

## Recruiting Prior Learning in South Africa: Crossing the Lines and Healing the Wounds

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### A Review of:

*RPL as Specialised Pedagogy: Crossing the Lines*

Edited by Linda Cooper and Alan Ralphs

*“Such are the travails of epistemology – hung up, it seems forever, between the worlds of Being and Becoming. Between the conflicting visions of necessary knowledge and contingent knowing; between the way things “abstractly are,” the way things “concretely are,” and the way that things “seem.”*

– Joseph Glick, 2005, p. 2

*RPL as Specialised Pedagogy: Crossing the Lines*, edited by Linda Cooper and Alan Ralphs (2016), presents four case studies of the use of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) process in South Africa. This is a very important story, as it speaks to the social justice aspect of prior learning practices in education, as well as demonstrates a range of applications from entry to undergraduate and graduate studies, to activist and worker certification.

I was introduced to the use of RPL in South Africa when I invited Alan Mandell, SUNY Empire State College professor, to speak to my students in a portfolio development course that I was teaching in 2013. I knew that he would offer them a unique perspective on the role of prior learning assessment in higher education, but the jewel of that presentation was his description of the case of South Africa. Talking to my adult students, mostly black and brown, mostly women, he articulated the use of prior learning assessment in South Africa as a change-making practice, a form of restitution, a way for the nation and its people to heal and rectify some of the injustices of apartheid. As he described this, students moved to the edges of their seats, visibly excited by the social justice aspect of the prior learning endeavor.

I also recognized this as a large part of why I was so excited about teaching prior learning to my own students. Many of my students in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York, came from poverty, violence and economic as well as racial discrimination. As they began their undergraduate liberal arts degrees in their 40s and 50s, after decades of work and family making, they faced the contradictions of their life experiences through autobiographical reflection. While they knew discrimination from the inside out, the effort to identify and reflect on this experience was painful. That is, they could feel their feelings, they could fight their fights, but they did not see the value of their experiences as learning until they connected them to the experiences of others, the history of inequality and the hope of prevention. In that way, assessing their experiences by reviewing them, reframing them and providing theory to them was revolutionary and emancipating. Through academic projects such as prior learning portfolio work, they put their experiences in the context of other people's experiences, as well as the historical context of the American experiences of oppression,

racism and economic inequality. They were not only able to reframe their own experiences in ways that helped them heal, but they could also earn college credit by doing this, advancing themselves toward degrees they had dreamed of their whole lives.

One of my students – who had been selling drugs as a homeless teenager and had fallen into decades of drug addiction, incarceration and further poverty – wrote a portfolio about her ensuing work as a peer counselor. She detailed one case after another in which she used the lessons of her own experiences as an addict to understand and serve those she was now helping to heal. Another student, who had spent over a decade in prison before entering college, wrote about the reading he had done behind bars – the voices of black political thinkers and activists that he called upon in moments of struggle in his present life. He wrote about teaching young black men he encountered to call upon these voices as sources for rethinking conflict and remedial action. He wrote about the dialogue among them in his own thinking; and in doing so, he regained value as well as credit for the time that he spent in jail. The use of RPL in South Africa has grave resonance and relevance for the application of PLA (prior learning assessment) to American histories of oppression and mass incarceration of black and brown bodies and minds.

The role of prior learning assessment and recognition in the lives of those most disadvantaged and excluded by the history of education itself is enormously important, and the Cooper and Ralphs book should be key reading for all in higher education across the globe. Unpacking the inequalities of history and rectifying their costs to so many is a necessary project for the times we are in. “In South Africa, RPL has been driven by strong political and moral concerns (in addition to economic, human capital concerns) as it is seen as a means of achieving greater equity and redress for those historically excluded from education opportunities” (p. 34). This statement should read as the global mission for RPL. Acknowledgement of particular educational processes and the review of life experiences through those processes as “healing” is important to understanding much of the work that needs to be done. That is one of the truly excellent and vitally important contributions of this volume. It helps one imagine and make more explicit this radical aspect and potential mission of the prior learning project.

In this book, the notion of “healing” is articulated explicitly, though it is not overstated, or even perhaps stated quite enough. It is Chapter 5, written by Kessie Moodley, Anitha Shah and Mphutlane wa Bofelo, in which this theme is explicitly addressed. This chapter presents a view into the Workers’ College, an alternative education program designed to promote and educate labor and community activists through a process of “collective learning” including group work and peer review, where healing is considered “a vital outcome of the diplomas” (p. 92). The authors describe a school designed to serve and validate activists by starting with their “struggle knowledge” and linking it to theory through dialogic peer engagement. Here the project of RPL is cast as “radical pedagogy,” and this is the inspirational crux of the book.

