

What can Fraser and Bourdieu teach us about success and obstacles in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning?

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Abstract

Despite the adoption of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies, its implementation lags behind, remains un-coordinated and lacks institutional support. The key issues underlying these challenges include knowledge contestation and gatekeeping in the form of resistant cognitive structures in defence of the intellectual foundations of university knowledge. This article weaves the theories of Fraser and Bourdieu together to analyse the literature on RPL policy, pedagogic agency and practice in order to deepen understanding of RPL's success and obstacles. Fraser's notion of parity of participation is useful in that it theorises how adherence to social justice principles to promote RPL implementation can be created in the academy. Bourdieu's work facilitates interrogation of the habitus, and social and cultural capital of RPL practitioners in relation to the habitus of academics, and how these impact the crossing of knowledge boundaries via RPL as a specialised pedagogy. The article concludes that successful RPL implementation requires, *inter alia*, that attention be directed to honing the class habitus of the academy as a whole, including adequate theorisation of the conditions necessary for the existence of pedagogic agency within the context of the prevailing knowledge difference discourse.

Key words: Recognition of Prior Learning, habitus, agency, social justice, parity of participation

Sommaire

Malgré l'adoption de politiques de reconnaissance des acquis de l'expérience (RPL), leur mise en œuvre est à la traîne, reste non coordonnée et manque de soutien institutionnel. Les questions clés qui

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sous-tendent ces défis comprennent la contestation des connaissances et le contrôle de l'accès sous la forme de structures cognitives résistantes qui défendent les fondements intellectuels du savoir universitaire. Cet article associe les théories de Fraser et de Bourdieu pour analyser la littérature sur la politique de RPL, l'agence pédagogique et la pratique afin d'approfondir la compréhension du succès de la RPL et des obstacles qu'elle rencontre. La notion de parité de participation de Fraser est utile dans la mesure où elle théorise la manière dont l'adhésion aux principes de justice sociale visant à promouvoir la mise en œuvre de la RPL peut être créée dans l'académie. Les travaux de Bourdieu facilitent l'interrogation sur l'habitus et le capital social et culturel des praticiens de la RPL par rapport à l'habitus des universitaires, et sur la manière dont ils influencent le franchissement des frontières du savoir par le biais de la RPL en tant que pédagogie spécialisée. L'article conclut qu'une mise en œuvre réussie de la RPL exige, entre autres, que l'on s'attache à affiner l'habitus de classe de l'université dans son ensemble, y compris une théorisation adéquate des conditions nécessaires à l'existence d'une agence pédagogique dans le contexte du discours dominant sur la différence de savoir.

Mots clés: Reconnaissance des acquis, habitus, agence, justice sociale, parité de participation

Introduction

The conversation on RPL in South Africa is just over three decades old (Jacobs, 2018). The concept was first proposed by labour unions in the 1990s (Ralphs, 2016) in order to promote access, equity, and redress (Osman and Castle, 2002; Osman, 2004; Ralphs, 2016; Cooper, Harris and Jones, 2016; Hlongwane, 2019), which are moral, social justice imperatives (Frick and Albertyn, 2010; Kindred, 2018; Jacobs, 2018; Browning, 2020).

The fact that the RPL conversation was not initiated by the academy accounts for the multi-faceted challenges related to the policy-practice disjuncture and pedagogic, agential implications. Some studies show that access via RPL is not yet widespread (Cooper and Harris, 2013; Patman and Vidovich, n.d.); and that it lags behind (Harris, Breier and Wihak 2011; Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013), with low uptake (Hlongwane, 2019).

Importantly, RPL remains “marginalised, invisible, misunderstood, underutilised... to some extent resisted within university”, uncoordinated and without institutional support (Browning, 2020, p. 31). It is not “readily recognised by most people, including most academics, and even by many in the prior learning community” (Kindred, 2018, p. 6), let alone its opportunities (Wihak, 2007).

There is also an incorrect perception that RPL is a shortcut to circumvent the academic demands of learning for adults without traditional qualifications (Osman and Castle, 2002), or that it does not provide foundational knowledge which is vital in preparing students in academia (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013).

These views could be due to higher education institutions’ interest in preserving their space and cultural capital (Pitman and Vidovich, n.d.), i.e., the stakes in the field (Bourdieu, 2002) and perceptions that research-driven institutions’ capitals may be under threat (Pitman and Vidovich, n.d.) if RPL makes unrestricted entry into the academy.

This article examines the lessons that can be learned with regard to RPL implementation by applying Fraser and Bourdieu’s theories. It argues that RPL implementation with a social justice imperative as articulated by Fraser (2008) requires that attention be paid to honing the habitus of the entire academy rather than only RPL practitioners or committees. It also argues for the need to adequately theorise the optimal conditions for the existence of an appropriate pedagogic agency within the context of the prevailing knowledge difference discourse.

