Orientation to teaching as one indicator of classroom participation among South Sudanese learners in Western Australia.

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Abstract:  
The number of South Sudanese people coming to live in Australia has been rising in recent years, and they bring with them a great diversity of educational experience. While many South Sudanese adults have had little or no schooling, there is also a sizeable group who have had sufficient education to access higher learning after a relatively short period in Australia. This paper will take a people-context situated perspective in order to examine these two groups in two distinct learning environments. The first learning environment was a voluntary program set up for South Sudanese women by the Anglican community, and the second learning environment consisted of first year study at university. In this research, similarities in the teaching orientation of the South Sudanese students across the two learning environments became apparent with regards to the respect shown to the teacher, and the desire for the teacher to take a didactic, teacher-centred approach to the lessons. Student participation appeared to be affected by whether educators’ teaching orientation matched that of the students; this paper will discuss these findings, with special reference to the congruence between the educators’ and students’ teaching orientations in the women’s community group, and the conflicting tutor and student teaching orientations in the university group.

Background  
This paper investigates differences and similarities in teaching orientation¹ between educators and South Sudanese² students from Dinka, Bari and Nuba backgrounds, and how congruence or lack of congruence between these orientations may affect student participation. The paper draws on research conducted for a study on the learning orientation of South Sudanese adults in Western Australia; this wider study was undertaken because the researcher was teaching adult students with South Sudanese backgrounds, and wanted to examine ways of teaching these students more effectively. Because the researcher is a trained teacher, the research was designed primarily as a participant-observer ethnography (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Babbie 2005)
in an attempt to shift the frame of reference to one which allowed the researcher to focus on learning from the research participants. In other words, the research was approached in this ethnographic manner so that a focus on learning orientation could take precedence over assimilation into mainstream Western Australian culture, the latter being the researcher’s previous priority as a teacher.

Participants were observed over a six to nine month period, and then formally interviewed; questions in interview were closely related to observed phenomena. The participants were learners in two very distinct learning environments; the first learning environment was a women’s community group initiated by members of the Anglican community to meet the perceived needs of a growing South Sudanese 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 in that the women’s community group had a literacy focus, and the more educated university group consisted entirely of men. The age range of the participants varied between early twenties to early fifties in both groups, and life experiences were diverse.

In both the university group and the women’s community group, observations were carried out on a weekly basis, and the researcher was also the tutor in the sessions she had with the university participants. In the women’s community group, being the only trained teacher present, she was asked for advice and she also helped to buy the necessary teaching resources for the group, but she did not teach regularly. Consequently, there were different degrees of researcher participation across the two groups but, although the researcher had a role other than observing, observing remained a strong focus. The fact that the researcher was able to teach many of the participants as well as observe allowed her to explore different teaching methods, such as facilitative and teacher-centred methods, and subsequent participant reactions. 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 simultaneously at their request. 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 South 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 this observation-interview triangulation of qualitative research methods was useful in that it was possible to ask questions about what the researcher had
observed in interviews, and then to observe further after the interviews to cross-reference what had been said by the participants.

A People-Context Situated Perspective

This paper takes a people-context situated perspective in that it interprets the individual as inseparable from social context (Mezirow 1991; Reinharz 1992; Schneider 1968). The context in this study is taken to be the educator’s role 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’, which serves 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 is then the enacted curriculum and the setting is the experienced curriculum in a situated view” (McCormick and Murphy 2000: 222). Lave (1988: 150) 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), it is difficult to ignore the role of the educator in the construction and/or perpetuation of cultural activity in a learning environment.

South Sudanese Orientation to Teaching

Culture has been recognised to have a significant influence on the way people think (e.g., D’Andrade 1995; Lakoff 1987; Lutz 1987) so it follows that there is some variation in perspectives and practices with regards to education (Bruner 1996). These cultural differences include student-educator relationships and how educators are perceived and, although the
literature in the area tends to focus on differences between Asian and Western cultures (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Matsumoto 2000; Volelt 1999), differences can also be observed in African cultures; the data collected for this research found orientation to teaching among the South Sudanese to be a prominent feature of their orientation to learning in Western Australia.

