

The effect of seating arrangements on methodology in adult education classes in Lagos State

By

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Abstract

Seating arrangements in the adult learning situation is important to the adult learner and what goes on in the teaching/learning situation. There are many possible types of arrangements and they all contribute in different ways to classroom management and even the achievement of learning objectives. A total of 132 adult learning Centres were surveyed in Lagos State using the questionnaire and an Observation Schedule guided by 4 items. 10 research questions were raised and answered and the single null hypothesis proposed yielded the result that there is a significant relationship between seating arrangements and the choice of teaching method in adult education classes in Lagos State. It was suggested that more attention be paid to classroom arrangement in adult education for better outcomes.

Key words: seating arrangements, adult education, classroom management, achievement of learning objectives

Introduction

Ever since Verner (1962:9) defined method by alluding, in part, to the seating arrangements (... method is the organization of the prospective participants for purposes of education...); and even though this definition was criticized as laying too much emphasis on arrangement, any good definition of method in adult education has since factored in the issue of seating formation. According to Cusick (1999) seating arrangement in the US Elementary School system indicates that there are many ways a teacher can arrange the classroom and this affects the learning process for individual students. The arrangement, she believes, is best determined by the type of learning activities planned and taking into consideration the learning objective of the lesson as well as the interpersonal dynamic among the students in the group. She is familiar with six types of arrangements (*desk/row, circle/semi-circle, table/row, cluster, activity zone and pairs*).

There is no doubt that seating arrangements in an adult class is equally significant and not only does it affect the learning process in different ways but also probably predicts or even dictates the type of teaching method to be used.

Most seating arrangements favour the constitution of the learners – whether they are to be alone, in large or small groups or in clusters. Seating in adult education usually mimics the way that people are naturally arranged in society – individually or in small and large groups. Knowles (1980) actually refers to method as ‘format’ which also considers the seating arrangement and Ampene (1979) who agrees with Verner defines method as the way people are organized in order to conduct an educational activity. This study examines and documents the popular seating arrangements in adult education classes of different types in Lagos State and looks at the effect this can have on the choice of a teaching method. Method itself can therefore be seen as a combination of the way people are arranged as well as the various tasks that are undertaken in a bid to bring together the learner and the learning task.

Types of seating arrangements

A typical learning situation can be arranged in very many different ways. There are however two main formations with different variants. Each type has its benefits and drawbacks. The most conventional is the *desk/row* arrangement which seems to be synonymous with traditional and formal teaching situation. This is where the teacher stands in front of the class facing the students whose desks are all facing forward (See figures 1 and 2). This arrangement automatically predicts what is going on – that the teacher is the primary source of knowledge which is enhanced by his elevated status (either on a raised podium or simply because he is standing head above everyone else). It promotes the one-sided classroom environment. This can come in different forms but the basic shape is the same as there is a lone figure, whether sitting or standing, in front of others. This type of arrangement works very well for the Lecture and other whole group instruction techniques as well as for individual work. It also makes it easy to use teaching aids like the writing board, posters and other projected media and helps to make for better class management. The major disadvantage of this method is that it does not work well with group work/discussions as an important part of a curriculum. There is no doubt that the class arrangement is vital in classroom management considerations. The *desk/row* formation is

mostly relevant and used in the Formal School system. It is also often found in many adult education situations but it is cautioned that this type of formation should not be overused for adult learners as it does not necessarily encourage participation.



Figs 1 & 2: Desk-row arrangement (conventional)

The *Circle arrangement* is one that allows for participation. (see figs 2 and 3). It is good as a group technique and helps the communication process while promoting peer interaction as an integral part of the learner’s growth because the ability to work and interact with others is a basic life skill. Communication is thereby encouraged in a face-to-face atmosphere therefore encouraging peer learning/contribution and shared responsibility. The key idea here is that there is no apparent leader and therefore there is more equality in status, which makes it more ideal for adult learning situations. Group discussions thrive in this type of atmosphere. This arrangement too is often found in adult education situations and is more in line with andragogical principles.

