Articles

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP OF MENTORING TO LEARNING IN RPL PRACTICE

Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

Elenor Wardrop
Athabasca University

Abstract

Through RPL's process of intensive reflection, learners come to understand the nature of their past learning. In so doing, new knowledge — knowledge about their own learning histories and learning styles — is created. This is not an easy task, and mentoring is important to learners as they engage with and learn to take ownership of their own learning. This study, informed by the central research question — how best can mentoring be enacted in order to foster and elicit the high-level cognitive activity required for successful RPL? — gathered data from learners and mentors from four Canadian institutions. Major findings include the importance of learners' "finding their voices" — academically, linguistically, and emotionally. Learners' empowerment emerged as a major theme as did the inability of both learners and mentors to speak fluently about their own learning process.

Résumé

Grâce au processus de réflexion intense que soutient la VAE (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience), les apprenants en viennent à prendre connaissance de la nature de leurs acquis. Par conséquent, ils développent un nouveau savoir : la reconnaissance du parcours de leurs propres acquis et la compréhension de leurs styles d'apprentissage particuliers. Cette démarche ne se fait pas facilement et il est important que les apprenants soient judicieusement suivis par un mentor alors qu'ils tentent de gérer leur nouvelle situation et apprennent à s'approprier leur propre apprentissage. Notre projet de recherche, soutenu par la question-clé, c.à.d : comment peut-on mener un programme de mentorat compétent pour soutenir et mettre à jour de façon efficace l'activité cognitive requise pour un apprentissage VAE?, a recueilli des données d'apprenants et de mentors

provenant de quatre institutions canadiennes différentes. Les résultats les plus notables incluent l'importance pour les apprenants de 'trouver leurs voix' — académiquement, linguistiquement et émotionnellement. L'autonomisation des apprenants est un thème majeur ainsi que l'inhabilité, tout autant des apprenants que des mentors, à s'exprimer aisément et couramment lorsqu'il s'agit de leur propre processus d'apprentissage.

Introduction

The practice of recognizing prior learning in post-secondary institutions offers learners the chance to optimize their experiential learning in several different ways. On a practical level, it takes less time and money to earn a credential when learners receive credit for learning gained experientially. Academically, engaging in a well-developed RPL[1] process[2] can help learners develop their learning skills. And on a personal level, the RPL process can boost learners' self-esteem and contribute to enriching self-knowledge (Andersson, 2006; Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003). Through RPL's process of intensive reflection, learners come to understand the nature of their past learning. In so doing, they create new knowledge about their own learning histories and learning styles. Because this is not easy, mentoring and coaching are important as learners engage with and learn to take ownership of their learning. In 2009, this research investigated aspects of coaching and mentoring within several RPL practices in Canada. The researcher's practice-based observations that mentoring constitutes an extremely important part of successful prior learning assessment experiences shaped this study's research questions.

Literature Review

To situate the research appropriately within RPL's many global and multi-themed contexts, this literature review addresses several topics, beginning by clarifying the role of RPL practice within Canadian post-secondary institutions and the limitations of RPL as a social, educational, and political phenomenon.

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1   RPL (recognizing prior learning) is used in place of the terms PLAR (prior learning assessment and recognition), PLA (prior learning assessment), or APEL (assessment of prior and experiential learning).

2   The issues and discussion put forward in this article assume the implementation of a set of processes that ask learners to demonstrate their learning in structured and deliberate ways, using the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's guidelines. Using such a system, learners engage in a rigorous process of reflective thought to prepare written work, usually in portfolio form, that is assessed by content experts. Such a process does not use an audit or checklist approach to RPL assessment.

The Power and Politics of Prior Learning

It has long been recognized that prior learning offers opportunities to those who have fallen, for whatever reason, outside the purview of traditional higher education. A large literature addresses this aspect of RPL, much of it emanating from areas where social oppression and disadvantage have been prevalent (Harris, 2000a, 2000b; Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003). The power of RPL to open doors to learning for the previously disadvantaged follows on the understanding of institutions of higher learning as places of privilege that value "symbolic mastery over practical mastery" through traditional practices of "intellectual debate [and] the 'bestowal' of authority" (Harris, 2000b, p. 6). In this sense, "RPL is part of contemporary challenges to the boundaries and boundary maintenance of traditional academia" (Harris, 2000b, p. 6). Working from this critical lens, Harris (2000a, 2000b) and others (Fenwick, 2006) have framed institutions' adoption of RPL practices by their responses to power, pedagogy, and practice. In Canada currently, RPL practice would entirely fall into Harris's (2000b) "Mode 1 RPL," which describes a "bolted-on," direct-equivalence model.

RPL, Pedagogically

The consideration of RPL as a learning process rests at the convergence of theories of experiential and reflective learning, within the constructivist paradigm. Historically, Aristotle and Socrates provided inspiration on the wisdom of valuing life's experience, and Dewey's (1938) seminal work highlighted the value of experience to modern educational systems: "The beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have . . . this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (p. 74). Dewey (1916) also described the value of experiential learning to society: "Society sustains itself through the sharing of knowledge and information and, in so doing, lives beyond the lifespan of the individual . . . . the very process of living together educates" (p. 4).

More recently, Kolb (1984), Vygotsky (1978), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Schön (1983) have espoused models and theories that place prior learning and reflection on prior experiences into pedagogical contexts. Classic adult education literature also supports these views (Brookfield, 1990; Candy, 1991; Cross, 1981). Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (1994) offered transformative learning as a thoughtful extension of prior learning's reflective processes.

