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Chapter 10
Considerations of Self in Recognising Prior Learning and Credentialing

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credentialing frequently focus on issues of equivalency and rigour, rather than the effects of assessment on self-structure. Yet, such processes invite reflexive self-assessment that results in either a conformational or destabilising effect on self-identity. Those interested in RPL therefore need to understand how the process impacts on self and how learner needs associated with those impacts may be met. This chapter explores the self as a sub-text within the RPL process and argues that learners should be viewed as holistic and complex beings and that educational strategies can meet multiple objectives that extend beyond the educational domain, potentially creating an overlap with learners' mental health. The authors encourage policies and practices that validate the individual and enhance the possibility of developmental self-growth. A learner-centred ethic that meets the dual needs of learners to obtain credit and achieve self-development is proposed.

INTRODUCTION

The act of learning, which is often intended to result in an education credential, usually involves some reflection on what has been learned; such reflection assumes a concomitant confirmation, negation or extension of related aspects of one's understanding of oneself or of one's identity (Conrad, 2008b; Robertson, 2011a). An examination of philosophy and theory related to open learning and formal credentialing would therefore be incomplete without an examination of the effect of that reflection on the individual.

Notions of what constitute open and flexible learning are many and diverse. Gunawardena and McIsaac (2004) somewhat functionally described open learning *as* flexible learning when they wrote: "Open

learning is flexible, negotiated and suited to each person's needs. It is characterized by open entry-open exit courses, and the courses begin and end when the student is ready" (p. 358). More insightfully, and more relevantly, they later alluded to more significant dimensions of flexible learning, referring to "... hybrid combinations of distance and traditional education in the form of distributed learning, networked learning or flexible learning in which multiple intelligences are addressed through various modes of information retrieval" (p. 358). These writers especially appreciate their reference to "multiple intelligences" in the sense that learners' diverse strengths and learning styles are accommodated by a variety of means. Of particular interest to this chapter is the inclusion of the notion of "different ways of knowing" which denotes, to these writers, flexibility in learning practices.

In this chapter, therefore, "open learning" refers to the ability of learners to draw on their experiential learning histories and contribute to the shape of their own learning from that process, usually referred to as recognising prior learning (RPL)[1]. "Formal credentialing" in this chapter will refer to credentials that may await adults in institutions of higher education.

This chapter presents the thesis that self-reflection is an interpretive exercise that generates new understandings. In it we explore the implications of the assessment of learning and subsequent credentialing on the development of the self. It is posited that these processes are key to such identity-related psychological constructs as self-concept, self-esteem and self-empowerment. Innovative The linkage between learning and concepts of identity has implications for institutions of higher education as regards the development of relationships between learners' engagement in learning and the process of obtaining formal qualifications. We submit that the innovative recognition pedagogies that inform open education practices and credentialing must also consider concepts of self-development in order to recognise the transformative potential of the process. recognition pedagogies refer here to those theoretical and conceptual models that serve to formalise assessment practices responsive to prior formal learning with the intent of credentialing of such learning.

To this end, the objectives of this chapter are two-fold: to encourage the development of institutional policies of open learning and formal credentialing that acknowledge the potential of both toward self-growth and appropriately supports that growth; and to bring awareness to learners of the benefit of pursuing open learning opportunities and/or self-development through learning.

THE HISTORY AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY OF SELF AS REGARDS LEARNING

The literature of higher education and adult learning has long recognised the value of providing adults with not only cognitive and workplace skills but also with tools for development in the affective - social and emotional - domains of learning. The giants of lifelong and adult learning literature have described extensively the relationships between adults and their learning: It is learner-driven, powered by internal motivators, and self-directed (Brookfield, 1990; Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1970). Adults learn *what* they need to learn *when* they need to learn it (Knowles, 1970; Tough, 1971).

Following on the foundational concepts of adult learning, Mezirow (1995) and Cranton (2001) added substantial research on the potential of transformational learning and authentic teaching. In so doing, they furthered the discussion of adult learning from the "how and what" of skills and knowledge acquisition and to the "how and why" of learners' affective engagement with both their external and internal processes, with their fellow learners, and with their instructors. Authentic teaching, posits Cranton

(2001), encourages and permits learners to engage with meaningful events in their own lives and environments and to build on those experiences while Mezirow (1995) holds that transformation *can* result from authentic adult learning experiences. Transformative learning offers the promise of "perspective transformation," a set of processes that include changes in understanding the self, a revision of belief systems, and resultant behavioural changes in lifestyle.

One of the most cogent and integrated applications of lifelong and adult education principles is found in the practice of recognising prior learning (RPL). Building squarely on theoretical foundations established by classical thinkers such as Aristotle, and articulated in modern educational language by Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), RPL marries informal and/or open learning with formal credentialing through a process that is both authentic and transformative. RPL's authenticity arises from learners' ability to work with and cognitively engage with their own life experiences (Conrad, 2010; Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2002). Transformation, on the other hand, may result from learners' critical reflection upon their own life experiences and related learning. While transformation is not *expected* and may not result from the RPL process, there is just as much chance that intensive RPL engagement may bring forth transformation as it is defined by Mezirow. Learners self-report on new levels of awareness and changed attitudes and perspectives as a result of their RPL work (Athabasca University, 2014).

