

**Lynda Lawson, Thandie Ngoma and Kashim Oriaje,
Queensland University of Technology
African student experience at university, a paradigmatic case using
narrative analysis.**

Abstract

Recent refugee arrivals in Australia are overwhelmingly young. Between 2002 and 2007 Australia welcomed 54,824 humanitarian visa entrants, 45,900 of these were aged between 16 and 30 years of age (DIAC, 2008). At the critical transition of entering adult life these young people have experienced massive re location shock and challenges to identity. Many have experienced extreme trauma and may often be making this transition without close family. Education, in particular, tertiary education, is a vital pathway for establishing their future. Yet often students from such backgrounds are perceived as “others” (Luke, 2005) and opportunities for both students and the institution to engage with and learn from each other are limited. This paper tell the story of one refugee student Ac who has overcome enormous challenges to succeed in engaging both academically and with the wider university community. The narratives that are the focus of this study come from 2 interviews of this student, one at the beginning and one at the end of his second year. This particular case was drawn from a cross sectional series of interviews of African students undertaken in 2011. The interviews with this student emerged as a “paradigmatic “case (Marshall & Case (2010); Flyvbjerg, 2001) because it provided rich evidence of the challenges faced by such students and the factors that facilitate success in a tertiary setting. It also became clear very quickly that Ac had a passion to tell his story, was a gifted story teller with a unique sense of “ownership of his narrative” (Marshall & Case, 2010). His gift for narrative coupled with the opportunity to tell this story through the QUT student ambassador programme have been protective factors providing him with a powerful identity resource. A thematic analysis is offered.

Introduction

This is Ac’s story. I tell it with his permission. For reasons of privacy, Ac is not his complete name.

I am 25 years old and I was born in Southern Sudan during the war. My family were cattlemen and I herded cattle until I was 13. I don’t know why but my father always refused to give me initiation marks on my face. When war came to my area, my father joined the rebels we had to flee my village; sadly my mother was heavily pregnant and could not run. She was killed. I was too small to carry a gun so I was not taken as a child soldier. My first experience of school was writing my letters in the dust in the schools under the trees of South Sudan. We fled to Kenya and I started school in the refugee camp there when I was 14. I was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, I should have gone to America but with 9/11 they stopped taking us and I came to Australia on my own, it was a random selection from the many young men in the camp. In 2003 we left and came to Australia. (Ac becomes animated and involves the audience through his intonation and excitement). Wow I thought hey exactly what’s going on here. I

hadn't never been to a city. OOOH I arrived at the airport OOOH what's going on here .I couldn't ask a lot questions I didn't know English

At the airport with the security door I didn't know what it was.. they must have thought ..this person has no idea

I didn't talk no English I thought the western world is the western world I said look how can I start here I have to do something to go back and tell the story in 10 years time I will be able to speak English and I will be able to get a job I wouldn't get a degree but at least a diploma will do.

It is hard to imagine a more difficult background from which to emerge and to enter tertiary study. I first heard Ac's story during a series of cross sectional interviews of QUT African students conducted in early 2011 as part of a project jointly funded by the Australian Association of Language and Learning and QUT Equity's Widening Participation Fund. These funds permitted us to employ two part time African peer advisors to connect with African students on campus and to launch initiatives to support these students. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained as part of QUT's first year in higher education (FYHE) initiative. I had started working with Ac as a language and learning adviser and counsellor during the second half of his first year but I interviewed him at the beginning and end of his second year at university. These two interviews thus look back over 4 semesters and Ac reflects on his learning across this time. During these interviews, Ac emerged as a 'paradigmatic' case (Marshall & Case, 2010 ; Flyvbjerg, 2001) as the case provided rich evidence of the challenges faced by such students and the protective factors that facilitate success in a tertiary setting. It also became clear very quickly that Ac has a passion to tell his story, is a gifted story teller and has a unique sense of "ownership of his narrative" (Marshall & Case, 2010). In fact it will be argued that Ac's gift in telling his own story has become an identity resource and a vehicle for him to engage with university life through the student ambassador programme.

This article will provide a narrative analysis of Ac's story. A brief literature review will provide a framework and a context for the narrative and its analysis.

Theoretical framework

The narrative analysis of this case was informed both by the literature review and by the following themes.

