

The Complexities of Research into Prior Learning Assessments: Some Reflections

Xenia Coulter, SUNY Empire State College

The edited volume, *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives* (2011) is, interestingly enough, quite provocative although perhaps not in the way intended by the editors, Judy Harris, Mignonne Breier and Christine Wihak. An outgrowth of the 2009 inaugural meeting of the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) at Thompson Rivers University in Canada, the purpose of the book is to describe the state of research on prior learning assessment (PLA) in countries across the world, specifically Australia, Canada, England, the European Union, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, the United States, and countries represented by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The ultimate aim is to make available a repository of recent research in order to further the goals of PLIRC, that is, “to stimulate innovative, provocative and rigorous research into the theory, policy and practice of RPL¹ (p. 2).” Such background is necessary, the editors argue, “[b]ecause it is not advisable to begin new theorising without a clear sense of what has gone before” (p. 3).

One problem with such a goal for this book, no matter how well intentioned, is that an examination of national differences is probably not the most helpful starting point for encouraging the development of theory about PLA (or any body of differential practices assumed to reflect the same process). Clearly the editors, and certainly the contributors, are committed to promoting serious investigation into PLA that transcends local contexts. From that perspective, the methodological variations, cultural differences, diverse socio-economic conditions, and assorted credentialing needs that are strikingly evident in the book and that may well deserve research in their own right, make fundamental questions about PLA difficult to locate and sort out from more parochial concerns. In other words, the organization of this volume tends to obscure the very issues that might stimulate the kind of theorizing so many of the authors believe is missing from the field. A better way of provoking such theories, at least for this reader, might be a book organized not around the *context* of practice, but around the *questions* that have been or ought to have been asked that define, explore and extend our understanding of nonformal learning and its recognition.

A related problem with the stated goal of the book is the decision to leave open the question of what exactly constitutes research. Many contributors struggled to find ways of organizing the varied and often voluminous literature -- available mostly in the form of governmental or foundation-sponsored reports (published or not), journal articles or books, and very occasionally doctoral dissertations. Several key chapters ended up sorting the literature by research methodology (e.g., Van Kleef, Chapter 3, who compares experimental, non-experimental, qualitative and mixed-method research designs, or Harris, Chapter 6, who categorizes her discussion by inventory, comparative study, network-sponsored investigation, project-based study, dissertation and critical academic research). But division by methodology, just as organization by nation, not only serves to misdirect the reader away from identifying issues that might lead to theory, but seems to suggest, incorrectly, that research questions are defined by the methods used to study them.

Freisen, in the “Endword” of the book, responding to the calls for better research and more theory, similarly muddies the water. He argues that the study of PLA is similar to the study of e-learning or distance learning

in that “they are not timeless or universal, nor are they reducible to some kind of common physical or biological substrate. They are products of policy and practice, not of nature, and as such are contingent and contextual” (p. 326). For him, then, agenda-driven government-sponsored investigations into the specific types and extent of PLA practice in their own country (or university-sponsored research into their own practices as in the U.S.) are exactly the kinds of research one might expect. Rigorous experimentation, much less the development of testable theory, is not only unlikely, but inappropriate for a field of such complexity. However, he misunderstands the problem. No more than it controls the questions one asks about a field of study, methodology is not a function of the complexity of a field. This kind of confusion about the nature of research reflected here and in earlier chapters might have been avoided had the authors received some advance guidance about the meaning and nature of the research process itself. With simply less emphasis upon methodological differences, the questions regarding PLA that are in particular need of theoretical explanations might have been more clearly exposed.

In the social sciences, a very fundamental distinction is made between “applied” and “basic” research, categories that are considered orthogonal to differences in methodology. Good applied research can certainly be rigorously experimental; good basic research can be entirely qualitative. Thus, the repeated cries for a more critical stance, more statistics, more scholarship, more rigor, that are heard in almost every one of the 13 chapters of the book are actually not calls for “better” research or improved methods, but a demand for “basic” research. Doctoral research is important, not because it takes place in a university or because it incorporates particular methods, but because it almost always represents a disinterested search for knowledge or an opportunity to pursue a question for its own sake--the ideal hallmark of basic research. The question should not be, “Does it work?” (as raised by the OECD in Wenquin & Wihak, Chapter 7), but “What is it?” In other words, the problem with research involving PLA and its lack of useful theory is not that PLA is so complex, but that the majority of the investigations have been overwhelmingly applied. The real solution to this problem, as with any empirical enterprise, is to find ways of convincing the world that basic questions about learning, experience, adult development and evaluation as they are expressed in prior learning and its assessment are fascinating in their own right.²

Setting its organization aside, the book does, nonetheless, offer much in the way of data and information. For example, as an academic from the United States, this reader was quite surprised to learn the extent to which PLA research across the world is conducted in the service of national economic policy. In the United States, a significant amount of research is sponsored by universities (not exactly disinterested observers) where individual student learning (still an applied concern) is of more immediate concern than national economic needs. (These economic interests, however, are still well represented by the Counsel for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], an independent foundation with considerable industry support that is a major advocate for PLA.) It was similarly surprising to realize how much more relevant PLA is to vocational and professional education than to higher education, despite the importance it has acquired in American colleges with their ever-increasing adult student populations. Apparently, the concept of lifelong learning -- not as personal development but almost exclusively in the context of workforce development--has been so widely promoted across the world and with such urgency, that preparedness for new learning and the recognition of prior learning is routinely regarded as vital to economic growth. Huge amounts of money (for example, 7 billion euros was mentioned as the budget of one large project in the E.U. [p. 143]) have been made available to study and describe what is currently being done to recognize and evaluate nonacademic learning and to document, promote, expand, improve, analyze and evaluate these practices.

