Recognition of prior learning in promoting lifelong learning: A pedagogy of hope or a shattering of dreams?

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an issue within the context of lifelong learning, given the (South African) issues of equity and redress, the international demands on adults to contribute to the knowledge economy, qualification inflation and increased competitiveness for knowledge workers. In the process of conscientisation and in an attempt to provide a pedagogy of hope, education could be seen by some as the panacea of all ills and RPL clearly needs to be handled with circumspection. RPL needs to be implemented ethically for it to be sustainable and to make a contribution to the individual perceptions and attainment of the Pedagogy of Hope. Integrating RPL has resulted in varied approaches: RPL can be aimed at the selection of individuals and the recognition of existing knowledge; or the transformation of individuals or knowledge in the process of assessment. This differentiation provides a useful distinction between the various functions that RPL can fulfill. In this chapter we intend to explore the potential that RPL holds as a pedagogy of hope specifically within the field of lifelong learning. We argue that the practice of RPL may facilitate or inhibit hope for adult learners in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has gained prominence in the South African higher education sector in the past decade. RPL has become an imperative in South African higher education given the legacy of the previous dispensation with issues such as equity and redress as pertinent points of focus. The aspects of equity and redress differentiate RPL in South Africa from similar initiatives in other countries (SAQA 2004) and it can therefore not be considered a politically neutral process within this context (Castle and Atwood 2001; Cretchley and Castle 2001; Van Rooy 2002; Osman and Castle 2004;). RPL can be defined as the comparison of previous
learning and experience of a learner obtained in whichever way, against the required learning outcomes specified for a specific qualification, and the acceptance of that which meets the requirements for the purposes of qualification (Kistan 2002; SAQA 1997).

The national discourse on equity and redress, together with the prominence of the current global spotlight on the knowledge economy, increases the urgency of RPL. This is important especially in the light of qualification inflation and increased competitiveness for knowledge workers (Hazelkorn 2004; Kraak 2004; Bloland 2005; Pearson 2005; McAlpine and Norton 2006). Whether RPL is considered as a strategy to redress an inequitable past or as a strategy to sustain a competitive workforce, it is clearly an issue with a strong emphasis on lifelong learning as adult learners are mostly involved (Osman and Castle 2002). RPL requires a negotiation of the value and significance of these learners’ prior formal, non-formal, and/or informal learning. However, the implementation of RPL becomes troublesome in any approach or model when formal learning has to be matched with informal learning (work or life experience) (Breier 2001). Michelson (2006) adds that not all forms of learning are valued in the higher education context. RPL has therefore become part of the power struggle between different forms of knowledge, where learning situated in a particular context may not be valued in another knowledge context. Osman and Castle (2002; 2004) argue that a clear-cut distinction between forms of learning and knowledge is not easily made, and that more constructive dialogue is needed to reconcile these different forms within the South African context. RPL may seem like a beacon of hope to many adult learners, but it is quite difficult to implement in a mass education system governed by a universal time-based calendar, a credit system and limited resources (Cretchley and Castle 2001).

Against this background we investigate the potential of RPL as a pedagogy of hope for South African adult learners. We focus on the macro-level aspects related to the institutional perspective, as well as those related to micro-level educational empowerment of individual learners. We argue that the practice of RPL may facilitate or inhibit hope for adult learners in higher education.

**MAKING A CASE FOR THE PEDAGOGY OF HOPE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The issues of equity and redress, which make the practice of RPL in South African unique, relate to the social justice goals propounded in Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy (Freire 1972, 1985, 1995, 1998). Freire’s critical pedagogy has been influential in education in general and in the context of development due to the social justice imperative (Prych 2007). Adult education (formal or non-formal) has espoused the philosophy of critical pedagogy due to its alignment with the general theories of andragogy (Knowles 1980). The context of Freire’s work was one where endemic poverty and exclusion affected the majority of the population and he thus advocated for social justice, liberation and a more humane society.
Freire’s philosophy of hope as an integral part of pedagogy may form an interesting link to calls for higher education institutions to play a transformatory role (Jansen 2002; Waghid 2002; Horsthemke 2004; Kraak 2004; Andreasson 2006; Botman 2007) and the call for greater relevance and accountability of higher educational institutions within their geographic context (Boyer 1997; Sall et al. 2003; Mseleku 2004). Social responsiveness and accountability are not only moral imperatives, but also fundamental elements of the knowledge society where knowledge is created within contexts of application and requires greater involvement with local communities and governments (Gibbons et al. 1994).