Race and Language as Capital (Luke, 2005)

In *Race and Language as Capital* (Luke, 2005) argues that all too often educational institutions repressively tolerate diversity and difference to maintain the privilege and power of class and gendered , racial and linguistic elites. An alternative and more respectful approach would be to accommodate the diversity of student languages and local stocks of knowledge of learners and their communities. As Marshall and Case (2010, p 492) note 'disadvantaged' students bring with them "particular resources that can be mobilised to their advantage in higher education". These issues are particularly pertinent for universities considering how to respectfully engage with and better meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

Diversity in Higher Education (Northedge, 2003)

Universities are increasingly challenged with radical diversification of their students, staff and some of their courses. In Australia this is driven both by internationalization and the move to widen university participation. To consider one example, 10 years ago there were few students

of African origin in Australian institutions. In 2011 African students are found in many classes: some are from refugee backgrounds, others are international and AusAID students reflecting Australia's recent shift in its aid focus to the African Continent. Northedge (2003, p 20) considers what this increasing diversity means for educators, students and support staff and encourages the adoption of a socio cultural approach to teaching and learning. In this approach, learning involves acquiring the capacity to participate in the "discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community".

Literature Review

Refugee Students in Higher Education

The number of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian universities remains relatively small. For example at QUT there are currently 50 students on humanitarian visas and Monash and Curtin report similar figures (Joyce, Earnest, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010). However these figures are certainly an underestimation as some students from such backgrounds have already become Australian citizens. Also it is expected that these numbers will increase as such students move through the TAFE system.

Needs and progress in meeting these needs.

Until recently, there has been a paucity of research into learning styles and academic needs of students from refugee backgrounds students particularly from Africa. However two recent reports have made valuable recommendations.

Based on interviews with students from refugee backgrounds and staff working in the area, Victoria University's Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives published a best practice model for the tertiary education and training sector to improve access for refugees. Problems raised include a lack of understanding of the culture of Australian universities, language barriers, and feeling excluded from the student community. Among recommendations was the need for a dedicated contact officer, careful monitoring of students including exit information, pre study programs and work integrated learning and financial help. Chief investigator Ben-Moshe (2008) underlined the importance of a holistic approach in which institutions take into account "socio-economic and cultural circumstances and provide general life education services beyond the usual remit of an education provider". This is in line with the overseas literature that shows the importance of bringing in health and social service providers to care for such students in a holistic manner. (Earnest, Joyce, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010). The report also recommends cross- cultural training for staff such as tutors, lecturers and librarians. In 2008-2010 results from a major Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project into the pedagogical needs of students from refugee backgrounds was published (Joyce, Earnest, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010). 10 in- depth interviews at Curtin (predominantly African) and 15 focus groups interviews at Monash , Deakin and RMIT (mostly African) were conducted (Silburn, Earnest, Butcher& De Mori, 2008).

The needs which emerged from the interviews related to English language, academic and information literacy, difficulty in participating in group work and tutorials, being too shy to ask questions, lack of understanding of services available external pressures and commitment. Motivating factors were also highlighted and participants in the study mentioned the value of

one to one contacts such as mentors and lecturers and tutors who had encouraged them at key moments to continue with their studies.

From the research a series of training materials and a video have been created, LIFE: Learning interactively for engagement (LIFE, 2010). Further research to evaluate the efficacy of these programs longitudinally is now required particularly with regard to grades and exit information. La Trobe University's Equality and Diversity Centre (with a dedicated community contact officer) has already begun to show the benefits of their support program to help students from refugee or asylum seeker background. The program (2008- 2001) has reported excellent results with the 109 students who have participated in the program displaying very high rates of retention (Latrobe Equity and Diversity Centre personal communication, 2011).

Findings from Joyce, Earnest, De Mori and Silvagni (2010), echoing those of Ben-Moshe (2008) found that community development approaches that connect refugee students with each other and the university community (all students and staff) are critical for the success and retention of refugee students. This is in line with research on student engagement which found that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds benefited most (in terms of final grades) from participating in collaborative learning and educational activities outside of class (Wasley, 2006). The challenge to institutions is to find conduits and ideas for such meaningful engagement.

The case examined in this paper contributes to the literature in at least two ways. Firstly it provides a detailed narrative analysis of refugee experience over a year, providing not just a snap shot of needs at one time but longitudinal insight into the way academic success can develop. It also provides a rich example of the way in which such students can become deeply connected with the university community.