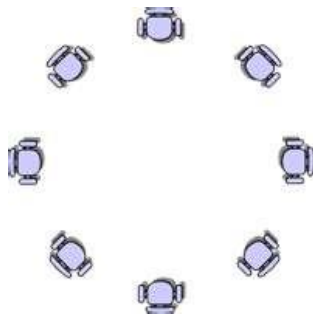


Fig. 3: Circle shape

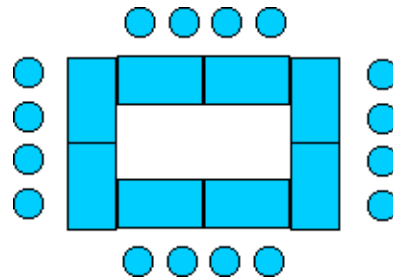


fig. 4: Square shape

The third type is *Clusters*. This is when the class is arranged in small groups and this is also conducive for group work. There is ample opportunity to confer and work together and it also helps to build essential cooperative skills while promoting group learning. However, this is best for group discussion and collaborative purposes as it will be difficult, for example, for everyone to see the central point (like the board or teacher) in this scattered type of arrangement. It is

often adopted for Workshop situations and group projects and is popular in Science Laboratories. It is also applicable to syndicates where the small groups can brainstorm on aspects of a theme before taking it to the larger group. There is often a coordinator/facilitator who oversees all the activities.

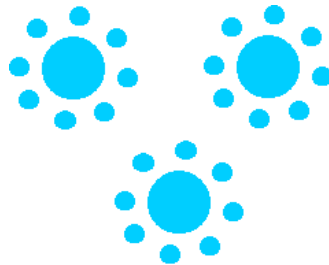


Fig. 5: Clusters

The last one (which does not form part of the study) is the *Individualized* type of arrangement. This is when the learning is done and the learner dictates the where, when and how. This makes the venue more flexible as it can be done anywhere. Nowadays the computer is the major tool for connecting otherwise dispersed learners, and it often even tries to mimic the traditional classroom situation through virtual contact and arrangements.



Fig. 6: Individualized

It is good if adult learners are flexible and can learn in any of all these arrangements. This is good for independent work and all of these are viable types of class arrangements for adult education.

There are three basic and popular seating arrangements in teaching learning situations and they are the *desk/row*, the *circle* or *semi-circle* and the *cluster*. However many authors have given them other labels even though they are all basically the same. McCloskey and McVetta (1978) believe that the communication that occurs in the classroom is partially a function of the seating

arrangement of students and confirm that the commonest of the three arrangements are the *traditional*, *horseshoe* and the *modular* and go on to say that over 90% of University campus classrooms surveyed in the US had the traditional arrangement. They also talk about the *horseshoe* or *semi-circle* while the modular is for specialized classes like in science laboratories. The conventional desk/row arrangement of a class is vital to information dissemination and also places primary focus on the teacher and the chalk board or other teaching aids while minimizing interaction. It definitely has its place in adult and child education as a natural formation of teacher/learner in education. Chambers (2002) recognizes: *rows of tables* and/or *chairs*; *circle* or *semi-circular* and *Fish-bone* or *banquet style*. Furthermore Ramsden (1999) also mentions *Rows/table rows*, *Semi circles* and *Clusters*. No matter what appellations are given, they all basically describe the same formations with different names. However, depending on the learning goal, there is no right or wrong arrangement.

Problem of the study

The physical arrangements of a typical adult learning situation is germane to the activities going on in adult education as it is an important aspect of how the teacher handles the class (classroom management) along with the technique to be used. Another reason why seating arrangement should be given primary consideration is that it can promote certain activities and communication while it is also capable of discouraging some others. This phenomenon is seldom considered or given the depth of contribution it makes to teaching/learning. If adequate attention is not given to this, adult education will continue to operate at diminishing capacity. How then does seating arrangements affect the conduct of adult education? Studies have shown that seating arrangements affects the learning outcome (Cusick, 1999), and that method affects learning (Bakare, 1999), but not many have focused on the effect of seating arrangements on the choice of method to be used.

Research questions

Ten research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What kind of arrangement is being used presently?
2. Did the facilitator create this?
3. Do you find this arrangement convenient?
4. Why did you think the class was arranged like this?
5. Are the facilitators aware of other possible seating arrangements?

6. Have you tried any other arrangements before?
7. What teaching method do you normally use?
8. Do students prefer a certain seating arrangement over others?
9. Does the type of program affect the seating arrangements?
10. Does the provision of infrastructure affect the seating arrangements?

Ho: There will be no significant effect of seating arrangement on the choice of method to be used in adult education teaching learning/situations.

