



Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education

Dianne Conrad

Contents

Introduction	2
The Recognition of Prior Learning	3
RPL: What It Is, What It Is Not	3
The Philosophy and Practice of RPL	5
RPL Benefits Learners	7
Institutional Infrastructure and Process for RPL	8
New Patterns of Accreditation of Students' Learning	8
Micro-credentialling in Higher Education	9
RPL and Assessment in the Larger Picture: Issues of Equity, Access, and Inclusion	11
RPL and Social Justice	13
Future Potential and Challenges for RPL	13
Final Words	15
References	15

Abstract

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) can, and does, play an important role in the accreditation of higher institutional learning, thereby benefitting students, employers, and society. Using rigorous tools that permit learners to bring forward for assessment their experiential learning from various life experiences, RPL can contribute to a fuller and equally valid expression of learners' knowledge than does traditional assessment. Additionally, RPL contributes to mitigating issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in education by acknowledging and valuing a variety of learning opportunities. RPL also raises difficult epistemological issues and the question of knowledge ownership, thus making it a contentious and challenging academic concern. This chapter reviews the process and pedagogy of RPL practice within the evolving context of accreditation, both at present and in the future, a future which includes innovations such as open educational

D. Conrad (✉)
Athabasca University, Athabasca, AB, Canada
e-mail: diannec@athabascau.ca

practice, MOOCs, and micro-credentialling, all of which create opportunities for traditional modes of accreditation and assessment to re-examine their purpose and process.

Keywords

Prior learning recognition · Assessment · Accreditation · Micro-credentialling · Inclusion · Access

Introduction

The hallmark of formal higher education is accreditation. Learners seek, via accreditation, acknowledgment of the learning that they have acquired from their institutions, be it the acquisition of degrees – post-graduate, graduate, or undergraduate – or perhaps a diploma requiring 2 or 3 years of study. Accreditation is an important – the most important? – goal for most higher education learners.

Accreditation of an institution, however, is equally important, involving many stakeholders. Students seek a viable institution with proven quality and a proven history; the labor market seeks assurance that graduates are appropriately knowledgeable, skilled, or certified. National and international agencies manage institutional accreditation processes in order to ensure and assess institutional quality in all its aspects: research, teaching, programs, assessment protocols, accountability.

Nevertheless, all accreditation is fraught with difficulties. Carey, from New America Foundation, says that “No one really likes accreditation but no one knows what else to do” (uPlanner, 2016). In determining “what to do,” in matters of accreditation, institutions face many challenges, both internal and external. This chapter examines the relationship between the accreditation of students’ learning and the process of recognizing prior learning (RPL) – a process internal to the institution. In so doing, this chapter discusses the underlying foundational principles of RPL, thereby establishing its educational philosophical ballast, and further topics of related concern: society, hegemony, epistemology, pedagogy, and the future. It will describe its process; it will outline RPL’s current role in higher education; and it will offer strategies to further engage institutions and learners in a valuable process that can expedite their studies, allow them to move more quickly and efficiently into the workplace, or to advance appropriately in their current positions. As the president of Capella University recently stated: “Improving the effectiveness of practices such as [RPL] is one way that institutions can reduce barriers to access and affordability and offer educational experiences that are tightly coupled with the needs of the students we serve” (Kelly, 2021). An academically rigorous RPL assessment process contributes to a sound accreditation process.

The Recognition of Prior Learning

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), also called Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), among other labels, is a practice in higher education whereby learners' previous and existing knowledge and skills are assessed by an institution's content experts. Credit is then granted (or not) toward the learner's program of study. This chapter uses the acronym RPL to appeal to the largest global readership.

RPL is not a new process; it rests philosophically not only on the work of John Dewey (1938) who proclaimed that the "beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have . . . this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (p. 74) but harks back to Aristotle and, more recently, to noted educators Knowles (1970), Vygotsky (1978), Kolb (1984), and Brookfield (1986).

Given its objective to facilitate faster and more accessible credentialization for deserving learners, what process could be more relevant today in the "age of open," an era now, in the twenty-first century, that promises and celebrates the lowering and abolishment of many of the barriers that have traditionally stood in the way of learners for decades? Even more dramatically and specifically, what could be more helpful now at the time of a global pandemic – and those that are projected to follow – than a path to higher education with fewer barriers and constraints?

RPL: What It Is, What It Is Not

Speaking broadly, the recognition of prior learning offers a "process-oriented approach for recognising and valuing what people have learned in their lives and linking that – through personalised lifelong learning – to further development steps" (Duvekot, 2014, p. 65). *Personalized lifelong learning* refers to, or includes, the recognition of prior learning, which permits learners to bring forth for assessment their *own* learning journeys and the results of that learning, whether it be formal or informal and experiential (whereas RPL generally attends to informal learning that learners have acquired experientially, formal learning is also often considered in the RPL process if that formal learning has not already been credited to the learner's transcript in the credit transfer process).

