

RESEARCHING THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Judy Harris, Mignonne Breier, and Christine Wihak (Eds.). NIACE, Leicester, England, 2011, 344 pages.

Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives is a valuable primer on the breadth and depth of research in the area. The editors (Harris, Breier, and Wihak) were contributors to this book along with eleven other researchers, and collectively the authors have provided a very good grounding to the state of practice and the level of conceptualization of recognition of prior learning (RPL). For those who are not familiar with the concept, RPL (also known as prior learning assessment [PLA] and prior learning assessment and recognition [PLAR]) has been defined by Thomas (2000) as the practice of reviewing, evaluating and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that adults have gained through experiential, self-directed and/or informal learning, as well as through formal education. Thomas' reference is mentioned on page one of the book and sets the stage for the accounts of PLA research that follow.

The first chapter, by Harris and Wihak, provides an introduction to the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) at Thompson Rivers University, and an overview of the book: the challenge to re-theorize RPL; a summary of the state of RPL research in selected countries; and suggestions for future RPL research. What follows is a world tour of the research that has occurred in a number of countries and regional organizations, showing the similar problems and variety of responses to RPL. The final two chapters are dedicated to issues related to RPL.

In the second chapter, Cameron provides a history of RPL in Australia. This country has an extensive national training agenda that includes a competency-based vocational education and training system, training packages, and the Australian Qualifications Framework. The chapter also focuses on the use of terms and definitions, the lack of uptake of RPL in different sectors (including higher education), the limited number of RPL researchers, and the characteristics of those using RPL. Cameron notes that governmental policies and expectations are not matched with resources to effectively support the practice. This is a reality found in other country reviews.

Van Kleef's chapter on Canadian experiences in PLAR shows some of the same drivers, benefits, and issues raised by Cameron, but Canada has the added challenge of no national qualifications framework. This chapter provides a good description of a typology for PLAR research, showing the different titles and types of research undertaken in Canada (Appendix 3.1). Van Kleef argues that it is important to shift from small-scale, descriptive, and exploratory qualitative studies to quantitative research, despite the challenges.

Bélisle provides information from the perspective of Québec. This chapter delimits the field, identifies the different terms used to describe RPL, reviews the Quebec government's 2002 action plan, and lists the names, locations, and kinds of RPL research undertaken. Funding support for research and collaboration with France is also mentioned. It would be interesting to read more about the province's use of a qualifications framework and how RPL is assessed.

Pokorny’s chapter on England’s research in accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) touches on many of the issues raised in other chapters, including social inclusion and employability, government policy support, and higher education resistance. The description of issues relating to the credit-exchange and developmental models of APEL is quite informative.

Harris writes the chapter on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) within the European Union (EU). Harris explains her criteria for including research in this chapter, as well as lists the key political landmark decisions that have influenced VNFIL growth since 1995. Inventories are identified as a common research method used within the EU for collecting and analyzing activities in different countries. Comparative studies and research through collaboration and networks were also mentioned. The chapter provides a review of issues related to validity and reliability, and describes the practical applications of administering VNFIL across different jurisdictions. Harris comments on the progress being made to develop validation systems that are resource-efficient, quality-assured, and flexible.

Werquin and Wihak’s chapter on OECD consolidates the main similarities and differences among OECD countries (Tables 7.1 to 7.5). The section on contextual factors is helpful as it further articulates drivers for the use of Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL).

The chapter by Whittaker shows that RPL activity in Scotland is policy-driven and development-based, both of which extend the scope and accessibility of RPL. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has been the key platform for research and development in RPL. Whittaker makes the case that the workforce development imperative is dependent on effective collaboration between employers, learning providers, awarding bodies, and others.

Breier’s chapter on research contributions from South Africa focuses on three broad purposes: research to develop policy; research to conceptualize and guide practice; and research to monitor and quantify implementation. The section related to the last of the three purposes concludes that workers need to be directly involved in the design and implementation of RPL and supported throughout the RPL process. Research into the implementation for higher education demonstrates that RPL was mainly employed for access rather than for credit or advanced standing. One challenge that was noted relates to adults with limited formal education; they often showed difficulties in tasks that required abstraction, generalization, and self-reflection, and many had difficulties with English academic literacies.

Andersson and Fejes’ chapter on Sweden’s contribution to RPL knowledge provides examples of research that study and analyze RPL/validation as a phenomenon and practice in Sweden. The need for the research was a response to policy changes that accepted validation as the main means to identify, assess, and document people’s prior learning and competence.

Travers’ chapter on PLA research in the United States reminds the reader that curriculum decisions are made at the state level and that a great deal of research is undertaken by graduate students through their dissertations. Some of the research found that PLA students (students who have undertaken a prior learning assessment) persist and have far greater success in their studies compared to non-PLA students. US research also found that there is a positive transformational effect in terms of self-awareness and skill development for those students who undertake PLA.

In the first of the two issue-based chapters of the book, Wong considers a major theme running through the chapters; faculty resistance to PLAR within universities. The relationship between university culture and faculty motivation is examined. Some clarity is provided on history and reasons for this resistance.

The final chapter, by Wihak and Wong, deals with research into PLAR in Canadian university adult education programs and indicates that there is a need for stronger theorization of PLAR within adult education departments. The authors also raise the issue of cost, indicating that sufficient resources are crucial for PLAR success within the mainstream of student services at Canadian universities.

In the Endword section, Friesen identifies a number of helpful questions that summarize the submissions within this book. He recommends a 'multivocal' approach to this emergent field, where multiple theories and methodologies are applied to PLAR, with a particular emphasis on descriptive, comparative and exploratory research.

In conclusion, as the use of RPL continues to grow, it is important that we take stock of the research that informs theory development, assesses government policies, and examines practice. This book provides important contributions in these areas. It is also important and timely that Thompson Rivers University has created the PLIRC to support international collaboration on RPL. I look forward to the next collection of articles on this subject that will provide further depth and breadth to our understanding of RPL. This can be achieved by building on the research analysis presented in this book, and by referencing research activities from other countries including those from the Global South.

Reference

Thomas, A. (2000). Prior Learning Assessment: The quiet revolution. In A. Wilson, & E. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING CITIES AND REGIONS: POLICY, PRACTICE AND PARTICIPATION

Norman Longworth and Michael Osborne (Eds.). NIACE, Leicester, UK, 2010, 354 pages.

The notion of learning cities and learning regions has been promoted since the early 1990s as a framework to build community partnerships through lifelong learning initiatives. Despite a number of interesting and innovative projects, the learning city/region project has never lived up to the power and potential its proponents have hoped. Chief among learning city proponents has been Norman Longworth, who has written extensively about the notion and has developed and supported learning city initiatives around the world. *Perspectives on Learning Cities and Regions: Policy, Practice and Participation*, edited by Norman Longworth and Michael Osborne, is another attempt to create much needed interest in the idea of the learning city/region.