Methodology

The research was a survey of adult education programs in Lagos State. The proportionate sampling technique was used to arrive at a figure of 132 different Adult Education Centres where one facilitator each (132) was also randomly selected for the purpose of the study. The instruments used for the study consisted of a set of validated questionnaires (Seating arrangements in Adult Education - SAAE) for the respondents and this was supported by an Observation Schedule (guided by a four-item check list). This was conducted by the researcher with the help of two assistants. Analysis was done through Frequency counts, Percentages along with the Chi-square test.

Findings

Out of the 132 Centres of different adult education types that were examined 53.2% were arranged in the traditional *desk/row* way. In all the Centres observed the common occurrence was the *desk/row* and the *Semicircle* or *Circle* and some were in *Clusters*. There were three distinct and basic shapes but often with different variations – a) is the *desk/row*: it can be *horseshoe* or *semi circle* but all with a leading figure in the centre and it can be small or large group; the next is b) the circle which can be closed or semi, it can also be in the shape of a square but there is no one standing out, it is usually in small groups c) this is the *cluster* and can be in *circles* or *squares*, it is usually for smaller groups and could be in the form of work islands.

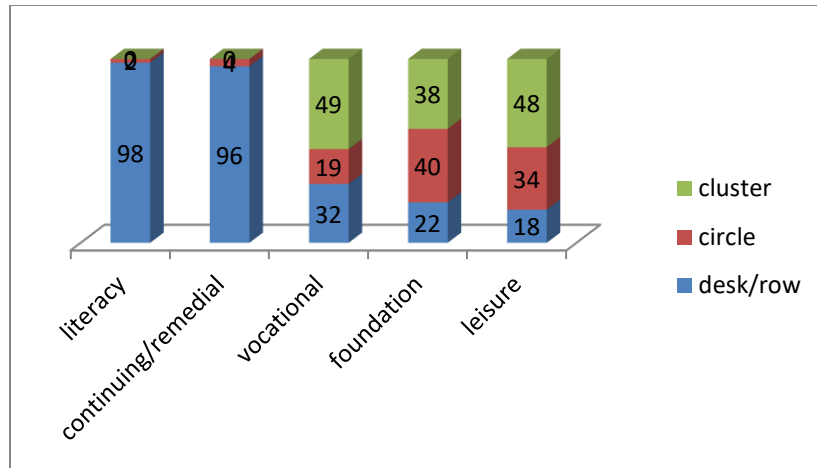


Fig 7: graph showing seating arrangement according to the adult education type.

The chart shows that the commonest remains the desk/row type of arrangement Circle and the Cluster. On method and adult education type the following chart reveals:

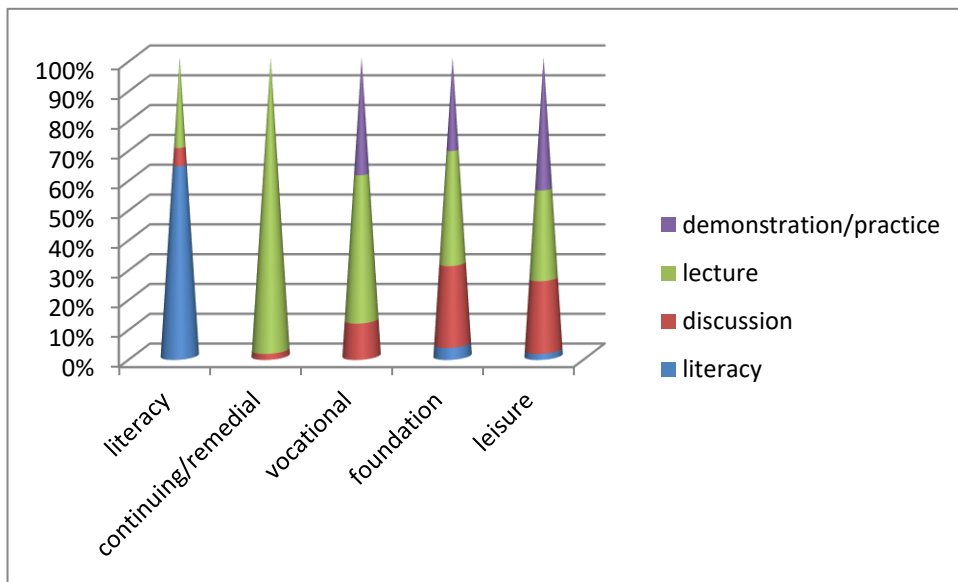


Fig 8: link between method and adult education type

The above chart shows the relationship between the adult education type and the teaching method.

