

# *Ways of seeing the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)<sup>1</sup>: What contribution can such practices make to social inclusion?*

JUDY HARRIS

*University of Cape Town, South Africa*

## **Abstract**

*This paper is an exploration of RPL practices. It was written following empirical work and concerns raised regarding the efficacy of RPL as a mechanism to enhance social equity and social inclusion in the South African higher education context. An attempt is made to position RPL within the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions of late- or post-modernity and to see it as a social practice rather than as a set of seemingly innocent and benevolent procedures. Four illustrative 'models' of RPL are presented and analysed in such a way as to reveal more about existing practices (particularly the social functions they perform) and to suggest possibilities for practices capable of making optimal contributions to social inclusion. It is argued that RPL practices are capable of multiple significations and that those concerned with the design and implementation of RPL could benefit from being aware of the various ways of seeing the practice and could combine this with a critical reading of the discourses of societal, institutional and curricular contexts in order to reveal possibilities for inclusive approaches.*

## **Background to the paper**

The concept of RPL entered South African education and training discourse with the National Qualification Framework (NQF).<sup>2</sup> In common with similar frameworks elsewhere in the world, the NQF aims to be a unifying device, to create ladders, linkages and pathways that afford seamless mobility to lifelong learners. RPL is currently positioned as a central pillar of redress, seen as having the capacity to widen access to education and training and to enhance the qualification status of historically disadvantaged adults. It thus holds restitutive promise which goes far beyond the equal opportunity discourses enshrined in other frameworks internationally.

Recent empirical research caused us, as researchers, to review the theory and practice of RPL and the claims that are often made in its name. In 1997/8 we designed and implemented an RPL pilot to access experienced adult educators to an Advanced

Diploma for Educators of Adults in the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town.<sup>3</sup> The educators concerned had substantial adult educator experience but were not in possession of the formal entry requirements (an M+3 level qualification). Although six of the seven RPL 'candidates' gained admission to the Diploma course, and are progressing well, we were left with more questions than answers regarding the nature of RPL.

A key issue was what prior learning we actually recognised through assessment. The Diploma had no explicit entry criteria apart from the formal educational requirements referred to above. We devised some in collaboration with Departmental academic staff. They reflected the nature of the existing Diploma curriculum which had quite a high social theory component, was textually-based and had a traditional mode of organisation. We designed an RPL process that began with candidates' life and practitioner identities and shifted to their (potential) learner/academic identities. Candidates' portfolios were assessed against the agreed criteria.

Although most candidates were successful, we were uneasy. We reviewed the process internally and drew on others in the university and beyond.<sup>4</sup> We began to realise some of the hidden exclusive factors in our approach to RPL. In effect, at the point of assessment (irrespective of what had gone before), we required candidates who could write with authority in distinct genres and who could hold to a reflective/academic discourse. Candidates with different holding discourses (for example, narrative, corporate, customary) or no particular holding discourse, were less successful. We expected that, as a colleague put it, we could 'move the Diploma discourse into people's heads, experientially', rather than allowing it to be acquired as a social practice. We also floundered because we did not have the tools, authority (or perhaps even the desire) to, in effect, re-engineer the Diploma curriculum.

Taken to a further level of analysis, we realised how candidates whose cultural capital did not resonate with that inscribed in the Diploma course and in the RPL process were disadvantaged. We began to see more clearly that RPL has very few intrinsic characteristics of its own and a very large propensity to reproduce firstly, the discursive characteristics of the context of implementation and secondly, the (possibly not unrelated) social constructions of the implementers! It proved possible to speak a language of radicalism whilst actually implementing a practice with quite conservative tendencies. In effect, RPL was fulfilling the same social function as traditional academia – the perpetuation of a social elite, of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This was a far cry from the restitutive promises of the NQF. Our advocacy stance towards RPL turned sceptical. It occasioned a withdrawal – back to the drawing board – and a more thorough epistemological and pedagogical analysis of RPL as a social practice rather than a set of seemingly innocent and benevolent procedures. It is the fruits of this analysis that follow in this paper.

## **Ways of Seeing RPL**

'Back to the drawing board' involved reviewing international RPL literature with our own empirical experience in mind. We wanted to evolve ways to interpret and explain the phenomenon of RPL more satisfactorily.

