

Myth, Romance, and Reality: Recognizing Experiential Learning in University Contexts

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1. INTRODUCTION

University-level applications of experiential learning practice are wildly diverse and often suffer confusions around process and language. As a result, it is not surprising that recognizing prior learning (RPL) practitioners are challenged not only in their efforts to establish and manage ethical and rigorous practices but also to explain them satisfactorily to others, especially to those who are critical of the inclusion of prior and experiential learning within the university context. Practitioners at Canada's Athabasca University have observed gaps between learners' romanticized views of past events and the pedagogical or cognitive contribution of those events to learning. The need to acknowledge and close these gaps underscores the importance of developing and implementing quality assurance measures. In so doing, the quality of the resultant RPL process should reflect the relationship of demonstrated experiential learning to pedagogy – a rigorous exercise that often challenges learners and practitioners to dispense with both myth and romance. This paper will present an analysis of Athabasca University's rigorous system of recognizing prior learning, using the analysis as a framework within which to address the challenge of application: how do we ensure high quality practice? The paper begins with a brief discussion of the history and current place of RPL practice in Canada.

2. SITUATING RECOGNIZING PRIOR LEARNING IN CANADA

Situating prior learning in Canada and describing current practice is difficult both practically and theoretically, in large part due to a lack of a clear and consistent language with which to describe it. Originally known as prior learning assessment (PLA, and still referred to as such by some), the term “recognizing prior learning” (RPL) is new to Canada but is making inroads. It is thought by its supporters to be more inclusive than the Canadian term PLAR (“prior learning assessment and recognition”) which has evolved from PLA (“prior learning assessment”) by the addition of an “r” which denotes *recognition*. In Canada, confusion results when PLAR is often used as an “umbrella” term that includes the

processes of credit transfer (CT) and qualification recognition (QR) processes because both these processes in fact also address prior formal learning. In Canadian universities engaged in the practice of recognizing prior informal and experiential learning for university credit, the term PLAR usually refers to RPL via portfolio assessment.¹ That is the intended meaning in this paper. In Canadian practice, similarly, both recent and current states of RPL are not well defined or clearly understood. The erratic nature that has characterized RPL's Canadian history is briefly highlighted below.

Education in Canada is provincially governed; systems differ therefore across the country. Institutionally, the Ontario college system and Manitoba's Red River College have been RPL leaders in Canada. Following some early pilot projects at Mohawk College in Ontario in the late 70s and 80s and the introduction of a PLAR policy at Mohawk in 1985, Winnipeg's Red River College initiated several projects that resulted in institution-wide policy implementation in 1994 (Van Kleef, 2006). Manitoba, still the national leader in PLAR policy and structure, introduced a PLAR policy framework “based on three cornerstone service areas – post secondary, advisory services, and industry” (CMEC, 2007).

The province of British Columbia once had innovative strategies in place for mature learners through agencies such as the British Columbia Open University and the Open Learning Agency, but the formal closure of BC's Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) in 2004 marked the end of an era of support for RPL initiatives. Currently, in BC as in Alberta, PLAR practitioners are working to forge a new provincial framework for PLAR activities. British Columbia surpasses Alberta's initiative, however, in that there is funding in place for PLAR activity in post secondary institutions.

In Quebec, PLAR policy became a priority in 1985 and was supported by funding legislation, and by 2003, Quebec's colleges were receiving PLAR funding equal to standard course delivery funding. Similarly, in 2003, Ontario's Ministry of Training,

Colleges and Universities implemented a province-wide PLAR policy that included a funding formula for PLAR services. In 2002, the province of Saskatchewan launched a PLAR funding initiative, in cooperation with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board and subsequently, Saskatchewan has embarked on a number of PLAR initiatives in the areas of human resources planning, early education, and nursing. Alberta's Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) has been the driving government force in that province, commissioning a study in 2005 to inform policy development and working toward the establishment of a provincial PLAR framework through a series of government-hosted province-wide fora. In Atlantic Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador developed provincial guidelines for PLAR in 1998. PEI issued a public statement in support of PLAR in 2002 and tied PLAR to its apprenticeship system in 2004 to help alleviate skill shortages. Nova Scotia implemented a PLAR framework in 2005.