The underlying question addressed by this volume for practitioners and theorists of prior learning concerns the issue of whether prior learning is primarily an assessment process or a pedagogical process. The authors clearly argue that RPL is best conceived as pedagogy, demonstrating in case after case that lack of pedagogical support in the portfolio process made RPL an untenable process for students. The primary issue identified throughout the book concerns exposing students to the academic and terminological issues of the credit-awarding bodies. As one who has taught portfolio development, I see the process as very much about the facilitative work of a pedagogical process over time. Portfolios are a developmental project in which the metacognitive perspective on one’s own learning must be supported to grow, alongside the cultivation of voice and confidence.

This aspect of the work is articulated in Chapter 4, "RPL for Access to Undergraduate Study: Navigation Tools," written by Alan Ralphs. This chapter details the process of creating a portfolio development course, and describes the boundary work involved in supporting students to both articulate their experiential knowledge and to encounter the demands of academic discourse and practice. Ralphs appreciates both the curricular issues and the artistry of this specialized pedagogy. He also shows the process from the perspectives of students, teachers and assessors. Chapter 4 describes the route into undergraduate study through RPL. It warns very early that despite the tremendous interest in this program, many of those who applied did not make it into the program, and many of those who made it into the program did not make it into the university. It also explains that for those who did make it into the university through RPL, most were successful in completing their degrees, and that the portfolio development course prepared them better for university than the tests of admission that were designed specifically with RPL in mind.

One of the most fascinating issues raised in this chapter concerns the trauma and disturbing experiences articulated by students in their autobiographical writing. The encounter with such experiences by assessors brings to light the biases of academic frameworks, in which such experiences pose a challenge to "distantiation" – the preferred cognitive distancing of a speaker from the subject of speech. This issue seems to me to be at the core of the questions that face us at the intersection of social justice and education. I remember students of mine describing their English teachers requesting an essay about a personal experience and not being able to emotionally handle the content produced. In this chapter, writing these experiences is considered as potentially healing, sometimes crisis inducing and sometimes advisedly avoided. Perhaps the key to the positive outcome of healing lies in the profile characteristics of the successful RPL student in this context. Ralphs explains that successful candidates tended to have at least two of the four attributes. They are worth reading in full, but in short they include: motivation originating in "their commitment to change the legacy of marginalization"; resilience rooted in suffering; enjoyment of the activities associated with literacy; and readiness and social support to embark on their degrees (p. 72).

There is another great benefit in developing the healing and social justice aspects of prior learning, and that is the production of stories that have not yet been known or written. The potential expansion of the knowledge base itself is a tantalizing outcome of engaging previously excluded communities in the work of prior learning in higher education. Chapter 3, "RPL Into Postgraduate Study: The Tension Between Knowledge Specialisation and Social Inclusion," written by Linda Cooper, Judy Harris and Barbara Jones, presents attempts to integrate RPL into the master's level of three disciplines. This chapter takes up a fascinating question about the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and experiential learning, including the actual effect of RPL on fields of knowledge themselves. Speaking to a major theme of the book – the notion of knowledge boundaries – this chapter describes three disciplinary programs with varying degrees of porosity to new knowledge and specifically to the experiential knowledge of RPL candidates. While experiential knowledge was supported as contributing to the knowledge in two fields, its role remained "to illustrate understanding of theory" in another (p. 43).

The discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in any particular discipline and how that affects its orientation to RPL is very interesting. "Their different purposes mean that these programs recruit experiential learning in different ways" (p. 43). For instance, the researchers describe a disability studies program in which there is considerable rewriting of theory going on inside the discipline itself toward a social constructionist perspective and away from a biological and medical orientation, "transforming the field of knowledge production and reshaping policies in the field of practice" (p. 42). In contrast to this, the authors discuss the master's program in adult education where the orientation is very theoretical and research driven. They write, "The coursework curriculum has a strong research orientation: its starting point is theory, and

although it 'works back' to experience, the role of this experience is to interrogate the theory and to question how practice might pose researchable questions, rather than mainly to enhance practice" (p. 43). These differences in orientation to experience seemed to affect the extent to which RPL was welcomed by the programs themselves. In discussing a postgraduate diploma in management practices, the writers explain, "The programme's applied purpose and methodology, its commitment to being relevant to specific contexts, and the interflow it encourages between academic knowledge and workplace knowledge, allow for experiential knowledge to play a significant role in the programme" (p. 43). The disability studies program relies on students to bring their experience into the academic environment in order to actually "'make it alive'" (p. 43). "Experiential knowledge is consciously and continually recruited in order to challenge taught theory and established understanding of disability, and ensure relevance particularly to the African context" (p. 43). The research contrasts these two programs that were more open to RPL with the adult education program, which was not.