Exploration of the self, in fact, is understood as a sub-text within the RPL process, even within the formality of institutional study (Conrad, 2010; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; PLA Centre, n/d). Care and vigilance, in dealing with learners' reflexivity during the RPL, must be exercised in order not to violate their sense of self (Fenwick, 2006; Robertson, 2011a). RPL mentors, advisors, and practitioners, well versed in the probability of encountering "self" discussions with learners during their learning process, take care to protect learners and respect their right to privacy[2].

This self has been a central theme in psychology, foundational to such concepts such as self-esteem, self-actualisation, self-efficacy, and self-validation. Adler (1957) placed the self at the core of an individual's "world view." Bridges (2001) tied his theory of adult transition to changes in this "self." Similarly, Fennell (2011) based her trauma therapy on assisting clients to develop authentic new selves en route to establishing a meaningful life. Hermans (2003) viewed the self to be a dialogic creation established in interaction with others with the capacity to create dialogue between internally generated personas. We agree with the conceptualisation of a culturally mediated self with sufficient stability to allow for the possibility of change. In the tradition of James (1890, 1999) we view the self to be primarily a cognitive structure that includes affective and heritable dimensions.

Although the conscious self is generally expressed in narrative form, the details of such expression are necessarily context specific giving the appearance of multiple or variable selves (Conrad, 2008b; Harre, 1991); however, people typically seek a sense that they remain the same *person* irrespective of temporal or contextual change (Robertson, 2010). Such stability of personhood is not found in narratives generated in various contexts in answer to such questions as "Who are you?" but in underlying structures upon which such narratives are drawn. For example, even though an individual may present with different remembrances, dispositions and even personality in the context of a party as opposed to a job interview, we continue to view the individual as the same person. Such a person might consider it odd were we to challenge her or him on the apparent transition from one "self" to another, holding it self-evident that one conducts him/herself with greater sober reflexivity in one context as opposed to the other. It is our view that individuals are not different persons in different contexts (although incremental evolution is possible with the result that the person may change over time), but that the internal focus triggered by variation in circumstance leads to alternative sets of subroutines. While behaviours and narratives may

be so selected, the range of possibilities available to each individual is not infinite (Barresi, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

Figure 1, representing graphically the self of a Caucasian male in his 50s, illustrates how it is possible to express a range of personas dependent on context while maintaining overall structural integrity. Using a method of segmenting transcribed self-narratives (Robertson, 2010), elemental units of culture or memes consisting of referent, connotative, affective and behavioural dimensions were identified and labelled with the labels appearing inside ovals on the self-map. The words in the rectangles represent more general themes inferred from the behavioural associations of clusters of memes. Lines between memes represent shared connotative, affective or behavioural meaning which can be interpretively understood as a form of bonding or attraction between those memes.