The result is a schema consisting of four 'Ways of Seeing RPL' (see Figure 1). The schema goes beyond our initial concern with the professional development of adult educators. It focuses on RPL more generally i.e. within post-school education. It is

primarily concerned with the recognition of non-certificated and/or prior experiential learning. Each model is depicted in terms of (a) where the model is, or could be, found (b) what prior learning is, or could be, recognised (c) the relationship, or possible relationship, between RPL practices and mainstream curricula or standards and pedagogy (d) how recognition happens, or could happen and (e) the actual, or possible, social functions the model performs.

Depicting models in this way does not imply that there are no others. Nor does it imply an absence of cross-fertilisation or hybridisation. Rather, in presenting somewhat caricatured and artificial models, it is hoped that the schema can act as a heuristic device for better understanding the actual and possible significations of RPL.

A range of concepts and theories are deployed within the analysis, probably too many! The principle frames are set out below and are further developed as they are put to use within the main body of the paper.

An attempt is made to locate RPL theory and practice within the changing socio-economic and cultural conditions of late- or post-modernity which have recast modes of knowledge production, circulation and communication, set new terms for the timing, location and utility of education and forced reconceptualisations of the meaning of 'learning' (Young *et al*, 1997; Usher and Edwards, 1998). Post-Fordist forms of economic organisation have established new relationships between the economy and education whereby the latter is based, increasingly, on the requirements of wider contexts of application and competitive international and local markets (Gibbons *et al*, 1994; Millar, 1996). Globalisation and marketisation are motifs. The knowledge society and lifelong learning are central concepts.

Furthermore, from a cultural standpoint, writers in a post-modernist vein have called into question Enlightenment thinking, particularly the grand and universal narratives that have traditionally shaped education (liberalism, humanism, radicalism and human capitalism). Knowledge as universal, externalised, decontextualised and value-free is problematised in favour of its locatedness or situatedness in complex sets of socio-historical relations, cultures of knowing and sites of practice and its non-innocent implications in power formations and relations (Michelson, 1996).

Post-modern thinking dislodges RPL's traditional theoretical 'home' - a 'village' within the experiential learning movement in education. The theory and practice of experiential learning are based on a commitment to experience as a foundation of learning and knowledge production. Experiential learning pedagogies are concerned largely with transforming experience into knowledge through reflection - as embodied in the various experiential learning cycles (Kolb, 1984; Boud *et al*, 1985) which have also become the methodological hallmarks of much RPL practice. Post-modern thinking problematises this on various counts. Firstly, it is claimed that experience may not be as neutral and available to rationality as is assumed. An alternative is to see it as partial, socially constructed, highly contextualised and as already embodying knowledge. Secondly, it is claimed that experiential learning methodologies remove experience from its social context and in so doing neutralise it and remake its meanings in ways that ultimately render it unknowable to the learner concerned (Usher, 1989). Usher also argues that there may be different ways to deal with learning from experience which do not involve abstracted, cognitive processes; allowing learning to retain some of its originary, social and subjective elements; and, which do not attempt to funnel experience and learning from experience into prescribed categories of meaning (Usher, 1993). In these retheorisations, individual reflection as the methodological tool for

'turning' experience into knowledge is called into question, and with that, the epistemological and pedagogical logic upon which much RPL practice is premised.

The conditions of late- or post-modernity are thus in the process of reconfiguring educational practices in a number of complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The elaboration of RPL practices that follows explores these processes of change in such a way as to reveal more about existing practices and to suggest possibilities for practices capable of making a greater contribution to social inclusion.

First, I present and analyse two models of RPL and suggest some sharper and less sentimentalised understandings of their social functions. A series of questions is then put forward which offers a basis for developing a stronger 'theory of possibility' for RPL leading to the presentation and analysis of a further two models.

### **'Procrustean' RPL<sup>5</sup>**

These forms of RPL are most likely to be found in contexts where knowledge is weakly classified and framed (Bernstein, 1996), such as further education and vocational training, and are frequently linked to qualifications or standards frameworks. They are usually underpinned by a market-led philosophy in which education is consumer-orientated and utilitarian and viewed mainly in terms of its usefulness to the labour market. The discourses of such contexts are referred to variably as human capitalist, behaviourist, functional or technical-rational.