Accepting, then, that systematic reflexive processes result in changed cognition for learners, this research centres broadly on the role of the mentor within the RPL process, addressing the question: "How best can mentoring be enacted in order to foster and elicit the cognitive activity required for successful RPL completion and subsequent learning?" The discussion that follows addresses, first, the instrumental — *how* self-reflexive learning is encouraged in RPL processes — and second, the role of the mentor in the learning process.

A Catch-22-like situation, however, makes both the research at hand and this literature discussion challenging. In short, RPL practice that emphasizes learning as a part of the process is not widely practised in Canada, a paucity that affected this study in three ways. First, it initiated this researcher's interest in *how* practitioners could spark such a

practice. Secondly, the lack of practice affected the way in which questions pertaining to learning could reasonably be asked of participants. Lastly, Canadian literature is largely silent on both the cognitive and learning aspects of RPL practice and complementarily on mentoring practices that foster learners' engagement in their learning.

In a nationally funded study investigating RPL in Canada, Wihak (2006) did not identify a single Canadian study that addressed the issue of learning through the RPL process. Several pan-Canadian studies completed in recent years highlight only quantitative measurements of output, such as numbers of completers, amount of credit awarded, or institutions engaged or not engaged in practice (Aarts et al., 1999; Barrington Research Group, 2005; Kennedy, 2003; Livingstone, Raykov, & Turner, 2005; Van Kleef, 2000. Wihak identified American, Australian, European, and South African sources whose topics came closer to discussing the quality and type of learning that occurred during learners' RPL preparations. Of these, LeGrow's (2000) study compared performances of RPL students who had received credit in certain knowledge areas to students who had studied similar content in formal classes, and reported that the RPL students "showed superior knowledge organization and generated more complete problem solutions . . . [concluding] that definite educational benefits accrued from the reflecting on and articulating of learning required by the portfolio process" (Wihak, p. 48). Similarly, RPL scholars Harris (2000a, 2000b) and Michelson (1996, 2006) not only described the learning that occurs during the RPL process but also highlighted the disparity between the demands and structure of traditional, formal, institutional learning and the type of practical grassroots knowledge generally brought forward by learners for RPL assessment. Reflecting on this gap, Peters (2006) suggested that

> there is, thus, a new code that students need to apply to their real-life experiences in order to connect the latter with higher education and in-so-doing [*sic*] re-categorize what they know about themselves and their lives. This may well be a difficult process for the uninitiated to take. (p. 172)

The enormity of the RPL task for learners makes clear the importance of the mentoring role.

Mentoring in RPL

Andersson and Harris's insightful text (2006) documents from many perspectives the "pedagogical conflicts between formal teaching and the assessment of prior knowledge" (Osman, 2006, p. 214). And, although Fenwick (2006) suggests in Andersson and Harris's volume that "an educator might be helpful in these [RPL] processes as an interpreter" (p. 297), the words *mentor* or *mentoring* do not appear in the book's index.

In cases where RPL learners have had occasion to work with mentors, coaches, or advisors (terminology varies), their experiences are reported to be positive. Approximately 100 learners in Athabasca University's Gateways Project benefitted from mentoring (Arscott, Crowther, Young, & Ungarian, 2007), and Clarke's (2000) UK study highlighted learners' preferred desire for more direction.

Citing Morton (2003), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (2007) outlined the mentorship role in its provision of RPL services, describing mentoring as providing "support, advice, and guidance in a relationship which is confidential, open, and non-judgemental and where the mentor listens and asks questions which promotes the mentee to reflect on their [*sic*] own development" (p. 1). The methodological description that follows describes how the study sought to understand the contribution of mentoring to RPL learners' cognitive process.

Methodology

This study investigated how several Canadian post-secondary institutions used mentoring within RPL practice. The study's objectives were informed by the central research question: How best can mentoring be enacted in order to foster and elicit the cognitive activity required for successful RPL learning? The study had three objectives: to explore the learning potential of RPL processes within Canadian post-secondary environments; to explore how mentoring can foster learning activities in learners; and to determine best practices for post-secondary RPL practice.

The qualitative research design included RPL learners and mentors from four Canadian institutions. Participants included learners who were currently engaged in a prior learning process and learners who had completed RPL within the last year. The small number of practitioners (n=6) is a reflection of the limited practice that currently exists in Canada. Student respondents—male and female adult learners who had been engaged in the prior learning process regardless of program or course of study—numbered 22; their names were put forward by program administrators contacted by the researcher. The researcher sought to cast as wide a net as possible to explore the nature of mentor-learner relationships in the limited number of institutions using such systems.

The study comprised two data-gathering stages. Initial questionnaires containing open and closed questions were distributed to potential respondents. These questionnaires served to gather background information and establish participants' broad perceptions of their experience with the RPL process. More specifically, questionnaires asked participants about their understanding of learning activities in their respective systems. RPL practitioners responded to similar but adapted questionnaires. Ethical protocols were strictly observed.