Defining what RPL is *not* offering a narrower path to defining what it is. The RPL process is not credit transfer nor credit equivalency. However, some institutions' categorization of RPL lump it into the classification of transfer, along with advanced standing and block transfer, thus further confusing the issue (see, for example, Sheridan College in Canada).

Credit transfer (CT). On many occasions and in many institutions, RPL is often confused with credit transfer (CT). Credit transfer offers learners another portal to advanced standing via the transfer process where credits earned formally at a previously attended formal institution are assessed for value by the host/receiving institution and subsequently awarded to learners following their successful

application for transfer. “It is important for reasons of social equity and educational effectiveness for all institutions to develop reasonable and definitive policies and procedures for acceptance of such learning experiences” (Distance Education Accrediting Commission [DEAC], 2021). As such, most institutions have developed, in cooperation with other similar institutions, such agreements.

The evaluation of already-recognized credits – or a completed credential – from a recognized institution to another institution is quite different from RPL, where it is the learner’s experiential, nonformal, or informal learning that is assessed. In considering the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education, a recent article by Commonwealth of Learning personnel presented transfer credit as part of a “new model for a new normal” (Kanwar & Carr, 2020), a model that focuses on accessibility and mobility, thus permitting learners additional flexibility as they work toward a credential. While it is true that increased credit transfer processes will indeed serve learners, so too would the increased use of RPL. Transfer credit recognizes formalized learning; RPL recognizes nonformalized learning.

Credit equivalency (EQ). Some institutions (see, for example, [Recognition of Prior Learning Service at NBCC](#) in Canada) equate life experience and life’s experiential learning (volunteerism, military service, workshops, seminars, training, self-directed study, faith study) to the outcomes or competencies required in a formal course, unit, or module. In these cases, documents are submitted to indicate the scope of learning and the “match” of the applicant’s experiential learning with the institution’s offering. The defining difference between EQ and RPL is the dependence on the externally evidenced fit of one to the other. EQ requires little of the applicant but to fill in the logistical details of his or her experience. “Samples of work . . . which demonstrate specified learning, such as portfolios, product, models, written reports, visual presentations, published articles, or project plans” (NBCC, 2021) are accepted as evidence of learning; whereas in a rigorous RPL process, these items only serve as documentation.

In sum, credit transfer and credit equivalency can be fairly straightforward, following a close vetting of course curriculum and the acceptance of stated curricular levels, intended outcomes or objectives, and assessment protocols; RPL is usually, and *should be*, a more detailed and personalized demonstration and examination of an individual’s learning in a clear fashion as demanded by the receiving institution. The components of such a process are outlined below.

While RPL-offering institutions will each have their own process, there are several important foundational concepts that form the basis of those processes. Following are those concepts as presented by the Open University of the Netherlands (EUCEN, n.d.): the process must be learner-centered; clear guidance and instruction must be provided to learners; learners must provide evidence of their learning; evidence of learning must be supported by documentation; and RPL credit awarded must be of equal value to the similar credit earned through program study.

The Philosophy and Practice of RPL

Issues around knowledge are key to the understanding and implementation of RPL practice. Although scholars approach the understanding of knowledge from various perspectives, a key question problematizes the central issue: how do experiential and academic learning articulate with each other (Osman, Shalem, Castle, & Attwood (2000, p. 12)? Discussion around this issue raises the question of knowledge boundaries: What are they? Are different forms of knowledge separated by *soft boundaries* that permit the transfer of knowledge across contexts or *hard boundaries*, where informal learning may produce a different knowledge than that acquired in a formal context (Harris, 2006)?

Harris (2006), citing Bernstein (1999), raises another fundamental epistemological issue, that of vertical or horizontal discourses and their associated knowledge structures which impact ways of learning, curricular context, and the suitability of RPL assessment protocols (see Harris (2006) and Bernstein (1999)). While a full discussion on the manifestations of philosophical differences regarding knowledge is outside the scope of this chapter, despite these differences, however, a process has emerged as a viable approach to determining the validity and usefulness of prior knowledge in formal institutions' credentialing protocols where RPL applicants are required to align their prior knowledge to institutional requirements that are usually expressed in course/module/unit or program outcomes.

The varying and often discordant discourses attempting to define RPL protocols indicate that, as with any and all facets of higher education, recognizing prior learning is a philosophically based and often contested academic process. As such, learning must be positioned at the heart of RPL. Citing Kolb (1984) and Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Shalem and Steinberg (2006) hold that "Much current research and policy of RPL is premised on the notion that 'experiential learning' . . . that is, learning from experience, can be made equivalent to a disciplined academic way of learning" (p. 98). While the pedagogical complexity of such a process is not disputed, three pillars of RPL are widely recognized as essential factors in an academically rigorous process: clear learning outcomes that serve as a blueprint for learners' guidance, the creation of a portfolio that serves as the vessel for the presentation of learners' knowledge, and qualified assessors who serve as evaluators of learners' work.

