

# Changing Learners: The pedagogy of the assessment of prior and experiential learning and personal and professional development.

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Increasingly over the last decade there has been a considerable literature given over to the Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning, AP(E)L, particularly with its methodology of critical reflection, (Wailey, 2002). Social and technological changes have illustrated more than ever the necessity for institutions to acknowledge learning wherever it takes place. Many applications of this methodology have found their way into State commissioned reports such as Dearing (1997). Consequently one of the major outcomes has been the subsequent expansion of Personal and Professional Development, PPD, within the curriculum in terms of the exploration of the relationship between knowledge and context. This theme provides the focus for the paper in terms of assessment procedures and levels of integration.

More importantly Personal and Professional Development across the mainstream has become the same as that which AP(E)L traditionally addressed namely what is learning and how is it assessed, more importantly how is it related to both professional development and subject discipline and how does this link with curriculum and employment.? This set of relationships maintains a three-fold character with its heartland in advice and in Widening Participation:

- With students subject discipline and academic development
- With students sense of enterprise and career enhancement
- With students themselves as learners, treating their own learning as a research object with themselves as subject.

More importantly for such initiatives to be successful they have to be delivered, assessed and accredited within the mainstream curriculum. Recent literature illustrates this point well; however the core discussion remains the focus around theories of knowledge and about the relationship between knowledge produced through AP(E)L or PPD to complement the knowledge as understood by traditional academic curricula.

What is interesting is that the underpinning rationale that surrounds the two areas of Assessment of Prior and Experiential learning and Personal and Professional Development often overlaps and is to be found side by side within the curriculum in terms of the diagnosis of student need and the development of academic convention, systematic reference to Careers, Enterprise and interpretative knowledge and then to the development of individual research methodologies. Personal and Professional Development is a manifestation of this growth particularly where a great emphasis is given to “creative”, “spliced” or “portfolio lives” as well as the more formal technical and academic requirements surrounding the cognate discipline.

Personal and Professional Development is also about encouraging learners to articulate their learning within different contexts. This includes study at specific levels of an undergraduate programme, technical and academic at level one, hermeneutic or interpretative at level two and critically reflective at level three, in other words, the development of academic skills, enterprise, careers and embryonic research skills and finally an understanding and application of action research skills.

For our purposes this article will focus upon level one. The “ reflective diary” and its implication in terms of relating different forms of assessment together with the critical summary that accompanies it, attempts to categorise professional development within a critical field of literature and is the one we shall consider here. In terms of technique and developing academic convention at this level the central question, remains “what is learning and how is it assessed?”

The notion of a reflective diary is the subject of individual learning and also as a mode of assessment that occurs and re-occurs in different contexts of an increasingly learner centred curriculum over the first year of study. It is not only a mode of epistemology currently being addressed within the Art Design and Communications Sector but also at a wider contextual level and by an international audience. This context frames many cognate disciplines surrounding political and cultural questions in South Africa to the more academic and ideological ones posed by the challenge to the curriculum from the Antipodes to Scotland or even to France.

Within this set of circumstances the assessment of certificated and experiential learning and personal and professional development is part of that cycle of wider access to Higher Education and the development of the “reflective” curriculum across primarily the Anglo-Saxon world. It tries to bridge the gap between the disparity of the Savoir - Faire and the Savoir - Theoretique disjunction which has consigned so many learners claims to history.

Here resides the notion of cycles and of development, which have latterly engaged with linking the assessment of prior learning, the assessment of work based learning and the assessment of personal and professional development in terms of individual learning experiences. This work initially drew heavily upon the conceptual framework provided by David Kolb (1984)

In terms of cultural capital however and reflecting on the different ways in which knowledge entitles itself, a recent reference reminded me that the notion of a learning cycle was far too complex an analytical tool for the early principles of applying and integrating knowledge. The aforesaid comment was made by the author of Catch 22, who pre-war had worked low down the chain within a publishers office: "before 1941 I was just Joey Heller from Brooklyn...sometime during the 1950's, I became Joseph".

What the comment alluded to was the importance of the GI bill in widening access to Higher Education in post-war America. It is a history that gathered pace in the 1960's with widening access and then actually gave credit for learning experiences. Historically this was promoted by certain colleges and found a ready forum from philanthropic organisations and state initiatives at local and national levels, latterly with trade unions with the Ford Motor Co EDAP programme.

Essentially the message is: 'why be typecast? You are more than your job; you are more than your career'. The heart of personal and professional development and assessment of prior and experiential learning is still based upon a holistic assumption of learning that has its roots in American community practice and has since the post war been sharpened philosophically by European critical thought. Curiously however that thought in broadly European terms has proved reticent in its capacity to invade the formal curriculum in terms of credit.

The notion of educational entitlement whilst being a core feature of Western European societies is also more severely stratified when coming to enter University. Alongside its more formal declarations, this straitjacket of access is something that the Bologna Declaration (1999) is working hard to redress. AP(E)L over the last decade has paved the way. The integration of PPD into the assessment of undergraduate programmes is the latest challenge to

the formal curriculum. In other words, the State has become involved in reflective learning, simply because reflective learning had become associated with access.