Following the initial data collection, follow-up interviews and focus groups were conducted with selected participants who had indicated willingness to engage further. In telephone interviews (n=3), a face-to-face interview (n=1), and a face-to-face focus group (n=7), the researcher probed the nature of learners' and mentors' experiences. In the qualitative tradition, questions were used as starting points and participants explored the meanings of questions with the researcher. From the subsequent compilation of data, the researcher analyzed, codified, categorized, and thematized participants' experiences (Creswell, 2003). The study was limited by the following conditions: only portfolio learning was under study (not prior learning by challenge exam, for example), and learners who had failed to complete RPL were not surveyed.

Findings: Learners' Voices, Mentors' Voices

The study's findings, ranging from broadly useful demographics to more specific insights, are reported below. Findings are also separated into learners' and mentors' responses.

Learner, Mentor, and Institutional Demographics

Since the field of RPL practice within Canada is small, the researcher first contacted mentors to seek their participation. Mentors, in turn, suggested the names of learners who were, or had been, engaged in RPL. Of 31 learners contacted, 22 participated in the study (71% response rate). Female respondents outnumbered male respondents three to one. Most participants were aged 35 to 50. No one was younger than 26. Three female participants were aged 51 to 65.

Institutional choice was limited by the type of RPL practised (see footnote 2). Mentors (n=6) varied in their roles within their institutions. Mentors in two of the institutions who participated served as academic faculty located within RPL-supportive departments or units. Mentors in one post-secondary institution were hired as mentors and supervised by an experienced RPL practitioner. Another mentor-participant was a retired academic now engaged by an RPL-practising organization.

RPL practices also varied within the participating institutions. Three institutions ran on-site portfolio preparation courses of varying lengths at the end of which learners submitted completed portfolios. One institution mentored learners through an open-ended process rather than a set-length course.

Learners' Reasons for Choosing RPL

Respondents were asked to prioritize several reasons for choosing RPL. From the six reasons presented, this ranking emerged: (1) reduce time to complete degree; (2) use relevant knowledge; (3, in a three-way tie), reduce cost of degree, use resultant portfolio for career purposes, use resultant portfolio for new job; and (6) appreciate the self-directed aspect of the process.

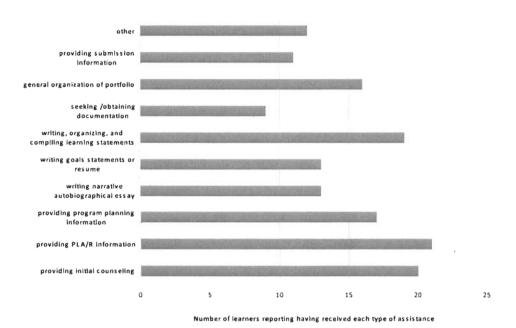### *Learners' Familiarity with RPL Materials*

Almost all respondents indicated a good understanding of the resource materials available to them during their RPL process, although one learner engaged in face-to-face RPL indicated that she was unaware of the availability of materials.

The data related above were gathered to establish learners' fit within adult and distance learning paradigms. As demonstrated, data indicate that the study's participants reflect what we know about adult learners: they are somewhat self-directed, are often middle-aged, and take responsibility for their learning (Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1970). Distance learners enjoy the flexibility and convenience offered them and they were comfortable with that mode of learning. The findings that follow more specifically address issues of learning and the relationships between mentors, their mentoring styles, and learners' successful completion of RPL.

Ways in Which Mentors Assisted Learners

The guiding/helping relationship that defines mentoring (Daloz, 1985) includes many functions. Participants were asked to indicate which of the following types of assistance they had received from their mentors. Overall findings are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

How Mentors Assisted Learners

Number of learners reporting having received each type of assistance

In the focus group (n=7), learners were asked to describe what type of feedback from their mentors had moved them forward. Over and over again, in open-ended written questionnaire responses and in the focus group, learners indicated that their mentors had inspired them with confidence and "given us permission" to speak their stories. It surprised one learner when she discovered that "I was allowed to do that"—to talk about herself in a learning context.

Mentors pushed and pulled their learners forward. "Just a little bit more," they'd urge. "You'll get there," they promised. Mentors adapted their coaching style to the learner's style, using sensitivity, intuition, and insight. "You have to invest time in yourself," they insisted, and they "front-loaded the course with a sense of self" in order to get their learners rolling. Learners repeatedly mentioned the notion of "getting permission for self." Other comments follow here:
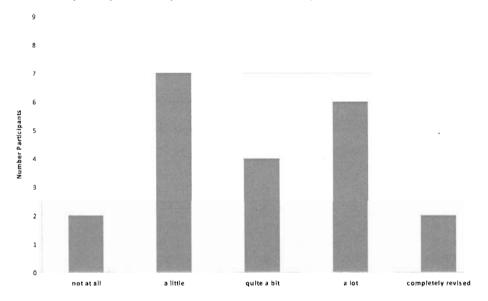
- "Encouragement, faith, support and empathy were key characteristics of my mentor that helped me move through the process."

- "Cheerleading! My advisor kept me going long after I would have tossed those learning statements into the round file."

- "My mentor is extremely patient, offering me suggestions that move the learning statements another notch up."

- "My mentor guided me in writing more meaningful learning statements."

Mentors' Influence on Learners' Narrative/Autobiographical Essays

In most types of RPL portfolios, a narrative presentation lets learners tell their stories. Participants were asked how helpful their mentors had been during this aspect of portfolio preparation. Figure 2 data show overall levels of helpfulness.