In the global era, knowledge is seen as a public and private good, the key to economic advance and social inclusion (Henkel 2007). This comodification of knowledge and its concomitant power has implications for patterns of dominance and oppression in society. Kahn and Kellner (2007) question whether Freire’s radical pedagogy has any currency within this context of competition for admission. RPL can thus be framed as an issue of social justice (transformation at the macro-level), as well as for personal transformation, progress and liberation (empowerment at the micro-level). Both micro- and macro-level aspects need to be considered in the context of liberation (Albertyn et al. 2002). According to Freire (1972), development and liberation result from individual self-awareness and subsequent collective action. McArthur (2010, 302) builds on the macro-level aspects and contends that a common facet of critical pedagogy is the intention to foster public spaces in which learning within higher education is not artificially separated from society, but rather engages with the broader society in a creative and transformative dialectic. Kahn and Kellner (2007) call for new modes of revolutionary struggle within the global era. Understanding the context is important, but action is essential in the process of education. RPL may form the basis of such action and therefore has potential as a pedagogy of hope through challenging existing knowledge structures at the macro-level and enabling empowerment at the micro-level.

**RPL AS A PEDAGOGY OF HOPE: TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONS THROUGH CHALLENGING EXISTING KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES**

RPL in higher education institutions is often critiqued on the grounds that it:

- does not challenge academic claims to epistemological authority: it posits academic knowledge as the norm around which judgments of inclusion and exclusion can be made; it extends the academy’s traditional gatekeeping function; and it calibrates the legitimacy of students’ knowledge according to sameness and correspondences (Michelson 2006, 155).

Such a conceptualisation of RPL limits its transformative potential, and therefore it’s potential as pedagogy of hope. The potential of RPL as pedagogy of hope at the macro-level therefore needs to be considered within the margins of philosophical and epistemological power that institutions hold.
Andersson (2006, 32, in reference to Kvale 1996, 121) differentiates between ‘selection’ and ‘transformation’ as the main functions of RPL, with the focus on either the individual or knowledge. RPL can be aimed at the selection of individuals and the recognition of existing knowledge; or the transformation of individuals or knowledge in the process of assessing prior learning. This differentiation provides a useful distinction between the various functions that RPL can fulfil.

Authors such as Breier (2001), Harris (1999, 2000) and Osman and Castle (2004) emphasise the transformative value of RPL as a tool to redress of social inequality and facilitate social inclusion. However, it has to be noted that other literature on RPL (Castle and Atwood 2001; Osman and Castle 2002;) also focuses on broader instrumental issues such as the accessibility of education systems in general, which does not necessarily focus on the role of RPL in social redress and inclusion. A distinction between transformative or instrumental approaches to RPL may, however, be too simplistic. Most institutions have a complicated mix of different approaches to RPL (Breier 2001) and RPL may therefore challenge the philosophical and epistemic status quo in a variety of ways.

In South Africa, Harris (1999) has referred to the Procrustean, Learning and Development, Radical and Trojan-horse approaches as possible ways of looking at RPL practice. The Procrustean approach to RPL assesses individual competence according to prescribed outcomes and standards, with a focus on the future development of specific knowledge and skills. Knowledge is viewed as a measurable commodity with an exchangeable market value (Harris 1999). This approach seems to have a strong selective function in terms of both the individual and knowledge, but limited transformative potential if compared to Kvale’s (1996 in Andersson 2006) distinctions in educational assessment. This approach to RPL allows institutions to make judgments about learners’ preparedness for study and/or eligibility for credit (Osman and Castle 2002 and 2004) based on existing and accepted notions of academic knowledge.

The Learning and Development approach (Harris 1999) has a less stringent classification of individual competence and prior knowledge. Individual advancement and the democratising of education underpin this approach. The transformative potential for the individual and knowledge construction in this method would seem to be greater than in the case of the Procrustean approach (Harris 1999). However, knowledge is still stratified, with disciplinary knowledge more highly valued than that gained from experience. Individuals’ prior learning therefore has to be moulded to conform and fit in with dominant academic discourses and existing disciplinary bodies of knowledge. RPL functions as the acculturation process in the elite academic system of formal knowledge structures that are not challenged. The transformative value in terms of knowledge assessment is therefore limited.