The arrangements had not been created by the adult educators though majority found it convenient. When asked why the class was arranged the way it is presently, adult educators' responses are indicated in the chart below:

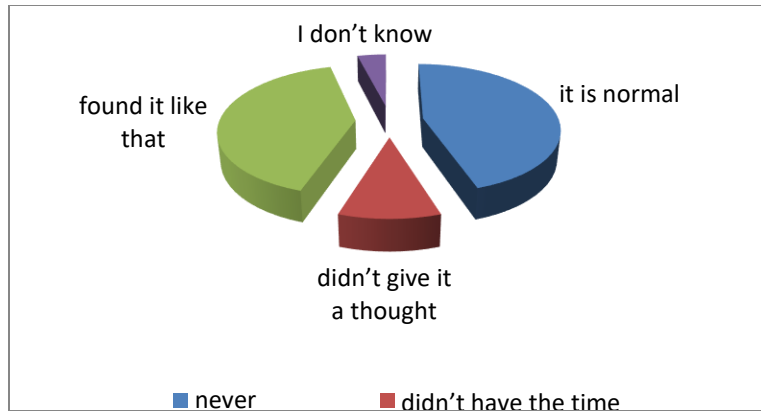


Fig 9: reason for present teaching/learning seating arrangement

The pie chart shows that 45% thought it was normal for it to be arranged as such, 42% simply said they found it like that while 17% didn't give it a thought, and 4% claimed they just don't know. Many were not aware of other possible types of seating arrangements, and when asked whether they have tried something different before, their responses show that majority had never done so.

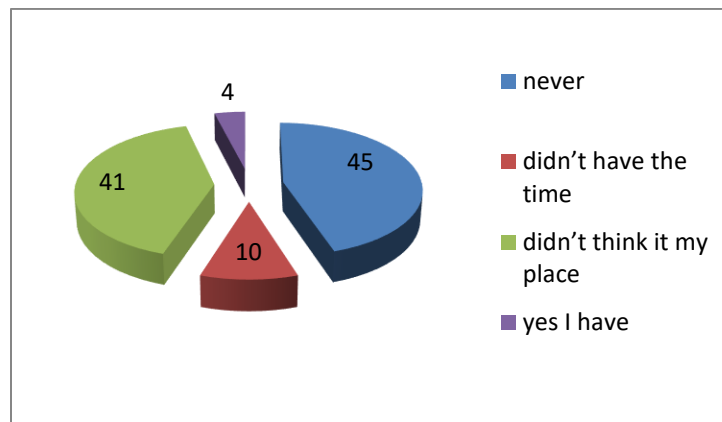


Fig. 10: attempt to try new seating arrangements

This chart shows that only 4% of the respondents have tried different seating arrangements from the regular formation. The majority, 45% have never tried any other type of seating arrangement. 41% thought it was not their responsibility to change the seating arrangements while 10% claimed they simply did not have the time to do so.

Out of the 132 facilitators surveyed, 101(76.5%) were found to be using the Lecture method. Popular methods found include the Lecture, Discussion, Demonstration/Practice and Literacy methods. Some methods were found to be peculiar to certain adult education types; the lecture was used across board and was the most popularly employed in all the programs. The Vocational used more of Discussion and Demonstration/Practice; Literacy classes mostly used literacy methods and the Lecture; while the Foundation used a combination of all; The Continuing/Remedial classes used the Lecture most of the time.

The next research question was to see if students preferred a particular arrangement over others and the Observation Schedule noted that they were just generally complacent and went with whatever arrangement was provided. The study further sought to establish whether the type of program (Formal or Non-formal) affected the seating arrangement and the Observation Schedule also revealed that the *desk/row* formation was the most popular for the more Formal type of programs.

The single null hypothesis posited that there would be no significant effect of seating arrangement on the choice of teaching method. The result is shown in the next table.

Table 1: chi square value of the effect of seating arrangement on the choice of teaching method

Variable	Seating arrangements						
	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Total frequency	χ^2	Table value	N	remark
Choice of method	528	396	17424	12.59	44.00	7	Ho rejected

$\chi^2 = 12.59$ $P < 0.05$; $DF = 6$

The calculated chi-square value from the above table is 44.00 with a degree of freedom of 6 and 0.05 level of significance, the critical value is 12.59. The higher calculated value above the table value means that the null hypothesis that the seating arrangement in adult education classes will not be affected by the choice of method was therefore rejected and the alternative upheld. This implies that there is a significant relationship between the seating arrangement and the choice of method in adult education classes.