Figure 2

Learner Reports of Mentor Influence on Narrative Essay Presentation
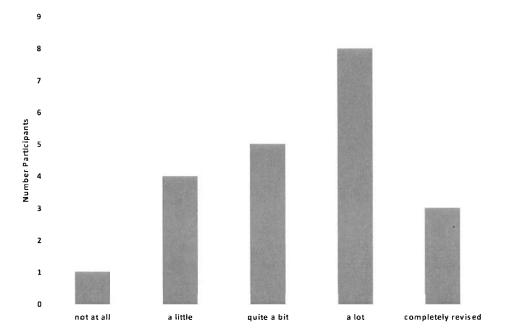

Learners recognized and appreciated the value of telling their stories. "The big thing is the story," noted one learner. "The story grows and changes," said another. "That's growth." Being able to share individual stories of growth and learning was deemed "sacred" by one focus group learner. Writing the narrative was regarded as a challenging task: "You have to find out who you are." Subsequent growth was described as spiritual, intellectual, and emotional. A focus group learner also noted that writing her story had brought her "to a place of humility," while it also helped her understand her own value.

Mentors' Influence on Learners' Learning Statements[3]

Although RPL portfolios may differ in shape and size, at some point learners must demonstrate to their audience the nature of the prior learning that they claim to have. Participants were asked to indicate how helpful their mentors had been during this difficult aspect of portfolio preparation. Figure 3 indicates overall indications of helpfulness.

Figure 3

Learner Reports of Mentor Influence on Learning Statement Presentation
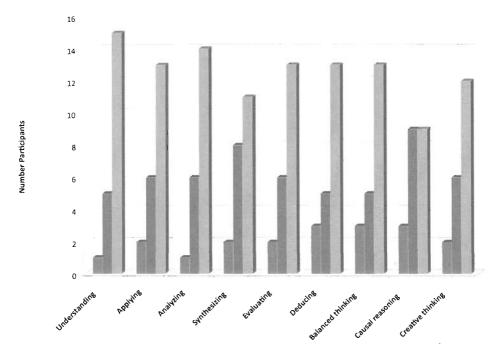

Learners' Assessment of RPL as Aiding the Development of Cognitive Skills

Learners were given a selection of cognitive functions derived from Bloom's (1956) *Taxonomy*, including, in order of ascending difficulty: understanding, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Added to these were the higher-level functions of deducing, balanced thinking, causal reasoning, and creative thinking. Figure 4 reports learners' assessment of RPL as an aid to developing cognitive skills.

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3   Finding the language to describe this part of the portfolio was difficult due to institutions' varying expectations of the finished product. Language was carefully constructed to describe this particular part of the portfolio by function, and the researcher took time to explain, in follow-up sessions and focus groups, what was being referred to.

Figure 4

Learner Assessment of RPL as Aiding Cognitive Skill Development

In the focus group session, which included six learners and one mentor, specific questions designed to address the many issues around learning and the mentor's role in the learning process evoked rich qualitative responses. Relevant questions are itemized separately here.

How did you learn to separate learning from experience? Learners recognized the difficulty of this task, noting that it's difficult to "understand what a skill is" and to "deconstruct a 'do' into a skill." A part of the cognitive work in this process involved what one learner called a "what's-another-word-for-that?" exercise. In some cases, working in groups or pairs, learners were encouraged to create linkages to other learners' stated skills: "Finding likenesses helps build bridges." Brainstorming was another popular technique used by mentors to encourage expanded thinking among learners.

How were you able to find the words to describe your own learning? Learners described this process on two levels; one included "finding the words." "I am continually writing," said Megan. "I might find the word while stopped at a traffic light and know, 'That's it!'" Joanne described a process where another learner—"somebody from outside who didn't know you"—articulated what she saw as Joanne's skills. On another level, mentors gave techniques to learners. Wendy described taking the task at hand and learning how to break it down into small pieces. This technique allowed her to find her voice, and once that happened, "I started to talk and they didn't know what to do with me." Another learner stated, when asked about finding the words: "They [mentors] give them to you."

What the Mentors Said

A total of six practitioners participated in the study. Their qualitative responses to open-ended questionnaire questions, in follow-up interviews, and during focus group participation are reported below.

In what ways do you assist learners? Mentors emphasized that they introduced their learners to adult learning principles as a foundational tool in the mentoring process. Their reliance on adult learning principles was connected to encouraging learners to reflect as a first step to portfolio preparation. They noted also that the meta-cognitive sense of "learning how to learn" proved to be a motivating factor for learners. Another meta-cognitive approach—establishing the parameters of "what is a portfolio"—was also considered to be a core learning function.

What do you see as the most significant challenge facing learners in demonstrating their learning? Mentors isolated four major challenges facing learners, including helping their learners to (1) find the learning in the experience and realize that learning transcends experience; (2) find the relationship between the learning and the "target" (sometimes course outcomes); (3) recognize, accept, and "own" the value of their own learning; and (4) present their learning in appropriate language.

Do you think that learners could arrive at the same level of expertise in their demonstration of learning, by themselves? Unanimously responding "no," mentors reaffirmed the importance of their roles in helping learners arrive at appropriate expressions of their learning. "My experience is that the critical reflection required to produce strong learning statements is best facilitated through review and discussion with a mentor," captured the gist of how all mentors answered this question. "This process is unique and different and new to the learner, therefore support and guidance are critical," said another. "Some learners [would get there]," said another, "but it would be a small percentage and generally a gruelling or discouraging process." Mentors itemized the following benefits that they felt they brought to the process: providing materials and examples to help with concise and appropriate expression; bolstering learners' self-confidence; "transitioning" learners by serving as a "bridge or a catalyst" to adapt to university processes and move through emotional barriers; and helping learners understand and meet institutional and academic standards.