Harris (1999) describes the Radical approach to RPL as a move towards social change, with a closer link between experience, learning and knowledge as socially constructed entities. Radicalism has a strong transformational focus in both the assessment of the individual and of knowledge. However, this approach
risks idealising experiential knowledge and thereby excluding and alienating more formalised discourses.

Harris (1999) presents the *Trojan-horse* approach as a conceptualisation of RPL where more permeable knowledge boundaries, curriculum flexibility and practice-based learning programmes are evident; changes that are notable in some contexts in South African higher education. This approach has a transformation function for both the individual and knowledge systems. The Trojan-horse approach has a critical element that aims to align experiential knowledge (as obtained in practice) with disciplinary knowledge (as promoted in theory), neither of which are deemed beyond contestation. RPL therefore becomes part of the construction of knowledge and curricula, transforming both the individual and the knowledge. This more transformative approach to RPL facilitates equity and redress through the progression from one NQF level to another (Harris 2000).

These different understandings of RPL have led to the development of three main models, namely the credit exchange model, the developmental model, and the transformational model (Osman and Castle 2004). Credit exchange is the most efficient model but has the least implications for institutional change, as it does not address the issues of equity and redress, as in the case of the developmental and transformative models (Breier 2001). The implementation of RPL takes on different forms in this model, according to purposes varying between access and credit. Castle and Atwood (2001) argue the advantages of following the RPL for access only route, which recognises the individual’s personal and intellectual potential, but does not assume the learner’s knowledge, skills and/or experience to be equivalent to that gained through formal education. However, approaches to RPL that merely focus on access, often do not pay attention to what happens after access (post-entry). Castle and Atwood (2001) lay emphasis on the importance of post-entry experience with the aim of deepening and extending prior knowledge. RPL for credit has advantages, such as giving learners negotiating power, but Van Rooy (2002) and Osman and Castle (2004) warn that it removes learners from the learning experience itself. RPL for credit would, in addition, suggest predetermined and static curricula. Learning then becomes a product rather than a process. RPL for credit transfer requires inter-institutional agreements on evaluation standards, as well as a national system of credit transfer between higher education institutions and other providers. Credit transfer may therefore be difficult to achieve, but will generate closer networks between the community, industry, employers, professional bodies, labour and other educational institutions (Van Rooy 2002; Osman and Castle 2004).

The developmental model (Osman and Castle 2004) requires of the learner to extract and articulate learning from experience in a format closely related to academic learning for which access and/or credit is sought, although the experience might not be acquired from formal sources. In the credit exchange model described by Osman and Castle (2004), learning is viewed as a form of acquisition. Experience is seen as a commodity that can be traded and transferred. Therefore only experience accredited by an authority or institution is commonly recognised. Articulation of qualifications
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through the NQF and SAQA frameworks facilitates such a process. This approach
is simple to administer, but it is more instrumental and less transformative. Such an
approach runs the risk of making little contribution to equity and redress in South
Africa, as possible candidates have already been disadvantaged by their previous
education.

The transformational model emphazises the transformative potential of RPL,
with issues such as equity and redress as central features (Osman and Castle
2004). The transformational model combines the drive for social change evident
in the Radical approach (Harris 1999), with the more flexible and open view of
knowledge construction within the Trojan-horse approach (Harris 1999). As such, the
transformational model of RPL is most probably best aligned to serve as pedagogy of
hope within the spirit of Freire’s work, but it may be difficult to achieve in practice
where traditional discipline-specific notions of knowledge prevail.

