South Sudanese learners in Western Australia: Learning environments, expectations and participation
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Abstract
South Sudanese people coming to live in Australia in increasing numbers over the recent years bring with them a great diversity of educational experience. While many South Sudanese have had little or no schooling, there is also a sizeable group who have had sufficient education to access tertiary education after a relatively short period in Australia. This paper takes a people-context situated perspective in order to examine two groups of South Sudanese learners in two distinct learning environments: a women’s group in a community literacy course and the first year university students, an entirely male group, also attending learning support units. Using situated learning theory, this chapter explores the different ways in which the women and the men negotiated their expectations of the educational process with their teachers in their respective learning environments and how the interplay between the expectations of educators and students affected participation, as well as the possible effects of these differences on their more general social inclusion.

Background
The South Sudanese learners discussed in this paper all immigrated to Australia as part of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs’ (DIMA) offshore humanitarian program, or to be united with their family members who were resettled as part of the program. Their flight from Sudan was sparked by a devastating long-standing civil war between those pushing for an Islamic state and the mainly Christian and Animist tribes of the south. The presence of oil in the south of Sudan has exacerbated the fighting. Since 1983, two million people are thought to have died in the conflict, and four million have been internally displaced (VFST 2005). The civil war formally ended when the Government of Sudan headed by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and the main rebel force, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), signed a peace agreement in January 2005. However, the dangers for civilians continue and people are being displaced by different militia groups which have yet to be
brought into the peace process (UNHCR 2005). The South Sudanese in Australia are among the few who have been resettled in Western countries.

The South Sudanese participants in this study are from three ethnic groups: Dinka, Bari and Nuba. The Dinka and the Bari historically come from South Sudan, but the Nuba are from the northern Nuba Mountains. The Nuba are considered to be politically South Sudanese because they were allied with the SPLM/A against the Government.

This paper explores differences and similarities in learning expectations between educators and the South Sudanese students, and how congruence or lack of congruence between these expectations may affect student participation, and consequently the preparation education provides for social inclusion (Apple 1979).

Method

The data was taken from ethnographic participant-observer research (see Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Babbie 2005) in which participants were observed over a six to nine month period, and then formally interviewed. The participants were learners in two very different learning environments. The first learning environment was a women's community group initiated to meet the perceived needs of an emerging South Sudanese Anglican congregation, and the second learning environment included a first year English support unit and foundation units at university. The prior education level of the whole group was gendered: the women's community group had a literacy focus while the more educated university group consisted entirely of men. The age of the participants varied between early twenties to early fifties in both groups and their life experiences were diverse.

In both the university group and the women's community group, observations were carried out on a weekly basis. In the women's community group, the researcher was the only trained teacher present and asked for advice and also assisted in buying the necessary teaching resources for the group, but did not teach regularly. In the sessions she had with the university participants, the researcher was the also a tutor. Consequently, there were different degrees of researcher's involvement across the two
groups, but in both the researcher had a role other than simply observing. Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) refer to this approach as 'participant-as-observer'; the way that the researcher could participate in the activities around her was through her ability to teach English (Reinharz 1992). Ten participants in each group consented to being observed. The formal interviews took approximately one hour. Four men were interviewed separately, and two who were good friends were interviewed at the same time. The six women were interviewed in pairs with an interpreter present. Three of the volunteers, including the chief volunteer, were also interviewed, and four educators with a high proportion of the Sudanese university participants in their tutorials were interviewed in pairs. All interviews were semi-structured, in-depth 'active' interviews (see Holstein and Gubrium 1995), and were designed to deepen understanding of the observations.