Themes and their implications

The article critically engages themes drawn from the literature on RPL, including (1) the discourse on the contestation of knowledge, (2) the disjuncture between RPL policy and practice (Jacobs, 2018; Hlongwane, 2019), and (3) pedagogic agency in relation to its effects on RPL practices. Regarding the first theme, knowledge difference influences RPL policy and practice, including the disjuncture between the two. In relation to the second theme, the article posits that a collective disposition attuned to RPL at university structural levels is important for effective institutional RPL practices.

The specialised nature of RPL and pedagogic agency identified in theme three are perhaps the most important recurring themes; they

are always tacitly involved and yet engraved in the RPL literature (see Shalem and Steinberg, 2002, 2006; Sanderberg and Andersson, 2011; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014; Cooper, Harris and Jones, 2016; Ralphs, 2016; Cooper, Ralphs and Harris, 2016). The themes have a relationship with one another and with RPL’s success or failure. They are critiqued at length after the brief discussion on the theoretical frameworks employed.

Theoretical Frameworks

The work of two theorists – Fraser and Bourdieu – informs the overall argument in this article. Fraser addresses social justice, while Bourdieu is concerned with both reproduction and gradual changes in human practices.

Fraser

Fraser is a social justice theorist whose work is concerned with overcoming economic, political, and cultural injustices (Fraser, 2008). Since RPL falls within these three interactional dimensions, there is a need for access, redress, and equity via RPL (Ralphs, 2016). Of relevance in this article is the notion of cultural injustice which Fraser also refers to as misrecognition (Fraser, 1996, 2008). In her view, this calls for recognition which is not just about recognising difference, but embracing it, thus regarding what is different as having value and therefore worthy of recognition rather than subordination to the powerful (Fraser, 1996).

In its purest, aspirational form, RPL seeks recognition of knowledge forms and sites whose value and status were not previously recognised. Fraser (1996, p. 7) notes that an individual or group may suffer from three outcomes of the exercise of cultural power; namely, “cultural domination..., non-recognition ..., and disrespect”. She holds that this can be addressed by “revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups”. While strides have been made in revaluing prior learning, RPL remains ideationally objectionable to some structural and cultural elites who feel the need to protect the academy from intrusion.

Cultural misrecognition and representation can negatively impact RPL discourse, policy, practice, and pedagogic agency. The concept of parity of participation that aims to redress the injustices of misrecognition

and misrepresentation is important in understanding the need for equal representation of marginalised knowledge forms. As discussed later under the theme, knowledge discourse, equal representation does not imply that knowledge forms enjoy equal relations with one another. Rather, it means that the interfaces between them can be fairly recognised and credited and that they have an equal chance of being considered in the processing of RPL applications and appeals.

While useful, Fraser's conceptual structure has limitations. One is that it is more propositional than explanatory in terms of the conditions that make it possible for misrecognition and misrepresentation to change to recognition and representation. For example, she calls for change in institutions' objective structures (see Fraser, 1996, 2008) without explaining how such change takes place.

Furthermore, the proposed concept of parity of participation lacks a theory of change, as it does not explain why institutional patterns, structures, and values remain unchanged or are changed when policies, for example, are adopted to facilitate such change. Bourdieu's theory offers an explanation of the tendency for reproduction of or gradual change in human practices in different fields.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu's theory explains why and how reproduction of structures and practices is possible in a field. He does so through his three main, interlocking constructs – habitus, capital, and field. Habitus refers to the entire structure of a person's thoughts, beliefs, cognition, ideas, and actions (Bourdieu, 1990). It involves previously internalised dispositions resulting from implicit and explicit socialisation within a specific logic of practice in a field (Ibid.). According to Bourdieu, the process of socialisation is generally not formal and intentional, but it produces lasting intellectual, cognitive, and practical behaviours.

It is for this reason that actors usually take previous practices as true and unchallengeable, and other possible actions that are outside the logic of the field as unthinkable (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu empirically demonstrates the tendency for human practices to be reproduced through the alignment of cognitive and external structures. In terms of this theory, academics and assessors (actors) have a habitus that corresponds to the logic of the academic field. For example, “[i]t could

be said that the habitus (disposition) of the assessor affects the RPL assessment process, which in turn fortifies the habitus of the field of higher education” (Pitman and Vidovich, n.d., p. 3).