Methodology

This research takes the narrative turn (Riessman, 2008) and uses narrative analysis to interpret Ac's story. Narrative analysis has been chosen because it is concerned with how people create meaning through the stories they tell (May, 2011) and it also permits a constructivist approach which links the narrative to the broader culture (Gergen, 1994). These two features of narrative analysis make it particularly pertinent to answer the research question: How has Ac managed to succeed at university despite his severely disadvantaged background? (Marshall & Case, 2010)

Two in depth interviews were conducted. With the first interview the transcript was used to construct a narrative account (Pepper & Wildy, 2009). Reflecting the writer's growing understanding of this methodology, the narrative from the second interview is in Ac's exact words. A thematic analysis is offered.

Ac's overall narrative is one of personal growth (Marshall &Case, 2010), of someone who enjoys learning and senses the transformative power of education. The story is powerful and he enjoys telling it. It is ongoing in nature and Ac has framed it as a 10 year episode (from his arrival in 2003 to 2013 when he hopes to graduate).

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained as part of QUT's first year in higher education (FYHE) initiative.

Trauma

Ac's mother died in the most tragic of circumstance and Ac describes a childhood characterised by violence and fighting. For over 20 years, Sudan has been beset by conflict. Two rounds of North-South civil war have cost the lives of 1.5 million people and up to 5 million people have been displaced. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14094995>). Ac's father fought as a rebel soldier and remained behind in the Kenyan refugee camp where he died in 2011.

His father's decision not to have Ac's face marked with initiation marks perhaps suggests he knew Ac would not remain in South Sudan as a cattle herd. This is a clearly meaningful 'moment' in the way Ac makes sense of his narrative. Ac retains a strong sense of his own identity both in his village and in relation to his father. He often says "I have given myself 10 years to make him proud". This is clearly both a motivating and protective factor in his life. As Herrman, Kaplan and Szwarc (2010) note, parental capacity and family cohesion are as important as or more important than direct exposure to traumatic events in predicting the severity of post – traumatic stress. Despite a childhood of exposure to open warfare and extreme violence, in two lengthy interviews, Ac showed no evidence of post traumatic stress symptomatology.

Education

My education was under the trees; the government in the North wanted us to fail. From that school under the trees there was bombardment.. I find myself running away. You think that's like the end of the world but then we found people who took us to refugee camp where we had a school, look there was a big difference there's a roof how can I go back and tell my friends there are schools with roofs .

At 17 Ac arrived in Australia alone, he had had little formal education and spoke very little English. He was enrolled in private schools in Toowoomba and received support for ESL and career counsellors and made friends: *there was an aboriginal boy in grade 12 with me and he was very friendly and helped me a lot.*

The absence of formal schooling has created many areas of academic life where Ac has little or no knowledge. He learns quickly and applies concepts he has learned, for example in economics, intriguing and will often repeat examples given by his lecturer (for example his comment that he was part of a "random selection of lost boys"). However, without early foundations for senior schooling in either maths or economics, he has found core subjects in business (e.g. Economics 1) challenging to pass. *I like learning I find the concepts in economics very interesting... but there are so many things I have never experienced there are basic concepts missing.*

On the other hand, his capacity to reflect on his experience critically is profound. He initially had little idea that some assignment tasks were looking for exactly this type of reflection. When he consulted me about an introductory unit on workplace English, where he was asked to reflect on cultural difference in a team, his first draft was stilted and formulaic. When he

realised that his own reflections about theory were needed, he wrote an excellent reflection and was delighted to with his mark. This learning has impacted positively on his studies this year in a subject on cross cultural negotiation.

Choices

From school I wondered what I could do. I have to be my own mother and father. First I wanted to be a comedian and I tried in front of my class but nobody laughed then I thought then what about military, planes and bombing and all about war. My childhood was all about FIGHTING.(raised inflection) I thought military could work for me. I did it for 2 years and then I realised I wouldn't get a high position because of my accent and you need high qualifications so I stopped being a soldier and started thinking about In 2007 I wanted to work but there were no jobs so what I have to do .. I went to QTAC and applied to do diploma of business at TAFE in Brisbane I just said wow I can't believe I am graduating with a diploma.. people are encouraging and I can keep I contacted QUT and then enrolled for the bachelor of business..I I did accounting because I did it at school I feel a little bit sure about payroll and concepts like that. I still don't know what's going on with my course structure I just hope I can get a job at the end of the day.