What techniques do you use to help learners to present their learning? Mentors' responses have been categorized in Table 1.

Table 1

Mentors' Techniques for Helping Learners with Their Learning

Cheerleading/affective domain	Learning/thinking	Organizational/ mechanical
Constant encouragement	Strong examples of specific tips or techniques	Refer learner to resources
Stress iterative process		
Constant feedback		Provide guidelines, structures, templates
Build confidence through sharing stories	Use learner's own writing to illustrate application of techniques	
		Provide timely references geared to where learner is at any one time
Work with learners one-on-one	Use learner's own writing to demonstrate how to develop and expand it	
		Provide sample portfolios and samples of other learners' writing
Collaborative group sessions	Ask "how, why, and what" questions to expand learner's grasp of material	
	Provide sample portfolios	
	Practise language skills to develop new vocabulary	
	Round-robin group interaction and sharing of examples	
	Structured debriefing	

Discussion

A popular adage states that a fish cannot define water while *in* the water because the fish cannot find the creative distance to analyze critically the properties of its own situation. Similarly, learners find it difficult to reflect on their own learning in order to understand how their lives' events and actions have contributed to their becoming the learners that they are. Self-knowledge and the related ability to understand analytically one's past learning history are critical to successfully completing the RPL process. Through RPL, learners are challenged to identify their relevant prior and experiential learning and locate it within their post-secondary program. Mentoring helps learners with this complex cognitive process. Mentoring at a distance involves additional levels of communication and time-management skills. How best can mentoring work to elicit the cognitive activity required not only for successful RPL but also for sustained learning?

The Nature of Mentoring: Decisions, Delicacy, Discretion

Just as the practice of recognizing prior learning relates conceptually to adult education theory (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), so too does the practice of mentoring incorporate adult education beliefs. Daloz's (1985) description of mentoring echoed Knowles's (1970) classic view of helping adults learn:

> In an atmosphere of care and support, the teacher-mentor challenges
> . . . supports . . . [and] provides vision for students to examine their
> conceptions of self and the world and to formulate new, more developed
> perspectives. Thus, mentors are interpreters of the environment, since
> they help students to understand how higher education works and what it
> expects of them. (pp. 355–357)

This study's learners often described their process in the language of adult education, perhaps as a result of their mentors' stated respect for adult education principles, perhaps as a result of their own experiences as adult learners—perhaps a combination of both. Whatever its genesis, the connection between mentoring and adult education appears to have worked in several ways. Mentors drew on adult education techniques and styles in their interactions with learners, practising respect, mindfulness, and flexibility, and, above all, empowering learners through difficult cognitive and affective terrain. Learners understood this and were able to speak knowledgeably about the intersection of adult education techniques with their mentoring experience. In describing mentors—"respecting knowledge that was already there," "making you challenge yourself," and "meeting you where you're at,"—RPL learners lived the language of adult education and, in so doing, voiced their alignment with one of the fundamental principles of RPL and with negotiated, supportive processes used in RPL practices.

Empowerment, Self-esteem, and "Finding the voice"

Learners spoke eloquently and consistently of the effects of RPL on aspects of self-image and confidence, and mentors were aware of the importance of their attention to learners' confidence and self-esteem. At its most obvious and accessible level, RPL's ability to help adults to develop in these important aspects of their lives is admirable. Practitioners

recognize that boosting self-esteem is either an intended outcome or an inevitable unintended outcome. The PLA Centre in Halifax, for example, promotes self-esteem and self-development as important RPL outcomes in videos showing successful portfolio completers (http://www.priorlearning.ca).

Women learners, especially, voiced the sentiment that "I am not enough." Some, like Lenore, with a background of underemployment and some degree of oppression, spoke of "claiming my authenticity" with the discovery and acceptance of "okay-ness." In the focus group, Lenore told a poignant story from her past as an apple-sorter. Initially, her story was couched in the self-deprecating "I'm *just* . . ." discourse of underachievement. Her mentor first coached her to understand that her attention to detail enabled her to sort apples quickly and efficiently. She then discovered that her ability to distinguish good apples from bad apples was another type of learning, as was the knowledge of apple varieties and their characteristics. Lenore came to understand that she was in fact exercising skills while "not knowing that you are doing it."

Establishing trust is a foundational and necessary precedent to "finding the voice" for learners. "I had a problem with trust," a focus group learner admitted. Deep-seated fears about levels of ability emerged: "I had to spend a lot of time fishing for [thoughts];" "I thought I was organized but I was not;" "it took me a month to wrap my head around it. There was a two-month period between starting and being able to write." (Researcher: "What were you looking for?" Learner: "I don't know.") In this case, the mentor had urged, "Just start! Sit down and write and let the words fall out." The learner grappled with a "grave fear of failure," but trusted her mentor's guidance. Words came out; it was a beginning.

On the other hand, Jill experienced an "aha" moment near the end of her portfolio work. To this point, she had not been encouraged to explore her developing understanding of her learning or to incorporate additional learning. Was her mentor negligent in not guiding Jill into new territory? Perhaps she had sensed Jill's frustration and retreated. Perhaps there was simply no more to say. Whatever the in-the-moment situation, Jill's 20/20 reflections highlight not only the delicacy of the learner-mentor relationship but also its potential. Jill's story follows.