Bourdieu defines a field as a relatively independent space in which actors interact or play the game using various strategies. The academy (the field in question) enjoys a high degree of autonomy and control over decisions about knowledge production and distribution, just as it shapes academics' dispositions. Although independent, it is not completely immune to external influences such as government policy and economic demands. The field becomes the terrain in which manifestations of power dynamics and contestations for the accumulation of capitals occur (Bourdieu, 1990).

The article also deploys Bourdieu's relational concept of capital, specifically social and cultural capital, which he holds are both “transformed, disguised forms of economic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 24).

Social Capital

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is generally about networks and connections made by individuals in the field, i.e., relations outside the individual actor. “The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the *size of the network* of connections [one] can effectively mobilize and on the *volume of capital* ... possessed in [one's] own right by those to whom he [sic] is connected” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 22. *My emphasis*).

In the context of this article, social capital refers to the extent of RPL practitioners'/assessors' connections with departmental, faculty, and senate members. As a relatively new and specialised area, RPL requires practitioners to navigate an academic space in which other academics may not yet readily accept it. This calls for RPL assessors to establish a comprehensive network that can advocate for RPL. Those entrusted with the institutional duty to sit in admissions committees act on behalf of a department or faculty and are regarded as competent to administer RPL related processes and therefore to represent the academy's attitude towards RPL – because ultimately, they must demonstrate to academics that knowledge created outside is equivalent to that offered in the academy.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to individuals' personal assets – knowledge, skills, and qualifications – through and because of which they navigate the field in which they exist (Bourdieu, 1986). It follows that just as individuals within the academy have different volumes of cultural capital, there are differences between the cultural capital of RPL applicants and those of their assessors. Moreover, cultural capital is not equally distributed between the academic site and other sites of knowledge production, resulting in the unequal status of these knowledge forms and their relationship with access to economic capital (opportunities for well-paying jobs). Such differences mean that RPL assessors could be influenced by their history, culture, and the academy's attitude towards knowledge produced outside its control or sphere when dealing with RPL issues.

In summary, Fraser's notion of parity of participation advocates for recognition of previously devalued knowledge statuses and groups of people who, as a consequence of their non-academic knowledge, have unequal capitals. It calls for the restructuring of institutional mechanisms and patterns in favour of structures that advocate for social justice imperatives. For his part, Bourdieu theorises the ways in which institutional actors are socialised and how their socialisation affects their level of conscious reflection when engaged in RPL related matters. Both frameworks help to illuminate how and why actors engage in RPL, just they enhance our understanding of its slow, complex implementation.

Knowledge Discourse and Its Relation to Policy and Practice

The knowledge debate is not rehashed in this section. Suffice to state first, that tensions are evident with regard to knowledge production and the site of its production and acquisition (Osman, 2004; Cooper, 2016; Starr-Glass, 2016). Second, the dominant view in the debate is one predicated on knowledge difference (Ralphs, 2009; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Cooper, 2016), which this article agrees with.

Differences in knowledge structures, together with notions of the extent of academic disciplines' weak and strong boundedness (Bernstein, 2000), may affect how policy is constructed, including the practical ways in which the academy engages with RPL as a specialised pedagogy. For example, Cooper and Harris (2013) state that academics have high regard

for the academy as the site of knowledge production, implying that their collective habitus has not yet unreservedly acknowledged the validity of externally produced knowledge. In many ways, this is not surprising, because a change in habitus takes time to evolve and ordinarily emerges gradually (Bourdieu, 2000, 1990).

In the knowledge discourse, RPL is accommodated, sceptically by some, and on terms by sometimes resistant research-based institutions (Browning, 2018; Patman and Vidovich, n.d.) that feel that it poses a threat to "the intellectual foundations of university learning" (Wihak, 2007, p. 98). Such sceptical accommodation and gatekeeping (see Osman, 2001; Wong, 2011; Harris, 2013; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Browning, 2020) in the form of resistant cognitive structures (Wong, 2014) or beliefs (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013) reflects constraining ideological differences (see Archer, 1996) about where and how knowledge is produced and learning occurs.

However, human agency has the (constrained) power to act creatively and overcome structural and cultural constraints. Indeed, studies show instances of both good RPL policy (Hlongwane, 2019; Jacobs, 2018) and creative RPL practices (Ralphs, 2016; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Singh, 2011). These laudable policies and practices occur despite the practical reality of knowledge difference, perhaps because when knowledge takes the form of curriculum and pedagogy, pedagogic agency creates the opportunity for creative RPL practices (Cooper, Harris, and Jones, 2016). This point is further addressed after the next theme.