Discussion

According to the responses of the facilitators, as corroborated with the Observation schedule, the Lecture method is the most used across board. This overwhelming majority suggests that arrangement dictates the method of teaching to be employed and agrees with the suggestions of Cusick (1999); Verner (1962); Bakare (1999) and Okenimkpe (2003). This was further tested with the single null hypothesis which implied that the seating arrangement has a significant effect on the choice of teaching method.

The high percentage of response shows that most students in adult education classes prefer the traditional or *desk/row* type of seating arrangement across the different adult education types. The facilitators also show that they, more often than not, use the traditional arrangement, with majority just going with the flow as they met the class arrangement before. For the Non-formal type, more students prefer a more interactive arrangement like the circle or cluster. But it is obvious that for the more Formal education, the traditional remains the most used seating arrangement. It is presumed that most students are aware of their desired level of participation and the participation demands of each type of seating arrangements. However, generally the learners did not show any particular interest in the seating arrangements.

The implication of the findings for the facilitators are significant. The seating arrangements clearly affects students' learning. So if their seating preferences are not duly considered, it may likely interfere with their learning, especially since the real goal of education activities is learning. Students are usually given the freedom to choose their seats. However, facilitators must be mindful of the seating arrangement that will encourage learning to take place. The students did not seem to have any particular preferences. Facilitators did not pay particular attention to the class arrangement as 60% were only vaguely aware of other possible positions but 75% had not even tried any other ones. There, however, looked like 45% prefer the *desk/row* arrangement over others and the observation schedule reveals that the type of program seemed to affect the seating arrangement. The other side of this is that if students have preferred seating arrangement and they are forced to use other ones, they may not necessarily be as responsive as is expected by the facilitator. For example, it may be difficult to try the *circle* and *cluster* arrangement for a group of students in the Formal type of education because they may be

deprived of the one-on-one interaction with the facilitator that they desire. Therefore, adequate care must be given to the seating arrangement.

Provision of infrastructure (room size, furniture etc) did not seem to affect the arrangement a lot, because no matter what the resources were available were found to be directed towards the traditional arrangement. In a way it could be said that the arrangement dictates method to be used. All of these are further reflected in the teaching method. If the method chosen is affected by the seating arrangements, then more attention must be given to the way people are arranged while undertaking an adult educational program.

Conclusion

This study has examined and documented popular seating arrangements in adult education classes in Lagos State and also established the link between arrangement and choice of teaching technique. The study has determined that the seating arrangement has an effect of the method to be used to some extent. The study also examined students' reaction to the arrangement. If students do not like an arrangement, it may pose a needless barrier to the learning, even when other things are properly put in place. It was suggested by Adams & Biddle 's (1970) research that the main determinant of students' communication in the classroom was their location within the seating arrangement – and that usually those with proximity to the leading figure perform better and they can be found in the front to the middle rows with diminishing in intensity towards the rear. Sommer's (1969) findings corroborates this, while Crawford repeating Sommer's study with a discussion group reveals a linear relationship between row and interaction as those in the first few rows were found to contribute up to 6 times more than those at the back. It was further revealed that those normally in the front performed better in tests. This pattern is replicated in other seating arrangements where those nearer the hub of activities tend to communicate or participate more. It can therefore be surmised that occupying certain seats increases students' participation. If this is so, then it stands to reason that seating arrangements are vital to the achievement of learning goals. It was also established that the seating affects the teaching method. Therefore, depending on what outcome is required, a suitable seating arrangement can always be fashioned. It is imperative that more attention than has hitherto been

supplied need to be given to the issue of seating arrangement if adult education is to be optimally effective and efficient.

Suggestions

If class arrangement is seen to affect the choice of method this much, it is only prudent that adult educators begin to take more notice of how the class is arranged in the course of helping the adult to learn.

- This can be further ensured if more attention is given to better training of adult educators
- Teaching of methodology should be factored into teacher education curriculum
- Ensuring the provision of better infrastructure (because one of the key elements that could deter effective seating arrangement is if the classroom is too small or the furniture is inadequate.

There should also be more awareness creation for other seating arrangements for facilitators, especially if it is seen to have an impact on the learning outcome. This can be achieved through the input of outreach programs of short courses for adult educators to be organized by the adult education department of Universities where more emphasis will be put on the necessity for seating arrangements.

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