This challenge comes within the context of a greater mass of students now entering Higher Education and the strategies needed to deal with their demands and with less resources to service those demands. Reflective learning and the methodology of individual professional development is the art of the personal alongside the art of the cognate subject but offers no panacea other than self help. A critical summary still has to link the different elements of the curriculum together although reflective learning now finds its place for students alongside other professional definitions and academic conventions in the completion of a proto - professional journal, such as one might find in the laboratory book of an endocrinologist or the sketch book of a graphic artist. They are part of the same learning process.

Learning outside formal teaching has now come to be recognised as part of the curriculum providing that learning can be articulated and assessed in a similarly holistic manner. But not everywhere. What is ironic is that the assessment of prior learning and personal and professional development policies in relation to State decree are probably at their most developed in France and in Quebec. They are at their most political in South Africa. However in relating AP(E)L and PPD to the Humboltian Research University of the Germanic, Balkan and Scandinavian institutions and the Napoleonic professional competence universities of France the students go missing in terms of articulation of the ambits of their own self managed learning. The central question remains: the appropriateness of what is being measured and assessed. This is of particular relevance when we allude to questions of virtual learning environments and the relative autonomy of the learner.

Such features of the modern day curriculum also raise questions of the political, the professional, the economic and the equitable, namely each of the “villages” that assessment and experience can address itself to and was aptly addressed by Susan Weill and Ian McGill (1989) over a decade ago. Personal and professional development has taken many of these component parts and has translated them not only to undergraduate provision but also in the overall reshaping of the pre and postgraduate offer. Again this is akin to the gains made by AP(E)L and the manner in which the consistent use of methodology has resulted in the systemic unpacking of the cognate subject discipline to leave curriculum space for other aspects of learning. This mantle is now addressed by PPD, to be taken into credit worthiness and held to the light across all levels of undergraduate provision.

Where AP(E)L has succeeded is not only in its depth within the old polytechnics of Britain and new colleges of America but increasingly with the advice, guidance and, among others, Quality Enhancement Units that have traditionally underpinned much of this expansionary activity. Personal and Professional development with its related question of what constitutes learning, its diagnostic assessment and its credit rated programmes is at the heart of the many questions posed of more traditional curricula in the older universities.

Complex themes such as employability and globalisation together with recent Government policy have driven even specialists within those universities across the world to recognise policymakers’ desires to move towards more systemic change in policies directed towards more open access and learning experiences. Reflective learning has its place here in the historic methodologies of access.

What has followed has promoted serious changes within the curriculum. Advice, diagnosis, assessment and credit are the key stages to this learning process whether within an individual, department, school or institutional enterprise. More importantly such initiatives have to be delivered, assessed and accredited within the mainstream curriculum. Recent studies illustrate this point well in terms of the concept of constructive alignment. (Biggs,2002)

Perhaps more importantly, the epistemological question is determined in its relationship to both cognate discipline and personal development and is linked to curriculum, learning outcomes and employment opportunities. This set of relationships incorporates a three-fold character over a period of the three levels of the undergraduate career:

- Within students subject discipline - Technique
- Within students sense of career, enterprise and early research - Hermeneutic
- Within students themselves as learners, treating their own learning as a research object with themselves as subject - Critical

Despite distinct levels of economic disparity and often, modes of study, both AP(E)L and PPD are based upon a recognition and acceptance that in modern technological societies learning occurs in almost limitless ways outside of formal education institutions. This framework provides us with context, theory and the level of personal and professional practice within any particular institution. It also returns us to the core discussion between knowledge revealed through the assessment of prior and experiential learning and personal and professional development and knowledge as understood by traditional academic institutional curricula.

Charles Handy notes in his work on learning and employment that: “What was a way of life for most of us will have disappeared. Organisations will still be critically important in the world but as organisers not employers” (Handy 1994). In terms of the information society this development remains the same for Institutions of Higher Education and is likewise fragmented in many major companies

Yet there are still countless hurdles. The problems encountered would take too much space here but they have a generic core, namely the lack of recognition or lack of framework to facilitate and accredit learning from wherever it takes place across a wide plateau of assessment. Whether driven down the road of “competence” or within a more holistic adult education agenda, it boils down to the same issue – how to influence the traditional curriculum of post-compulsory education with its subject driven paradigms and quality control arrangements that segment and fragment rather than overarch and unify. (Evans 2001)

These are big questions but social and technological changes will illustrate more than ever the necessity for institutions to acknowledge learning wherever it takes place. The old Council for National Academic Awards with its vision statement of, Balance, Integration, Coherence and Progression has a resonance here. Personal and Professional Development is a sign along the way in terms of both census and map in the organisation and framework of professional learning within the mainstream curriculum and as a consequence the exploration of the relationship between knowledge and context.

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