Departments that saw themselves as close to the field of practice seemed more open to RPL. On the other hand, those that were highly regulated within the university culture in terms of knowledge hierarchies and boundaries were less open to RPL. This seems obvious, but there is nothing inherent in one discipline or another among the three studied that seemed to predict its openness to experiential knowledge. The story presented is much more subtle and complex and seemed to be woven into the histories of knowledge as well as the histories of each program's relationships to the university. While the authors explain that programs in the hard sciences were generally more resistant to the idea of RPL, all three programs described could be seen as related to the "softer" sciences and humanities and were chosen because they were predicted to be friendly to experiential knowledge. However, the chapter presents grounded research to give contextual reality and nuance to this discussion.

There is a certain irony to the fact that the adult education program is the most exclusive of RPL, considering that it is the adult education program that would be most likely to theorize RPL. It is the adult education program that would most likely have within its codified structure of knowledge the very terms of RPL, that is, the discussion of the dialectical relationship between experiential and formal learning. Instead, the authors explain that the adult education program had "the specific intention of deepening the knowledge and research base of a field that has historically been practice driven" (p. 42). In this context, experience serves to illustrate theory or to provide the ground for researchable questions rather than enhance or extend the knowledge base. The fact that there were RPL students who had succeeded in all three programs, despite difficulties, was almost surprising.

The contrast across departments of RPL-friendliness is extended toward a discussion of the distinction between RPL as pedagogical experience integrated into the educational process in the disability studies and management practices programs, and RPL as assessment before entry into the adult education program. This idea of pedagogy versus assessment is translated into a notion of programs having soft and hard boundaries to the portfolio development process. Students in the management practices and disability studies programs are encouraged to work on portfolios alongside their academic study, thereby enriching both in a kind of dialectical relationship between theory and experience. Finally, and it almost goes without saying, the focus on RPL as pedagogy or "a pedagogical orientation rather than an assessment focus" is also associated with "a more inclusive quality" (p. 45). This inclusivity is mirrored in the values associated with characteristics that are measured in enabling learners. For instance, psychological capital – "motivation, confidence, the ability to be reflexive, emotional maturity and 'life skills'" (p. 46) – is valued in the more open programs rather than simply conceptual knowledge and ability to read and write academically. Those programs less oriented to the conceptual and academic as prerequisites were also more likely to provide help for learners in the process of

graduate study, which the writers do note is unusual at that level.

Chapter 6, written by Karen Deller and titled "RPL and Occupational Competence," is a case study of qualifying competencies for the workplace that involved extensive interplay between changing policies, the college, and workplaces themselves. This case study is focused on office administrators and support staff who were sponsored by their companies to engage in RPL qualification. Here competence was defined as "performance with understanding," which included being "able to adapt to changed circumstances and explain the reasons behind those adaptations." (p. 103). Deller explains that, while this is largely an assessment process, it also came to necessitate and include a pedagogical strategy designed to help students with the specialized language that would correspond to their tacit knowledge and workplace learning. This pedagogical component, Deller explains, was necessary in order to bridge the gap between the practical aspects of people's learning and the unit standards that included terminology and conceptual dimensions. In this sense, the pedagogical component addressed the problem of articulation, or the ability to demonstrate one's knowledge using the terminology of the field.

Deller explains that a shift in policy led from an integrated framework to a disaggregated framework. That is, the program went from a framework in which all skills were assessed together to one in which the components of knowledge, practice, work experience and foundational learning could be qualified separately and by separate assessors. Deller describes a complex scenario in which the earlier integration model was re-engineered to the new disaggregated model. In this process, candidates met with surprising difficulty. Deller describes one candidate who scored very low on formal computer knowledge while scoring, and 100 percent competence in the practical assessment. "In this case, the candidate has learned her accounting computer skills from the other finance staff in the department and the language of her practice was not that of the generic computer literacy knowledge standard specified in the qualification" (p. 109). Deller describes this back-and-forth between failure of the candidates, followed by further pedagogy, followed by success as a process similar to "action research."