A People-Context Situated Perspective

In this paper, the individual and social contexts of learning are considered to be inseparable (Mezirow 1991; Schneider 1968; Reinharz 1992). The educator's role is part of the social context in that the South Sudanese participants are interacting with their teachers and, in so doing, are participating in their learning environment. From a situated perspective, learning through this kind of participation may be understood as 'participatory appropriation' rather than 'internalization' in order to emphasise the interaction between the person and the social context, and to avoid the idea of individual knowledge construction (Rogoff 1995). In keeping with this idea, Sfard (1998) gives a participation metaphor as the basis of situated learning: knowledge is replaced by 'knowing', and 'possession of knowledge' is substituted by 'participation in activities'. Therefore, situated learning theory asserts that a separation between knowledge (concepts) and action (procedures) is contrived, and there is no distinction between procedural and conceptual knowledge (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Situated learning theory may then be further related to the role of the educator as context in that the educator's role is inextricably linked to classroom procedure. If one describes a pedagogical context as an arena, and the way a learner negotiates
and experiences an arena a setting, ‘[t]he arena [becomes] the enacted curriculum and the setting [becomes] the experienced curriculum in a situated view’ (McCormick and Murphy 2000: 222). Lave (1988) also conceptualises this setting as a ‘relation between acting persons and the arenas in relation with which they act’. Finally, given that learning is a process of participation in cultural activity, and this participation is essential to the creation of meaning (McCormick and Murphy 2000: 208-09), the influential role of the educator in the construction and/or perpetuation of cultural activity can be central to learning.

**Learning expectations and participation in the two groups**

*The women’s community group*

In the women’s community group, it became apparent through observation and interview that there was a high level of congruence between volunteers’ and students’ expectations of how classes would be conducted, and this appeared to have a positive effect on the students’ participation in class. The students’ active participation in class was significant because the community classes were initiated to assist the women to integrate into the mainstream society, and the students’ participation allowed the classes to progress in the direction of this objective of social inclusion. Ways in which teacher-student expectations appeared to be congruent will be discussed below, and examples of the students’ participatory behaviour will be given.

The community group was set up by both South Sudanese community leaders and Australian members of the Anglican Church and from the beginning the initiative was designed to teach the women, rather than as a cross-cultural exchange. The South Sudanese leaders, however, took little responsibility for the teaching, leaving the objectives and daily running of the group to the chief Australian volunteer. The chief volunteer then directed the other volunteers by giving them the content to be taught that day, and assigning them to an individual student or students. Minzey and Le Tarte (1979: 15) claim that ‘the ultimate goal of Community Education is to develop a process by which members of a community learn to work together to identify problems and to seek out solutions to these problems’. The process in this instance was, on the whole, determined by the Australian members of an
Anglican community who considered themselves to be responding to the needs of other more recent members of their community — the South Sudanese women. This type of education is identified by Brookfield as adult education of the community which 'cannot be shaped solely by the results of a needs assessment [but] rather, [...] rests at least partly on the educator's beliefs as to the kinds of features he or she thinks a community should exhibit' (1983: 87). All the volunteers appeared to be primarily concerned with socialising the South Sudanese women into the 'Australian' way of life and exposing them to literacy tasks rather than learning from the women and, consequently, positioned themselves in the authoritative role of teacher.

The South Sudanese women in the community group seemed to accept this model of learning and reinforced the volunteers' chosen role of educator by complying with most instructions and deferring to the volunteers. This deference may have been a result of past schooling experience: even though they are Christian, many of the students, both men and women, were exposed to Koranic schooling in the Sudan or in refugee camps, because this was their only schooling option (Yates 2003) and this is likely to affect the way they view learning. Islamic education highlights both teacher-as-expert and obedience (Scribner and Cole 1981; Yates 2003).

In addition, the women were eager to study literacy and, although it is generally agreed that adult learners should have a teacher-student relationship based on equality (Thompson 1994: 344), literacy students have been found to be uncritical of their tutors and teachers and, indeed, praise their tutors highly, genuinely assuming the role of deferential student (Levine 1986). The South Sudanese women's compliance may have therefore also been a product of their low levels of literacy coupled with their desire to become literate.