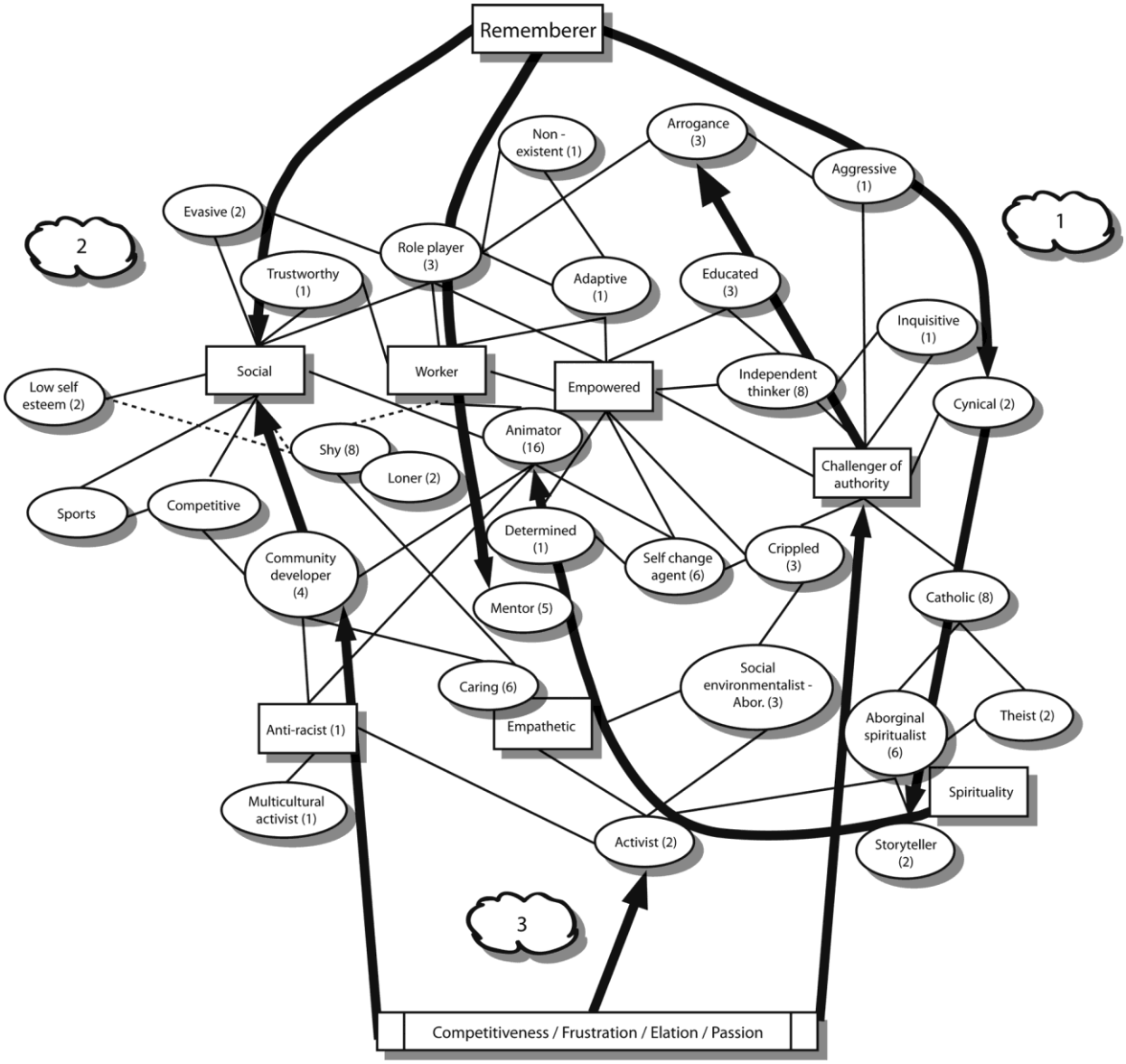
The self pictured in Figure 1 developed through a series of transitions beginning in childhood. While united by a common empowered core, a group of memes identified as Mini-self 1 are united by the theme "challenger of authority", Mini-self 2 has the themes "worker" and "social" while Mini-self 3 has the themes "anti-racist," "empathetic" and "spiritual." The mini-selves presented are triggered through a process involving emotional valence represented by the bar at the base of the figure. The emotions may, in turn, be triggered by context or by internal processes. Although the worker and social themes shared memes such as trustworthiness and shyness, the inclusion of those two themes in one cluster was arbitrary, as Mini-self 2 could have been subdivided further based on contextual themes. Similarly, Mini-self 3 could have been subdivided further into anti-racist, empathetic and spiritual clusters although those three clusters shared common characteristics not shared with, for example, the "challenger of authority" cluster. This method of illustrating mini-selves is arbitrarily dependent on the desired level of focus. What is illustrated, however, is how the same individual subject could appear to be different in separate contexts.

While we expect individuals to deliver different presentations in alternative situations without becoming a different person in the process, the process is not without limitations. For example, a person who never went to war will likely have difficulty constructing a battlefield self-narrative that is felt to be true; indeed, it is frequently a characteristic of Euro-American adolescence that many selves may be attempted with some felt to be false while others are felt to be true (Harter, 2012). We then incorporate that which feels true into our self which, in turn, provides a repertoire of behaviours that may be applied in various situations.

In short, we define the self as a cognitive structure consisting of units of culture with that structure exhibiting sufficient stability over time to allow for its own evolution. Figure 2 illustrates this conceptualisation of the self as an understanding resulting from the interplay between heritable physical and psychological characteristics and interpretations of lived experience mediated by cultural factors. This results in an implicit representation of the self upon which we construct our worldview and from which we interpret life events. This implicit self becomes explicit when we consciously turn our focus of attention inward in self-reflection as occurs when we contemplate our prior learning. Once the self is defined in a way that permits conscious reflection, then the individual may plan developmental transitions through which she or he may change.

While the self may be understood as a theory of who we are (Harre, 1989), what counts as evidence in support of that theory will be highly individualised and may not appear rational to an outside observer; however, irrespective of the evidence, we tend to become the person we consciously or unconsciously believe ourselves to be. While this adds to a sense of self-stability, change happens as we admit new evidence into our awareness. Since reflection involves re-examination and re-interpretation, and since assessment results are a form of feedback, it is our contention that the experience of building a RPL