The recognition of non-certificated and/or prior experiential learning is relatively unproblematic in these contexts because there is a long tradition of valuing learning from experience and utilising that learning as a tool for the further development of (very specific) knowledge and skills. The issue of the transferability of learning is thus relatively unproblematic (Usher and Johnston, 1996). Learning from experience is viewed as an individual commodity and as being vital for post-Fordist flexible modes of production. However, as the name suggests, Procrustean RPL practices recognise only those aspects of individuals' prior learning which 'fit' or match prescribed outcomes or standards. Market-related performance is valued and this is seen as synonymous with 'competence'.<sup>6</sup>

In these contexts, and in these approaches to RPL, knowledge tends to be understood in positivistic and normative terms, as a product or commodity, as 'visible, potentially measurable performance' (Butterworth, 1992: 43), and as a means to an economic end. Its extrinsic, economic use-value is brought to the fore; its social value pushed to the rear. In the contexts concerned, knowledge and skills tend to be organised hierarchically in standards or criteria which, although viewed as neutral, asocial, ahistorical and apolitical, usually reflect the interests of dominant groups in society. As mentioned, Procrustean RPL practices only engage with standards or formal curricula in order to gauge which aspects of individuals' prior learning match them. There is no opportunity for critique of those standards or of the curricula that are distilled from them; RPL is a discrete activity. This lack of engagement with the nature of knowledge can be seen as a de-politicisation of education and training and lacking in concern for the social policy and power and authority issues underlying education and education reform processes.

Non-formal courses are sometimes *a priori* credit-rated against standards so that individuals automatically get formal credits if they can prove successful course attendance. More generally, a range of behaviourist methodologies are used to

Figure 1: Ways of Seeing RPL

Model	Where found?	What prior learning is recognised?	Relation between RPL and mainstream?	How is prior learning recognised?	Social purposes?
Procrustean	Further Education	That which matches pre-determined standards	Very little	Assessment foregrounded	Human resources as economic resources
	Vocational training		Reinscribes what exists	New learning reargounded	Site of knowledge production challenged
	Qualification frameworks		Discrete RPL	Behaviourist methodologies	Convergence/standardising of knowledge
	Economic, human capital discourse		No critique	Specific credit	Advantages the advantaged
Learning and development					Containment and appeasement
					Reinscription of dominant discourses
	Higher Education	That which matches or approximates to often implicit academic standards	Very little	Through learning and assessment	Humanistic goals of self-actualisation
	Social Sciences		Reinscribes what exists	Experiential learning methods	Site of knowledge production challenged but knowledge converged etc
	Humanist and progressive discourses	Cognitive capacity	Discrete RPL	Portfolios	Reclassification of individuals
			One-way bridge to existing mainstream	Psychological approaches	Advantages the advantaged
				General and specific credit	Reinscription of dominant discourses

Model	Where found?	What prior learning is recognised?	Relation between RPL and mainstream?	How is prior learning recognised?	Social purposes?
Radical	In contexts where the concern is radical social change	Subjugated knowledges (learning from struggle) as alternatives to dominant forms of knowledge	Dominant forms of knowledge are destabilised in favour of subjugated knowledges	Through participation in social movements	Radical transformation and redress on a collective basis
	Emancipatory discourse	Social and collective ways of knowing		Conscientization	Recognises divergence but not necessarily diversity
				Ideology critique	Challenge to dominant discourses
Trojan Horse	Higher Education	Prior experiential learning in and of itself	More engagement	Through learning and assessment	More socially inclusive
	Massifying systems	Prior learning as socially constructed	Two-way bridge	Prior learning examined critically as an individual and a social phenomenon	Critical engagement with curricula and pedagogic change
	History of curriculum flexibility		Engagement with mainstream curriculum design and pedagogy		Diversity and divergence of knowledges recognised and power relations
	Where there is pressure for educational reform and (to varying degrees) social change		An enquiry into curriculum	Portfolios and 'critical framing'	Critique of dominant discourses
				Sociological approach	
				General and specific credit	

recognise prior learning such as: performance testing, interviews and evidence of competence compiled into portfolios. Although RPL advisors or mentors may be involved as well as assessors, the emphasis is on generating evidence for assessment rather than on learning anything new. RPL candidates' understanding of their competence does not alter during the recognition process 'for it has never been explored...they have not learned anything they did not know before' (Butterworth, 1992: 45). Essentially, individuals re-present themselves as 'evidence' in relation to prescribed performance-orientated standards. Definitional and decision-making power rests solely in the hands of the provider or the assessor. In some literature this kind of practice is termed the 'credit exchange' model as candidates 'exchange a successful work record for course credits' (Butterworth, 1992: 45).