South Sudanese orientation to teaching was seen to be consistent across the different education levels in two ways: the respect shown to the teacher, and the desire for the teacher to take control of the classes or tutorials. First, respect for the teacher was evident during observations. Participants in both groups did the work set for them without ‘answering back’ to the teacher. This was most apparent in the women’s group when the women did not want to do the work. One woman was eager to learn to drive, but was placed in a group where she was learning parts of the body. She did not argue, but instead waited until the next lesson when she was able to join the driving group with no perceived disrespect to the volunteer. On another day another woman stayed in the driving group for fifteen minutes before letting the volunteer know that she had already passed her driving test. In the university group the men also showed their respect to the teacher through their deferential attitude. On the one occasion that a man answered his mobile phone in class and kept talking even though the researcher/tutor had been in the middle of helping him, the rest of the class were very vocal in telling him to stop.

The theme of respect for the teacher was most evident in the interviews when the participants were asked to comment on the statement: ‘A student challenges the teacher on a statement s/he makes in the course of the lesson’\(^5\). Some participants at first understood ‘challenge’ to mean ‘confront’ and were emphatic in saying that this was a bad student. One lady from the women’s group put it this way:

...you can come to [the teacher] ask her but it’s not with strong voice.
(Sally)

And another:

What is hard then wait and then after class and then you can talk to [the teacher]. If it’s not hard, it’s just something slight mistake, you can talk.
(Rachel)

The emphasis appears to be on the feelings of the teacher. This is supported by the observation that participants in the women’s community group took the interview as an opportunity to thank the volunteers for their teaching through the researcher, and to say that all the volunteers were good teachers.
One of the participants from the university group also refers to the teacher’s feelings when he is speaking of his past experiences learning in a Kenyan refugee camp:

Well in Kenya some of the teachers they are not well qualified because all of them, the majority of them if not all, they are fourth form leaverés, and some of their students may even challenge a lot and can have a knowledge maybe some other teachers don’t have, so it’s if you challenge, you challenge [to a] certain level, but not to the extent that you will annoy the teacher. (Mike)

Later in the interview this student gives a reason why he is concerned about the feelings of the teacher:

If I give you know feedback, negative things, they may fail me the exam. (Mike)

One possible reason, therefore, for the respect shown to teachers is fear that one will be regarded as a troublemaker and barred from gaining an education. The importance that is attached to education among South Sudanese groups (Hoeing 2004: 22) is likely to be sufficient motivation to show respect even if one is aware of the failings of specific educators.

The second consistent orientation to teaching was the desire for the teacher to be in control of the class. The women’s group participants mainly demonstrated this by giving the volunteers responsibility for their learning even though they knew that the volunteers were not trained teachers. However, it was the university group participants who discussed the control issue directly in the interviews, perhaps because their expectations were not entirely being met. Some of the younger participants talked about the strict way classes were controlled in Kenya and Sudan – through corporal punishment in primary school and expulsion in secondary school. The older participants brought up their desire to be managed more firmly in university tutorials. The statements below are examples of the way two of the men expressed this desire:

I decided to talk but I don’t get a chance because we have a different system of talking, so the tutor or the teacher will give you the chance, you know, when you raise your hand up, but sometimes I wait somebody or I just raise my hand up […] just another person just jump and talk […] The tutor should control. (Morgan)

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)

These two aspects of orientation to teaching were not necessarily consistent among the participants because of similar learning experiences in Africa; learning experiences appeared to
be dependent both on sex\textsuperscript{7} and age\textsuperscript{8}. Even though all of the participants of this study were Christian, many of them have been exposed to Koranic schooling because it was their only schooling option (Yates 2003), and this is likely to affect the way they view their teachers. Islamic education highlights both teacher-as-expert and obedience (Scribner and Cole 1981; Yates 2003). In addition, 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); this directly relates to the women who received no formal schooling in Africa. Finally, examinations have historically been given great priority in sub-Saharan Africa and, as King comments, “[t]he organization of teaching and learning is deeply affected by the importance of selection. A good deal of the renowned order and discipline in African classrooms is probably directly attributable to this” (1990: 215).

