

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) in higher education: Doing boundary work?

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Introduction

Changing economic, political and socio-cultural conditions provide an increasingly global framing for explorations of contemporary developments in education and training such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The rise in global markets, the shift from large-scale manufacturing to services and niche products, rapid developments and diversification in information technology and massive organisational restructuring processes have transformed the environment, nature and experience of *work* (Gee et al 1996; du Gay 1996) and have established new relationships between the economy and education whereby the latter is based increasingly on the requirements of the former. Drawing on Waters' concepts of economic, political and cultural globalisation McIntyre and Solomon analyse the impact of 'narratives of globalisation' on *higher and further education policy and reform*. They illuminate a discursive convergence whereby 'the binary of the academy and the workplace/organisation is problematic and difficult to sustain' (McIntyre & Solomon 1999: 7).

Pedagogically, these processes of change have recast modes of knowledge production, circulation and communication, set new terms for the timing, location and utility of education and forced reconceptions of the meaning of learning (Gibbons et al 1994; Usher & Edwards 1994; Young & Guile 1998). Solomon and McIntyre (1999) view this process as the 'deinstitutionalisation of knowledge', representing a 'radical break with "knowledge codes" that have traditionally prevailed in higher education.

In practical terms, the above changes have been enacted through interventions such as performance outcomes; modularization; pre-packaged open and distance learning opportunities; increased emphasis on professional and vocational practice and the deployment of notions such as the 'reflective practitioner' as curriculum technologies (Schon 1983); methodologies such as problem-based learning; greater and more formalised valuing of learning from experience (as evidenced in RPL); new modes of assessment such as profiling and portfolio development; a range of partnerships between workplaces and the academy; and, the pursuit of 'relevance' and 'flexibility' through the tailoring of learning programmes to individuals' needs.

What we are seeing then is a very wide range of direct and destabilising challenges to traditional academic practices and boundaries. It has been argued that negotiated awards such as work-based learning (WBL) programmes represent an intensification of such challenges because they usher in a new 'politics of curriculum'

in which work, academic study and professional practice are integrated through a mix of RPL, formal learning and action research – with the workplace occupying the central position (Crocker et al 1998; McIntyre & Solomon 1999; Usher & Solomon 1999).

These then are broadly the conditions under which RPL has become a discrete and bounded practice that has matured through several ‘generations’ (Storan 1998). RPL practices can thus be seen from the outset as part of contemporary challenges to academia. Indeed, the present project of boundary reconfiguration in higher education is an incitement to practices such as RPL. However it is a little understood practice.

This paper represents work in progress with regard to doctoral study (Harris 2000a; Harris 2000b). A review of the RPL literature revealed much of it to be advocatory, descriptive or prescriptive. The concept of power is seldom deployed and when it is, it is viewed as a top-down and negative force: there is little discussion of the micro circulations of power within RPL nor of the possibility that RPL itself might be co-implicated in power relations or that power could be exercised differently and the RPL practice/experience improved as a result. The boundaries between knowledge and power are not well addressed. Nor are the ways in which identity positions are constructed for learners and for practitioners within an RPL process.

The concern of this paper then is to find ways to better understand these issues within the growing range of RPL practices, especially as they are developing within WBL programmes and negotiated awards. There is scope for a more discursive approach to RPL, one which ‘involves an examination of the exercises of power at work in [the] micro-practices’ (Edwards 1998). The notions of ‘boundaries’ and ‘boundary-work’ are deployed and an analytic framework for doing boundary-work is presented and put to work. Key aspects of the boundary work of two types of RPL are then discussed. Thereafter, ideas are presented for ways to extend the above lines of enquiry into empirical work.

An analytic framework for doing boundary work

Boundaries and boundary-work have become widely used to map contemporary social practices (Massey 1994; Edwards 1997; Edwards & Usher 2000). *Boundaries* are structuring metaphors of space and location - ‘spaces of enclosure’, markers of ‘the limits of difference’ which ‘provide the basis for deciding what is to be included and what is to be excluded’ (Edwards et al 1996: 1). They are not static ‘things’ – they are complex and ambiguous - subject to ‘change within boundaries and changes in the boundaries themselves’ (Edwards 1997: 98). They are also controversial - usually involving exercises of power

- and often translating into social phenomena through divisions of labour, identity creation and through the 'voice' they give to particular social agents and individuals. *Boundary-work* is thus the active, socially constructed process through which boundaries and spaces are continually enacted, inscribed and negotiated.