Upon positioning themselves as teachers, the volunteers assumed a pastoral orientation to learning. Levine (1986) gives two different voluntary tutor orientations to teaching literacy: technical and pastoral. Tutors with a technical orientation prioritise student literacy. They focus on their relationship with the students only to the extent that the relationship has an impact on the student's progress. Tutors with this orientation are unlikely to have engaged in volunteer work outside the field of literacy or, perhaps,
education. Tutors with a pastoral orientation prioritise helping the students, and literacy is only one way to assist them. These tutors are focused on caring for the students, and literacy may be substituted for conducting sessions about social issues or personal problems, or any other perceived need. The volunteers in this study fell into the latter category; for example, the chief volunteer in the women’s group not only concentrated on developing the women’s literacy skills, but also ran two sessions to help the women manage their finances, and focused on teaching how to care for teeth and how to cook Australian food.

The pastoral orientation allowed the South Sudanese women to negotiate the content of the sessions to a certain degree. The general program set at the beginning of the community initiative was that the women would come to learn English, to learn about Australian culture, and to learn how to cook. However, it gradually transpired that many of the women wanted to obtain a driver’s licence, and needed both the driving knowledge and the English to attain this goal. The strategy the women used to communicate their desire for assistance in this area was to bring their driving books to the sessions and show them to the volunteers, who then began to use the books as teaching tools. Some of the women who were preparing for the theory section of their driving test were also invited to do practice tests on the chief volunteer’s computer at her home. The South Sudanese women did not rely on verbally assertive or confrontational strategies to get what they wanted, but instead were able to show the volunteers how they could best be assisted. Because the volunteers did not have a technical orientation to the acquisition (and therefore teaching) of language, they were more flexible, and were able to accommodate the women’s expectation that the program could be directed to meet immediate needs.

The university group

In the university group there appeared to be a lower level of congruence between teachers’ and students’ expectations than in the women’s community group, and this observed gap in expectations had a tendency to lead to reduced student participation in tutorials. Most of the students demonstrated a desire to participate in tutorials or, in other words, to be actively included in the social distribution of knowledge, but this desire was
often in conflict with the students’ expectations of how the tutors should behave. When there was less conflict between teacher-student expectations, however, the students were observed to participate to a greater degree. The gap in teacher-student expectations and subsequent levels of participation will now be explored by using data collected from observation and interviews.

The university group was similar to the women’s community group in the sense that it was not the site of cross-cultural exchange; again the mainstream Australians in the role of tutors were positioned as educators. However, learning for this group was much less teacher-centred. It is well documented that tutors at university are often encouraged to be facilitators who give their students more responsibility for their own learning (e.g., Tough 1969; Brookfield 1987), and Knowles et al. describe the role of facilitator as ‘process manager’ with a secondary role of content resource (Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson 1998: 200-01). This emphasis on independent learning deconstructs the idea of teacher-as-expert, and ‘process manager’ does not necessarily correlate with authoritative classroom manager. Although there has been some argument against Knowles’ (1984) idea that adult status is responsible and self-directing, and therefore self-direction is a key concept in adult education (Hanson 1996), tutorials in the humanities are often set up to be almost completely student-centred. Most tutors have studied in this student-centred university system in the humanities, and have therefore been socialised to facilitate rather than tell the students the ‘correct’ answers.

However, it became apparent in the interviews with the South Sudanese university participants that most of them did not see the tutoring role as that of facilitator — instead, they felt that the tutors’ job was to be a monitor or guide, clearly positioning the tutor as classroom manager. The statements below are examples of the way two of the men expressed their expectation.

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I expected the teacher to be a monitor, a class monitor who should have access to say no, this shouldn’t be like this and no this should be like this, but when a teacher just looks at things the way they go, people will not know exactly where the problem is. (Daniel)
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A tutor is somebody who gives you direction...you have to do this and do this, and you should not do this and that, so I expect guidance from my tutor. (Peter)

A pervasive Western cultural model of teachers is that they are supposed to be ‘transmitters’ of knowledge. A good teacher is one who organises lesson content in an orderly, logical way, gives illustrative examples, clarifies when necessary, gives the students the opportunity to practise what they have learned, and makes sure that tests are fair (Knowles et al. 1998). The participants’ attribution to the university tutor the role of class monitor or guide in the sense of classroom manager appears to subscribe to this cultural model even though the model has supposedly been relegated to the past in the West (ibid.). In interviews some of the participants described how their classes in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya followed this model, explaining that the teacher was the only real source of knowledge.