Nationally, the federal government has supported PLAR initiatives as a labour force development strategy since 1994. The Canadian government continues to fund learning and recognition-of-learning initiatives, often under the umbrella of foreign credential recognition (FCR) or workplace skills initiatives. Regardless, the outcomes are designed to realize "PLAR's perceived potential to identify and recognize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of immigrants who find themselves unemployed and underemployed in Canada's labour force" (OECD, 2007).

Why is this idiosyncratic history important? Its relevance to this paper falls into the realm of reality on two fronts: the reality of the slow and lurching progress of RPL initiatives across a large and ideologically disparate country; and the reality of the importance of economic ties to the health and urgency of those initiatives. Always an important factor in institutional consideration of RPL's benefits, the current economic tide in Canada has evidenced by labor and government spokespeople calling emphatically for a greater and more robust recognition of prior learning. (cite) These are the foundational realities against which Canadian post secondary institutions frame RPL. But a third reality – the reality of relating prior and experiential learning to a firm pedagogy – provides the realism that grounds Athabasca University's RPL practice while stringently setting it apart from the elements of myth and romance that seem to accompany the notion of RPL in the minds of learners.

3. DISPELLING THE MYTHS OF RPL

Within Canadian university settings, there are a number of levels at which RPL practice is misunderstood. The first is purely definitional – where learners do not understand the difference between transfer credit and RPL. At AU, there are many hundreds of transfer credit agreements in place because of the nature of our open university and its role in the Canadian post secondary system. Most learners entering an AU program are able to import generous amounts of transfer credit earned from study at other universities or colleges. This process is handled by the Registrar's Office in a prescribed, lock-step fashion.

Once enrolled in a program at AU, learners are eligible to enter the RPL process (called PLAR, locally) and work toward gaining the maximum number of credits permitted by their program. (PLAR credits range, across programs, from a low of 3 possible credits – in a three-year, 90-credit BA degree program) to a high of 39 possible credits (in a three-year, 90-credit Bachelor of Labour Relations and Human Resources degree program). Based on their misunderstanding of what RPL is, and the accompanying lack of clarity around the distinction of formal learning from informal or non formal learning, the first myth that our RPL learners entertain is that the process is mechanical and check-list in nature. This hugely pervasive myth blurs the first basic tenet of prior learning assessment which separates the concept of *doing* from the concept of knowing (CAEL principles....).

Myth #2 is a double-edged sword. Learners often believe that either none of their informal learning has value, because it did not come from a classroom, a teacher, or a book; or they believe that everything they have done will translate into university-level knowledge. Of course neither is true. Dewey (1938) was among the first to recognize and celebrate the value of experiential learning. The other side of the second myth is more difficult to present to learners. In our system at AU, not only must RPL-awarded credit be at university-level – once again adhering to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning's basic principles – but it must also fit within the learner's program of study. That is, physics and chemistry knowledge gained from a firefighter's experience on the job or training at the fire academy may not complement its host's attempts to earn an Arts degree. On the other hand, it may; each decision arises from the individual case and spans the advising, counselling, strategizing, and mentoring stages of our portfolio preparation process.

Myth #3 reflects a belief that is commonly held both by some learners and by those who would malign RPL and declare it not fit to be a part of the university learning process. The myth is that including RPL credit in a degree program is a fast-and-easy way to a credential. In truth, when AU's prior learning process is enacted, through mentoring and careful supervision, in measured, guided, and rigorous pedagogical fashion, many learners are tempted to walk away from the deliberative and deeply cognitive work that is required. "It's easier just to take the courses," they say. That may or may not be true; but we *do* know with certainty that acquiring RPL is a money-saving route. It's highly likely also, in most cases, that the RPL work load involved in successfully receiving, for example, the equivalent of seven courses' worth of credit, will generally be less than the work load required to slog your way through seven university courses.

The corollary to Myth #3, again held by RPL naysayers, is that learners acquiring RPL credit are not sufficiently well-prepared for subsequent study at the university. Recent research has shown that, to the contrary, AU learners successfully completing prior learning processes have performed as well or better than non-RPL learners in subsequent courses (Arscott, Crowther, Young & Ungarian, 2007). Additionally, anecdotal evidence collected in AU's RPL exit survey indicate that RPL learners value the learning process that they have engaged in while demonstrating their prior learning, rating the process with 4s and 5s (very good and excellent) in terms of the quality of learning and the transferability of learned skills to other learning situations.