Learning outcomes, providing direction and guidelines for RPL applicants.

How do learners identify, construct, and display their experiential knowledge? Ironically, as Michelson (2006) points out, while purporting to honor the individual learning of each applicant, most RPL processes ask learners to conform to "universalised academic norms" (p. 148) that meet institutional standards, thereby articulating their knowledge in recognizable academic language. To do so, applicants must be mentored or coached in that language, assistance that is usually offered by RPL personnel. Even with such help, framing their knowledge in the appropriate lexicon is challenging for learners.

The learning portfolio, providing a vehicle for presentation. The RPL portfolio is a learning portfolio rather than a performance or showcase portfolio; as such,

its task is to provide the vehicle for learners to clearly demonstrate their experiential knowledge in the format adopted by the institution. Developing an RPL portfolio comprises both product and process: in today's world, the product is usually an electronic portfolio mounted on a platform such as Mahara; the process is one of deep thinking and reflection of one's learning, situated in the institution's academic context of outcomes and language.

The portfolio is a daunting document that is often criticized for constraining learners' perceived experiential learning. Realistically, however, in this sense, portfolios do not differ from any assessment instrument used in education. Critical thought recognizes that *all* assessment is flawed in some ways and to some degree (Conrad & Openo, 2018). All assessment privileges one audience over another. All assessment depends on someone's epistemological stance.

However imperfect assessment processes are, they remain integral to higher education. In the case of portfolio assessment, compared, for example, to examinations, candidates are given the opportunity to build on and develop their understanding of their own relevant knowledge, usually with the assistance of mentors or coaches. The portfolio development process involves several stages of reflective inquiry by learners to identify the acquired experiential knowledge from any number of locales or sources, formal or informal – work environments, past informal or non-credentialled study, volunteer work, faith life, domestic experience. RPL tools exist for this preliminary step of the process (Sansregret, 1993). That recalled knowledge is then situated – one could say massaged – to align with institution-provided learning goals or outcomes.

Criticism notwithstanding, the reflection required for this step of RPL is praised by successful RPL candidates who are exposed to and educated in this skill often for the first time. The discovery by learners of their tacit, hidden, or unidentified learning from past experiences is rewarding and creates a new – and triumphant – sense of self-esteem which is considered by RPL practitioners to be one of the most important aspects of the process, both for learners and for those who assist learners through the process. Assessors, too, often comment on the visible evidence of meaningful reflection present in portfolios. A short, autobiographical piece of writing usually required in the portfolio provides the opportunity for learners to reflectively position their learning within their life stories.

A final task for portfolio applicants requires the inclusion of documentation attesting to the experiences that they have named as knowledge sources. Such documentation can take many forms including letters from those who are or have been in positions of observation or evaluation of the learners' performance in whatever venue. Locating such documentation, while often tedious and laborious for learners, is regarded as a checks-and-balance mechanism to assure authenticity and rigor. That said, the heart of the portfolio remains the learners' expression of knowledge, with documentation serving a supporting role.

Assessors, providing quality and informed evaluation. If learners' learning comprises the heart of the RPL portfolio, then those who assess learners' work provide the lifeblood that feeds the process. As qualified and engaged teachers are deemed to be the appropriate assessors of students' work in higher education

institutions, so too are RPL assessors tasked with that moral and academic authority. That said, the selection and training of assessors is a critical aspect of the process. Assessors must be intimately familiar with the intended outcomes of the program, module, or course with which they are RPL-associated. However, more than that, they must appreciate the spirit of prior learning assessment. They must accept the notion that not all valid knowledge comes from textbooks. Not all knowledge can be broken up neatly into a course or module-sized box. As Michelson (2006) explains, if all knowledge is:

... situated knowledge, then similarity to academic knowledge cannot be the sole criterion for assessment; there will be times at which a path of inquiry with compelling explanatory power will lead to knowledge that is not congruent with academic forms of truth. (p. 156)

This discussion leads directly back to issues of power and politics within academia: Whose knowledge counts? Whose knowledge should be credentialled? This foundational discussion cannot be avoided and likely will not ever be satisfactorily or quietly resolved. However, as Michelson (2006) concludes, “by substituting dialogue and mutual recognition for what was unidirectional judgment, we destabilise the basis on which validation is given and invite a sharing of epistemological authority” (p. 157) – whether welcomed within the institution or not.

