Reflection on "Ways of Seeing the Recognition of Prior Learning: What Contribution Can Such Practices Make to Social Inclusion?"

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Why Did I Write "Ways of Seeing"?

When I wrote "Ways of Seeing RPL" (Harris, 1999), I was about to start a Ph.D. and had just completed six years as a lecturer/researcher at the University of Cape Town. I had arrived in South Africa in 1993, just before the first democratic elections (held in 1994). An enormous amount of pre-policy preparatory work, of which RPL formed a part, was underway. RPL had entered the South African lexicon via the labor movement (ANC/COSATU, 1993) influenced by developments in Australia where a national standards framework was under construction with RPL as a cornerstone. RPL seemed to fit the bill for South Africa, on paper at least, because of the legacy of discrimination, and the need for redress. However, the concept and practice sat uneasily with the dominant oppositional and progressive discourses of the time and their focus on the broader role of education in society. From these perspectives, the efficacy of RPL as a robust redress mechanism in post-apartheid reconstruction was questioned. It was not that it was too radical; it was not radical enough.

It was against this backdrop that the introduction of RPL was to be calibrated over the years to come, and still is being calibrated, to some extent. My identity as an RPL practitioner and advocate was challenged, and as I stated at the time, my "confirmatory" position shifted to a more "disconfirmatory" one. I began to see more clearly that RPL has very few intrinsic characteristics of its own; it can take many forms and contribute to a variety of social ends. "Ways of Seeing" was my first published attempt to theorize RPL and capture some of its complexity in order to better understand it from the inside (in terms of the nature of the practices themselves) and from the outside (in terms of realistic, non-sentimentalized readings of its social functions, especially in terms of redress and equity).

After re-reading the article, I can sense its naïvety. If I had known then what I know now, I would never have dared to traverse such complex sociological, epistemological and philosophical terrain. However, I am not sorry I did so, because the paper does succeed in raising questions about the taken-for-granted "goodness" of RPL, and this has been one of the enduring themes of my work ever since. As Breier (2011) put it, speaking of the empirical research project from which the schema in "Ways of Seeing" was derived:

> Would the 'failures' [i.e., those who were not successful in the RPL process] have fared better in another kind of RPL process? Harris did not ask this question specifically, but much of her work since then seems directed at answering it. (p. 207)

Breier is right. To a certain extent, I remain unconvinced about RPL as practiced in many parts of the world. I think in some cases, it is a romantic response to much deeper structural issues of inequality in society that refract through education. As such, and without care, it can detract from rather than contribute to progressive work toward equity.

Developing the Trojan Horse

I fed my uneasy relationship with international approaches to RPL into a book entitled *Power, Pedagogy and Possibility: Conceptual and Implementation Guides* (Harris, 2000). This was essentially a step back into the empirical research project that informed "Ways of Seeing" to marshal all of its theoretical, conceptual and practical resources and to further develop the Trojan horse RPL model, which seemed to me at the time to hold the most progressive promise. Through a theoretically-informed critical reading of commissioned case studies of international RPL practices, I conceptualized a goal of "optimally socially inclusive" RPL and evaluated the emerging further education and training and higher education sectors in South Africa against it. Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, I can see that "optimally socially inclusive" RPL was, for me, another attempt to "get real" about what RPL was actually capable of. I used the term "responsible" on many occasions to suggest being as open as possible to adults' prior learning by pushing institutional flexibility around understandings of knowledge, learning, experience, learning from experience and pedagogy in favor of RPL but without losing sight of the desired objectives of the sector or institution concerned. *Power, Pedagogy and Possibility* was a sociological project reflecting a key issue at the time, which was to take account of the transforming local conditions while avoiding the marketization of higher education that was becoming increasingly prevalent around the world. The implementation guide involved potential RPL practitioners analyzing their contextual (institutional and curricular) conditions and planning interventions at those levels first, as a steer toward a broader social democratic or even transformatory project for higher education. I argued that "optimally socially inclusive" RPL required these conditions. Only after such analysis and interventions were the nuts and bolts of a possible RPL procedure addressed, which, in sum, I referred to as "knowledgeable RPL practice."

The role of knowledge

While preparing my Ph.D. thesis, *The Hidden Curriculum of the Recognition of Prior Learning: A Case Study* (Harris, 2004), I reassessed the position I had taken in *Power, Pedagogy and Possibility* (Harris, 2000). In the pursuit of "optimally socially inclusive" RPL, I realized that I had adopted a "soft boundary" position in relation to knowledge and had downplayed the role of pedagogy. This was confirmed in my thesis literature review where I argued that there were silences, paradoxes and contradictions around understandings of knowledge and pedagogy in RPL. For example:

* The assumption in the main body of RPL literature is that even if there are distinctions and differences between forms of knowledge (experiential, non-codified, formal, codified and so on), these can be overcome because boundaries are soft and knowledge(s) can transfer unproblematically between contexts (Harris, 2004).
* The notion of pedagogy is underplayed and largely implicit in the RPL literature. It is frequently seen as interfering with learner agency and autonomy. The most common perspective is one in which reflective processes enable candidates to cross soft knowledge boundaries even though other pedagogies may be implicitly at work (Harris, 2004).