The analytic framework consists of five inter-related lines of enquiry:

- *What boundaries and where* - the nature of boundaries – their degree of permeability – and where they are placed, marked, erected, differentiated, enacted and so on
E.g. the convergence of the boundaries around the academy and work – where workplaces become ‘learning organisations’ and the academy becomes ‘performative’ and ‘enterprising’
- *What is in/out* – positionings, placings, displacements, marginalisations
E.g. the foregrounding of (informal) learning at work and the destabilisation of traditional 'knowledge codes' within academia
- *Who or what sets them* and maintains, mediates, manages, controls, polices them i.e. boundary identities and functions (activities, performances, practices)
E.g. the boundary control functions traditionally exerted by academic ‘disciplines’
- *Who or what is ‘working’ the boundaries* – re-enacting, negotiating, crossing, transgressing, blurring, reconfiguring, re/de-differentiating i.e. *shifting* boundary identities and functions
E.g. the role of policy in blurring boundaries between education and work; the discourses of 'flexibility' and 'relevance'; partnerships; practices such as WBL and RPL
- *How they are being ‘worked’* - the interplays and elisions between boundary differentiation and de/re-differentiation (Edwards 1997)
E.g. through new hybrid identities and new textual practices (e.g. around quality assurance)

Putting the framework to work in relation to different types of RPL practice

The above framework is now put to work in relation to two different types of RPL practice, which I have called Mode 1 RPL and Mode 2 RPL for reasons that should become clear as the analysis is developed. Mode 1 RPL is likely to occur in more traditional academic contexts whereas Mode 2 RPL increasingly exists within negotiated awards such as WBL programmes. These two types or modes are synthesised

from the wide-range of literature reviewed. They do not therefore relate to individual practices or sites of practice. Rather, they are generalised views intended to stimulate further debate around the nature of boundaries and boundary-work. The following table sets the scene by offering a description of these two broad types of RPL practice:

A description of two types of RPL practice

	Mode 1 RPL - e.g. in traditional academia	Mode 2 RPL - e.g. in WBL programmes
Typical RPL process	A short portfolio development course in which humanistic, experiential learning methodologies are used – reflection etc. Learners engaged in largely individualised, <i>retrospective</i> , reflective processes designed to generate evidence of cognitive capacity and a meta-language about learning.	A short course in which learners research and plan an individualised learning programme. Notions of the reflective practitioner deployed? Experiential learning in managerial mode? Learners engaged in a largely <i>prospective</i> exercises designed to generate evidence of research and planning activities and to produce a relevant learning programme deemed to be at HE level.
Location of RPL practice – physically and epistemologically?	Likely to be at a distance from mainstream academia. Discrete. <i>Bolt-on</i> . Difficult for RPL practitioners to have a say in mainstream curricula/formal knowledge.	Integrated into the award. <i>Embedded</i> . Dialogue between prior learning and the new/future learning - an essential part of a negotiated award.
What prior learning is recognised/assessed?	That which matches canonical bodies of knowledge and/or traditional notions of cognitive capacity and level - within a <i>prescribed</i> notion of academic coherence.	That which has the potential to contribute to/inform a learning programme and thence employee and organisational development - within a <i>permissive</i> notion of academic coherence.
How is prior learning recognised/assessed?	Through direct equivalence in relation to course outcomes or curriculum content. Or through a broader notion of equivalence in relation to generic outcomes or level descriptors for example. Criteria are often implicit.	Not assessed through notions of direct equivalence. Placed 'in eschew' - assessed through the ability to plan a coherent and relevant learning programme at HE level.
Who does what and how?	Learners largely responsible for documenting their prior learning in relation to existing academic programmes. Supported by advisers. Academics assess – based largely on academic judgement.	Learners and academic and workplace mentors work together plan the programme. Acceptance of learning programme determined through negotiation. Likely to be explicit criteria governing aspects and elements of a learning programme.

So, what does the analytic framework help us to say about the above descriptions, about the boundaries around, and the boundary work of, RPL?