RPL Benefits Learners

Ample evidence from the field indicates that recognizing prior learning serves students well. Becky Klein-Collins, Vice-President of the US-based Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), reported these statistics in a Lumina-hosted session:

- The average number of PLA credits earned by students is 15.
- Cost savings for adult students range from \$1,500 to \$10,200.
- Time savings for adult students’ completions with PLA credits range from nine to 14 months.
- “Tipping point” analysis for PLA completers’ data indicate that adult students see increased effects with 15 or more PLA credits. (2020)

The benefits of RPL to learners’ higher education experience and progress are many. Successful RPL completers will achieve their educational goals more quickly, save tuition costs by earning RPL credits toward their program of study, benefit from an individualized RPL process that allows them to tailor their program of study around their prior experience, benefit from cognitive development resulting from rigorous RPL demands, experience personal growth from reflective activities contained with RPL processes, recognize the integration of their prior (and present) learning with past experience, and experience increased self-esteem and confidence following the formal recognition of their prior learning.

Institutional Infrastructure and Process for RPL

A major stumbling block for many institutions that express an interest in implementing an RPL process is the institutionally complex nature of the task. Unlike many higher educational processes which operate within programs or units or faculties – for example, an arts faculty or a science faculty, where most day-to-day decisions can be made by the top-ranked administrator – the RPL process must span the entire institution; it must encompass, equitably, all programs. In fairness, it must offer the same opportunities to all learners.

In some cases, institutions will initiate an RPL in one program area as a pilot study in order to determine the efficacy of their process before expanding that process to the institution at large. The Open University of the Netherlands, as an aid to the implementation process, has developed a task chart that outlines the various responsibilities and actions that comprise an RPL process. In it, they categorize task, its implications, and, importantly, *wider* institutional implications (EUCEN, n.d.)

To best successfully position the RPL process within an institution, the creation of an independent unit or center is advised (Conrad, 2008). This center should stand alone, detached from academic units, in order that its decisions can be perceived to be fair and not influenced by faculty or program personnel. Ideally, this independent center or unit will be led by an experienced academic who is knowledgeable in epistemology and assessment. Because the RPL process will span the institution, the RPL champion – for the RPL leader *must* be a champion for the process, given the probable pushback and/or misunderstanding of the process by colleagues within the institution (Osman, 2006; Van Kleef, 2014) – will require skills in communication as well as a broad knowledge of institutional academic structure and requirements. An RPL leader should be invited to engage in pan-institutional meetings, both academic and administrative, to initiate, present, explain, and even defend RPL processes as they pertain to learners' engagement with the process and the integration of their RPL-earned credit into their academic status.

Although the establishment of such a unit or center is key to RPL success within an institution, such hubs have historically not been perceived as necessary or fiscally possible by institutional administrators. In an ideal situation, RPL personnel will minister to the needs of learners both academically, via an assessment process, and administratively, in collaboration with administrative personnel. However, in many cases, RPL practitioners find themselves working alone, shouldering not only the responsibility for many learners' academic assessment but also the subsequent administrative tasks.

New Patterns of Accreditation of Students' Learning

The prior discussion of RPL rests within – and takes its function and importance from – the larger discussion of accrediting students' learning. To that end, prior learning and recognition advocates have long recognized that the learning obtained

by students enrolled in higher education programs of study forms only a partial representation of an individual's acquired knowledge. Accordingly, RPL processes have provided pathways for learners to bring forward and capitalize on their prior or experiential learning.

However, as outlined earlier, these pathways have not been without hurdles and bumps. Also, with a nod to technology and education's current advances in media, Pittinsky declared in 2015 that higher education "must find ways to credential better – with more information and in more accessible ways – using the transformative technology we now have available." Pittinsky unapologetically acknowledged that our society – he referred specifically to the United States – is a credentialing society and that higher education institutions are the "gatekeepers of many of those credentials" (2015).

The societal and economic push for credentials is not germane to this discussion save to say that they exist, have always existed in the modern world, and will no doubt continue to exist. However, Pittinsky (2015) raises the issues of access and scalable logistics to question the reasonableness of current credentialing protocols. He suggests that there are innovative trends that can contribute to better meeting societal and labor market needs and expectations of higher education graduates. Of interest to this RPL-centered discussion are open education, massive open online courses (MOOCs), and micro-credentialling.

As Pittinsky points out, innovative processes have been developed to meet evolving societal needs. The broadest category of innovation, open education is, as leading scholar Laura Czerniewicz (2020) points out, neither a simple nor single-faceted concept. However, attempts to open education have proliferated around the world, at all levels of education, contesting traditional views of access, equity, and diversity (Conrad & Prinsloo, 2020). MOOCs, a type of openness, implemented in 2008, provide opportunities for access to higher learning *en masse* with some provision for accreditation. Currently, however, micro-credentialling offers perhaps the most concrete innovation toward accreditation for learners at many levels, including higher education.