The potential of RPL as a pedagogy of hope at the macro-level is therefore essentially
a question of knowledge construction and validation. According to Osman and Castle
(2002, 64), RPL assumes that broad equivalency can be established between the
learning acquired through experience and that used in formal education. They contend,
however, that there is contention regarding whether knowledge from experience can be
a resource for academic learning or for disciplinary knowledge. They state that learning
is seen to be subjective and developed within specific contexts. ‘Knowledge gained
from the workplace and community is likely to be personal, unspoken, unformalised
knowledge, bound up in the affective, cultural and social context in which it was gained’
(a point also mentioned by Mezirow 2000). They point out that this knowledge may
appear ‘insignificant, irrelevant or even invisible when set beside the more theoretical,
abstract and systematic knowledge valued by university educators. It may be dismissed
as subjective, lacking in rigour, atheoretical and concrete.’ This points to the debate
whether experience leads to learning and how to measure and value recognition of
learning from experience. Michelson (2000, in Osman and Castle 2002, 64), maintains
that whether work experience can be a resource in higher education depends upon
how RPL is conceived and practised; what students make of their experience; how
academics conceive of learning; and how they regard epistemology and curriculum.
Osman and Castle (2002, 64) state:

As university educators, we accept that experiential knowledge is distinct from
academic ways of knowing, and that learning that occurs in a variety of contexts
is not always transferable, but we believe the epistemological challenges in RPL
relate to whose knowledge is valued and privileged, and whether knowledge
outside disciplinary boundaries can be recognized by those within the discipline.
Different kinds of knowledge and learning may complement each other. They may
be interdependent rather than exclusive. Furthermore, we suggest that the university
can be both a site which defines and constructs knowledge and a site which examines
and engages critically with different contexts of knowledge creation. RPL facilitates
a meeting of different traditions of knowledge emanating from different sites of
practice. It brings into the university different and other ways of knowing.

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RPL can therefore be seen as a catalyst for change and a pedagogy of hope, but it has implications for the mission, admission policy, programmes, curriculum, and mode of delivery, time-table, assessment procedures, staffing and the learning environment at any higher education institution (Osman and Castle 2004). RPL demands a new perspective on learning and challenges traditional conceptions of knowledge. It is clear that RPL will only succeed as a pedagogy of hope in South African universities if it is backed by a considerable investment in research, policy development and advocacy at the macro-level. The macro-level, however, needs to consist in tandem with the micro-level and the educational empowerment for personal liberation is an essential part of Freire’s philosophy.

**A PEDAGOGY OF HOPE IN TRANSFORMING INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS: ENABLING EMPOWERMENT**

Integrating RPL into higher education practices has resulted in varied approaches (Frick et al. 2007). According to SAQA (2004) and its promotion of a transformative approach, South African higher education institutions are required to incorporate RPL in their strategic plans and their institutional policies. However, RPL is often not directed at important issues such as inclusion and adult learning, which might not be considered crucial by those not strongly motivated by the need for social transformation. As pointed out by several authors (Breier 2001; Castle and Atwood 2001; Cretchley and Castle 2001; Van Rooy 2002; Osman and Castle 2004), RPL often tends to be instrumental rather than to address equity and redress. Breier (2001) found that most South African institutions of higher education provide RPL for access rather than for credits or qualifications. It is, therefore, mostly a pre-entrance mechanism rather than an active in-course progress (post-entry) mechanism. An instrumental approach to RPL may have limited potential for transformation and empowerment, and therefore limited potential as a pedagogy of hope at the micro-level.