Mode 1 RPL - in traditional academia

What boundaries and where? What is in/out?

In traditional academia, strong boundaries are placed around all aspects of pedagogic practice – particularly knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge is centrally positioned within this 'space of enclosure'. It is propositional, mode 1 knowledge (Gibbons et al 1994). Mode 1 knowledge refers to knowledge produced by academics and scientists

working within discrete disciplines in academic and research-based institutions. Usually it is seen in quite positivistic terms as universal, fixed and objective. This 'inside knowledge' is therefore markedly separated from other forms of knowledge such as everyday, informal knowledge. Most particularly, for a consideration of RPL, experience and learning from experience are not valued commodities in such contexts. In fact, they are seen as largely irrelevant for learning except for the motivation they confer and as a way of illustrating theory (Usher & Johnston 1996). They are clearly located beyond the boundary – what is inside being largely non-negotiable. Such a view of knowledge lends itself to similarly firm boundaries around understandings of learning, the latter tending to be seen in individual and cognitive terms, as largely adaptive to disciplinary norms (at the lower levels) although more investigative and reflexive at higher levels (Usher & Johnston 1996).

Drawing on Bernstein's (1996) concepts, the pedagogic orientation of traditional academia is towards 'introjection' i.e. a concern with developing the inner consciousness of the learner. There is a clearly differentiated boundary between such a pedagogic orientation and 'projection' i.e. pedagogic practices directed outward towards fields of practice or the needs of the market. Introjection pedagogies (which can have liberal, popularist and radical forms) tend to permit high levels of variation and heterogeneity in pedagogy and evaluation e.g. 'evaluation over time' against criteria that are often not explicit, and rely on a shared and tacit ideological basis which allows considerable discretion for teachers. Projection pedagogies are likely to involve a pronounced movement towards a common pedagogy and a tendency towards a common system of evaluation' i.e. homogeneity and less discretion for teachers.

Who or what sets them?

All these boundaries are set by disciplines and maintained and policed by wide-ranging academic practices: elaborate gate-keeping mechanisms, peer review, hierarchically organised qualifications, initiation rites at various stages, acquisition of learning over time. Along with a strong sense of knowledge as property lie strong sets of identities and functions: the 'disciplines' of intellectual debate, the 'bestowal' of authority, a highly visible pedagogy, a privileging of symbolic mastery over practical mastery and so forth.

Who or what is 'working' the boundaries? How?

It has been established that RPL is part of contemporary challenges to the boundaries and boundary maintenance of traditional academia. The task now is to probe the nature of the boundary-work performed by RPL in such contexts. Aspects of RPL that challenge traditional

boundaries are: the focus on the learner and on the learning (and the assessment of learning) acquired outside the academy, the high valuing of experience and learning from experience, the belief in the unfettered transferability of learning between contexts, the advocacy of fast-tracking rather than long-term acquisition, and the premise of 'earning' authority rather than it being bestowed. RPL practitioners and protagonists thus hold very different pedagogical understandings to those enshrined and privileged within the bounded terrain of traditional academia.

However, the strength and relative impermeability of the boundaries around traditional academia amount to a need for RPL to deploy technologies of reflection and portfolio development to move experience and the learning from it closer to those forms of knowledge valued in the context. Thus, reflection, portfolio development and notions of equivalence are used to broker the transferability of knowledge and seem therefore to be the key boundary de-differentiation devices of RPL. RPL practitioners or advisers obviously play a significant role in this process although how this boundary work happens in practice is unclear given the lack of empirical study. The literature suggests that it involves the deployment of reflective, experiential discourses and populist, introjection pedagogies bordering on the therapeutic. How these enmesh, in practice, with the more traditional academic discourses of the context – or whether they do – would be worthy of further enquiry.

How powerful a boundary-working device is RPL in these contexts?