Policy-Practice Disjuncture

RPL policy development in South Africa points to evolution of thought at national, sectoral, and institutional level, a shift from matching prior learning to the standards of the academy (SAQA, 2002), which is criticised as too technical and procedural (Ralphs, 2012), to a more mediatory pedagogic device in the 2013 sector policy (Ralphs, 2016). However, little progress has been made in implementing RPL policies. Internationally, despite the existence of policies and funding, RPL also lags behind (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011) and is marginalised and inadequately exploited (Wong, 2011 and Travers, 2011 cited in Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013). The United States of America, particularly at college level (Starr-Glass, 2016), is an exception (Travers, 2011). However,

RPL is uncoordinated and lacks institutional support in Canadian universities (Browning, 2020). Furthermore, RPL policies are regarded as inconsistent, inadequate and unconcise as in the case of the United Kingdom (Coombridge and Alansari, 2019).

Policy formulation is a subjective process that is driven by powerful interests and interest groups, including those that seek to preserve their academic capital. An Australian study argues that institutions which embrace different knowledge sites are perceived to have “low academic capital” (Pitman and Vidovich, n.d., p. 8). Deductively, taking into account institutional type and history, institutions ranked at a lower level could, depending on the extent of their commitment to social justice, scale down their flexibility on RPL to avoid this perception.

Pitman and Vidovich (n.d.) show that an institution’s volume of capital (and institutional type) and disposition influence the way RPL is received and implemented. All three institutions they studied with different capitals valued *work* rather than *life* experience, reasoning that students come to university in order to get jobs at a later stage.

In contrast, Moodley, Shah, and Bofelo (2016) found that the Workers’ College in Durban, South Africa that offers access to university through one-year diploma programmes also values life experience and uses it to inform curriculum development. The reason lies in its founding philosophy that is based on liberation and transformation; it has no intention of competing or increasing its capital outside its fundamental liberatory purpose. This philosophical socialisation and its internalisation by institutional actors operates differently and more favourably towards RPL than an institution not directly founded on these ideals.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping could be embedded in policies that are in themselves academically justifiable. Beyond the lack of interest in social transformation among other academics (Frick and Albertyn, 2010), there could also be an interest in maintaining the precarious status of RPL and its applicants – the injustice embedded in the institutional makeup in the form of looking down (Fraser, 1995) on prior knowledge.

RPL is sometimes seen as politically driven, and therefore, a threat to academic standards (see Cooper and Harris, 2013; Hlongwane,

2019). In some cases, these notions are held by senior academics that have the power to admit applicants (Cooper and Harris, 2013). This is consistent with the argument that cultural elites, in the form of the university professoriate, act in ways that protect the long-held logic of academia discussed above (Singh, 2011; Osman and Castle, 2002). These ideas and practices increase the likelihood of misrecognition and misrepresentation (Fraser, 2008), and therefore, continued marginalisation of prior learning knowledge structures.

Hlongwane (2019) investigated institutional policy compliance with national RPL policies in the context of Library Information Systems among ten universities. The study found that six have policies that make reference to legislation and regulations related to RPL. Documentary analysis showed that institutions were committed to broadening access for RPL candidates and to the ideals of equity, and redress. However, Hlongwane does not go beyond policy alignment and abstract commitments to explore concrete institutional practices on RPL. Interrogation of the disjuncture between policy and practice is thus lacking.

Jacobs’ (2018) research fills this gap to some extent. It found that the university it studied had sound policies and regulations that value RPL and lifelong learning, but concluded that an embedded institutional culture prevented the policy ideas from playing out in practice. Cooper and Harris (2013) and Cooper, Harris, and Jones (2016) concur that institutional culture plays a significant role in RPL implementation. The question that thus arises is: how can cultural biases and a lack of expansive RPL implementation be reconciled with the fact that some institutions have RPL policies?

A possible answer is that academic institutions and agents can only represent the interests of RPL applicants intellectually and in aspirational terms in policy documents. Pitman and Vidovich’s (n.d.) study concludes that RPL policy can be constructed beyond the idea of valuing valuable knowledge; it can be constructed to serve the academy’s strategic interests rather than those of RPL applicants. One such strategic interest may be to represent the institution as policy compliant in the eyes of the public. Another may be to enhance its reputation.

The “active and conscious process of [RPL] policy development” found by Jacobs (2018), for example, in the case of Stellenbosch

University, may be a response to government policies on access, redress, and equity by institutional, powerful agents who feel pressured but not committed to and interested in the implementation of RPL. The lesson from Bourdieu's framework is that such measures are themselves strategies adopted to play the game, rooted in the academy's historical immersion in belief in its hegemony over the location of knowledge production. However, at the point at which RPL "is viewed as a threat to a university's position, universities will enact RPL policy to restrict knowledge acquired via nontraditional learning processes" (Browning, 2020, p. 19) in order to maintain their cultural position (see Pitman and Vidovich, n.d.).