4. REALITY:

The pedagogical reality of AU's RPL process itself stands in greatest opposition to the slate of myths outlined above while providing the greatest challenge for implementation. For it is in the process of preparing a RPL portfolio that, while giving learners the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge through the careful selection, reflection, connection, and projection of learning artifacts, challenges them to fully exercise the scope and latitude of their prior knowledge. In so doing, learners' cognitive engagement with their learning histories through reflection gives rise to new knowledge – of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession. Through this practice of portfolio-as-journey, learners pass through a number of cognitive stages while assigning identity to their experiences. They "reflect, select, connect, project," and each of these

steps requires intense and laborious thought; each step may spark the "aha" moment that occasions learning.

4.1 Reflect

From the starting point of applied relevance and personal meaning, learners enter into a thoughtful reflective process to create new meaning, resulting in what Crites (1971) has termed a movement from the "mundane" to the "sacred": learning to understand experience beyond the isolated, secular level (Angelo, 1993; Mackeracher, 2004). Helping learners to settle at this level of interpreting their experiences is a process intended to elevate their stories beyond the confines of their own immediacy to more generic levels of knowledge. For example, a single mother who wrote about her demanding schedule that included shuttling her sons back and forth to hockey practice and assuming multiple parental roles used those experiences to highlight her organizational skills and the resultant value that her inter-collegial skills brought to her workplace. As she worked through the process of reflecting on the lessons emanating from her household tasks, she drew new meaning from those tasks and "learned" that she had actually been honing new skills.

4.2 Select

Adults are celebrated for their rich and varied learning histories, and, when preparing their portfolio, they must mine their past experiences selectively for the events that can most effectively anchor the learning narrative that they are creating. Their selections constitute a type of scaffolding upon which they build the stories of their learning. In putting together this framework, they map both their histories and their futures in a form of strategizing similar to the cognitive processes that would formulate the answer to an essay question asking for a detailed explanation of the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this case, however, the value and nature of the knowledge incidents are contained in the fact that they are related to self; selecting them and denoting them as valuable labels them as integral pieces in the exercise of building self-knowledge.

4.3 Connect

The act of connection occurs both subsequently to and concomitantly with the act of selection. Once the "knowledge items" have been identified, they must be linked or arranged into an order that serves the purpose at hand. While the complex "brain rules for

meaningful learning” (Mackeracher, 2004, p. 14) are located in cognitive psychological studies that are outside the purview of this paper, as educators we depend on research that tells us that the notion of connection is critical to learning as it both creates and uncovers meaning. The integral theme of connecting experience to meaning recurs in situated cognition theory (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) and also in transformation theory (Mezirow, 1991). Using the same processes that Mezirow outlines for engendering transformational learning by critically reflecting on and modifying current assumptions and understandings, the PLAR process also asks learners to engage in knowledge-building activity.

4.4 Project

The last step for RPL applicants in putting forth the demonstration of their learning is to determine an appropriate presentation method – to project the evidence of their learning in a format deemed acceptable by the receiving institution. The presence of the rigorous, policy-mandated guidelines serves to assure those within the institution of RPL’s quality as a learning process. That there is an ongoing tension around the related issues of power, control, and voice is well understood within the field (Andersson & Harris, 2006). Nonetheless, in conforming to a structured set of expectations, learners meet another set of learning outcomes by fulfilling process (or generic) outcomes that contain skills such as using and constructing documents accurately; communicating appropriately in text; understanding one’s learning style and adapting it to tasks at hand.

5. WHERE'S THE ROMANCE?

The reality of a pedagogically-sound RPL practice, described above, should belie any of the myths that exist in the minds of those not familiar with the practice. Still, presenting oneself for review - or creating an identity through a collection of artifacts – seems to hold some intrigue for learners, and a “romantic” view of experiential learning is at times manifest in some learners’ perceptions of the quality and nature of their histories as learners over-celebrate the self through extensive personal history activity. That said, Harris (1999) spoke of the relationships between personal biographies for self-therapy and of connecting personal experience to social history in meaningful ways. There is no doubt that the autobiographical substance of RPL-activity is a useful and personally satisfying aspect of a laborious process. Recognizing prior learning must be allowed – and encouraged – however, to transcend

the celebration-of-self and become a celebration of learning. It is challenging to find the balance between the two integral functions of the portfolio.