What in effect seems to happen in RPL is that prior learning has to be manipulated to fit the epistemological contours of traditional academic knowledge. This is clearly evident in the nature of the assessment criteria used (see above table) i.e. assessment through direct equivalence or through broader notions of equivalence. Learners are thus invited to recontextualise their prior learning as academic learning, with academic literacy and cognitive capacity often being more important than prior learning per se. In order to negotiate the boundary into academia, successful learners are, it seems, required to teach themselves the discourse of HE and to engage in processes of self-representation that are acceptable to the context concerned. Ultimately therefore in Mode 1 RPL there is a lack of engagement with formal curriculum knowledge. Although the site of knowledge production is challenged what counts as knowledge is not. There seems to be an enduring tension between attempts to make prior learning fit existing knowledge structures *and* the idea that RPL can challenge those structures.

The boundary de-differentiation devices referred to above seem ultimately to be rather weak ones. The firm and well-policed boundaries around traditional academic practices and identities are at most disrupted but not certainly not transgressed or dissolved by RPL: ultimately the RPL process seems to be a re-enactment and mediation of existing boundaries. It is therefore no surprise that RPL candidates, especially those whose prior learning was gained at a distance from formal education, are the least likely to be successful in translating their prior learning into formal curriculum knowledge (Trowler 1996; Harris 1999). So, there is a sense in which these forms of RPL advantage the already advantaged.

Furthermore, in reinscribing existing boundaries, the literature suggests that this type of RPL creates some of its own. Through a somewhat confessional process, learners are required to expose their prior learning to public scrutiny, to the 'disciplinary' gaze. Although assessment in RPL practices (in the literature at least) is often seen as a neutral, technical procedure, learners are essentially subjected to the traditional academic assessment practices of observation and examination. Such practices are a complex nexus of power-laden relationships between different forms of knowledge and cultures of authority. It could be argued that RPL is a more deeply penetrating assessment process than more conventional approaches, in that more of the learner enters the educational frame. This arguably creates the conditions for learner (self) discipline and (self) regulation which links to Foucault's concept of governmentality - the contemporary way in which social regulation occurs (Foucault 1979). So, paradoxically, whilst protagonists of RPL see themselves as transgressors of boundaries, as 'shaking the very foundations of the educational establishment' (Spencer et al 1998: 3) and freeing learners from the tyranny of academic disciplines, they could be more involved than they think in disciplining learners in other ways. The boundary-work of Mode 1 RPL seems to be an area ripe for empirical enquiry.

Mode 2 RPL - in WBL programmes

What boundaries and where? What is in/out? Who or what sets them? Who or what is 'working' the boundaries? How?

The WBL literature suggests that in negotiated awards, knowledge boundaries are more permeable – a direct response to the mode 2 knowledge production practices of the professions and the corporate world. Mode 2 knowledge production practices are more social, more specific to context, more diffuse and more performative and action-orientated than mode 1 practices. Knowledge, so produced, is characterised by a mix of propositional, personal, tacit and process knowledge (Eraut 1994; Solomon and McIntyre 1999; Challis 1997; Lahiff 1998). Traditional understandings of learning are virtually

dissolved by mode 2 processes. Learning has become unbounded with individualised cognitive approaches giving way to investigative, reflexive and more social orientations.

Boundaries around knowledge are reconfigured with academics having only a part-share in the knowledge production processes alongside workplace supervisors and learners themselves. Thus definitional responsibility is shared and the academy finds itself dealing with knowledge which it has not taught. This refocusing of pedagogic orientation towards the outside world contributes to a weakening of the previously firm boundary between insider knowledge and outsider knowledge and a blurring of the differentiation between learning from experience and more formal knowledge. These boundary de/re-differentiations allow experience and learning from experience to play quite central roles - as conferring the necessary direction for the negotiation of a coherent learning programme - with coherence increasingly defined according to the needs of the employment context. This suggests a loosening of the boundaries around traditional academically prescribed notions of academic coherence. Knowledge, for example, can be organised in less hierarchical ways, frequently embodying transdisciplinarity and curriculum flexibility.

Traditional academic identities and functions are under pressure and boundary management activities increasingly disrupted. In their place are new boundary working identities and functions, structured by wide ranging interests and values and constructed in ways that are fluid and permeable into which outside interests can insert themselves. For example, flatter structures, more horizontal lines of communication and new managerial functions replace traditional hierarchical yet collegial relationships. The learner seems to take a more privileged position and identity as a more active re/constructor of his/her own prior learning and future learning. This re-positioning also brings extra responsibilities – managing time and monitoring the development of the programme for example. Contemporary WBL learners are therefore both more visible and charged with a wider range of responsibility for their own learning than are their counterparts in traditional higher education.