Riding RPL's Emotional Roller-Coaster: Jill's Story

Reflecting on writing her learning narrative, Jill mused that "[it is] clear to me today [that I was] bragging about myself, although I don't think that was the intent." Looking back, Jill can now see herself through a reader's eyes, but admits she did not have this vision when she was writing. In an interview, she noted that her mentor "did try to move me there," but admits that she "didn't get" it at the time. At the end of a three-month portfolio-writing stint, its purpose became clear to Jill. But by this point, she was drained of energy and her course was over.

Jill's situation required her to submit her portfolio for consideration for university admission. The institution wanted more work done on the document, making repeated requests for more information. From her workplace, Jill "received a certificate and a pat on the back for having done [RPL]." She came away feeling disappointed and frustrated, feeling that she could have benefitted from more information at the front end of the process.

"The guidance could have been clearer . . . How can I demonstrate that I can learn?" she mused.

Ultimately, Jill was glad to have finished the project. She worked full-time and had to use her evenings for chats with her mentor. She also noted that, at her age, "middle-aged people [have difficulty] trying to dive into memory banks." She happily reported, however, a "high sense of pride" in having completed the work. "It was quite rewarding to fill a four-inch binder. I didn't think I would be able to fill even a one-inch binder when I started the course." Describing the process as a "trying time," Jill "walked away with [my] head held high."

Other learners alluded to the emotional aspects of mentorship during the portfolio process, commenting: "I feel so respected;" "they totally listened to my story" (spoken with great emotion; they "*listen*-listen" (referring to deep or active listening skills); "it starts a healing process." And, in summation: "I believe this whole process is about the mentoring."

Mentoring, Cognition, and Building Knowledge

Although many theories purport to explain the phenomenon of learning, scientists and educators alike are quick to point out that we still do not completely understand how the brain functions. Nonetheless, those seeking to understand learning in the context of RPL look to the fields of adult education and experiential learning to explain the processes at work in prior learning activities. Tough's (1979) work on self-direction, Mezirow's (1991) on transformative learning, Schön's (1983) on reflection, and Brookfield's (1990) and Knowles's (1970) on adult learners complement Dewey's (1938), Vygotsky's (1978), Bandura's (1971), and Kolb's (1984) foundational work on social and experiential learning. More specifically, the application of these theorists' work to portfolio learning has been delineated in case study approaches, most recently in substantial edited volumes (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Michelson & Mandell, 2004).

Of the many contributions of mentors to learners' learning processes highlighted in this study, three major themes emerged.

Mentors helping learners to reflect. The discussion of reflection and reflexive practice is not an easy one (Boud & Walker, 1998; Fenwick, 2006). Viewed through a critical lens or through the literature of social justice and power, the action of reflection complexifies according to context (Boud & Walker). Boud and Walker eschew the careless use of reflection, the one-size-fits-all, "recipe" approach that is sometimes used in education—reflection that gives over to meaningless emotional disclosure and the elevation of reflection into contrived meaning. Still, they confirm that experience and knowledge are inseparable and that experience alone is neither coherent nor complete (cf. Bryant, Usher, & Johnstone, 1996).

Osman (2006) raised similar issues, asking, in effect, "Whose learning is it, anyway, when a mentor helps a learner through a reflexive process?" Whose knowledge is really being presented? This study's findings substantiate that RPL's mentoring situations— as evidenced in these settings—are significantly different from Boud and Walker's (1998)

type of professional training contexts so as to considerably lessen or remove factors that would bias mentors' guidance *away from* the interests of the learner. Specifically, mentors' non-teaching roles free them from ownership of designated content and the subsequent obligation or perceived need to impart that content; mentors encourage growth rather than compliance; mentors are responsive rather than directive; mentors listen *before* speaking and often in lieu of speaking. In other words, mentors ideally do not take positions apart from those of mentees.

Participants' commentary spoke to the reality of this theoretical position. Several learners echoed this sentiment on their written questionnaires, describing their mentors as "extremely non-judgmental and very open and understanding. [She] left me with the impression that whatever I wrote in my history or chronological record or goals would be as unique as I am and therefore perfect for my portfolio." Learners responded positively to facilitative empowerment, noting that "I saw this as an opportunity to articulate my learning to myself" and that "[the portfolio process] was a valuable and rewarding inward look and inventory of my skills and strengths." Most of the study's respondents indicated, in statements similar to the following, that they had been able to understand and balance the cognitive and affective outcomes of effective mentoring experiences: "The [portfolio process provided] the opportunity to apply learned skills toward a university degree all the while offering the ability to learn more about myself."

Learners consistently felt that through a process of reflection and extrapolation—of skills, of knowledge gained, of learning—they had succeeded in "getting at" their own stories. When asked to evaluate the degree of contribution of mentors to their progress, learners frequently reported "a lot." How? One commented, "by supporting me and encouraging me to tell my story and then drawing the learning from it." Do such sincere and enthusiastic endorsements from learners negate the possibility of mentor bias having "reconstructed" learners' stories? Possibly not, and this research did not ask learners precise questions on that topic. However, it is important to note that the institutions represented in this study produce portfolios that comprise a number of parts, triangulated one to another, with the aim of producing consistent, reliable learning scenarios for assessment. As part of an academic assessment process, assessors should recognize inconsistencies within the sum of the parts as they would recognize any type of irregularity in students' work (Conrad, 2008).