It should be noted that innovation and variations in the credentialling of students' learning directly affects the long-regarded bibles of student achievement – the transcript. That logistical discussion is not a part of this chapter.

Micro-credentialling in Higher Education

Micro-credentialling is defined as a "representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials" (HEQCO, n.d.). The recent move to micro-credentials is closely linked to workplace recovery plans that will necessarily follow the Covid-19 pandemic which has affected global systems from 2019 into the foreseeable future (Marcus, 2020). The pandemic has shifted priorities and protocols, in education as well as in most other major societal-life areas. Educational research on the effects and outcomes of the

changes wrought in education has resulted in new data on related topics that examine not only the effects of the “pivot” to what has been termed *emergency remote learning* but also on prospective and future avenues to credentialling and student success. Educators continue to look to the future of higher education to determine the long-term effects of Covid’s enormous impact on educational systems.

Among other studies, Marcus (2020) reports that “stackable” bachelor’s programs in the U.S.A – those that permit the accumulation of degree credits via a series of short courses – at Western Governors University has doubled in size during Covid-19. Similarly, MIT and Harvard’s online provider, edX, has experienced a 14-fold rise in enrollment during approximately the same timeframe. The University System of Georgia has initiated a “nexus degree” which comprises certifications that add up to associate degrees initially and then bachelor’s degrees.

In the UK, the Open University has partnered with FutureLearn to offer a range of micro-credentials as have the University of Glasgow and Coventry University, among others. In Europe, the challenges and opportunities for micro-credentials in higher education were addressed in a report coordinated by Italy and Germany that included participants from Finland and the European Distance Education Network (EDEN). The report noted that students approved of micro-credentials, and the demand for such learning was acknowledged, but “certification is perceived as optional” (Uggeri & Hudak, 2019, p. 37). In conclusion, the report recognized the need and potential usefulness of micro-credentials but noted bureaucratic concerns around the development of such and of a related “digital passport for education” (p. 37).

The American National Student Clearinghouse Research Center that tracks the process of bachelor degree candidates reports that more than 40 percent of those learners will not complete within six years (Marcus, 2020). Creating micro-credentialling paths toward degrees is seen as a solution to such a high attrition rate. The president of Brigham-Young University’s online arm, BYU Pathway Worldwide, praised micro-credentialling in this way: “If you were design [college] from scratch, this is how you’d do it” (Marcus, 2020).

Tooley and Hood (2021) speculate that micro-credentials can serve teachers well as they seek new and immediate new skills with which to adapt their practice to Covid-19 realities:

High-quality micro-credentials verify a small, discrete, and evidence-based competency that a teacher demonstrates by submitting evidence of application from their practice (as assessed by a validated rubric). The associated resources and assessment are offered digitally in an asynchronous, self-paced format, which is crucial for schools forced into remote learning.

Professional and continuing education providers have traditionally been more nimble as regards meeting workplace and employer needs; therefore, it is not surprising that continuing teacher education, for example, has realized the value of micro-credentials. Traditional, credentialled higher education, on the other hand, has historically been slow to adapt to change given its need to adhere to strict oversight and rigorous academic vetting of new protocols.

Leveraging micro-credentials into students' credentialing options begins to meet the needs of fast-changing economies and societies by focusing on an individual's competencies, skills, and knowledge. In this way, the gap between learning and work is lessened; access to learning is increased; and individualism is valued. From these changes result increased equity among learners and the lessening of the negative effects of social and economic diversity among learners. The recognition of prior learning can be key to these changes.

Klein-Collins and Travers (2020) note accurately that the recognition of prior learning has not changed much in many decades; they ask, subsequently, how the practice can be thought of differently so as to meet future learning needs. They note, however, that higher education has experienced some shifts in "how learning is defined, valued, delivered, credentialled, and supported" (p. 2). New types of credentialing include the emergence of "short-term, competency-based, and stackable" (p. 2) micro-credentials as well as the recognition of less-formal modes of learning such as that offered by open programs and MOOCs, described above.

RPL and Assessment in the Larger Picture: Issues of Equity, Access, and Inclusion

Issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion have received more prominence in recent years. Injustices of the past in many parts of the world – slavery and colonialism, for example – are being revisited, often accompanied by attempts to right those historical wrongs. In the field of higher education, the turns toward open education, open educational resources (OER), and open education practices (OEP) have touted access and equity as primary concerns. However, additionally, cultural responsiveness has been deemed an important aspect of equitable education and training. The complementary states of educational openness and global "village-ness" have awakened educators to the importance and complexity of culture. Also, from outside the field of higher education itself, employers and the workforce have been calling for not only more highly skilled workers but also more cognitively prepared graduates from institutions of higher learning.

