Welcome From the Three Co-Chairs of VPL Biennale #5

(Recorded on December 20, 2024)

Susan Forseille: Director of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, Thompson Rivers University, Canada

Nan Travers: Director of the Center for Leadership in Credentialing Learning, SUNY Empire State University, USA

Andrina Wafer: Head of International Mobility and Prior Learning at Quality and Qualifications, Ireland

Andrina Wafer:

One of the things that I think was very courageous in Biennale #5 was that we organized the conference around a question: People, validation and power, democracy in action? The question mark was important and remains really important. The question we wanted to ask was whether validation forces a re-evaluation of valid knowledge and of the relationships between (recognition) authorities and different ways of learning. We also wanted to explore whether policy or what policies and what practices are evidence of democracy in action. The ambition we set as a consortium was to give people an opportunity to come together to share that learning, to have that conversation in as open a way as possible, and to share their insights to see if what was going on all around the world was evidence of democracy in action. We had four pillars: skills, mobility, individuals, and inclusion. The more I looked at the pillars, the more I thought that they were like standing stones in the corners of a field, and the field is democracy in action. We experience democracy through our skills, through our mobility, and through our inclusion as individuals. Do we get to do those things? Do we get recognized? How does that take place? What policies? What practices make that happen for us? We continued to think that the bigger question was whether this really is about democracy in action, and if so, how? What difference does recognition make to democracy? These are the questions that we tried to ask. What did we achieve?

Susan Forseille:

When I was reflecting on what we did, why we did it, how we did it, it struck me that we were going through the process we ask the learners to go through. We surfaced the learning, we reflected on it, we shared it with one another, and we're still assessing it. It's the VPL process! We're still thinking about these conversations. How do they impact the practice we do? How do these conversations impact our research? I think these conversations are going to echo for weeks and months and years, and they are going to make us all better.

Andrina Wafer:
In terms of engaging the conversation, people came and were excited about the conference theme. Remember that we booked out before the "early bird" even closed! It was the most extraordinary thing. We were shocked. Still, there was this common concern: somehow, the question of democracy-in-action rumbled away while people talked about their everyday practice. This hum went on in the background: Were we really changing things? A challenging question was raised from the floor: Are we building systems to keep people *out* or to bring people *in*?' Everybody went home with those questions still in their hearts. Are we truly opening the doors? Are we loading things with, as Ted Fleming put it, "generosity"?
Is what we are all doing truly democracy-in-action? Is it about communicating, sharing, and stabilizing our capacity for it? Throughout, we wanted to make people understand that this is possible.

Nan Travers:
One of the things that struck me is that if we look at the historical roots of the recognition and validation of learning in all its different ways, it started from a social justice perspective: being able to recognize people for what they know and can do, those who had not been recognized before because their learning took place outside of the traditional academy. As VPL has grown in practice, theory, and research, as it has grown around the world, I think we tend to get caught in our busyness of doing these kinds of things, but we are often working in isolation. Raising this topic of people, validation and power and asking the question of democracy in action, brings us back to our social justice roots. It also brings us into community helping us understand this work from a collective perspective, which becomes even more powerful.

Andrina Wafer:
I think you've really nailed it there now, Nan. For me, that "community of conversation" was the key. The other thing that really struck me was something I mentioned earlier, the phrase that Ted Fleming used in his opening keynote: "loaded with generosity." When you meet a scholar, there is typically that generosity of spirit, there is that generosity of inquiry, there is that hunger that just drives something forward. And I think that recognition, that desire to know in the way that Ted captured it, to know another, to recognize another's learning is part of that "generosity." He pushed it even further by acknowledging the potential for and power of transformation. That's also part of the character of the scholar—not the character of the hoarder. So yes, validation or PLA or RPL can result in accreditation, documentation, and certification. This is really important for a huge number of people, particularly those who haven't had that, but it's the recognition, it's the process. That's a really powerful thing.

Susan Forseille:
In the weeks and months since we've had the conference and in all of the work leading up to it, the more academic words epistemology and ontology have been mentioned: the epistemology of whose knowledge is most valued and the ontology, the truth of knowledge. We had over 90 sessions and 370 participants! Yet, six words from one woman resonated all of these months later: "Why can't I dance my learning?" This

question is about the epistemology and the ontology of learning and also about the barriers that are put up when we are assessing and validating knowledge. "Why can't you dance your learning?" can be expressed in so many different ways, but I think that question gets to the root of it. It gets to the people, the validation, the power. Who has the power? How do we wield it? How can we wield it in a more inclusive way and expand our ways of knowing? Once we look at other people's perspectives and knowledge systems, our own knowledge grows. One of the phrases we often used for this conference was "when the tide rises, all boats float," and as I reflect on the conference, that was what we were doing. We were raising all of us to a higher place of understanding so that when we come back to the work that we do, we could lift our heads up and we could be more. We could have a better understanding of where we are going next, how we are getting there, and how we are going to remove some of these barriers, knowing that there are so many other people in the "same boat," whether they were from South Korea, or Ireland, or from Canada (31 countries were represented!). There are many similarities in what we are doing and a lot of power in knowing that we're all struggling and succeeding and making a difference. And I'd like to add one more note. This work is inspired by the philosophy of *Pelkwaílc kt es knucwentwécw-k* which means, "We all come together to help one another" in Secwepemctsín. This value guided us throughout the biennial.

Nan Travers:
The articles that have been submitted for this special issue of *PLAIO* point to ways in which people are taking the ideas that were raised in the concept paper and shared throughout the conference and continuing to think about how talking about democracy in action is a collective effort. This democracy in action is not about the individual by themselves. It is an individual within the context of the community. What I think we've done is to expand the conversation to really make sure this is a community of action, of reflection, and of conversation.