Fenwick (2006) likened mentors' possible roles to that of interpreter. Following that view, the activity is assisting participants to name what has been and continues to unfold around them and inside them, to continually rename these changing nuances, and to unlock the tenacious grasp of old categories, restrictive or destructive language that strangles emerging possibilities. (p. 297)

Still, while honouring their learners' voices and creating learning environments where those voices can be heard, capable and responsible mentors are also cognizant of the demands of their institutions. The political reality around RPL in Canadian post-secondary institutions is larger than what this paper can adequately address; suffice to say that the institutions in this study *do* support and permit prior learning to come forward within well-defined frameworks. A level of acceptance is therefore implicit in this discussion. Are the impacting constraints on these mentors' RPL practices any different or greater than the span of constraints guiding other parts of the educational process? Probably not. However,

some of the effects translating from these types of tensions are shown in this study to manifest tangibly in mentors helping learners find the language to present their learning for institutional assessment.

Mentors helping learners to think. Reflection is the first step in learners' preparation of their prior and experiential learning for assessment. Through the process of reflection, learners identify and gather material upon which to situate their learning (Conrad, 2008). Reflection uncovers and recoups incidents, events, and situations that house past learning that will be useful to learners in their post-secondary quests. The learning that is uncovered or rediscovered *belongs to* the learner. How learners come to think about their learning is one of the mentors' major roles.

The study's questionnaire asked participants to indicate the ways in which mentors had helped them work with their knowledge. In the cognitive categories suggested to learners—understanding, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, deducing, balanced thinking, causal reasoning, and creative thinking—findings indicated that learners acknowledged "a lot" of assistance from mentors. Similarly, learners acknowledged the value of the RPL process to their overall learning, with 16 learners assigning a "high" value to the contribution of RPL to their overall learning and 5 assigning it a "fairly high" value.

What does this study say about the ways in which mentors helped learners to learn *about* their learning? The most fundamental observation validated in questionnaire data, follow-up interviews, and the focus group is that it's very hard for learners to talk about their learning. When asked about their RPL experiences, learners tended to relate a slate of emotional and psychological responses. Series of directed questions were needed to explore learners' views on cognition. This level of exploration was not easily achieved on the written instrument, although space was provided for open-ended responses to this question. Instead, learners provided affectively-based expressions of trust and gratitude, learned patience, and increased self-esteem. In conversation, however, with probing (and without using the language of learning that had been provided on the written questionnaire), learners found words to describe their processes.

Learners identified four distinct hurdles in the RPL process after the initial flustering of "wrapping [their] head[s] around it" and gaining enough confidence to begin: (1) separating learning from experience; (2) identifying and naming skills; (3) finding the linkages to display the learning; and (4) finding an appropriate writing language. (Though it is acknowledged that all are closely related skills, writing is discussed separately in the next section.) Mentors concurred with these challenges. Taken together, these steps represent the span of cognitive processes delineated by Bloom's (1956) *Taxonomy.* Separating learning from experience is a fundamental RPL principle and a starting point in practice, and its importance to the RPL process was reflected in the ways that learners spoke about it. "You don't know what you're doing," learners said, explaining how they had to first discern what a skill was before determining whether or not they had that skill and its attendant knowledge. Unable to achieve that level of insight individually, those who worked in a group situation were encouraged to bounce ideas back and forth with peers. This technique was invaluable for learners, not only for sharing knowledge but also for the encouragement and support received. In one-on-one mentoring, mentors focused on giving

examples to illustrate what "learning looked like;" they also "encouraged me to look at my learning from a different angle. [She] encouraged me to think."

Learners most frequently referred to the first five of Bloom's six levels. Bloom's sixth and highest level, evaluating, was not named as such by learners, although the process of valuing various learning experiences is critical to portfolio preparation; therefore, helping learners do this is one of the mentor's most important functions. Similarly, while learners consistently indicated that they used the four remaining "top-end" cognitive functions in the written questionnaire, they rarely mentioned those functions by name. In their recounting, or lack of recounting, of their cognitive struggles, learners may have meshed their understanding of their thinking processes with their understanding of their writing processes, ultimately verbalizing the difficulty of the more tangible act of writing.

Mentors helping learners to write. RPL's critics and its critical literature identify language issues as key factors in the delicate power balance between mentor and learner, and, by extension, between institutions and learners. Peters (2006) and Harris (2000a) are among those whose writings highlight the hegemony implicit in RPL processes where learners' success often hinges on their ability to master academic language. Fenwick (2006) also interpreted learners' struggles to find acceptable academic language as misrepresenting their own knowledge in terms of someone else's—in this case, the institution's—knowledge.

Certainly, the learners in this study were very aware of the challenges in expressing their knowledge in language that was deemed acceptable. Their mentors, mediating between learners and institutional demands, recognized this part of the process as one of the most difficult. Both mentors and learners commented on the level of difficulty that academic language presented to learners. Learners in the focus group jokingly referred to "ASL"—academia as a second language. A large part of mentors' work at the early stages of portfolio preparation involved demystifying ASL, which was uniformly described as "not very accessible." Learners found that mastering this process was one more way that they grew into themselves as mature, confident learners. Focus group learners spoke of realizing the power of language for the first time. They wanted to "raise [their] own bar" by meeting the language requirement and joining this "secret society" perceived to hold the keys to their success. Language literacy represented one of the ways in which learners became aware of their own equality in an institutionally defined system.