The literature suggests that the above reconfigurations and reworkings of the boundaries around knowledge and pedagogic practices within WBL programmes are reflected in the RPL aspects of those programmes. A projection pedagogic orientation leads to an emphasis (within RPL) on planning future learning rather than documenting past learning. Prior learning and formal learning are thus brought into closer proximity through a process whereby both merge and change rather than the former being brought into line with a fixed understanding of the latter. Prior learning counts in terms of its

relevance to the proposed learning programme and in relation to broad, generic notions of academic level, not in terms of its fit with canonical bodies of knowledge. Thus, the recontextualisation of prior learning that Mode 1 RPL necessitates seems to be less of an issue in Mode 2 RPL.

How powerful a boundary-working device is WBL (including its RPL component)?

There is no doubt that WBL programmes represent serious challenges to traditional boundaries in academia. They can be seen as boundary-working practices on all major pedagogic fronts - repositioning or even displacing existing pedagogic understandings and arrangements.

In actively reconfiguring boundaries, WBL also creates some of its own. In traditional academia, the boundary policing devices and associated workings of power were easy to see. In WBL boundaries are less obviously policed; rather, they are contested in more unclear ways. As Solomon and McIntyre argue:

Both the university and the workplace “speak” in terms of power-knowledge discourses which in the context of work-based learning are sometimes congruent but often are not (Solomon & McIntyre 1999: 17)

So, although suggestive of greater social inclusiveness, power-knowledge issues are likely to be struggled over under the benign and seemingly progressive banners of ‘negotiation’ and ‘collaboration’. For example, who exactly decides what knowledge counts or what constitutes an appropriately coherent negotiated award? How do propositional, personal, tacit and process knowledge combine in a programme? What is actually assessed? How do the boundaries around the worlds of work and the academy actually blur in practice? How do hybrid discourses ‘lamine’ one onto another (Silverman 2000: 41)? Whose interests prevail? Solomon and McIntyre (1999) argue that boundary-work of WBL amounts to new and complex processes of surveillance and regulation for learners (and arguably for academics too) – most importantly, new forms of subjectification and self-regulation. In effect ‘discipline’ is reconfigured i.e. not located in tradition academic power-knowledge configurations but in networks of emergent regulatory practices shared between learners, academics and employers.

Mode 2 RPL seems to have become part of the process of boundary reconfiguration. As a practice, it is able to succeed in some of the boundary-work that was attempted (less successfully) by Mode 1 RPL practices. However, it does not seem to be RPL per se that raises the challenges to boundaries; the WBL programme as a whole that does that. RPL, it seems, is put to work as a boundary-working device

within a bigger project. As with Mode 1 RPL, the boundary-work of Mode 2 RPL is ripe for empirical investigation.

Implications for empirical work

The analytical framework based on the notions of boundaries and boundary-work, as applied to the literature, seems capable of generating significant debate around issues of power, knowledge and identity. It is also suggestive of fresh discursive approach to empirical enquiry. What little empirical research has been undertaken in RPL seems to have been conducted in quite narrow terms – certainly not framed by a post-structuralism paradigm. There does not seem to have been much (if any) empirical research into the inner boundary-workings of RPL. The following questions could therefore be empirically explored using the same analytic framework:

- What power-knowledge discourses are at work within RPL? How do they operate/are they consumed? What 'work' do they do?
- What identity positions are available for learners and practitioners within RPL? How do they operate/are they consumed? What 'work' do they do?

To end on a reflexive note, in writing this paper I have found myself working at the edges of several literatures. Although I have attempted to focus primarily on the immediate RPL literature, it has been necessary to refer to and use other literatures particularly to surface the silences in that literature. This paper represents one 'reading' of those literatures; itself bounded by the approach taken and by the choice of literature to review. There may be a need to examine in more detail what literature I included and excluded and what boundaries have been created by the classifications I have made. The use of the notions of boundaries, although generative, tends to itself be premised on binary and potentially problematic notions of what is in or out. Is it the case that doing boundary-work in some way constructs the problematic it seeks to deconstruct?

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