In these RPL practices, international discourses of education reform seem to be uncritically at work. An economic language is powerfully dominant, one in which human resources are seen as economic resources. There is an assumed correlation between national and individual economic needs and interests. The citizen is seen as a 'rational, economic being with citizenship viewed in pragmatic, narrow and exclusive terms' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 3).

Although the site of knowledge production is challenged, what counts as knowledge most certainly is not. The decontextualised nature of standards disguises cultural and political connotations and assumptions about 'human beings and their relationship to the world' (Barkatoolah, 1989: 159). Knowledge, skills and experience are standardised and formalised with whatever falls beyond the purview of 'standards' being rendered invisible. The holders of knowledge, skill and experience which diverges from the standards can, all too easily, be subjected to alternative (perhaps slightly kinder) forms of exclusion. There is a sense in which the people who benefit most are those whose competence is closest to that which is formalised in standards. Given the privileging of economic capital and employer discourses in standard-setting processes, those are likely to be people with a history of gainful employment in contexts which have allowed them to exercise a degree of agency. Although Procrustean RPL practices are of practical use to some individuals, there is also a sense in which at a societal level they are about containment and appeasement.

If Procrustean practices were to make a more substantial contribution to social inclusion, the criteria for assessment (be they embedded in standards or curricula outcomes) would have to be conceptualised in such a way as to attribute as much value as possible to the prior knowledges held by the majority of potential RPL candidates. Furthermore, there is strong evidence to suggest that candidates need appropriate pedagogic support to successfully recontextualise their prior learning into the language of national standards - irrespective of the content of those standards.

### **'Learning and Development' RPL**

These forms of RPL are common in higher education contexts around the world, particularly those parts of higher education where knowledge is less strongly classified and framed - the social sciences and the professions for example. Bernstein (1996) argues that the boundaries around higher education are weakening because of the rise of the market (as opposed to social class) as a defining factor. The discourses underpinning these practices are largely humanist and progressive (although the discourses of the context may be different), with the twin aims of supporting individual

advancement and democratising education. In retrospect, our own empirical research developed a model of RPL that fell into this category.

In many of the above contexts (particularly the more traditional universities) hierarchical disciplinary knowledge is valued and there is little tradition of valuing learning from experience. Not surprisingly, contestations regarding the equivalence between experiential and formal learning are articulated more sharply within these contexts and consequently it has been hard to introduce RPL. However, in the less strongly classified areas referred to above, and in 'newer' institutions, there is more of an acceptance that learning from experience has the potential to be recognised for the purposes of access or advanced standing, and that such learning has a role to play in future learning.

In Learning and Development RPL, candidates' prior learning has to be manipulated to conform to canonical bodies of knowledge. As with Procrustean RPL, the practices are often discrete and at a distance from the mainstream. There is no critical engagement with mainstream curriculum, with what knowledge is valued and why, or with how that knowledge is transmitted. The concern is to develop 'epistemological access' (Morrow, 1993) to dominant academic discourses (as opposed to 'physical or formal access' which is often the case in Procrustean practices). Learning and Development RPL is essentially a translation device, a one-way bridge-building process between different cultures of knowledge. As the name suggests, there is an emphasis on gauging whether individuals already possess, or have the capacity to develop, cognitive capacities equivalent to often implicit academic standards.

As with Procrustean RPL, there may be external agencies that recommend an *a priori* credit-rating of non-formal courses which can then be accepted or not by the receiving higher education institution. More generally, these RPL practices tend to focus on raising individuals' awareness of their prior learning and learning processes through experiential learning methods. There is thus some emphasis on new learning as well as on recognising prior learning. This might include the development of formal academic literacy skills and 'insights' into the formal curricula to which access is sought. These RPL practices at their best do seem to support candidates in developing a meta-language about their own learning processes and they tend towards a competence- rather than a performance-orientated philosophy. However, they are often highly psychologised – experience and feelings are privileged and 'meaning' is seen as personally constructed.

Methodologically, 'portfolio development' comes to the fore. The process is essentially one of self-representation. In portfolios, RPL candidates provide documentary evidence of relevant past learning and reflective narratives which analyse their learning processes and make comparisons with academic modes of thought. Prior learning thus articulated is evaluated either in its own terms as 'general' credit (deemed to be at higher education level) or in terms of the extent to which it actually intersects with formal bodies of knowledge – as 'specific' credit.