The reason for these silences, paradoxes and contradictions, I advanced, were that theories of experiential learning do not address the nature of knowledge in any concerted way. Where it is discussed, it is largely from the perspective of social psychology and in terms of a commitment to experience as a foundation of learning and knowledge production. In contrast, the knowledge question had always formed part of RPL discourse in South Africa, mainly because thinking was guided and informed by the sociology of education, which connected with different and broader debates within philosophy and social theory in which the contested nature of what counts as knowledge formed part, but without necessarily reifying "authentic" experiential knowledge at the expense of "inauthentic" formal knowledge. Referring to the discourses of experiential learning, Millar (1998) argued that the commitment to "authentic" learning constructs the experiential learning movement as a "quest and vision sharply contrasted with the false, mediocre or corrupt." The quest, he claimed, requires a "negative pole" which is "learning which is narrow, intellectual, subject-bound and has somehow comes adrift from feeling or practice" (p. 2). This forces an unnecessary and unhelpful dichotomy that I wanted to address in my thesis.

I used Foucauldian and Bernsteinian concepts to analyze the empirical data in my thesis. Bernstein can be seen as a "hard boundary" theorist, who draws attention to the form and structure of knowledge and its recontextualization into curricula (Bernstein, 2000). His distinctions (vertical and horizontal discourse, hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures, singulars, regions and so on) present "ideal types" rather than empirical realities, but each generates stronger or weaker boundaries or degrees of insulation from other knowledge. This is obviously central to RPL, suggesting that while knowledge gained from life and work experience may be as valuable as formal, academic knowledge, these two forms of knowledge are not the same. The former tends to be contextually situated, whereas codified knowledge is more abstract and capable of generalization across contexts. It follows that experiential knowledge does not necessarily or automatically provide an adequate basis for access into academic study.

My thesis concluded that RPL is power-laden and capable of serving multiple social interests; that knowledge differences play out in practices, even if implicitly, and that RPL has pedagogic dimensions that are often tacit. I recommended a more knowledge-aware approach and a more visible pedagogy based on the metaphor, "knowing the borders and crossing the lines" (Anzaldua as cited in Muller, 2000, p. 71). I argued that theorizing relationships between forms of knowledge and developing teaching and learning strategies to connect them would increase rather than decrease the social inclusiveness of RPL, and that without such understandings, RPL glosses over, rather than resolves, inequity in access and success.

Further Re-Theorizing
The aim of the edited collection *Re-theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning* (Andersson & Harris, 2006) was to further link RPL to different and broader debates within philosophy and social theory. As a counterpoint to adult and experiential learning theory, the chapters in the book draw on a wide range of theoretical frames to suggest new ways of thinking about and practicing RPL: assessment theory; actor network theory; situated learning; critical discourse analysis; cultural historical activity theory; complexity theory; symbolic interactionism; and social identity theory. Taken together, they provide a rich canvas for fresh thinking directed toward improving practices so as to better meet the social goals they purport to advance, and for rising to the challenge set my Michael Young (2006) in the book's Endword:

> RPL is not only a practice that *needs re-theorising* but one which offers the possibility of *new theorising*. ... Once RPL is freed from its largely rhetorical role as the great radical strategy or the great solution to inequality, it offers a unique and very concrete set of contexts for debating the fundamental educational issues that such questions give rise to and for finding new ways of approaching them. (p. 326)

This challenge was taken up in the first output of the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC), *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives* (Harris, Breier, & Wihak, 2011). In order to support new theorizing, PLIRC required a clear sense of what research already existed. The book acts as a compendium of reviews of RPL research in Australia, Canada, England, the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Scotland, South Africa, Sweden and the United States, establishing a benchmark for further research.

