institution that suppressed heterogeneity and difference. So, adult education from a “modern” world is poorly equipped to articulate how it can persist a meaningful emancipatory practice (Plumb, 1995b, p. 188). It can be argued that this is a very difficult situation for adult education because in this postmodern world all of those “forms” of adult education have largely been “inherited” from “modern” world. How could this happen? This is because in the concept of postmodernism there can be no “precise” form for everything. No any form can be the criterion forever. Thus, before the emergence of a real “fluid” and “emancipatory” form, for practical reasons the old “modern” forms need to continue to be utilized. If there is really no any form of adult education, how can adult education be planned and implemented? It can be argued here that this is the dilemma of the practical aspect of the implementation of the ideal of postmodernism. This ideal is great, but because it is against all kinds of “fixed” ideas it turns out there can be no “fixed” methods to do anything. The trouble is that for the pursuing of the only truth, all “doors” are opened to welcome every truth possible. But, because of all of these truths are usually contradictory to one another the result can be that the possibility of reaching the only

truth is extremely slim. Consequently, under this situation, sometimes the old “modern” ways need to be adopted again for practical reasons.

### **An age of uncertainty but development potential**

Thus, there can be no criteria in the age of postmodernism because everything is contested and up for grabs, everything can be questioned, right or wrong. How could this happen? This is because for the understanding and description of a certain issue, the method is up to the “angle” to which one is to look at and further to interpret. That is, interpretations depend on where one is standing. It can be argued that out of the different standings there can be different factors that constitute a certain “facet” of a particular issue. And this can be a certain “truth” that is very “objective” when looked at in a particular angle. So, considering the fact that there can be no criteria for everything, the consequence can also be that there will be no means of choosing sensibly between one course of action and another because no one is sure if one’s choice is sensible or not. This is because when looking into the consequence of the action, there can be no distinction between right or wrong.

So, it can be argued here that this postmodern world is actually an absurd one because no truth can be found. And there is only a plurality of signs, styles, interpretations, and meaningless process. It can even be seen that every different kind of process of pursuing truth is meaningless because the acquired truth can be proved wrong if approached from other “angles.” So, the basic view of postmodernism can be seen as “offering a pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment...of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 15). But, meanwhile, there is also a brighter side of postmodernism that can be seen as hopeful – a world that is “nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological” (p.16). It can be argued that, it is from this prospect that adult learning can be valuable because in the postmodern world there

is no any bondage to restrict the development of any form of adult education. This brighter side can always be an encouragement for the planning of the adult education in this world – the future may be gloomy, but there has always been a possibility of unlimited development.

### **Pursuing truth in the world of uncertainty: current adult education**

Besides the problem of “no criteria,” another issue to be discussed regarding this postmodern age is the meaning of “self.” The self in postmodern thought is not the “unified, integrated, authentic self of modern times. Rather, the self is multiple, ever changing, and even fragmented” (Merriam & Carrarella, 1999, p. 357). From this description, it can be implied that this kind of self is simply a type of “lost” one because there exists no “central” and “principled” self. And what is worse than this is that it is ever changing. Thus, it is a situation that a person may constantly exist “in a state of continuous construction and deconstruction...each reality...yet another reality.” So, it can be seen that this characteristic of “ever-changing self,” which is typically an on-going process of the reflexive questioning of the genuine self, may pose some problems for adult learning and development. Still, scholars like Clark (1997, p. 111) establishes a theory that this is a benefit. This is because, as he argues, the “learning from a unified self fails to recognize other dimensions of the self – the unified self only privileges the “rational” self. Thus, the “complex relational quality” of one’s learning would have missed because of this approach of “rational” learning. Of course, this kind of “irrational” learning, as it can be so argued here, may to a certain degree create a crisis of the question of “identity” in the arena of adult learning and development. But McLaren (1997, p. 25) has some very useful ideas for this. He holds that “educators as cultural workers” need to assist students in dealing with the “questions of identity” – one may no longer desire to identify oneself in this social order, one may not understand what one’s desired direction, one may not know if the desire is really one’s



own, one may not know what's the consequence of one's desire because nothing is for sure, one may not know as to the extent of the inventing of one by one's society, one may not know how to unmake oneself in order to remake the world. It looks like the solution of all of these questions can be an impossible mission, especially the great ideal of "unmaking oneself in order to remake the world." However, it can be argued that these are all what the spirit of the postmodernism really is – to attack problems from every angle possible, and always have some doubts in the obtained answers or solutions because this world is ever changing and nothing is for sure. The great ideal of "unmaking oneself in order to remake the world" can be argued as a true idea of philosophical logic that lies in the ideal of the ever-improving of one's intellectual ability to make this world a better place. This can be the real spirit and attitude of the teaching and learning of adult education – although everything in this postmodern world is in a state of uncertainty, human will for pursuing the sole truth can never be stopped. A real adult of this age can never be, for his/her own sake of any form of life-long learning, confined by his/her own conceived conception or social environment.