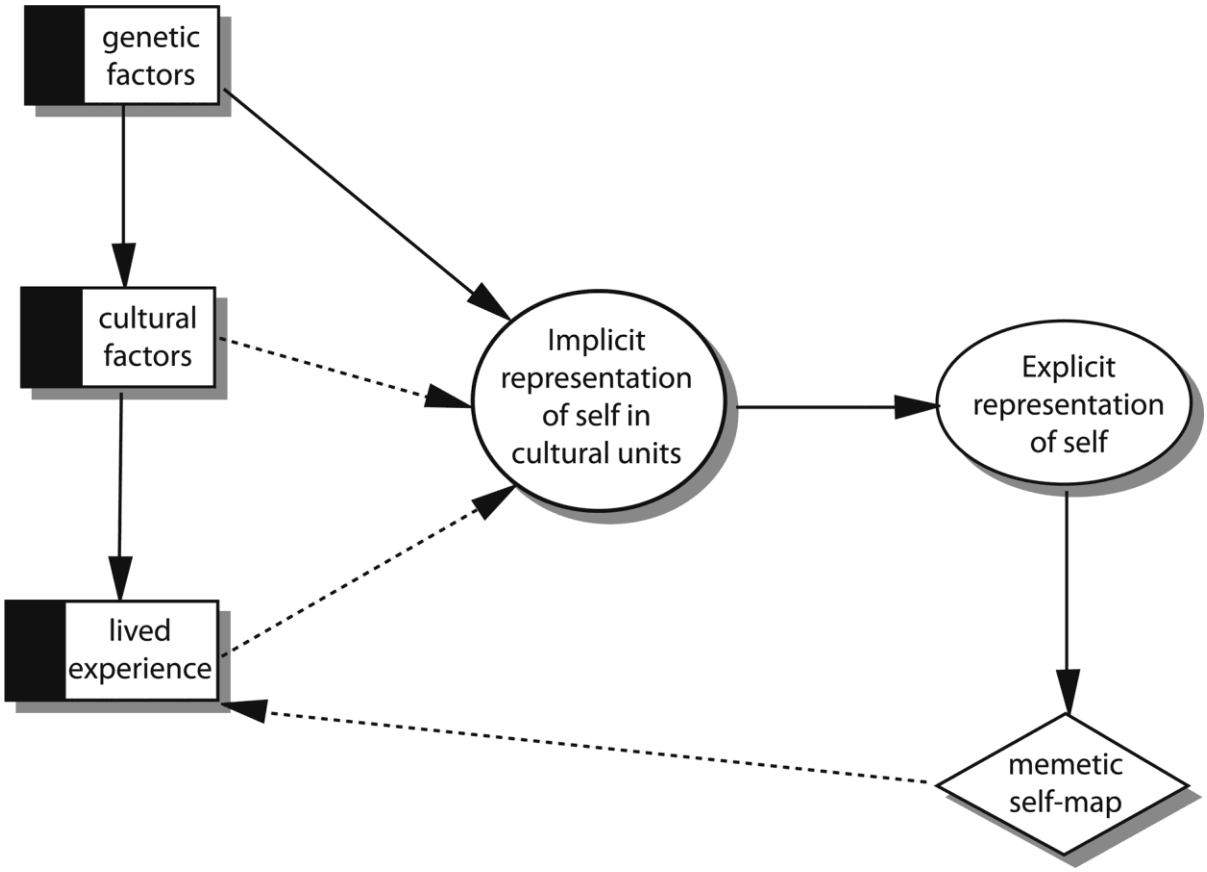
Figure 1. A self-map of a Caucasian Canadian male illustrating his self-definition in units of culture (Robertson, 2009)



portfolio or anticipating and completing performances or processes leading to other forms of credentialing will affect underlying self-structures in ways that may be anticipated.

The next section outlines in detail how the process of working toward receiving a formal credential in higher education, in this case by using the RPL process, may contribute to self-change in learners.

Figure 2. An understanding of how the self may be interpreted into existence referencing genetic factors, cultural factors and lived experience
(Robertson, 2011b)



TOWARD SELF-CHANGE: REFLECTION, RPL, AND LEARNING

Within higher education studies, the work of obtaining a credential should lead to reflection about what one has learned, sometimes for the first time; such reflection may lead to feelings of accomplishment, the identification of desired areas of new learning, or both. The practice of recognising prior learning, above all practices, demands a high degree of self-reflection. A closer examination of RPL will illustrate how the RPL process may lead to self-change and/or identity construction.

Our argument is framed by the notion that educational institutions have always been in the business of identity construction, tacitly or explicitly, with learners interpreting themselves in terms of self-esteem and confidence, in part arising from academic success or failure; and in part arising from classroom or in-process experiences (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Cranton, 2001; Lewin, 1931; Mitchum, 1989; Stipek & Kowalski, 1989; Travers et al., 2011; Wlodkowski, 1999). We cannot assume, however, that such activity will, by itself, always result in positive change. The transformative potential of portfolio development, for example, can potentially also serve to entrench existing dysfunctional attitudes; additionally, a misapplication of a power-unbalanced and potentially hegemonic process that may implant stereotypic

"true" selves in individuals is fraught with ethical implications (Fenwick, 2006; Harris, 2000; Peters, 2006; Robertson, 2011a), a topic that will be further addressed at the end of this chapter.

As individuals, we define ourselves based on our interpretation of learned experiences, and the resultant self-definition is core to our life decisions. We selectively present those parts of what we have learned about ourselves deemed relevant to our goals to employers and educators who have the capacity to advance those goals. While a process of prior learning that leads to a credential contributes to the efficiency of the educational system by eliminating redundant training for individuals who have developed skills and knowledge elsewhere, such processes also need to be viewed through the lens of self-construction and self-maintenance. It is likely that individuals who engage in such a process will develop a positive view of their knowledge or abilities as related to the credential they seek. Those who succeed in obtaining the desired credential will therefore be affirmed for aspects of their identity that they had incorporated into their self-identity during the completion of the process.