Policy Caveats and Biases

Apart from the above, policy restrictions may take the form of structural caveats like "exceptions" to the rule, as can be found in the sector policy (CHE, 2016). For example, the rules set by South Africa's Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2016) prevent a candidate from gaining a qualification solely via RPL. The CHE maintains that this is in line with the residency rule, which prescribes that only up to 50% of credits can be transferred. The rule is predicated on refreshing a candidate with relevant, up-to-date knowledge in a particular field (CHE, 2016). There appear to be valid academic premises for the existence of these rules. However, there are also critiques of them. First, it was found that institutions used the residency rule to deny articulation "no matter how up-to-date and rigorous such learning [by an applicant] might have been" (SAQA, 2018, p. 95). Second, it has been claimed that the residency rule is outdated (Bloem, 2013) and needs to be revised (Needham, 2013). The cap on admissions via RPL at 10% (CHE, 2016) is also regarded as discriminatory (Singh, 2011).

Policy prescripts such as these may unintentionally serve as a strategy of sector dispositional schemata to ease ideational contradictions between RPL advocates and gatekeepers of and in the academy. This renders the relationship between policy change and cultural change worthy of brief interrogation.

While important, policy does not automatically change nor directly shape culture. It is also not sufficient to change RPL practices. Instead, "cultural systems shape the nature of practice" (DHET, 2013, p. 13 cited in

Jacobs, 2018). In an institutional setting, such dispositions hide knowledge of the cultural injustice academics mete out to RPL applicants. Harris (2006), cited by Kawalilak and Wihak (2013), affirms this formulation in the context of RPL practices rather than policy. She found that, despite being committed to social justice in relation to admitting RPL candidates, programme facilitators were not aware of their own dispositions which privileged academic criteria in judgement of prior learning. They unwittingly did not equitably represent these knowledge sites.

Therefore, while *social justice* is important as a conceptual, aspirational phenomenon in policy documents (perhaps as Fraser [1995] would like, for institutions to create institutional arrangements which make *parity of participation* possible between multiple knowledge sites), beneath it lies the vitality of embedded institutional culture, agential interests, and habitus as important enablers of or hindrances to RPL.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the gap between policy and practice persists, and the cost and time required to implement specialised RPL pedagogies like the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) cannot be underestimated (see Ralphs, 2016). Indeed, funding is an important aspect (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013) of the PDC process.

Apart from cost and time, agential interests of the structural and cultural elite and academic practices as a dispositional issue offer an even more important explanation for slow implementation. This makes it critical to move beyond policy to explore the cognitive structure of the habitus of the whole academy, and the extent to which a flexible academic class habitus is explicitly called for and imparted by policy to institutional actors. It raises the question of how to transition from a class habitus that reproduces misrecognition to a more transformational one. Alongside habitus, this implicates agency in relation to RPL as a specialised pedagogy.

Pedagogic Agency

Navigation of knowledge boundaries, and experiential and codified academic knowledge, is not rooted in the history of institutional structures and patterns of thinking. Moreover, it is a complex process which can neither happen automatically nor through reflection alone (Cooper and Harris, 2013). A unique, specialised pedagogy needs to

be adopted (Ralphs, 2009) to negotiate prior and academic knowledge (Cooper, 2016). Yet, such navigation presupposes the indispensability of transformation of institutional habitus and pedagogic agency.

Pedagogic agency entails active advocacy by “academics who are committed to widen access via RPL” and “play a role in designing diverse pedagogic interventions that are appropriate to purpose and innovative in form” (Cooper and Harris, 2013, p. 14). It is about exercising a certain level of novelty (Archer, 2004) in RPL practices, particularly in the performance and redefinition of roles. Put differently, academics and RPL practitioners have a responsibility to think beyond the constraints arising from curriculum (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011) when processing RPL applications.

According to Breir (2005, p. 59), practitioners should be influenced by, amongst other things, the following factors in their decision-making process on RPL applications: the academic discipline concerned; the way the discipline is structured; relations between non-academic and formal knowledge; and the degree to which pedagogic discourse mirrors the relations. The decision-making process involved in determining the capacity of RPL candidates to succeed (Brenner et al., 2021) is subjective. The implication is that, given that assessors do not always have the appropriate set of pedagogic skills and expertise to assess prior learning (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011), the possibility of injustice is already present. Whether assessors or RPL practitioners do not capacitate themselves and the reasons thereof is an empirical question.

Furthermore, the habitus of practitioners and academics remains a challenge. Predispositions in older academics’ cognitive structures may temper or complement decision making on RPL matters. This explains why one of the participants in History Studies (see Cooper and Harris, 2013) was reported to have evoked an anarchic disposition, rather than an existing rule or the attitude of the class habitus of those in the academic programme, as a reason to support the broadening of access via RPL. However, a favourable disposition to RPL is not a sufficient condition for making appropriate decisions.