Liberation is a process and not a once off event. According to Curry-Stevens (2007, 38) there is a post-structural recognition of the pluralised sites of domination. Therefore liberation, as well as the definition of oppression, is relative to its context (Shim 2008). Education for liberation is grounded within each participant’s context. Within this context, participants do not only learn as a result of information that is imposed on them, but they enter in deep enquiry and questioning about their own knowledge and assumptions (Freire 1972). Participants should not be merely seen as objects of a learning experience but rather as partakers of their own development process to bring about transformation. Learning in this case does not only take place on a cognitive level, but also on a conative and affective level (Mezirow 2000). Learners move from their world where they may have been exposed to false consciousness towards critical reflection on their realities. Critical consciousness is thus a deliberate, systematic education process that must be cultivated and nurtured over time (Clovanec 2006). Freire (1972) emphasised the importance of reflection, action and reflection.
Institutions that are able to implement RPL effectively appear to follow a learner-centred approach that is inclusive, supportive and respectful of difference and personal preference (Osman and Castle 2004). Geyser (2001) emphasizes the central role the learner plays in the entire RPL process. It is the learner who finds and imparts relevant evidence of prior learning. Harris (2000) presents learning as both a process of self-organisation and one of enculturation that occurs within the educational realm. Michelson (1999, as quoted in Van Rooy 2002) promotes learner input into curriculum development, which has implications in terms of institutional commitment to RPL and flexibility in terms of module construction. Harris (2000) suggests that learners be given the opportunity to self-assess their prior learning in comparison to the whole curriculum, and be given opportunities to consolidate their prior and new learning throughout the programme. This will enable learners to plan ahead and link prior learning to the existing curriculum and is referred to as the spine module that is strongly reflective nature. Learners should ideally also be able to customise aspects of the learning programme to address their own needs and interests and this is referred to as open modules. This flexibility may signify the integration of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge in curriculum development, which is not always easily achieved (Harris 2000). Curriculum development would then require a critical review of and possible changes to the dominant pedagogical stance(s). Harris (2000), however, argues that curricular change may not be sufficient and therefore supports an even broader notion of equivalence, which implies flexibility not only in terms of modular and programme construction, but also in terms of awarding credit.

Furthermore, RPL requires a choice in curricular offerings and requires a flexible institutional structure that provides a variety of entry and exit points and routes through programmes. Flexible entry and exit points in programmes allows for the utilisation of prior learning and for an individual pace and level of learning (Cretchley and Castle 2001). The role of dialogue and communication within a nurturing respectful relationship with the facilitator and fellow learners is important in the process of liberation. Freire had a vision of a dialogical, non-authoritarian relationship where both parties learn from the other (Freire 1998). Meaning is thus created in the interaction between dialogue partners. Problem posing was a key element in the process of learning and learners and teachers are co-investigators in the mutual learning process (Shim 2008). According to Dysthe et al. (2006), active participation fosters growth and transformation of understandings. For this process of social transformation, a common vision or hope which unites people is needed (Allman 2001, in Clovanec 2006). In such environments a pedagogy of hope may develop that support meaningful transformation and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The conceptualisation of RPL in both philosophical and epistemological terms has implications for the practice of RPL and will influence students, lecturers and institutions (Osman and Castle 2002). The aim of creating a more humane society is
Recognition of prior learning in promoting lifelong learning ... based on both micro- and macro-level components of liberation. Power imbalances are seen as the core of critical pedagogy which aims to enable both students and lecturers to gain greater freedom and control (McArthur 2010). Empowerment is a process that takes place over time and it refers to the amount of control that individuals have over the circumstances of their lives and their ability to make choices (Kabeer 2005; Laverack 2005). This represents a move away from traditional notions of power to the post-modern conceptualisation of the creative aspect of power that is situated within the everyday reality of individuals (Bloland 2005).

Through moving from the micro-level dynamics of learning in a nurturing environment to develop confidence and critical consciousness, the macro-level can be collectively challenged to achieve the aims of social justice and a more humane society. This is supported by Kahn and Kellner (2007, 440) who state: ‘[e]ducation, at its best provides the symbolic and cultural capital competencies that empower people to survive and prosper in an increasingly complex and changing world, and the resources to produce a more cooperative, democratic egalitarian and just society’. Mc Arthur (2010) proposes that higher education offers some chance to minimise the distortions of power and to engage in emancipatory pedagogy by focusing on providing a balance between authenticity (knowledge which is complex and contested) and inclusivity (where the boundaries are permeable and foster public spaces).

RPL may provide the impetus for social justice and for creating a more humane society on a macro-level. However, there needs to be balance on the micro-level. Advocacy for transformation at the sites of education once learners have gained access to higher education institutions is imperative. Adult educational principles should be applied in teaching and learning practices within higher education institutions. Application of these principles will ensure that the entrants via RPL are not victims of the pedagogy of hope without the necessary processes in place to realise both personal transformation and meet the aims of social justice. In the process of conscientisation and in an attempt to provide a pedagogy of hope, education could be seen by some as the panacea of all ills and RPL clearly needs to be handled with circumspection. RPL needs to be implemented ethically for it to be sustainable to make a contribution to the individual perceptions and attainment of the pedagogy of hope.

REFERENCES


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SAQA, see South African Qualifications Authority.


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