The choice of study and a career path is complex and bewildering for Ac; he longs for parental advice and at the same time feels the burden to succeed to be able to make his father and his community proud. Clarke and Clarke (2009) in their study of Sudanese students at the University of Southern Queensland found that these students generally had little understanding of career pathways, and they argue that for many, high education aspirations can be a barrier to successful engagement. Ac certainly requires careful career counselling and mentoring and particularly help to find an internship and work experience. However to argue that someone like Ac's higher education aspirations are a barrier to successful engagement seems to miss the point. With appropriate support that scaffolds his growing understanding and approaches to teaching and learning which are inclusive, he has proved himself able to overcome educational disadvantage and take advantage of opportunities to obtain his degree.

Accessing Support at University

My first semester was very difficult When I arrived at uni, I found myself in an orientation for post graduate students, there had been a mistake on the letter I didn't realise for a couple of hours. I needed help but didn't know where to go. In second semester I saw information about international student services and the peer adviser told me I should go there but I thought I can't go there I'm not an international student. It was hard for me to approach international student services but eventually I pretended to be international and saw an advisor there who helped me a lot. I used that services until now one and half years .. suddenly I got a very good mark like others . .now I come here to get a good mark ..

Students from refugee backgrounds may benefit from language and learning support provided for international students, but the way these are marketed and labelled may stop such students accessing them. Also some refugee students may wish to fly below the radar and not seek help until advised to for example after failing. Ac was rather different in this respect his motivation

and courage gave him the confidence to seek help. Now the work we do with him is not remedial, his aim is to achieve at a higher level

Learning

I didn't do that well in my first semester, I found group work hard I felt people didn't want to sit next to me but I started to grow in confidence when I met with the language and learning advisor, we worked on ideas about cultural differences and I got a distinction in a workplace learning reflection. (first interview March 2011)

In a large city university such as QUT, group work may be the only opportunity students have to mix with those from other cultures. This experience can be variable for all students but particularly those who speak English as a second language. Those from refugee backgrounds may not have the options available to international students who frequently network across their language group. For Ac it was clearly very stressful when other students didn't wish to sit next to him or work with him. This experience of being treated as "other" (Luke, 2005) in his first weeks at university is commonly reported by African and Moslem students. Fortunately it did not cause him to drop out and by the end of his second year; Ac had gained a valuable perspective on this issue. He had taken a unit on cross cultural negotiation and said -

I'm learning.. I didn't know about cultural differences in the beginning but from my studies I learned I am from a very collective culture.. I have learned that Australians are individualistic they like their personal space and if they don't know want to sit next me .. It's not a problem I wish I had the course about cultural when I started

First of all I'm very proud of my culture it's not a bad culture it's a good culture. (second interview November 2011)

This is a significant moment in Ac's story and a turning point in his life in Australia. Such transformative learning experiences should be encouraged by all those involved in tertiary study: from support staff, policy makers, curriculum designers, lecturers and especially tutors who are in the front line of dealing with group work. It requires staff to have a high level of intercultural awareness and skills in group dynamics and to foster the same in their students.

In the beginning I felt so shy when I had to stand up and give a presentation in front of my elders, I had never done anything like that before. Now I am a student ambassador and go out to disadvantaged schools and talk about my transition. The kids find it interesting and the principals often say "I have never heard anything like that".

This is another significant moment in his story. His initial shyness in front of elders is a common experience for students from more traditional cultures. Becoming a student ambassador has enabled him to overcome this reserve and to communicate confidently with elders i.e. "to learn to accommodate to switching between discursive worlds" (Northedge, 2003).

Specific Challenges

"Refugees originate from and seek refuge from the poorest countries on earth where lack of access to healthcare and education are long term conditions. The experience is therefore different from those of migrants who typically choose to leave their own country and are often

selected for settlement because of their skills and resources” (Herrman, Kaplan & Szwarc, 2010 p. 4) or international students.

I asked Ac twice “Tell me about this year?” thinking he would talk in depth about university; however this was his reply:

Semester 1 was very very (raised inflection) challenging

Look you know I tell you back in the village people need help but they expect me to help them they get sick normally they think I am educated and they have a very big expectation that I can help that I have money they have had the hope that I can help the kids go to school I got this pressure and I got a scholarship and the ambassador work

this semester It's all ok . Food is available there. I have to do something I have to do something for the kids in my village I have to do something some they lost parents not everyone escaped like me

I don't know where I can get a job but I can make a difference I want to encourage other kids to do something.