Conversely, failure to achieve the desired credential may lead to challenging related aspects of that identity or, in an effort to preserve the existent self, a questioning of the legitimacy of the actual credentialing process. In either case, the process of reflecting on one's past experience is instrumental in generating new understandings or affirming existent ones prior to the act of successfully (or unsuccessfully) completing a higher education credential.

Notions of Self in Life and Learning

Given the reflexivity of the RPL process, the whole self, including dimensions of constancy, distinctness, volition, productivity, intimacy, social interest, remembering, community and emotion (Robertson, 2010), must be considered. The use of a holistic view of self is not uncommon in mental health. Returning to Bridges (2001), for example, grieving was characterised as an emotionally null state that permits the construction of a "new" self incorporating new data from a changed world. The last two stages of Fennell's (2011) four stages in treating trauma involve the co-construction of a "new" self with the goal of integrating the new traumatic circumstance and achieving resolution for establishing a meaningful life. Similarly, in a 2006 case study, Hermans described how a 33-year-old woman integrated conflicting internal self-definitional positions represented by "Mary" (her positive persona) and "the witch," following a mediated dialogue between the two. In a case study of a youth who had attempted suicide on five occasions, Robertson (2011c) described how self-mapping had revealed a meme for depressed person as core to her being and how the development of a new core preceded successful cognitive behavioural therapy. However, none of these four therapies of the self involved the construction of a totally "new" self. In each case, beneficial transitions were built upon pre-existent foundations. While the self will evolve over time in any event, the process of change in a therapeutic setting may be understood as consciously controlled evolution. The evolution of individual selves in educational and occupational contexts, however, is not often consciously controlled and often not mediated by trained professionals. Our notions of self begin in childhood where we learn that we are worthy of love – or feel that we are not; that we are competent or stupid, volitional or passive, or other descriptors often understood in dichotomousfashionwithpotentiallymoderatingideasofcontextdependencyorgraduatedcharacteristics generally incomprehensible to the individual until late adolescence (Harter, 2012). While we may have developed our own personal notion of self as adolescents, the process of exploration and self-maintenance or self-construction never ends. While we may never invite feedback on our own perceptions, we remain sensitive to the opinions of significant others and rely on their support for the maintenance of our identi-

ties. For example, immigrants who are separated from their cultural communities have been shown to experience an under-validation of self with concomitant mental health problems (Christopher, D'Souza, Peraza, & Dhaliwal, 2010; Ishiama, 1995).

While validation of self is essential for individuals' effective functioning, that validation rests on what counts as evidence as perceived by the individual. As evidenced by the self-esteem movement in the United States that was successful in raising academic self-esteem without the intended consequence of increased performance (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2004; Harter, 2012), external validation may have unintended consequences. Educational affirmations designed to increase academic self-esteem may have the intended consequence of increasing the individual's willingness to place effort in striving for excellence, or it may have the opposite internalised message that such a striving for excellence is not needed. Thus, the practice of recognising prior learning, as a means of credentialing and a form of validation, must be rigorously and ethically administered to ensure appropriate recognition of real achievement.

To this end, since the self is central to our ability to achieve, educational strategies should be selected in order to develop those aspects of self that contribute to efficacy in learning, aspects which encompass more than narrowly defined academic goals. Adults' learning motivations are many and can be loosely categorised in terms of goals, social activity, and learning-for-learning's sake (Selman, Selman, Dampier, & Cooke, 1998). They are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap, forming a complex nest of factors. However, the reasons learners choose to participate in various types of learning seeking resultant credentials have mental health – and therefore "self" – implications. For example, a US study (Strawn, 2003) found that people with low social capital tended to enrol in upgrading programs while their educational level peers with higher social capital were more likely to gravitate toward informal learning opportunities. One interpretation of this phenomenon is that people with established relationships are more likely to engage in learning that preserves those relationships while isolated people choose structured environments that allow the opportunity to build new relationships. In short, social isolates are more likely to use the educational setting to accommodate social self-needs than those with more robust social lives. In principle, many deficits related to mental health and identity issues are addressed through educational processes (Christensen & Marchant, 1993; Robertson, 2011a).

Notions of Self in Portfolio Development

Given that people will use a single strategy to meet multiple (educational, social, mental health) objectives, the development of a learning portfolio, while ostensibly prepared for display to potential employers or educational institutions, also holds the potential for self-affirmation. Such portfolios may include a resume, work samples, testimonials, photos, records, audio and video tapes, and narratives of specific life experiences. Reflection on one's collective portfolio may generate new understandings of prior experience with implications for identity and self-development. Since the act of self-reflection allows the reflecting individual to revise what counts as evidence, with respect to his or her self characteristics, such portfolio development "gives rise to new knowledge – of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession" (Conrad, 2008a, p. 142).