Although there is an acknowledgement that learning can take place in a range of different contexts or sites there is no major challenge in these practices to disciplinary boundaries or to traditional constructions of knowledge or to the criteria for making judgements or who makes those judgements. Diverse or divergent forms of knowledge cannot easily be recognised, as knowledge that is constructed outside of existing disciplinary frameworks is not usually recognised as valid knowledge (except in a limited way as general credit). Traditional curriculum categories and content are



therefore at most slightly disturbed, certainly not challenged in any way, by this form of RPL.

The field of academia is structured by powerful forces of tradition and privilege. Available 'capital' (i.e. knowledge) (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997) is distributed to those whose personal capital most closely resembles that which is prized in the context. This suggests that the work of traditional academia is the creation of an educated elite which perpetuates the system of class relations and reproduces the social, cultural and economic status quo. To succeed, RPL candidates have to reclassify and accommodate themselves to the demands and assumptions of the current system. They have to 'translate' their knowledge into that which is valued in the field. It seems highly likely that the candidates who succeed in this endeavour will again be those whose knowledge is already proximate to formal knowledge structures i.e. those who are the most socially advantaged and who already have serviceable academic skills.

It follows that these practices, although they may lead to advancement for some individuals, are more about a reinscription of dominant discourses than any challenge to them. Existing power relations are preserved and reproduced and an institutional, disciplinary language dominates. Taken as a whole, the above analysis suggests that Learning and Development RPL practices cannot really claim to represent a serious engagement with social exclusion – being again more about alternative (maybe ultimately crueller) forms of exclusion.

If Learning and Development RPL were to make a more substantial contribution to social inclusion, a realistic dialogue would have to be realistically possible between what is enshrined in curricula and individuals' prior learning. Establishing this dialogue would involve curricular and pedagogical interventions beyond the remit of many RPL practices and practitioners.

## **The story so far**

The story so far is rather gloomy in the search for socially inclusive approaches to RPL. Practices seem to be trapped in contexts characterised by unexamined modernist theories of knowledge and experience which are not reflective of contemporary conditions. Both Procrustean and Learning and Development forms of RPL are largely complicit with views of education as an unproblematic, value-free key to personal and social progress. Prior learning is valued largely in terms of its similarity to pre-existing conceptions of 'desirable' knowledge and skill. There is no politics of difference. There is no critical epistemological or pedagogical engagement. The gatekeepers have widened the gates slightly in terms of greater flexibility regarding the site of knowledge production but care is taken not to let any actual 'outsider knowledge' slip through unnoticed.

The social equity claims of both of these forms of RPL are therefore questionable. Although of practical help to some, and of rhetorical value to many, these forms of RPL are more likely to advantage the already advantaged than to make a significant contribution to social inclusion. Furthermore, there is little if any questioning of the implications or potential social costs of converging and standardising diverse and divergent knowledge forms in national standards.

The foregoing analysis reinforces the points suggested earlier, namely that some careful thinking is required if RPL is to have any efficacy as a tool of social inclusion in South Africa. As mentioned, RPL needs a stronger 'theory of possibility'. A series of

inter-linked questions drawing on the concepts deployed in the above analyses provides a broad canvas for the development of such a theory:

- Is RPL going to be part of a serious engagement with curricular and institutional change?
- Is RPL going to be about inclusion or more invisible forms of exclusion?
- Is RPL going to be about individual advancement and/or social/collective advancement?
- Is RPL going to be about redress or containment?
- Is RPL going to contribute to the convergence and standardisation of knowledge and skills or seek to find ways to value diverse and divergent knowledge and skills?
- Is RPL going to recognise 'competence' or market-related performance?
- Is RPL going to view knowledge as universal and objective or knowledge as socially constructed and partial?
- Is RPL going to view curriculum and/or standards as normative and fixed or as contested terrain?
- Is RPL going to view learning as a cognitive process and/or knowledge/learning as embedded in social practice?
- Is RPL going to privilege economic interests and/or social interests?
- Is RPL going to be about mediating boundaries, reforming boundaries or transforming boundaries?
- Is RPL going to uncritically reflect the dominant discourses of education reform and institutional context?

With the above questions in mind, two further models of RPL are presented. I first consider epistemological and pedagogical understandings within the emancipatory/radical tradition. I do this more to illustrate available parameters of understanding than to suggest that RPL be based on these principles (as the arguments below will show).