In my past years at school my teacher or our teacher just used to give information then yours is just to come and read this, and you don’t do a lot of research. (Matthew)

When we were in Kenya you know teachers act as guidance, but they were the only source of information. (Peter)

Many of the participants had not attended university before coming to Australia and were unused to independent learning methods. The older students who had been educated in the Arabic tradition in Sudan twenty years earlier had also not attended university before arriving in Australia.

The facilitative nature of the tutorials also exacerbated issues regarding cultural competence. The tutors, focusing on content and short of time, often did not see their role as assisting their students with the conventions of academic writing, whereas the participants wanted to know exactly what they needed to do in order to complete an assignment successfully. Morgan, one of the older participants drew attention to this when he said: ‘We are having a problem with the culture, not English alone’.
He then went on to describe how he had been able to use the practical feedback that the researcher had given him in one of the tutorials.

**So when Marianne told me that you have – to do this – what you have mentioned last time […] , you should have to make it long [here], you have to make it short [here], and you have to put your ideas [this way] so that [she] has given me a clue of how I can go and write. (Morgan)**

All of the participants of the study went through a four-week intensive program to furnish them with the necessary university skills of critical thinking, note-taking, and essay writing and, because writing conventions were a focus of this intensive course, the participants may have had the expectation that they would continue receiving this kind of tuition as part of their ongoing university study. Because the researcher had been a tutor in the intensive course, she was able to tailor the unit in which she tutored to suit the needs of the participants, since all the students in her tutorial had participated in the alternative entry program. Other tutors were only paid for half an hour of consultation time — the only time it would have been possible to assist the students in the structure and practicalities of writing an essay since the tutorials were devoted to facilitated discussion.

Finally, the university participants’ expectation that tutors would assist them in developing metacognitive skills can be related to their expectation that the teacher’s role was to monitor and guide student learning; metacognition was an area in which they needed a lot of guidance. The participants of the study pursued this guidance through their attempts to access support from their tutors and from the Teaching and Learning Centre set up within the University to support students’ learning needs. They were assertive in expressing their desire for more teacher direction in focus groups run by the Teaching and Learning Centre, independently raising this issue and discussing it at length. Their respect for the tutors, however, generally precluded raising the issue in tutorials.

This active determination to be guided in their learning appeared to indicate that the university participants were highly motivated to succeed in their education. This finding is supported
by Hoeing’s UNHCR study of Bari refugees in a refugee camp in Uganda where education was viewed by the refugees as a way of gaining status, autonomy, and power. Education was also seen as contributing significantly to the improvement of community life, social relationships, and society as a whole (Hoeing, 2004:22). The research participants demonstrated their determination to achieve through their constant questions, timely completion of required assessments, and attendance at tutorials even though they were often not able to contribute to the discussion. This comment by one of the younger participants is illustrative of this desire to learn and the difficulties involved.

> Then my tutors say [Peter] today you are out of the room, then I tell him no I was inside with you, but [...] there is nothing I can answer [...] the history of this country, maybe thirty years ago, even two years ago, I don’t really know anything. (Peter)

The kind of setback that Peter speaks of here did not stop him from attending tutorials or dampen his determination to succeed, and other university participants also raised similar issues of wanting to participate in tutorials, but not having the required cultural knowledge.¹¹

**The significance of expectation on participation**

Student participation in the two groups was therefore influenced by congruence or lack of congruence between teachers’ and students’ expectations with regards to both approach and content in the two different learning contexts. The South Sudanese women in the community group demonstrated their satisfaction with the teacher-centred approach of the volunteers (see Levine 1986) through their continued presence and active participation in a non-compulsory community class. Also, as a result of the volunteers’ pastoral orientation, the women were able to negotiate content. They requested and received instruction in pressing practical activities such as driving lessons, while still ceding responsibility for their general learning to the volunteers. Hanson (1996:103) points out that adults are willing to accept the power imbalance of a learning situation, but their power lies in the fact that they can usually decide whether or not they will stay; the teacher must earn
the right to be in a position of authority (see also Sork and Newman 2004). The volunteers in this study appeared to have earned that right through both their teacher-centred and pastoral approach to teaching\textsuperscript{12}.