Such specific challenges related to famine and war are common to many students from refugee backgrounds and some scholarship students. How many of his fellow students or university staff are aware of such pressures and the impact this will have on course progression?

Discussion

The focus of this narrative enquiry has been on the question: How has Ac managed to succeed at university despite his severely disadvantaged background? (Marshall & Case, 2010).

This narrative enquiry has highlighted at least two parts of the answer to this question: the personal qualities Ac has brought to the task and opportunities the university has provided for engagement and support.

Marshall and Case (2010, p 497) note ‘disadvantaged’ students bring with them “particular resources that can be mobilised to their advantage in higher education”. Ac’s story is one of immense personal resilience, a common thread in every refugee story. He has shown great personal courage and commitment in entering university and keeping going despite first weeks of feeling rejected by other students, experiencing failure in a number of early units and dealing with extreme pressures to provide for his village. Despite many setbacks, he has a strong sense of his own agency:

If you choose you will be like that that's what I think

His story clearly reveals his learning strategy both in the short term: the need for focus, *Here you can easily get distracted with other stuff some, they (other refugees), didn't finish their grade 12 very well.*

and in the long term: his ten year plan which also included another short term strategy and his motivation,

Someone can come from a refugee camp and his life can change.. Set yourself a goal for ten years and study everyday so at the end of the day I want to make my father proud.

At every stage of Ac's narrative we can see he brings to his study a strong capacity to reflect on and learn from his experience, to critically analyse situations and to ask questions. He has discovered his strengths in analysing cross cultural situations and has learned how to work effectively in groups.

The institution has also provided opportunities for Ac to learn and engage. Earnest, Housen and Gilleat (2007) argue universities have to find new ways to impart the necessary skills and sensitivities for living successfully amid diversity. Students need to be enabled to become active members of learning community and have a sense of belonging to this culture (Earnest, Joyce, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010). In Ac's case the opportunity to become a student ambassador and present his story to local schools has provided a strong sense of belonging to the university community. Ac has recently become treasurer of the QUT African Association which is a truly international group committed to sharing Africa with the university community. Such engagement bodes well for his future studies as research has shown that engagement is positively correlated with academic success particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wasely, 2006).

Academic staff, peer mentors and language and learning support staff have scaffolded his learning and self reflection. Units such as Bridging Cultures and Cross Cultural Negotiation have been very helpful. They have enabled him to reframe his experiences of racism and they have given him a chance to draw on and share his vast store of social, intellectual and cultural capital. In Northedge's words (2003) such learning has given him the opportunity to acquire the capacity to participate in the "discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community". The positive learning experience in such units has also given him a sense of self efficacy to deal with units he has had little foundation in.

Implications

Education is your mother and father.

Sudanese proverb

While limited in its scope, this narrative enquiry confirms, adds detail and a longitudinal perspective to the findings of research by Ben Moshe (2008), Earnest, Joyce, De Mori and Silvagni (2010) and Silburn, Earnest, Butcher and De Mori (2008). Such research has highlighted the many issues facing students from refugee backgrounds. Narrative enquiry gives us an insight into the lived experience of one such student over 4 semesters and the way he used his considerable personal strengths and learned to overcome obstacles to engage successfully with the university community.

We would echo Ben Moshe's' (2008) call for a holistic approach that includes

- language and learning advice,
- specialist career counselling and help in finding work experience
- general life education
- health and financial support
- extra tuition where needed.

Care needs to be taken to orient students to such services. Services need to be carefully labelled and marketed. A dedicated contact person for students from refugee backgrounds could be considered.

From Ac's story we can see the value of student engagement activities such as student ambassador programmes for such students. This project was greatly assisted and enriched by the use of two African student research assistants. Such programmes should actively recruit students from equity groups.

Institutions should sponsor opportunities for students to show case and share their culture with the university community. For example Africa day is on the 25th of May.

Universities should sponsor community groups and activities between community groups and the wider student bodies.

Institutions should also consider teaching courses such as Bridging Cultures to students from refugee students early in their studies.

Specific orientation sessions that address cross cultural issues and strategies for successful study should be offered similar to those in the LIFE (2010) programme. These should be co facilitated by university staff and experienced peers. University staff could also benefit from training concerning the many issues facing such students and also the many ways in which these students can contribute to the classroom and the wider university community.

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