It is possible for learners to use the process of portfolio development to gain a holistic view of one's self without the intention of sharing the information therein with potential employers. It is also possible to use such portfolios for therapeutic purposes with therapy, in this case, defined as a systemised attempt to change the self in certain functional ways. In the North American aboriginal context, this

process has been used in group settings with the intention of building positive self-identities in indigenous people (Hill, 2004; Robertson, 2006). Affirming oneself in a supportive group setting of people with shared characteristics can be empowering. Using an historic trauma model (Brave Heart, 2003; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004), some portfolio facilitators have assumed that all aboriginal selves were traumatised by colonialism and this trauma may be corrected in a RPL group setting through a process of disclosure and the building of replacement aboriginal identities (Robertson, 2011a). This would be an example of taking the transformative potential of holistic portfolio development too far as ethical issues are raised about utilising groups that were not set up specifically for therapy led by facilitators not trained in trauma. While there is always concern about the emotional and psychological health of learners asked to reflect and perhaps re-live their past lives, especially when assessment is at stake (Fenwick, 2006; Harris, 2000), trauma victims are even more susceptible to mistreatment, however unintentional, at the hands of untrained RPL practitioners.

Ethically, therefore, educators who attempt to treat a trauma in a group whose purpose is portfolio development have crossed a boundary into mental health where such therapy should be facilitated by trained professionals in groups specifically established for that purpose. By the same token, an educational institution that uses a prior learning practice toward the goal of obtaining a formal credential runs the risk of – and should be cautioned against – ignoring the inevitable effects of the process on the self-development of learners. Higher education's challenge, therefore, is to develop ethically-based systems for accommodating self-development needs while evaluating prior learning according to institutional and academic standards.

THE JOURNEY TO ETHICAL PRACTICE

As discussed previously, the reflective activity in prior learning assessment can result in changes to or affirmations of various aspects of self-definition. This supports the notion that institutions engaging in such assessment have an obligation to acknowledge the transformative potential of the process. Portfolio development has the potential to focus transformation in ways that can be useful not only for credentialing in higher education but also for planned self-development and even psychotherapy. As the reflexivity inherent in RPL coupled with its transformative potential has implications for learners' credentialing process, we propose to define an ethical role for institutions of higher learning that enables practitioners to meet the needs of learners given the possibility of conflict between the dual processes of obtaining credit and achieving self-development. These outcomes need not be mutually exclusive. The following section demonstrates how the objectives of both activities may be met through the use of well-structured and ethically developed portfolios.

Reaffirming Focus: Learner-Centred RPL Assessment

Our basic premise for ethical practice highlights one key concept: assessment must focus on the learner – the learner's needs within the context of his or her development. And while most educators would insist that they always keep the learner's situation and needs as the focus of assessment, consistent implementation of this practice requires two considerations; 1) a humanistic orientation to practice, and 2) a critical understanding of institutional purpose, policy, and practice. These considerations are complementary:

The Humanistic Orientation

A call for humanism is not new in adult learning. In fact, from the early work of Knowles (1970) through to Rogers (1961), Candy (1991) and Brookfield (1990), adult learning practice is understood to be a child of humanistic philosophy. Following this thought, the well-being, self-development, and autonomy of learners is held to be the desired outcome and ultimate purpose of the teaching-learning dynamic.

RPL both provides an ideal venue for implementing humanistic practice and requires that application of humanistic thought for successful practice. Learners are vulnerable when engaging in reflection that summons up their past lives and histories in any context, no less so when examining successes and failures in educational endeavours or in their work lives. Seasoned and sensitive RPL practitioners, in focusing on their learners' needs, will recognise and honour learners' individual situations. In many RPL contexts, but not all, the logistics of practice permit this close attention to personal well-being. A humanistic orientation focusing on promoting learners' autonomy (Rogers, 1961) manifests itself in ways beyond institutions treating learners with respect. For example, in RPL assessment, assessment reports may take on a variety of characteristics including differences in language and voice dependent on the intended audience and authoritative stance of the assessors (Travers, et al., 2011). Thus, if the intended audience is perceived to be the institution, then the language and focus of assessment reports will reflect institutional needs and culture.

Critical Understanding of Institutional Purpose, Policy, and Practice

Assessment of all types must be seen as an integral part of the learning cycle and learning achievement, rather than a finite or end-goal. In this vein, the RPL process must be considered not as a one-time operation for learners who will conclude their studies and leave formal education for the workplace but as an integral event in a lifelong process – the goal of which constitutes a type of holistic development that will benefit our knowledge society. To this end, the current trend to e-portfolio usage in higher education promotes the transferability of learners' archived knowledge from institution to the workplace and to life. Learners are encouraged to build a portfolio that can grow with them over time, and serve various purposes in their career lives (Francis-Poscente & Moisey, 2012).

An institution that understands and embraces its purpose or mission as furthering the growth of learners as "whole" citizens should be eager to develop policies and practices that promote not only RPL practice but also other forms of alternative assessment that encourage learners' holistic and critical thinking and recognise achievement against a variety of outcomes. The learning portfolio, in particular, is a useful tool in combining the rigour of assessment against institutional standards with the interpretive flexibility needed for growth and self-development.

Responsibly and Ethically Facilitating the Development of Holistic Portfolios

Although summative assessment can play a role in learners' self-development by way of insightful and constructive feedback, it is largely through the reflective lens of a process such as portfolio development that learners can map their journeys en route to educational and personal achievement. An holistic approach to portfolio development, resting on the work of advisors, mentors, coaches, or coordinators, is necessary to ensure such outcomes. The "holistic portfolio" is defined here as an assemblage of materials, narratives and other artefacts that give evidence of a person's lifestyle, goals, and worldview, of

which career forms one facet. It thus serves to situate career goals within the context of the individual's total reality.