In contrast, the participants in the university group did not attempt to negotiate content, but their attitude towards the way tutorials were run by the tutors was ambivalent, and the effect this had on participation was salient in both the observation and interview data. This lack of congruence between tutors’ and participants’ expectations with regards to approach led to the participants commenting that they found it difficult to participate in tutorials, and were frustrated by this even though they understood that they were in a new country, and therefore required to conform to a new ‘culture of power’ (Delpit 1988). Most of the participants expressed a desire to become more adept at the process of learning independently, but some commented that they would be able to gain more from their tutorials if the tutorials were more firmly controlled by the tutor\textsuperscript{13}. This control extended to guidance on the conventions involved in completion of assignments. These comments were very much supported by the researcher’s own observations of participants engaging very positively in her more controlled tutorials. It would appear that building a bridge between teacher-centred and student-centred learning for South Sudanese university participants is a way to improve their ability to participate meaningfully in class and to assist them in attaining their educational goals.

In conclusion, teacher-student expectations were found to be a significant factor with regards to students’ participatory behaviour in the two groups and learning environments under study. This has implications not only for the social inclusion of students in knowledge distribution inside the classroom but also for the inclusion of South Sudanese humanitarian entrants to Australia in the mainstream society outside the classroom. Education is likely to play a pivotal role in showing South Sudanese learners ways in which they can participate in Australian society (Bruner 1996), and obstructions to classroom participation may subsequently hinder the successful navigation of their new environment. If the students are exposed to teaching practices which coincide with their expectations — for example, the teacher explicitly positioning her/himself as an expert and
figure of authority and then gradually exposing students to new learning practices, such as independent learning in the case of the university students, social inclusion in Australian learning environments may be facilitated, along with an increased ability for these learners to integrate with, and be accepted in, wider Australian society.

References


Notes

1 Many of the research participants are already Australian nationals, but will be referred to as South Sudanese for ease of reference.
Even though the methodological issue of teacher-student dependency did arise (National Health and Medical Research Council 1999), the university appeals system was explained to the university students in order to emphasise the fact that the tutor did not have ultimate responsibility over their grades. Leading questions were carefully avoided in interview so that the students who were happy to participate had a greater opportunity to voice their own opinions (see Babbie 2005; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005).

The women were interviewed in pairs to increase their level of comfort. The men were, on the whole, interviewed separately because they were accustomed to interacting with the researcher/tutor on a one-to-one basis, and they were more confident speakers.

The way the students interact with each other is also significant, but falls outside the scope of this paper.

The South Sudanese leaders involved were struggling with domestic and employment issues, which did not leave them much time to devote to the group.

At least two of the women had received post-primary instruction in Arabic and still more had experienced Arabic education at primary level.

These participants had completed Form Four in Kenya; this is the equivalent of Year Twelve in Australia.

Tutors raised this issue in interview.

The unit was an English support unit designed to give the students a better grounding in university conventions.

For example, in a tutorial where the students were required to give an oral presentation, many of the research participants became agitated. However, none of the students chose to speak of their frustration to the researcher until she questioned them in interview. Respect for teachers was explored in the study into South Sudanese orientation to learning, but lies outside the scope of this paper.

It would be logical that international students may also have this problem, but the general knowledge of international students often appears to be much greater than that of South Sudanese students. This point was raised by a TAFE educator in an interview which falls outside the scope of this paper.

The women used avoidance strategies if they did not want to participate, such as wandering away from activities and speaking in Arabic but, in general, they actively participated in the sessions.

This cannot be directly compared with the women's community group in that, although the sessions were teacher-centred, the volunteers usually did not firmly control turn-taking among the women, and the women did not take issue with this in interviews. Possible differences in the importance and contexts of turn-taking between South Sudanese men and women is worthy of further research.