**The Role of the ‘Australian’ Educators**

The learning experiences of the South Sudanese participants in the two different groups were very distinct with respect to context. The women’s community group was set up as adult education of the community; in other words, it was not only based on a needs analysis by the community but also based on what the volunteers/educators believed should be learned (Brookfield 1983). Even though educated members of the South Sudanese Anglican congregation expressed their interest in the women’s community group, they left the daily running of the group to the Australian chief volunteer. The volunteers also had a pastoral orientation to teaching (Levine 1986) in that teaching English was considered to be only one way that the women could be helped. Literacy was sometimes substituted for conducting sessions about social issues or personal problems, or any other perceived need; for example, sessions on finance were organised, and practical driving lessons were also arranged.

In contrast, tutors at university are often encouraged to be facilitators who give their students more responsibility for their own learning (e.g., Brookfield 1987; Tough 1969). 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 the type of authoritative classroom manager to which the university participants were alluding in their interviews. 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. Indeed, in interview, the educators of the university participants discussed their position as tutorial facilitator as clashing with the participants’ desire to know the ‘facts’⁹. However, curricula are still designed to carry out particular objectives (Hanson 1996: 101) and the cultural norms embedded in the curricula proved to be mystifying and disempowering to the South Sudanese participants of this study who have not grown up in Australia, and thus have not been socialised into Australian educational practices (see Apple 1979; Freire 1972).

Discussion

The participants across the two learning groups were respectful of their teachers and this seemed to influence their participation in class in the way that participants engaged in tasks, and were deferential towards their teachers. In the women’s community group the South Sudanese participants seemed very happy with the teacher-centred approach of the volunteers (see Levine 1986), and they not only stated their appreciation in the interviews but demonstrated their satisfaction through their continued presence and active participation in a non-compulsory community class. Also, as a result of the volunteers’ pastoral orientation to teaching, the women were able to request – and receive instruction in – pressing practical activities such as driving lessons, but ceded 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 appear to have earned that right through both their didactic and pastoral approach to teaching¹⁰.

In contrast, the university participants’ attitude towards the way tutorials were run by the tutors was ambivalent, and the effect this issue had on participation was salient in both the observation and interview data. It was clear that all the participants were highly motivated to succeed in their education through their constant questions, attendance, and timely completion of required assessments. However, some of the participants commented in interview that they found it very difficult to participate, and were frustrated by this, even though their respect for the tutors generally precluded direct confrontation and, being in a new country, they were required to conform to a new “culture of power” (Delpit 1988). Most of the participants demonstrated 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\footnote{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 the interviews. Possible differences in the importance and contexts of turn-taking between South Sudanese men and women is worthy of further research.}. These comments were very much supported by the researcher’s own observations of participants engaging very positively in her more controlled tutorials, and it would appear that building a bridge between teacher-centred and student-centred learning for the South Sudanese university participants of this research is one way to improve their ability to participate meaningfully in class.

\footnotesize

\textbf{Footnotes}
\footnote{Orientation to teaching is taken to be one aspect of orientation to learning.}
\footnote{Many of the research participants are already Australian nationals. The term South Sudanese is used in a political sense (i.e., this includes people from the Nuba mountains) and for ease of reference (i.e., instead of the clumsier ‘people of South Sudanese origin’).}
\footnote{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.}
\footnote{The way the students interact with each other is also significant, but falls outside the scope of this paper.}
\footnote{See ‘Background’ section for description of interview method. This statement was written on a card; a set of six such statements about the actions of students in class were given on cards or translated to the participants who were then asked to comment on the action taken by the student.}
\footnote{This is the Kenyan equivalent of Year 12 in Australia.}
\footnote{See comment made in the ‘Background’ section of this paper.}
\footnote{The three younger male participants who were interviewed were educated in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya whereas the three older male participants were educated in South Sudan.}
\footnote{Most of the participants have chosen units, such as politics units, where critical thinking in tutorials is emphasised.}
\footnote{This can naturally only be said for the women who chose to come regularly to the women’s group.}

\textbf{References}