There are many techniques and strategies that can be used to generate the reflection and consequent self-knowledge necessary for a meaningful and authentic holistic portfolio and the use of such tools will be dependent upon institutional practice and process. For example, at a distance institution such as Athabasca University (AU), most mentoring or advising is done at a distance and is dependent upon the exchange of documents by email or phone. Still, extended communication and conversation is both necessary and possible.

At New York's Empire State College (ESC), also a distributed learning environment, the presence of many satellite campuses makes more face-to-face interaction possible. In guided classrooms, seminars, or workshop situations, mentoring for portfolio development can take place using role plays, theatre, and storytelling, among others. Robertson (2011b) summarised the role of those who facilitate portfolio work:

The competent holistic portfolio developer is more facilitator than teacher, but the art of facilitation involves inviting new interpretive possibilities. Often the student or client will not have recognized skills and abilities that are evident in the portfolio or will have downplayed their significance. It is the duty of the facilitator to point out evidence of possible skill sets and their applicability to new contexts. The [student] may have been overly harsh in his interpretations of past events and the facilitator may point out that alternative interpretations are possible while empowering the [student] to make the final "correct" understanding. On reflection the [student] may wish to engage in areas of self-development. The facilitator may suggest resources the [student] could utilize in pursuit of such a quest. (p. 469)

An holistic portfolio allows the learner to integrate the demonstration of his/her competencies with the discovery and consequent surfacing of a self-defined individual who has hopes, dreams, aspirations, doubts and a worldview. While the difficult "Who am I?" question is not able to be completely answered by a listing of those things in which one is competent, the answer to that question is vital in determining which competencies are important to one's life direction and in identifying those competencies that need further development. This represents a catch-22 of sorts, one that is partially resolved by including items in the holistic portfolio such as values, family relationships, hopes, and significant events that are useful in defining the person but have little direct relation with respect to specific competencies. While the totality of the holistic portfolio is meant for the edification of the student and anyone with whom the student chooses to share, specific sections may be pulled from this foundational document to demonstrate competencies in specific targeted subject or employment areas. The combination of competencies coupled with those sections of the holistic portfolio that highlight reflection, self-narrative, and critical incident work encourage learners to integrate and solidify critical thinking skills applied to life direction and purpose.

These outcomes give direction and purpose to one's competencies, which may be represented by pictures, art, self-narratives, poetry and artefacts external to the individual to which deeply held meaning is ascribed. A self-map, as pictured in Figure 1, is a visual way of representing the whole person that has the advantage of listing the particulates that make up the whole and showing a relationship between them. That self-map was developed through a process of identifying memes from transcribed self-narratives (e.g., Robertson, 2010); however, a serviceable self-map can be developed from having learners make a prioritised listing of the roles they have, the beliefs they hold, the things they would change about themselves if they could and the things they like about themselves and placing each resul-

tant concept identified by a word or short phrase in a relational context (e.g., Robertson, 2011c). Other visual representations may also be used to answer the "Who am I?" questions, although some may find writing a narrative or a biography more appropriate in developing their self-definitions. Whatever method is used, holistic portfolio development helps students validate their past experiential learning in meaningful ways; develop and practise organisational skills; develop the ability to reflect meaningfully on past learning; improve their writing skills; think critically about their own learning; and develop their self-esteem and professional competence.

There are risks associated with helping students relive or delve into their pasts in order to produce a meaningful document as described here. Although RPL-trained facilitators may be competent in teaching portfolio development strategies in a group, classroom, or distance environment, they may not be appropriately trained in the specific strategies associated with personal and vocational counselling. It may be, for example, that a review of a student's holistic portfolio reveals internal conflicts or confusion with respect to career choice. In such cases, a referral to an appropriate career counsellor might be appropriate. Similarly, a review of an holistic portfolio may uncover unresolved mental health issues with a resultant referral to an appropriate professional. In the event that educational institutions are unable to provide counselling support to the RPL program internally, facilitators should have a listing of external resources available to such students. How should RPL practitioners distinguish between the territory able to be addressed by their coaching, mentoring, and advising skills and the territory more aptly defined as therapy?

There is, in fact, a spectrum of possible helping relationships including advising and educating with the intention of information sharing; counselling, both career and personal, and therapy, with its focus on developmental transitions. Those trained in the tradition of Adlerian Psychotherapy often make the useful distinction that counselling involves planning, problem solving, perspective building, goal setting, and other activities involving those who have an essentially intact self, while psychotherapy is aimed at changing the world view in which the self is central (Dinkmeyer, Pew, & Dinkmeyer, 1979; Mosak, 1979).To this end, while recognising that self-change is on-going, counsellors must recognise the limits of their competence and make referrals to psychotherapists where self-reconstruction efforts are desired or necessary.