At AU, a responsive mentoring process for learners addresses issues of identity and learning and helps to bridge the chasm – however narrow or wide – between romance and reality in the RPL process. Our experience has shown us that it is critical to provide mentoring opportunities where learners can receive assistance to bridge those gaps (Arscott, Crowther, Young & Ungarian, 2007).

At a distance institution such as AU, all mentoring – of necessity – occurs either over the telephone or by email transaction. Overall, mentors attempt to de-emphasize the “diarist” element of the learner’s portfolio-writing process. To do so, mentors focus on critical reflection and meaning-making by through the use of RPL instruments that have been designed to foster critical thinking and encourage the connecting of experiential critical incidents to life choices, especially educationally and professionally. AU’s RPL process has introduced a portfolio component called “framing the issue” wherein applicants are invited to focus critically on how they have come to be where they are – in their lives, in their work, and in their studies. This particular part of the portfolio encourages movement toward Crites’ (1971) “sacred” understanding of higher-level importance. The management-oriented assessors who reviewed the hockey mom’s work were very pleased with the elevation of socio-economic specifics to a more generic and academically relevant level of understanding.

6. ENSHRINING VISION, ENSURING QUALITY

Athabasca University's RPL process, described above in terms of helping learners distinguish mythic and romance perceptions from realistic expectations and procedures, has provided a framework that, broadly speaking, houses our work in applying university-level RPL. Given the obstacles of perception and procedure inherent in practice, what measures can help to ensure a quality practice?

AU is fortunate that, as regards its RPL practice, recognizing its students' prior learning is mandated by virtue of the university's designation as an open institution and its accompanying mission of reducing barriers to learning for Canadian learners. AU is unique among Canadian universities for its open and distance mandate and for the extent of its

commitment to RPL. Even so, the health of its RPL practice and the level of acceptance by not only its own academic community but by the larger national and international communities is dependent on stringent measures that safeguard and ensure a quality practice. While recent research on quality assurance in RPL determined that the attention paid to quality assurance in Canada has been, generally, inadequate (Van Kleef, Amichand, Carkner, Ireland, Orynik, & Potter, 2007), AU employs a multi-level quality assurance system. In the absence of government legislation or policy, most of AU's quality control mechanisms fall into the categories of collaboration, institutional mechanisms, and indirect stakeholder support (Van Kleef et al, 2007) with a strong emphasis on institutional governance.

- **Mandate.** Prior learning assessment and recognition at AU is enshrined in the University's commitment to the provision of open and flexible education.
- **Policy and procedures.** AU's RPL is enshrined in policy and accompanied by a rigorous set of procedures and regulations that govern the process. AU's RPL policy adheres to international standards (CAEL).
- **Governance.** RPL policy dictates that there are two levels of oversight to the RPL process. An internal council comprises representation from AU's academic areas. An external advisory committee comprises representation from RPL-relevant sectors and institutions across Canada. The Centre for Learning Accreditation within with prior learning assessment resides is managed by a Director who holds an earned PhD.
- **Assessment rigor.** Each portfolio is assessed by a team of subject matter experts working independently. Applicants and assessors adhere to a criteria framework. Assessment results are triangulated. Portfolios are vetted by CLA's Director before proceeding for assessment. Letters of Attestation are received directly by CLA and vetted before their inclusion in portfolios.
- **Transparency and accessibility.** All RPL documents, templates, examples of completed work, and assessment tools are available on AU's web site and also in paper copy.

- **Student support.** RPL applicants have access to AU's system-wide support system, including counseling and advising services, as well as access to the services of the CLA coach/mentor. Both telephone and email assistance are available on a sustained basis.
- **Communication and feedback.** RPL applicants and completers are invited to provide feedback to CLA on the RPL process through an anonymous Web survey tool.
- **Appeals process.** Prior learning assessment is governed by AU's policy for academic appeals.

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