Many interesting problems arose that point to the gaps between practical context-based learning and theoretical abstracted knowledge. Even the notion that somebody should be assessed as an individual flew in the face of the collaborative nature of the way tasks were conceived and accomplished in the workplace. A final step in which a test was mandated was refused by participants in the research simulation of this new qualifications framework because "it reminded them of the bad experiences many had had with the knowledge assessment component of the rollout, and with their formal schooling" (p. 113). Deller refers to this effect as "alienation" and warns that the focus on written assessment is biased against workers. This is demonstrated within the case study and is offered as a general proposition about writing-based portfolio assessments. Deller concludes, "Disaggregation is counterproductive to pedagogic interventions that assist competent workers to acquire the conceptual language necessary for describing and interpreting their integrated practices" (p. 120). Finally, too, Deller makes a distinction between the appropriateness of the integrated model for more expert workers and the disaggregated model for more novice workers. This seems like a crucial insight, worthy of further exploration. It also seems to defy the logic of RPL itself, which proposes to credit experienced workers with the knowledge they have gained.

Tying all four of the case studies together are four lines of inquiry: knowledge, pedagogy, institutional conditions and learner agency. These themes are explored in each chapter. A truly excellent quality of the entire book (including the framing chapters and also each case study) is the extent to which the work is grounded in theory, such that each issue that arises is explored with extensive reference and explanation. Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Bernstein and Mezirow can all be found among these pages. All of these are mentioned with

familiarity, and their reference inspires confidence and trust that these researchers are grounded in deep theoretical discussion with each other. The main impetus of the book is quite practical, and while the grounding in theory is evident and exciting throughout, it is not usually fully articulated, integrated and explored inside of the case studies. Instead, these deeper theoretical discussions bracket the case studies in framing chapters at the start and end of the book.

Chapters 2 and 7 provide a rich and dense theoretical framework for the conceptualization of RPL. The authors make a strong assertion that experiential knowledge domains and contexts should be understood as differentiated and specialized, even if not in the same formalized way as academic disciplines. They use Basil Bernstein to describe the diversity of knowledge forms and the boundaries between them, as well as the gaps that open up between fields when knowledge is moved across them. Vygotsky's notion of the dialectical relationship between spontaneous and scientific concepts works to enhance the image of these gaps in which meanings can be lost while others are created. Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is further brought in through an application of Engeström's (2015) triangular representation of learning as a mediated activity anchored by community, rules and divisions of labor. In laying out this framework, the authors emphasize the point that RPL practitioners are and should be "boundary workers" and that RPL is a specialized pedagogy embedded in a community of practice. Similarly, they stress, the mediating tools facilitators bring to the pedagogical work of RPL should be dialogical in order to effectively recruit learners' knowledge.

Overall and throughout, the authors demonstrate sensitivity to the experiences of RPL students and participants, providing considerable quotations to demonstrate both the difficulties and successes of the process. One student entering the undergraduate program described the RPL process this way: "Here they come and they take all this doom and gloom and they turn it into something positive" (p. 73). This quote seemed to sum up many of the issues presented concerning the nature of the students' experiences and the need for a reparative pedagogical process. The title of the book derives from a quote by Harris about "knowing the borders and crossing the lines" concerning the issue of "agency in navigating access to higher education" (Harris as cited in Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, p. 57). This issue arises throughout the book, as portfolios are understood as boundary-crossing processes for all participants: the learners, the teachers or facilitators, and the assessors who must "look both ways" toward the "socio-material world of prior learning" and to "the discipline-based world of academic practice" (p. 75).

Helping the world become prior learning-friendly is a clear goal of this book. Helping people recognize hidden knowledge is part of the prior learning agenda. In order to be the advocates for this specialized pedagogy, we all must speak about it in ways that are accessible beyond academic jargon and beyond the prior learning that keeps the knowledge of this process buried deep inside of the academic framework itself. For that reason, the use of the acronym RPL in the book's title presents a problem. RPL is a term not readily recognized by most people, including most academics, and even by many in the prior learning community. The use of RPL in the title immediately lets most of the world know that this book is not for them; it is only for people who already understand what RPL means. In fact, one student quoted in the book decries the lack of awareness of RPL beyond the university in which he was awarded credit; and this problem is not solved by the exclusive quality of the book's title. This book will not open a door to an unsuspecting mind; it will not expose new people to the prior learning project even if it has great things to teach them. In the interests of transparency and spreading the word of prior learning rather than containing it, this book should be called "Recruiting Prior Learning in South Africa: Crossing the Lines and Healing the Wounds," and it should be widely shared.

## References

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