The ethical standards for facilitators, mentors, or advisors using RPL portfolios, including holistic portfolios for self-development, should be similar to those of counsellors. Learners' needs for confidentiality must be respected; this would include the provision that learners must not feel pressured to self-disclose in group settings. RPL facilitators, mentors, or advisors must recognise the interrelatedness of emotion, thought, and behaviour and the inseparability of learners from their social context. They must understand that truth and reality can vary according to circumstance, context and experience. Finally, action and thought must be rationally oriented to future consequences, thus recognising learners as the final determiner of their own plans, goals and choices.

Clearly, the balance between where RPL facilitators, mentors, or advisors may "go" with learners and where they may not ethically go is finely wrought. Since facilitators may vary in their training and responsibilities, it is incumbent on them to recognise and declare their areas of professional competence. Context is also a factor since therapy should not be attempted in a classroom setting. With that important caveat, portfolio development may be efficiently taught in a classroom setting, and sometimes students will gain insight into themselves as a result of their participation in the activity, while others will simply gain a new tool with which they can pursue their career objectives. Some students, however, would benefit from a referral to a trained counsellor.

Career and personal counselling is most often one-on-one although group work is feasible where there is sufficient defined homogeneity of purpose. As with RPL facilitators, it is important for counsellors to recognise and declare their areas of professional competence, and such areas of competence will vary between counsellors and their roles within the organisation. We recommend that counsellors who offer support to RPL learners become acquainted with the uses of portfolios in individual counselling and that therapists who are expert in self-change are available where needed[3].

Finally, this ethical scan ends at the role of the institution which must understand and define its role in the scope of learners' education. We have endeavoured to make the case for institutions offering a range of student centred services related to RPL that will enhance their opportunities for growth and development as lifelong learners.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Socrates' famous declaration that "the unexamined life is not worth living" has been interpreted by many to mean that one must unearth meaning from one's existence in order to fulfill oneself and, over the years, many educators and theorists, including Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), have based their work on, or included in their work, notions of reflection, discovery, and meaning-making. Recognising the prior learning of learners seeking formal credentials is an intense process that calls for and depends upon learners' ability to closely examine their experiential learning in order to uncover meaning within their learning that can be demonstrated to contribute to the credential that they seek. Such an exercise, while optimally and ultimately fruitful, also often teeters on the brink of psychological invasion or therapy as learners struggle with issues of identity, history, achievement, or lack of achievement. In light of this important balance, this chapter has issued a call for ethical and responsible approaches to RPL, such that the new understandings of self that inevitably result from such powerful processes are appropriately respected and understood within our higher education systems.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Experiential Learning: Learning that occurs outside a formalised program of learning, also called informal learning or "happenchance" learning.

Higher Education: Referring to education at degree level and above, (Queensland Government, 2010), this includes all the following degree designations: associates, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral; graduate certificates and diplomas are also included.

Learning Portfolio: A collection of artefacts and narrated reflection demonstrating learners' prior and experiential (informal) learning. Also, e-portfolio, an electronic format containing the same information.

Meme: A small unit of culture with referent, connotative, affective and behavioural dimensions that may be transferred from one individual to another through imitation or communication.

Portfolio Development: The process of creating a learning portfolio, that includes determining which learning to include, making meaning of that learning, and presenting that learning in a manner acceptable to those who are reviewing and assessing it.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): The acknowledgement and assessment of learners' prior experiential learning by institutions toward a formal credit (within the higher education context); also known as prior learning assessment, assessment of prior and/or experiential learning, etc.

Reflection: The act of constructively and purposively thinking back on past experiences with the intent of making sense of it in a given context.

Self: A cognitive construct defining who we are that consists of units of culture in interplay with physical, psychological and emotional characteristics maintained through internal processes such as rationalisation and external forces such as feedback constituting validation.

Self-Development: A process, usually involving reflection, whereby the individual makes changes to his or her self thereby aligning it to more accurately accord with both external feedback and internally generated goals and aspirations.

Transformational/Transformative Learning: Learning which dramatically alters learners' belief systems, world-views, and results new self-definitions and new behaviours reflecting those changes.

ENDNOTES

1 The practice of Recognising Prior Learning (RPL) goes by many other terms world-wide. The US uses mainly Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and Canadian varies between Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and RPL. Europe, Australia, and South Africa alternately use Assessment of Experiential and Prior Learning (APEL), Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) among others. Although differences in process exist among practices, in essence the intended outcomes are the same: give credit to learners for relevant and demonstrable learning that they have already obtained elsewhere, outside the confines of a formal institution or program.

2 As an example, Athabasca University's RPL mentors, in their dealings with learners, caution them gently about the inclusion of "too much information" about past personal events. It can be the tendency of learners to delve deeply into, for instance, past childhood trauma or abuse, when given the opportunity or asked to reflect on their learning histories. Mentors are trained to delicately and respectfully attempt to disengage learners from re-living their childhoods in this process but rather to focus on learning events that can be effectively tied to their current learning situations, aims, ambitions, and successes.

3 While the terms "counselling" and "therapy" are often treated as synonyms, for our purposes we have drawn a distinction between the two based on the level of competence claimed by the professional. A therapist, in our model, is competent to co-construct a plan of developmental self-change with the student who, in this context, may be viewed as a client. The competent therapist will aid the client in generating new self-understandings in a non-directive manner, and in particular, without assumptions as to the composition of self-identity based on race, gender or ethnicity.