Recently, the pandemic-induced sudden and dramatic pivot to emergency remote learning has increased even further the attention to culture, inclusion, equity, and access in education. Taken together, these facets raise the profile of socially just assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). As regards the interest of this chapter, new calls for equity and social justice in assessment resonate with the mandate and vision of RPL, which has been articulated above.

Equity and social justice rail against the many long-entrenched imbalances and inequities in education described here:

The dynamics of power and oppression. Traditional educational philosophies and teaching approaches have supported positivist and didactic approaches to learning both in presentation style and assessment techniques (Conrad & Openo, 2018). Classrooms have been teacher-centric from primary school to university classrooms. However, these strategies and approaches have been changing for

several years as learning philosophies have shifted from sage-on-the-stage to constructivist, learner-centered approaches which value learners' prior experience and recognize the potential and importance of guiding learners toward an authentic understanding of knowledge, one that resonates with them meaningfully rather than one that is forced upon them and construed in someone else's language or experience.

Thus, formerly, there was no question of whose knowledge was important and whose knowledge was disseminated; it was the knowledge of the teacher and the textbook which, in many countries, was the knowledge of the dominant culture. These "systems of power and oppressions influence[d] how students experience [d] college, engage[d] with the learning process, and [built] knowledge" (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, p. 7).

An uneven playing field. Neither education nor any aspect of society has ever provided equal access or opportunity to learners. Similarly, assessment protocols inevitably privilege some learners above others. For example, why does a pre-kindergarten child taking the Denver Developmental Screening Test not know what a hedge is when asked. Why does he not know? He does not know about hedges because he lives on a farm and has never seen a hedge or heard one being discussed around the farm kitchen table. Therefore, he is marked as deficient on this question. (The Denver test was revised in 1992 to address the difference in norms in, for example, ethnic groups.) "It takes a conscious, intentional approach to make [social equity] happen, alongside potentially hard conversations" (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, p. 8).

Subjectivity and the lack of critical consciousness. A critical consciousness is necessary to recognize our own subjectivity and subsequently, to recognize our own biases and stances on power and privilege. A popular expression, "don't ask a fish about water," refers to the fact that we cannot easily see beyond or outside of our own fishbowl existence (Don't ask the fish, n.d.). Stepping out of our own fishbowl, or our own comfort zone, however, requires conscious effort, attention, and reflection (Rose, 2013).

Institutional culture, language, and the will to change. Teachers' individual willingness to adapt to cultural, access, or equity challenges may be thwarted by an oppressive or tone-deaf institutional administration or culture that does not or will not provide or foster a climate that is receptive to change. In some cases, new language is required in order to even begin the discussion. In a similar discussion, Spence (2020) criticizes our current language as old and faltering; it cannot meet the needs of a changing society. At the very least, a leader is needed – a champion. However, educators are busy, multitasking professionals, already dealing with myriad issues and personalities; the advent of Covid in 2019 has only increased and complicated demands on their time. Who will take on the mantle of change-agent? "No one wants to waste their time or, worse, share their thoughts and see no action taken in response; thus adding to feelings of being unheard or unseen" or overworked (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, p. 15).

RPL and Social Justice

Social justice, long an important item on global agendas for change, forms a fundamental pillar to RPL's *raison d'être*, although its attention to this cause may not be obvious to those benefitting from the process – the learners. Learners perceive their own set of welcome benefits at the microlevel: they save money and time. The recognition of their prior learning permits them to complete a degree program more quickly and cheaply.

However, to those in positions to shape educational policy and programs, the awareness of RPL's contribution to social justice – equity and inclusion – is paramount (Wong, 2014). For while RPL provides a logistical framework for assessing prior knowledge, it does not answer the fundamental epistemological questions of knowledge that remains: Whose knowledge is valued, whose is not valued? Whose experiential learning is included, whose is excluded? The acknowledgment of valued knowledge is key to equity and inclusion. Many global RPL initiatives – in South Africa, Scotland, Australia, and Europe – have emphasized social justice in their platforms. (See, for example, Cameron & Miller, 2004; Guimarães & Mikulec, 2020).

Future Potential and Challenges for RPL

The recognition of prior learning has, over the years, been “represented as an emancipatory strategy to facilitate access to higher education” (Peters, 2006) for those for whom access has been difficult or denied. However, despite these high ideals, the path has not been smooth. Although scholars such as Felder looked forward in 2017 to “continued reflection by assessment professionals on the ways that current assessment efforts either centralize issues of equity or serve to perpetuate them . . . pushing the scholarly conversation forward towards wider understanding and action,” progress has been slow.