## **'Radical' RPL**

It could be argued that recruitment to social or political movements has long been a form of RPL, in groups. Any context in which experience occurs has the potential to be a site of struggle and a site for the recognition of prior learning – particularly in those contexts directly concerned with overcoming oppression. The discourses are emancipatory and radical. There are links with critical, feminist and post-colonial theories but seldom with post-structuralism or post-modernism. A generalised form of RPL based on these principles could only exist where social change was powerfully imminent. For many in South Africa, it was hoped that the post-1994 election period would yield such a moment.

Experience, learning and knowledge become closely inter-related in radical traditions. Experience is seen as a social product and as the foundation for the development of authentic and oppositional forms of knowledge. Learning and knowledge borne out of the struggle to examine experience from new perspectives are recognised, rather than learning gained within dominant societal structures and institutions. Bernstein's (1996) notion of innate competence resonates with radical oppositional practices, but perhaps at an intra-group, rather than an individual level. Learning is

recognised on a collective rather than an individualised basis and evaluated in terms of its emancipatory potential.

In the radical tradition knowledge cannot be neutral – it must either work to change the world or to reinforce the status quo (Boud, 1989). Formal knowledge structures and conceptions of experience are viewed as inadequate, biased and oppressive, to be radically destabilised in favour of the recognition of subjugated knowledges and the creation of ‘...knowledge calculated to make you free’ (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 3). Similarly, alternative standards are required in which the key reference point is the common good. Education becomes synonymous with a destabilising process.

The critical pedagogies of Freire (1972) and Illich (1970) come to the fore – conscientization, naming the world, ideology critique. Essential pedagogical characteristics are the importance of grounded experience in the construction of new knowledge, the collective evaluation of experience and the link to social action and change rather than individual access to, and advancement within, existing structures. Radical practices are concerned with societal transformation, liberation and redress. The focus is on changing social structures, overcoming inequality and on the (re)gaining and (re)claiming of political and epistemological efficacy on the part of oppressed groups – ‘enabling authentic “voices” to be heard’ (Usher and Edwards, 1998: 12).

However, the foundational tenets of radicalism are also called into question by the discourses of late- or post-modernity. As with Procrustean and Learning and Development RPL, epistemologically and pedagogically, Radical RPL is no less trapped in modernist frames. Avis (1995), for example, argues that the radical tradition embodies a positivistic ‘politics of experience’ in which epistemological claims are subordinated to political ones. Experience, although seen as affording unmediated access to truth and authentic knowledge, is also viewed as incoherent and potentially distorted ideologically and therefore in need of a grand (emancipatory) narrative. It is argued that radicalism runs the risk of creating notions of idealised futures which only serve to oppress through their totalising unattainability (Usher *et al.* 1997). Furthermore, radical practices have a tendency to converge alternative and divergent knowledges in such a way as to exclude diversity, obscure difference and silence the voices of those falling outside the dominant (albeit alternative) grouping (therefore epistemologically they are no different to Procrustean and Learning and Development approaches). The power of oppositional discourses to mount a challenge to hegemonic discourses is uncertain and the promise that learning from experience can lead to social and political transformation has all too often not been realised.

However, some of the above epistemological and pedagogical understandings can extend those embedded in the previous two models.

### **‘Trojan-horse’ RPL**

A further model of RPL is now presented – the Trojan-horse, which as the name suggests, is also concerned with change. It represents an attempt to conceptualise forms of RPL that are more reflective of the contemporary socio-economic conditions.

There are indications of these kinds of practices in some higher education contexts, particularly in massifying systems where there is a history of curriculum flexibility and where knowledge boundaries are weakening. This is evidenced by the growing emphasis on application and on flexible and practice-based learning programmes. In higher education for example, traditional disciplinary authority is weakening and

definitional responsibility increasingly rests with a broader range of stakeholders with greater responsiveness to market and individual needs. These shifts can be elaborated and extended in contexts where there is strong pressure for social change – such as South Africa.

Non-formal and experiential learning would be recognised in Trojan-horse RPL but bolder attempts would be made to value prior learning in and of itself rather than solely in terms of its degree of fit with existing standards or curricula or with the cognitive capacities deemed to be required to succeed in traditional academia, for example. The notion of ‘general’ credit would be used more extensively involving the development of theories of knowledge-equivalence rather than knowledge-parallelism – a divergent rather than a convergent orientation to knowledge.