Mentors Share Their Tools and Visions

How did RPL mentors understand their negotiation of the delicate balance between the tensions inherent in their task, given that learners admitted to confusion, fright, suspicion, and a general lack of confidence? As with most adult learners, learners were also pressed for time and burdened with personal and professional commitments.

Mentors' interactions with learners spanned both cognitive and affective domains. In all cases, establishing relationships based on trust provided safe starting places. Mentors used adult education principles of inclusion, respect, and unconditional regard upon which to base their interactions with learners. Interestingly, only one mentor of the six respondents was formally connected to an adult education department at the home institution. Another two mentors were less formally connected to adult education backgrounds through their

supervisor's affiliation with the field. Nonetheless, mentors uniformly understood the levels of fear, nervousness, and, in many cases, low self-confidence experienced by learners, and they knew that creating effective learning environments required the creation of safe learning places.

Several other themes characterized mentors' views of their roles. Mentors recognized the difficulty of the task at hand. They realized that "learners tend to think in terms of 'experience' and not about learning"—a RPL fact borne out by learners themselves. They also realized that, in order to think about learning, learners required access to a certain type of language that would serve as a bridge to demonstrating their experiential learning within the academy in institutionally acceptable ways. Mentors saw themselves as metaphorical "bridges," catalysts who shepherded learners through a complex process, taking them from positions of naïveté—cognitively, perhaps affectively, and certainly academically—to positions of assuredness and achievement.

Mentors also knew that they were privileged by holding knowledge of institutional systems and expectations. They enabled learners' success by providing on-the-ground logistical advice, gatekeeping, and generally "stick-handling" their learners' interactions with administrative bureaucracies in advocacy-type roles: "Much of my [mentoring] deals with the learning narrative and preparation of materials to meet the standards of an academic institution."

As part of the mentors' overview presence, they also considered learners' current and future learning plans. Not only were they consistently aware of the importance of learners' RPL endeavours to their current programs, but they were also aware of learners' external professional obligations to and pressures from "[other] academic institutions, sector councils, professional associations or employers." This mentor's perception of her role is typical of her peers' responses: "[I] help people understand where they came from, recognize their skills and abilities, how they developed, and what they would like to do in the future to maximize their potential and satisfaction." Another, in describing the process of helping learners' "authentic experience" work toward formal recognition, addressed the critically important issues of learner-centred respect and purpose that should, ideally, underpin RPL work.

Conclusion

This study investigated the experiences of RPL learners and mentors working together in four Canadian post-secondary institutions. Given the level of divergence in situation and practice, the first conclusion drawn pertains to the remarkable similarity between learners' and mentors' affective responses to their RPL experiences. Spanning the demographics of time, place, process, gender, and age, a clear picture emerged of how both RPL groups engaged with their process.

Both perspectives agreed that RPL experiences constituted a difficult and often emotional journey as learners reflected on past learning and experiences. Used in this process as a stepping stone to further cognitive exploration, the potentially controversial reflexive process was not *intended* to evoke psychological or emotional tussles; however, mentors recognized its potential to create levels of discomfort among some learners

and learners were vocal in describing the effects of revisiting their learning histories. The subsequent major part of the RPL process—demonstrating learning in appropriate academic language—also engendered stress among learners.

This study's findings indicated that it was in the process of guiding learners' writing toward acceptable academic standards that mentors' institutional biases were most likely to occur. Mentors' pre-knowledge of academic parameters formed important parts of their toolkits, and their caution in guiding learners in this area resembled a type of parental concern for their offsprings' well-being. This study did not ask for nor collect data to probe more deeply into issues of boundaries and ownership of knowledge that may have coloured mentors' work with learners in this regard. When considering the nature of this potential tension, Fenwick (2006) observed: "While addressing these sorts of questions may be difficult in an institutional context where those championing RPL are motivated by sincere commitment to champion adult students' experiential knowledge, they are not impossible [*sic*]" (p. 285).

To this researcher, a revealing finding in this study was the difficulty exhibited by both mentors and learners in talking about their learning process. A general paucity of responses to open questions regarding aspects of learning on the written questionnaire was possibly due to respondents' tendency to rush through written formats. However, attempted follow-up questioning in both telephone interviews and face-to-face occasions was difficult. Respondents tended to digress into descriptions of the complexity of the process, the importance of the process for career and professional development, or the suite of personal rewards (elevated self-confidence, self-knowledge) gleaned from the process. Talking about learning was difficult and rare, supporting the familiar onion metaphor, that peeling back the layers of RPL demonstrates that, " . . . like most apparently bounded educational practices, [it] is also a lens for examining the most fundamental questions about the purposes and practices of education" (Young, 2006, p. 321).

Implications for Further Research

Findings suggest that further investigation into issues of RPL learning is warranted. This study provides a starting point for deeper and more extensive inquiry into understanding both mentors' and learners' learning processes and styles. This study, for example, did not formally explore mentors' educational backgrounds. And while several questions alluded to the cognitive process, overall that line of questioning accounted for less than 25% of the questionnaire. A fuller understanding of the knowledge base, skills, and techniques used in RPL's mentoring process will enhance both its potential for effectiveness and its position in the post-secondary experience.

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