Ten “sketches of innovative pedagogies” for 2021, recently featured in Canada's Contact North/Contact Nord biweekly online newsletter (2021), were drawn from scholarship from the UK's Open University; they include the following:

1. Best learning moments
2. Enriched realities
3. Gratitude as a pedagogy
4. Equity-oriented pedagogy
5. Using chatbots in learning
6. Hip-hop education
7. Student co-created teaching and learning
8. Telecollaboration for language learning
9. Evidence-based teaching
10. Corpus-based pedagogy

While some of these innovations may seem more easily understandable and accessible to the reader than others, the notable point is that none of them mentions anything specific about assessment, prior learning, or inclusion. Indeed, while equity-oriented pedagogy may hint at innovation leading to increased openness or access to learning – a move that might rely on RPL – it does not explore this notion.

This author, while considering the future of RPL and assessment several years ago, wrote:

Re-examining assessment strategies, however, has emerged as the hallmark pedagogical issue linking traditional higher education practice to the innovations that attempt to challenge it. Finding the assessment ‘fit’ to legitimise open learning is somewhat akin to finding the Northwest Passage to claim the treasures of the East. Within the quest, RPL’s potential seems, to its champions at least, to offer an accessible and proven solution. (Conrad, 2014, p. 331)

At the time of writing, one might ask, what has changed? At 2020’s European Higher Education Bologna Process Implementation Report gathering, a presentation examining the current status of RPL in Europe concluded that little progress had been made even though accommodating legal frameworks have been created (Crozier, 2021). In spite of this provision, higher education lags behind adult education, vocational education, and the labor market in making use of RPL. Among the reasons given for this lag are these: there is little political advantage connected to individuals benefitting from RPL, and societal benefit is not well understood by governments; higher education is perceived to be sufficiently inclusive already; higher education has not championed or lobbied for increased implementation of RPL. Potential RPL applicants are also deemed to be unaware of its potential benefits to them.

In Canada, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) continues, at the time of writing, to offer training in RPL processes; its focus includes college and university level study as well as private and labor enterprises. In considering the future of RPL in Canada, CAPLA looks to micro-credentialling as potentially providing a boost to RPL’s momentum. Luff, Travers, and Piedra (2021) highlighted Canada’s 2020 Future Skills Council Report which directly called for the expansion of RPL for broader employer use. Their call is reinforced by UNESCO’s Institute for Lifelong Learning that asserts that RPL implementation meets the growing need of citizens for opportunities for continued and lifelong learning.

Beyond higher education, private institutions promote RPL processes via online training. The International Training Centre’s (ITC) “E-Learning Course on Recognition of Prior Learning,” offered in the spring of 2021, sought to attract policy-makers, managers in employment sectors and human resources, and stakeholders in NGOs and others in the fields of skills development. A Certificate of Completion was offered.

Final Words

This chapter aimed to elucidate the recognition of students' prior learning within the larger context of accrediting that learning. Both topics point to important issues around learning: quality, access, and equity. Accrediting higher education learning is an historic and usually traditional process that is carefully managed by institutions; RPL provides one facet of that total picture. Unfortunately, it is a facet not often fully understood, and therefore its affordances – for learners, employers, and society – are unappreciated, its process unimplemented or, perhaps, implemented badly.

Higher education institutions worldwide have adapted to and welcomed the concepts of open learning and micro-credentialling to varying degrees in order to hasten students' academic progress and provide greater and more equitable access to students. RPL's long history has proven it a worthy piece in the puzzle of accrediting learning. As education's responses to the still-current pandemic evolve, will RPL take its place among other solutions? While this writer is dubious, the hope remains.

References

- Bernstein, B. (1999). Vertical and horizontal discourse: An essay. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 157–173.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (Eds.). (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London, UK: Kogan Page.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cameron, R., & Miller, P. (2004). RPL: Why has it failed to act as a mechanism for social change? Southern Cross University. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/3439569/RPL_Why_has_it_failed_to_act_as_a_mechanism_for_social_change
- Conrad, D. (2008). Situating prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in an online learning environment. In T. Anderson (Ed.), *The theory and practice of online learning* (2nd ed., pp. 75–90). Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.
- Conrad, D. (2014). RPL in higher education: Past, present and potential. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 315–335). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Conrad, D., & Openo, J. (2018). *Assessment strategies for online learning: Engagement and authenticity*. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.
- Conrad, D., & Prinsloo, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Open(ing) education: Theory and practice*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Crosier, D. (March 21, 2021). *Current status of RPL: What progress have we made in the EHEA?* Swedish Council for Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.uhr.se/contentassets/e9abf4935ad94f308eaf84082313a608/david-crosier_eacea_rpl-in-he_present-status.pdf
- Czerniewicz, L. (2020). Opening education: Complex is as simple as it gets. In D. Conrad & P. Prinsloo (Eds.), *Open(ing) education: Theory and practice*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC). (2021). *Transfer of credit*. Retrieved from <https://www.deac.org/Student-Center/Transfer-Of-Credit.aspx>
- Don't ask the fish. (n.d.). <https://www.dontaskthefish.com/>
- Duvekot, R. (2014). Lifelong learning policy and RPL in the learning society: The promise of Faure? In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 65–85). Leicester, UK: NIACE.