### **A diverse but liberal culture for the promotion of adult education**

Although there are cultures that are not fragmented by changes, this is a world full of fragmentations as described above. There is not a simple relation among people, and even each one in his/her own self is not sure what kind of relation exists between himself/herself and others. So, what holds people together are the constants of relationships, connectedness, and interdependence. Thus, it can be argued that what holds people together in this world is a framework of "web" that forms a type of collective force to keep this society "organized" without falling apart. Therefore, Finger (1995, p. 116) proposes moving to a collective action agenda to respond to "the new

challenges...Experts must join groups of learners working collectively...Teaching and...with collaborative, vertical, horizontal, and cross-disciplinary learning...be a collective and collaborative effort, because there is no individual way out.” It can be seen that this is a very practical principle and strategy for teaching and learning of adult education in this postmodern world. It emphasizes the benefits of the collective efforts because, as it is argued above, problems can be easily attacked from every angle possible by the various expertise of all kinds of people.

Hence, what postmodernists cherish is the diversity – different people, ideas, and institutions. Thus, it can be argued that this can be a real world of democratic society because diversity and plurality are all accepted and consequently no one element is more privileged or more powerful than another. The advantage of this can be that “postmodernity has provided spaces for rising social groups...to articulate their own subjugated knowledge...education stops being a univocal, predictable reality...impact of a reconfiguration of education away from institutional and provider-led location” (Usher, Bryant, & Johnson, 1997, p. 22). So, it can be argued that this is a real kind of emancipatory education because the traditional concept of authoritarian education has been overturned. This is a kind of the spirit of liberalism in this world.

Of course, this cherished diversity can be a powerful tool for the promotion of a democratic adult education, but the potential negative side of this is its characteristic of fragmentation. It looks like that there is not a unified and effective power to overthrow the old style education of capitalism – it can be disempowering (Plumb, 1995a, p. 246). Nevertheless, Plumb argues that this is exactly what needed to challenge the disparate forces of oppression. Plumb does not object some kind of identity that can be utilized as a tool for emancipatory education because he argues that “no longer is it sufficient to foster the emergence of a particular kind of identity sufficiently strong to overthrow the inequitable norms of capitalism.” What is important is, further to this, he argues that “critical adult education must investigate new ways that identity can still productively

be mobilized in the fragmenting environment of postmodernity.” Thus, it can be seen that the crucial issue is to investigate “new ways for productively mobilizing identity to overcome the inequitable norms of capitalism.” Certainly this is a great idea suggesting a possible approach for the realization of the ideal of adult education in this postmodern world. Now, the direction has been suggested, but how could the goal be achieved? What will be the so-called new ways? This can be the problem.

### **A “New” Way**

However, a theory for feasible solution has been submitted regarding the problem stated above. This is what Paul Feyerabend (1993) writes about, and probably the most invaluable idea can be that “the only principle that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes” (p. 14). Feyerabend argues that there should not be any absolutely unchanging principles for conducting science research, and there is not a single rule that is not violated at any time or other as well. He even suggests that such violations are sometimes necessary for progress. He attests that some events and developments “occurred only because some thinkers either decided not to be bounded by certain ‘obvious’ methodological rules, or because they unwittingly broke them” (p. 14). He considers that this liberal practice is both reasonable and necessary for the growth of knowledge, and there are circumstances to ignore the rule and adopt its opposite.

Enlightened by the above, the researcher would like to refer to the Internet and open university. Although both of them can still be classified as institutional in a certain degree and represent a certain norm of capitalism, probably they are a kind of “new” way as channels to deliver knowledge to adults. The researcher takes these two as more liberal ones for efficient adult education in this world of capitalism.

## Conclusion

Postmodernism has been criticized for its lacking on specific techniques or strategies for dealing with the postmodern classroom or adult education program,

besides its pessimism, extreme relativism, and lack of a moral center. Probably, it can be argued here that this would be one of the consequences of the spirits and attitudes of postmodernism. In other words, it can be seen that because of its respect for diversity and all the thoughts are constantly in fluid state, a definite form of techniques or strategies won't be able to be easily conceived and planned. The enlightenment of postmodernism can be that it emphasizes the respect for diversity, the moving of previously marginalized groups into a position of equal value to other groups, and a critique of the categories by which we have labeled aspects of our practice.

Fortunately, amid this state of "uncertainty," a voice has been proclaimed that it is not without solution. And breakthroughs can be achieved once certain traditional, methodological rules are discarded. It can be observed that nowadays there have been various channels for adult education delivery, and many of them are non-traditional ones. These might not be "new ways to overcome the inequitable norms of capitalism," but they are certainly more liberal ones than the "old" ways. On the other hand, the very existence of these new channels is required since the nature of knowledge has been changed. Thus, the researcher is looking forward to an entirely new era of adult education free of (or at least partly free of) the absolute dominance of any institutions.

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