Parity of Participation: Why Is It Difficult to Implement?

The first, although not necessarily the most, important challenge to parity of participation is the language of the academy. Indeed, it has its

own language, style, and uniformity (Bourdieu, 1998). Language is a cultural good (Bourdieu, 1986), making “skills in using academically styled *language* an important issue” (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011, p. 9) for success in the RPL process. The language barrier could cause some candidates to drop out (Ralphs et al., 2012, cited in Ralphs, 2016). Thus, applicants require “more comprehensive support and mentoring than the traditional student” (Snyman and van den Berg, 2018, p. 25). This includes making “higher education understandable” (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011, p. 2).

The second challenge is equal representation; assessor and assessee should collaborate as equals without being constrained by learning outcomes and curriculum (Pokorny, 2016) as they both act in ways that shape and enrich taught curriculum. Pokorny sees this as an outcome of a particular pedagogic strategy, dialogic mediation, akin to the pedagogy of hope as envisaged by Frick and Albertyn (2010) since knowledge is co-constructed and potentially transformed. It follows that other knowledge forms cannot be properly navigated and articulated by relying on checklists and rigid, pre-meditated dialogue because this prescriptive approach undercuts deep exploration of the RPL candidate’s knowledge and the possibility of enhancing academic knowledge and curriculum (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013). While arbitrary practices are not advised, practitioners need to avoid rigid and prescriptive practices that can foreclose space for adequate submission and nuanced pedagogic assessment of knowledge claims.

Candidates benefit from the use of creative RPL practices. One study found that RPL candidates that underwent a PDC performed marginally better than those admitted via standardised admissions tests (Ralphs, 2016).

Overcoming language barriers and ensuring equal representation during assessment of prior learning calls for a pedagogy that fosters mutual understanding between assessor and assessee for a fair and valid RPL process (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011). Such a pedagogy should start from common understanding between these two agents (Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014). However, this model has not yet been deeply entrenched in RPL practices (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013), begging the question of why? Drawing on his “two principles of differentiation ...: economic and cultural capital”, Bourdieu shows that the quantity and

quality of the capitals possessed by agents in a social space [and these spaces may have different logics of practice] and their proximity determine the extent of their mutuality (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 6). The two knowledge sites in question differ markedly in stature and power, and their inequality can compromise mutual understanding and equal participation.

In the context of RPL processes, inequality in engagement arises first, not from the assessor holding power in relation to those assessed *per se*, but from the historical injustice immanent in the institutional make-up in terms of which assesseees with devalued non-academic capitals come to rely on institutions that possess the capital forms they require to increase their economic and cultural capital. When prior learning remains devalued during assessment, this represents an injustice, and “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction” (Zurn, 2012, p. 167).

Thus, for example, where lecturers privilege theory (general principles) over practice and students value practice (particular experiences) over theory (see Breir, 2005) during dialogical pedagogic approaches, parity of participation cannot be fully realised. Pedagogic rigidity in relation to crossing knowledge boundaries needs to be kept in check, as does the fact that the assessors of this crossing represent institutional power and are accountable to a class of academics who ratify or obstruct RPL decisions.

An RPL practitioner should consciously recognise this issue and circumvent its constraining power during interaction with applicants by means of critical reflection in and on his/her RPL practices and processes. Bourdieu illuminates why such recognition is not easy. In practice, what is active is the habitus of both agents that is not operating in a fully conscious state. As Breir’s (2005) study shows, the differences in their habitus manifest in privileging one’s (the academy’s) knowledge site. Such privileging is inherent in the cognitive structures of the academy and some of its members as much as in the power of RPL practitioners.

Crossing over Knowledge Forms; Flattening Power Differentials

Power differentials are implicated in the foregoing discussion. In relation to the PDC, Shalem and Steinberg (2006) claim that both assessor and assessee are in some position of powerlessness because of the

multifarious forms of pedagogy involved in assessing prior knowledge. Assesseees know little or nothing about higher education (Sanderberg and Andersson, 2011); the academy does not have deep knowledge of how to assess prior learning (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013), and assessors are predisposed to standard understanding of portfolio development in academia (Shalem and Steinberg, 2006).

However, their powerlessness is not equal but proportional to the capitals their knowledge sites possess and their personal agency during dialogic mediation. Differently put, the power of assessors is largely determinative in the final analysis. It can occur in a subtle paradoxical way (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011), when they lack pedagogic strategies to assess and extract prior learning from an RPL candidate or when applicants who lack the required linguistic capital do not properly articulate such learning (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013). Assessors falling in this category may respond to their inadequate pedagogic agency by falling back on the familiar rigid pedagogies related to portfolio development in the academy.