There seems to be two strands within this approach to RPL. One strand is to exploit and further develop the effects of globalisation and marketisation on education and the privileging of experiential knowledge and practice-based learning. A second is to do the same but with a more critical orientation i.e. to keep open power and authority questions regarding the nature of new relationships between education and the economy. Are they, for example, by definition democratic? What does the rise of the market as a defining factor in education actually mean?

In terms of relationships between RPL practices and mainstream curricula and pedagogy – both strands of Trojan-Horse RPL would move to close the gaps. What is suggested is a broader and less discrete remit for RPL, one which is concerned with mainstream curriculum design processes and pedagogical practices as well as with facilitating access to those curricula. The aim, in both strands, would be to build bridges two-ways, to work towards a ‘more equal and dialectical relationship between disciplinary knowledge (theory) and experiential knowledge (practice)’ (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 7). This would involve critiquing the way curricula are organised currently; supporting development of alternatives to the ‘theory to practice’ orientation of many programmes (which make it hard for RPL candidates to be granted credit for their prior knowledge); considering new ways of integrating theory and practice including using practice to critique theory rather than only to exemplify it; and, joining forces with academic development practitioners to engage with the pedagogical practices of mainstream courses in order to render them more accessible to learners. Furthermore, the academy’s sole ownership of knowledge would be critiqued in order to:

*...encourage a receptivity to the academic credibility of learning that does not follow the conventional patterns or that reflects a distinctive confluence of theory, practice and historical development (Mandell and Michelson, 1990: viii).*

More critical engagement could involve RPL becoming part of an enquiry into the social construction of knowledge and curricula. This is not to suggest that RPL take on the Enlightenment single-handedly, rather, that there may be opportunities for a joining of progressive forces in critical engagement with what knowledge is socially sanctioned and why. What counts as knowledge would be seen as a locus of power. Definitional responsibility could move beyond an alliance between the market, individuals and providers towards a broader alliance with group and social interests. Curricula would be organised in ways that speak to the social world as well as the academic world and the market.

A key issue would be to address what ‘serious’ knowledge means in contemporary

times. This implies a renewed social and moral commitment - beyond a commitment to the market. Critical Trojan-horse RPL could encompass a research role - research into the kinds of knowledges that are at risk of being kept outside of or rendered invisible within curriculum or standards development processes. The suggestion here is not that subjugated knowledges replace dominant knowledges in a counter-paradigmatic move (as would be the case in Radical RPL) but that different forms of knowledge be made visible and available to curriculum design processes. Curriculum designers and standards developers would benefit from increased awareness about how dominant, often implicit, values and ideologies determine what experience, knowledge, skills and qualities count as valid. An argument could be made for numerous small-scale curricular innovations of this type rather than totalising national initiatives.

How would prior learning be recognised? As with Procrustean and Learning and Development RPL there would be a need to explore ways of formally credit-rating non-formal courses. We are already seeing a growth in approaches to RPL that involve developing RPL/learning programmes that make educational demands that are broadly comparable with formal courses at various levels but which recognise differential holdings of capital. In these programmes, prior learning is validated and recognised in a process that offers ample opportunity for candidates to extend that learning in various ways including the development of formal study skills and academic literacy skills.

In a more critical vein, the above kinds of programme could be a space where relationships between different cultures of knowledge are explored, in ways that do not drift either into old humanism or into the sort of post-modern 'relativistic pluralism that glosses over a political understanding of social difference and thereby plays down oppression, exploitation and antagonism' (Avis, 1995: 180). The relationships between knowledge and power would be central - as would social inequality. RPL would become a space in which, through a process of mutual engagement and critique, a new and shared language for understanding knowledges and modes of meaning (and their relations to power) could be pursued leading to the development of a meta-language, within which individuals' prior learning could be located and better understood. This would allow tacit knowledge (beyond that which is market-related) to come to the fore. Key features could be attention to sociological rather than to psychological perspectives of learning and to commonality rather than individuality.

Experience, knowledge and the relationships between them, could be reconceptualised. Experience, rather than being treated as univocal, universal and unitary, could be explored in terms its many possible significations within different social contexts and social practices.<sup>7</sup> Thus, its social construction would be privileged rather than its neutral qualities as a foundation for individual learning and knowledge creation. Experience and knowledge would thus move into closer proximity. Within such reconceptualisations, learners would be seen as experiencing the world more through performative social engagement than through distanced contemplation.