Yet, despite the strong interest in PLA by government agencies and the extensive literature that this interest has elicited, the amount of assessment that actually takes place is remarkably small. In Australia (Camerson, Chapter 2) where PLA is seen as simply one of a number of different ways of receiving credit for knowledge, less than 5 percent of all credit received (typically for vocational knowledge) comes from such evaluated learning. Others, too, (e.g., Breier for South Africa, Chapter 9) report a similar “limited implementation” (p.

201).³ Why practice has lagged so far behind policy development is obviously a question of some concern to many of the authors, who offer a variety of hypotheses. The most common ones implicate, for example: (a) complicated systems for the initial recognition of knowledge (most particularly the demands of portfolio development); (b) heavy resource demands (particularly with individualized assessments); (c) lack of common, nationwide and easily used tools of assessment; and (d) universally, negative perceptions, particularly in higher education, of the value of informal, nonformal or experiential learning that lack expert guidance. The resistance of faculty in higher education to award credit for learning outside the academy -- even (or perhaps especially) in departments of adult education (see Wihak & Wong, Chapter 13) -- is addressed with an interesting analysis by Wong in Chapter 12.

Perhaps as a way of further legitimizing extra-institutional learning, many authors noted that two distinct components of PLA, the *identification* of prior learning and its *recognition* (often but not always by the award of credit), are roughly equivalent to, or extensions of, two common types of assessments made in traditional classrooms: the “formative” (similar to the PLA identification phase) and the “summative” (similar to the recognition phase).⁴ Whittaker in Scotland (Chapter 8) makes much of this distinction by arguing, on the basis of social identity theory, that formative evaluation considered separately may be critical in helping “hard to reach learners” (p. 177) acquire the necessary self-confidence for subsequent formal study. Her writings about the personal value of PLA, join others in the book that see PLA as more than just a process of credentialing. Michelson who writes within the context of South Africa (Breier, Chapter 8)⁵ argues similarly that PLA can be an important force for addressing social injustice, particularly the privileging of academic knowledge over all other types of knowing. Certainly one important contribution of this book will be to lift these and other voices beyond the boundaries of a particular nation.

In standing back to consider the book as a whole, this reader noted a few chapters that stood out as particularly likely to stimulate renewed interest in PLA as a phenomenon worthy of further investigation. Travers (Chapter 11), who writes articulately about PLA mostly within the context of higher education, takes the literature from the United States (which, as pointed out by Harris & Wihak in Chapter 1, includes more doctoral dissertations than from any other country) and very clearly organizes the material around the questions they raise. In Chapter 7, Werquin & Wihak reproduce a truly interesting cost/benefit model (p. 169) developed earlier by Werquin based on a large amount of data collected by the OECD. Certainly the only mathematical model in the entire book, it compares the cost of training to the cost of PLA and shows the point at which one might be chosen over the other, raising some interesting questions not ordinarily considered. And Breier (Chapter 8), in reviewing those theoretical writings that support the development of PLA in South Africa, while also recognizing the many practical issues that block its implementation, offers refreshing and critical perspectives that can easily be applied beyond the context in which they are considered.

Clearly, on balance, despite the inadvertent barriers raised by its organization, that this book is in print and reflects points of view that go beyond any one nation or institution or individual, is very important. Even by just skimming the book, it is impossible to miss the point that PLA is not a local concern and should not be defined or studied in isolation. Whether, by itself, it will immediately stimulate basic research and new theorizing is not certain. However, if it marks the beginning of a move away from solely agenda-driven research toward investigations that focus on those deeper questions that illuminate the nature of informal learning and transcend the pragmatic issues that currently dominate the field, our understanding of adult development and adult education will be that much the richer.

Notes

¹ Each country has its own terminology (and resulting acronyms) for what we typically refer to in the United States as PLA or prior learning assessment. In each chapter, the author(s) used only local terms with the result that RPL (recognition of prior learning), PLAR (prior learning assessment and

recognition), APL (assessment of prior learning), APEL (the assessment of prior experiential learning) or VNFIL (validation of nonformal and informal learning), whatever their possible differences, are, in this book, essentially interchangeable.

2 The establishment of this new scholarly peer-reviewed journal devoted to this field is certainly a major step in that direction.

3 SUNY Empire State College may be uniquely different in this regard. For the 63,000 alumni of the college since its inception in 1971, more than a quarter of their bachelor degree credits were acquired through prior learning assessments. In 2009-2010, for example, out of the 128 credits required for a four-year degree, 36 on average were PLA credits.

4 This analogy may be premature and perhaps even restrictive, given the paucity of research on the fundamental nature of informal assessments. It could be argued, for example, that PLA consists of at least four different stages, such as: (a) discovery of what is known; (b) articulation of that knowledge; (c) translation into language (or other behaviors) appropriate to assessor demands; and (d) assessment of that knowledge. When an objective test is the measurement, the first three stages are probably conflated, but with portfolio assessment, these four, and possible others, are readily distinguishable processes that may not be comparable to what occurs in the traditional classroom.

5 See also her article in this journal (2011).

References

- Harris, J., Breier, M., & Wihak, C. (Eds.) (2011). *Researching the recognition of prior learning: International perspectives*. Leicester, England: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Michelson, E. (2011). Inside/Out: A meditation on cross-dressing and prior learning assessment. *PLA Inside Out, 1*. Retrieved from <http://www.plaio.org>