Although it is a disadvantage for candidates, if this real possibility is recognised and properly dealt with by an RPL practitioner, assessors and assesseees can “possibly develop more creative recognition processes” (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011, p. 4). If and once *proportional* (not equal or horizontal) powerlessness is identified, RPL practitioners should begin from a premise of scepticism about the extent of their knowledge during a reflective dialogical process with assesseees.

Scepticism is at play when assessors push their pedagogical authority to the background during the development of a candidate portfolio (Shalem and Steinberg, 2002), thus flattening assessor-assessee power relations (Osman and Castle, 2002).

Clearly, an academic habitus rooted in old notions of pedagogy and assessment cannot achieve this demand; only agency which challenges it can do so. Ralphs (2016) shows that the historical trajectory and culture of those involved in the design of a PDC is critical to the kind of artistry required in RPL practices. Hence, the study found that the PDC design changed with the arrival of a new team with a different habitus.

As noted earlier, mutual understanding is not yet entrenched, begging the question of how this can be achieved in the academy. Frick and Albertyn (2010) appeal to Freire’s notion of *dialogue* that is horizontal

between assessors and assessees, seeing this process as emancipatory because it humanises and vindicates the applicant's being/life work and experience. Some studies have found that participants validate the importance of this assertion (Ralphs, 2016; Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013). However, assessors need to have appropriate and sufficient capital to humanise the dialogical space on the one hand, and obtain the buy-in of the department and faculty on the other, otherwise they can face the risk of losing their social capital to advocate for RPL, and this might impact the exercise of their agency.

Fraser's theorisation helps to illuminate that dialogic mediation is plausible if assessors and assessees perceive each other as equals and if the institutional set-up enables such equality. This does not mean the absence of institutional authority, but rather acknowledgement of the ways in which it can be used during prospective assessment (see Shalem and Steinberg, 2002). Indeed, authority will always be present when assessors guide the conversation which must, in principle, also guide them. Such authority should not mean transmitting to RPL candidates (Osman and Castle, 2002). Nonetheless, the risk of transmission is present, depending on an assessor's disposition.

This implies a need for open-minded assessors who are alive to this possible injustice during dialogical reflections, and raises the empirical question of whether this is possible and the extent to which it can be achieved among academicians in light of the culture and history of the department and faculty noted by Cooper and Harris (2013). Suffice to posit here that open-mindedness is more beneficial when one's pre-disposition is aligned with the social justice imperative. To complicate matters, and this is a large part of the fundamental challenge this article seeks to elucidate, the decisions of (even the most open-minded) assessors are subject to the scrutiny of their class habitus (relevant to an academic discipline and faculty) that is not embedded in the specific discipline or programme at hand or in RPL discourses and practices. As the following sub-sections show, the result is RPL's success or failure.

The analysis of the sample of empirical literature below shows the strong presence of both habitus and agency among RPL practitioners. Nuanced analyses reveal the vitality of individual and collective habitus, including how personification of roles can depend not only on individuals' rigidity or flexibility, but also on the role played by the

volume of their capital in mobilising support for their RPL positions. Scholarly work presents examples where class habitus prevails either in opposition to or support of RPL.

Cooper and Harris (2013) found that Nursing Studies were more amenable to and habituated in the practice of RPL. Institutional disposition towards RPL, informed by its historical trajectory, influences the kind of artistry touted by Ralphs (2016). The Workers' College is oriented towards beginning from experience in order to inform and enrich the academy (Ibid.). This engenders a reflective, critical disposition among facilitators in relation to the dominant knowledge of the academy. In this instance, RPL flourishes because the academic class habitus is as attuned to it as a fish is to water (Bourdieu, 1990).

However, Cooper and Harris (2013) also found that some RPL decisions were approved in the department of Media and Film but not in the faculty. The finding is consistent with Starr-Glass' (2016, p. 9) assertion that "Often, the reluctance to accept and recognise credit for prior learning is strongest within the faculty", with its worth being questioned (Wong, 2011). The problem is that faculty is usually distant, seeing itself as subject-matter experts without being directly involved and fully immersed in the practice of RPL.

Another example of class habitus arises in the Master of Education. Here Cooper, Harris, and Jones (2016, p. 41) found "negative or even hostile attitudes towards RPL", skewed towards increasing its cultural capital as being a research-focused programme (Cooper et al., 2016), which implies competing with other high-ranking institutions in research (Patman and Vidovich, n.d.). An RPL decision was rejected at the departmental level in the Master of Education, causing the programme leader to refrain from promoting RPL, reasoning that the academic class would turn the recommendation down anyway (Cooper et al., 2016). Here, class dispositions can be seen to influence whether agents can personify roles in certain ways that advance RPL.