Again, the portfolio comes to the fore as a way of organising and recording prior learning, including that which is not directly reflective of mainstream curricula or standards. Some interesting and new methodologies could be incorporated into the RPL process. For example, in their work on the development of 'multiliteracies', the New London Group (NLG) propose that the role of pedagogy is 'to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities' (NLG, 1996: 72). The group describes a methodology of 'critical framing' that could have much to offer Trojan-horse RPL. Through critical

framing 'learners can gain the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what they have learned, constructively critique it, account for its cultural location, creatively extend and apply it, and eventually innovate on their own, within old communities and in new ones' (NLG, 1996: 87). This could encompass a broader exploration of 'text' in which, for example, oral texts and candidates' own selections of 'text', could play a part.

Other methodologies that could be utilised are dialogues, narratives, life histories, story telling and learning conversations. Weil and McGill (1989: 249) see dialogue as being 'a consideration of personal meanings as well as the wider influences that have helped shape those meanings'. Michelson (1996: 193) sees it as an enquiry into 'what knowledge is born of personal and social history'. Brah and Hoy (1989: 71) see story telling as a way of developing analytical frameworks within which to examine and interrogate experience, make links with autobiography, group history and social and political processes and 'the sometimes contradictory relationship between personal biography and social history'.

Using the above methodologies, it might be possible to move from the therapeutic, self-reflective, literacy-based, confessional portfolio approaches used in Learning and Development RPL towards portfolios which engage critically with the individual and socio-political nature of knowledge, experience and meaning.

Trojan-horse RPL would not lay claim to radical transformation, but would hold out the potential for more modest and realisable goals such as a critique of dominant and totalising discourses; serious engagement with institutional, curricular and pedagogic change; a recognition of the diversity and divergence of knowledges, experiences and meaning (whilst not masking power relations); and, inclusion rather than alternative forms of exclusion. Trojan-horse RPL raises challenges to the pedagogic device whilst supporting learners in making their knowledge more effective within it.

## **Back to the Future : What is possible in South Africa?**

The foregoing analyses make it clear that RPL can fulfil a range of social functions through widely varying practices. Usher *et al* (1997: 105) sum up the complex social position of experiential learning in a way that could equally apply to RPL:

*...it is inherently neither emancipatory nor oppressive, neither domesticating nor transformative. Rather, its meaning is constantly shifting between and across these polarities. It is perhaps most usefully seen as having the potential for emancipation and oppression, domestication and transformation, where at any one time and according to context both tendencies can be present and in conflict with each other. Accordingly, it offers a contestable and ambiguous terrain where different socio-economic and cultural assumptions and strategies can be differentially articulated. As a field of tension, it can be exploited by different groups, each emphasising certain dimensions over others.*

At the beginning of the paper it was argued that conceptualisations of RPL that simply reinscribe prevailing discursive conditions may not address social exclusion. Ideally, those concerned with designing and implementing RPL need to be aware of the various ways of seeing the practice and combine this with a critical reading of the discourses of the contexts (societal, institutional and curricula) in order to identify the scope for discursive reshaping and, from there, the possibilities for optimally socially inclusive RPL practices.

## Notes

1. RPL is the term in current usage in South Africa. It is roughly synonymous with the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the United Kingdom (UK) and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the United States of America (USA) and Canada
2. RPL is defined by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) as: '... the comparison of the previous learning and experience of the learner, howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification and the acceptance for purposes of qualification that which meets the requirements' (SAQA 1997)
3. This was part of national research project in RPL in Higher Education – funded by the Human Sciences Research Council and involving the University of Cape Town and Peninsula Technikon
4. Thanks go to the staff of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies (UCT), especially to my co-researcher Janice McMillan and to Lucia Thesen and Rob Moore (Academic Development: UCT) and Elana Michelson (Empire State College, State University of New York)
5. The term Procrustean RPL is taken from Jones and Martin (1997). 'According to Procrustes, a ruler in Greek mythology, everyone could fit into his bed regardless of their size and shape. If anyone was too short, he placed them on the rack and stretched them. If they were too long, he would chop off their feet' (pg 16)
6. This distinction between 'performance' and 'competence' also comes from Bernstein's work. He argues that although the term competence is in common usage it is divorced from its earlier (Chomskian and Levi-Straussian) association with innate capacities and forged into a new relationship with a 'performance pedagogy' in which innate capacities and the understanding of the rules for performance are sacrificed to being able to perform. This represents a major pedagogical shift
7. See Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) for a detailed exposition of experiential learning in the social practices of post-modernity

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