- EUCEN. (n.d.). Recognition of prior learning. *The BeFlex project*. Retrieved from http://www.eucen.eu/BeFlexPlus/TrainingMaterials/08_RPL.pdf
- Felder, P. (2017). *On the importance of cultural responsive assessment*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Guimarães, P., & Mikulec, B. (2020). The paradox of utilitarian recognition of prior learning: The cases of Portugal and Slovenia. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 12(1), 109–122.
- Harris, J. (2006). Questions of knowledge and curriculum. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 51–76). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- International Training Centre (ITC). (2021). E-learning course on recognition of prior learning. Retrieved from <https://www.itcilo.org/courses/e-learning-course-recognition-prior-learning>
- Kanwar, A., & Carr, A. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on international higher education models for the new normal. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 7(3), 326–333.
- Kelly, R. (2021). 6 steps to move prior learning assessment forward. *Campus technology*. Capella University. Retrieved from <https://campustechnology.com/articles/2021/02/10/6-steps-to-move-prior-learning-assessment-forward.aspx>
- Klein-Collins, B. (2020). *Making the case for the recognition of learning: Evidence from the field to scale effective practices and policies*. Retrieved from <https://www.wiche.edu/events/making-the-case-for-rl/>
- Klein-Collins, B., & Travers, N. (2020). Learning recognition and the future of higher education – A vision for a post-pandemic learning ecosystem. CAEL. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/a-vision-for-a-post-pandemic-learning-system.pdf>
- Knowles, M. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education*. Chicago, IL: Follett.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Luff, M., Piedra, D., & Travers, N. L. (2021). *Will the micro-credential craze reset the recognition agenda in Canada?* CAPLA Education and Training Spring Webinars. 2021 Spring Webinar | CAPLA.
- Marcus, J. (2020, June 2). Urgency of getting people back to work gives new momentum to “microcredentials.” *The Hechinger Report*. Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/more-students-start-earning-stackable-credentials-on-their-way-to-degrees/>
- Michelson, E. (2006). Beyond Galileo’s telescope: Situated knowledge and the recognition of prior learning. In I. P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 141–162). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, A. (January 2020). *A new decade for assessment: Embedding equity into assessment praxis* (Occasional Paper No. 42). University of Illinois and Indiana University, Urbana, IL. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- NBCC. (2021). *Recognition of prior learning*. Retrieved from <https://nbcc.ca/admissions/recognition-of-prior-learning>
- Osman, R. (2006). RPL: An emerging and contested practice in South Africa. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 205–220). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Osman, R., Shalem, Y., Castle, J., & Attwood, G. (2000). *The recognition of prior learning: Early lessons, challenges and promise*. Paper presented at the Joint Education and Trust conference, Midrand, South Africa.
- Peters, H. (2006). Using critical discourse analysis to illuminate power and knowledge in RPL. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 162–192). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Pittinsky, M. (2015). Credentialing in higher education: Current challenges and innovative trends. *EDUCAUSE*, 50(2). Retrieved from <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/3/credentialing-in-higher-education-current-challenges-and-innovative-trends>
- Rose, E. (2013). *On reflection: An essay on technology, education, and the status of thought in the twenty-first century*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press.

- Sansregret, M. (1993). *Prior learning assessment: The portfolio*. Montreal, Canada: Hurtubise.
- Shalem, Y., & Steinberg, C. (2006). Portfolio-based assessment of prior learning: A cat and mouse chase after invisible criteria. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 97–116). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Spence, H. (January 2020). We need new vocabulary to accurately describe today's 'senior.' *Hamilton Spectator*. Retrieved from <https://www.therecord.com/opinion-story/9803063-we-need-some-new-vocabulary-to-accurately-describe-today-s-senior/>
- Tooley, M., & Hood, J. (2021, March 5). Leveraging educator micro-credentials to meet the moment. *EdNote*. Retrieved from <https://ednote.ecs.org/leveraging-educator-micro-credentials-to-meet-the-moment/>
- Uggeri, M., & Hudak, R. (2019). Challenges and opportunities of micro-credentials in Europe. *MicroHe*. Retrieved from <https://microcredentials.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/12/WP3-Interviews-with-Key-Stakeholders-Decision-Makers-Overall-Summary-Report.pdf>
- uPlanner. (2016). Common challenges for accreditation in higher education institutions. Retrieved from <https://uplanner.com/en/blog/desafios-para-acreditar-programas-de-educacion-superior/>
- Van Kleef, J. (2014). Quality in PLAR. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 206–232). Leicester, UK: NIACE.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wong, A. (2014). Recognition of prior learning and social justice in higher education. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 178–205). Leicester, UK: NIACE.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