The programme leader in this case was faced with what can be described as the convergence of ideational and structural interests (Archer, 2004) on the part of the department, with the class habitus of academics accounting for why departments and faculty sometimes block access via RPL despite the evident success of candidates admitted through this mechanism (Cooper and Harris, 2013).

It also stands to reason that when assessors perceive their social and cultural capital to be low in proportion to the members of their class to which they are accountable, the way RPL applications are processed may be disadvantaged. Thus, faculty and the department's commitment to RPL proves more important for the success or failure of RPL than the commitment of a practitioner or RPL committee.

Contrary to class habitus having a mechanical influence on individual actors, a single individual with personal conviction and commitment to RPL can take on the established class habitus in ways that create a precedent for its advancement. A case in point is the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Graduate School of Business where the admission of seven MBA non-formal degree holding candidates caused a fracas at faculty level before it was accepted (see Singh, 2011). This required more than proof that the applicants had valid knowledge. The advocate for RPL required capital that was recognised by members of the class as legitimating his active advocacy. His success also demonstrates evolving openness to the imperatives of access, equity, and redress in the academy, no matter how slow – as Bourdieu theorises, a habitus itself gradually changes.

Conclusion

Critical theoretical interrogation of the literature shows that, while it is the right thing to do, policy change on its own does not lead to change in deep-rooted ideas in the academy about the value of RPL, nor does it lead to commitment to RPL pedagogies. Instead, it may be a strategy by structural elites in the face of ideational contradictions, structural interests, and external pressure. The academy needs an RPL-inclined class habitus across academic disciplines. It has also been shown that practice is governed by and influences habitus, and that RPL practitioners have to overcome the power imbalance during the processing of RPL applications.

However, analysis has shown that the cultural capitals of RPL assessors are different from the applicants on the one hand, and those of the collective members of the academy on the other. As such, they have to grapple with the fact that a class of academics sits at all institutional levels to determine the ultimate fate of RPL applicants. Taking into account that RPL is not well known or understood by both practitioners and academics (Kindred, 2018), this creates the possibility of continued

injustice. This possibility must be averted. But how?

Through critical reflection on its habitus (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013), the academy can come to see slow progress in the implementation of RPL, and the dominance of the academy's ideas on what counts as knowledge during RPL processes, as a product of long years of its own socialisation in and internalisation of particular ways of relating to externally produced knowledge can change.

Simultaneous with reflection, all academics and relevant administrators need to be fully capacitated on RPL as a unique pedagogic device. To create the conditions for structural change and changes in practice in the field, and to advance pedagogic agency, this should not be rudimentary, but systematic and prolonged until it forms itself as a logic of practice. Reflection would help the actors recognise the repressed fundamental assumptions (Kawalilak and Wihak, 2013) operating in their unconscious that they unwittingly take for granted (Bourdieu, 1990).

The literature reveals the need for common understanding between the assessor and assessee for RPL to succeed (Sandberg and Andersson, 2011). Common understanding is preceded by and is an outcome of critical reflection by actors at all institutional levels, particularly at university faculty level (Starr-Glass, 2016). Reflection needs to take the form of explicit pedagogy (Yang, 2014). That is, it needs to be deliberate and specific as a means of re-socialisation of the current habitus of the academy.

In this way, the possibility of transitioning to a refined habitus can take shape. After all, due to its malleability, habitus does incrementally but not radically change and adapt within the limits of its categories of thought (Bourdieu, 2004). However, change takes time, and Bourdieu does not set a precise time period for it to happen. Archer (2004) suggests that change occurs when agents have amassed sufficient power and are consciously organised in pursuit of their interests. For Bourdieu (1986), such power is immanent in economic, cultural, and social capital to redefine the stakes in the academy as the UKZN RPL advocate has shown (see Singh, 2011).

Bourdieu's view that change is also affected by the rigidity or flexibility of a member of the structural elite helps the critical reflective process to interrogate these and other qualities of individual actors. It is plausible to contend that if those with much social and cultural capital

are also rigid in relation to changing their RPL attitudes and stereotypes, perhaps because of their vital material and intellectual interests, culture is reproduced and the social justice imperative remains out of reach.

In the final analysis, honing the habitus of the academy via a deliberate process of different re-socialisation of the old habitus provides a gateway to possible internalisation of new ideas about RPL. In this way, institutions can be inclined to move beyond just policy making but also towards changing practical institutional inhibitors using individual and group agency, while employing RPL pedagogic devices that advance RPL as a social justice imperative within the notion of knowledge difference as the prevailing idea.

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