RPL as "Specialised Pedagogy"
My most recent research has taken place with colleagues leading a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)/University of the Western Cape (UWC) research project, called "RPL as Specialised Pedagogy."[1] The starting position is one of understanding knowledge difference. As Ralphs (2009) put it: "Where and how knowledge is acquired or constructed really does matter and cannot be assumed as insignificant in the assessment and certification thereof" (p. 7). Moreover, moving between forms of knowledge does not happen automatically or through reflection alone: it is a complex process that requires deliberate pedagogy. Hence, the focus is on the specialized pedagogies that are needed to support RPL as a process of mediation and navigation between different forms of knowledge and sites of practice:

> RPL is seldom reducible to a technical formula for measuring equivalence and allocating common currency (credit); it is itself a *distinctive pedagogic practice*, an encoded practice with distinctive purposes

and rules of description that provides the tools for navigating learning and assessment practices in and across the different contexts of the system. (p. 13, emphasis added)

One of the university sites explored the following question: To what extent does the nature of the disciplinary or knowledge domain into which RPL candidates seek access determine the feasibility of RPL at postgraduate level? Interviews were conducted with academic leaders in a range of disciplinary fields. We found that although knowledge structure *does* affect the feasibility of RPL, it was not as important a determinant of postgraduate level RPL as we anticipated it would be. Equally important was "pedagogic agency," i.e., committed individual academics who played a central role in designing diverse and innovative pedagogic interventions. The converse also was the case: academics and managers opposed to RPL acted as powerful gatekeepers, even if the programs concerned were hypothetically conducive to RPL on knowledge grounds. The research also showed that knowledge is as much about cultural and institutional practices as it is about forms of knowledge. These practices translate into distinct environments within which RPL has to operate, and these play a significant role in offering affordances or barriers to pedagogic agency and the realization of RPL (Cooper & Harris, forthcoming 2013).

This is a work-in-progress. The research project will be analyzing candidate biographies in order to understand more about learner agency and success factors. A conceptual framework for theorizing and operationalizing RPL as a pedagogic practice is being developed and tested. The aspiration is to engage in some new theorizing, which will support the development of more successful and equitable RPL practices and act as an explanatory device in relation to existing practices in South Africa and beyond.

W(h)ither the Trojan Horse?

So, what has happened to the original ways of seeing RPL? The main contribution of the article, in my view, was to disaggregate RPL along a range of axes, and to provide a less sentimentalized understanding of its social functions. Obviously, the models were too simplistic; they combine and cross-fertilize in numerous ways, for example, Procrustean RPL is by no means the sole preserve of further or vocational education and training; it can equally well operate in higher education, because economic and human capital discourses have developed unabated and RPL has been progressively reconceptualized accordingly.

The Trojan horse model was suggestive to many, and still carries a certain resonance. Its descendant, "optimally socially inclusive" RPL, has survived in the South African context and is being taken forward in the SAQA/UWC research project outlined earlier as a vehicle of social redress that takes account of different forms of knowledge, navigational pedagogies and learner agency. Through new theorizing, the aspiration is to develop some conceptual wings for the Trojan horse (to stretch the metaphor perhaps too far!). More of these are needed to move it from a "feel good wish list" to a realistic set of educational goals fully cognizant of their grounding social conditions. We need to go beyond our experience to achieve this by engaging in the kind of scholarly activity advanced in *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives* (Harris, Breier, & Wihak, 2011).

OERs, MOOCs, RPL and the Trojan Horse

To turn to the theme of this *PLAIO* issue, I imagine that the advent of open educational resources (OERs) and massive open online courses (MOOCs) and the formal recognition of the learning acquired through them will raise many of the issues that RPL has faced over the years. In their favor, OERs and MOOCs look set to expand learning opportunities and have readily been harnessed to progressive discourses of change, widening participation and increasing equity. Importantly, they will already embody an educational logic. Knowledge will have been recontextualized in curricular terms and program designers will have taken account of pedagogic dimensions such as timing, pacing and sequencing (Bernstein, 2000). This should make the learning easier to accredit, and it is likely that a number of institutions or accrediting bodies will oblige; if they have RPL expertise so much the better. Indeed it is likely that providers of RPL are already being approached by MOOC dropouts. Certainly, the expertise is there to deal with students who decide they want to carry some MOOC

credit forward into another learning environment. Despite the hype, and notwithstanding their attractiveness at face value, we can, however, be reasonably sure that OERs and MOOCs will be power-laden at various levels:

- What type of resources will become "open"? How relevant and suitable will those resources be in an international, albeit globalizing world? Will they result in the dominance of standardized learning packages developed by particular universities? Is this desirable?
- Who will get access to what type of OER or MOOC? Who will manage to study effectively with them, and who will drop out because of a lack of structure and pedagogic support? How will sustainable communities of learning be developed? How will the potential for learner isolation be mitigated?
- Will OERs actually increase the democratization of education or support further differentiation between types of institution and types of qualification? Will the role of specialist institutions be undermined? Will institutional thinking be subsumed into systemic thinking?

In conclusion, the knowledge issues that typically inhere in RPL will be less stark when it comes to recognizing learning from OERs and MOOCs. However, these new developments do raise similar sociological and pedagogical questions, suggesting that although they seem to "fit the bill," they may not be as democratic and equitable as they appear at first sight.

Note

[1] It involves five RPL sites: a private provider specializing in trades and occupations, two public universities and the Workers' College in KwaZulu-Natal.

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