

CONTESTED CULTURES OF KNOWLEDGE – IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES TO INCLUDE EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE INTO THE ACADEMY

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on a case study of attempts at one university in South Africa to widen access to adult learners in a post-apartheid policy of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). It outlines the context of the policy, the ways in which RPL is implemented at one university and the epistemological challenges experienced both by staff and RPL students to argue for the inclusion of diverse categories of knowledge into the academy.

The article considers how postcolonial theories of knowledge can contribute to this debate, my own involvement in and qualitative data from a study led by Cooper and Harris (2013) to argue for the continued value of experiential, work, community and political knowledge as important categories of knowledge in themselves.

Introduction

In this article, I illustrate that the academy needs to recognize knowledge in all its diversity so that we can explore a more productive relationship between formal scholarship and kinds of knowledge that have been excluded from it (Green, 2013).

This is a case study of a university which was previously a ‘white’ and advantaged university under apartheid. It locates the education of adults within the post-apartheid period and the institution-wide policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The institution’s

RPL policy committed it to widening access to adult learners. However access via RPL has remained only a tiny proportion of admissions. I argue that one of the reasons for the low admission rates is that epistemological access for adult learners has presented some challenges one of which is how to account for experiential knowledge in the academy.

I used a case study research approach as the study focused on exploratory and descriptive types of questions, the how and why questions – the phenomena being investigated were real life situations within a bounded context (Yin, 1995, pp. 1-5).

The research data drew on my own experiences as an RPL advisor and assessor as well as a review of postcolonial and RPL literature. It included evidence from a qualitative study which mapped current RPL practices at the university led by Cooper and Harris (2013). In this study individual interviews were held with faculty staff across six faculties who were responsible for RPL admissions and those who oversaw the admissions process and senior managers within faculties and the various transformation committees. Interviews were also conducted with RPL students from the different faculties. Pseudonyms are used for the students interviewed for reasons of confidentiality and staff members designations have been used to indicate the context of staff members either as managers or academic members in a specified faculty.

Context of the case

In the South African context widening access and participation in Higher Education to those previously excluded under apartheid laws is a political, moral and

economic issue. As under apartheid many black people (black includes all racial groups disenfranchised during apartheid and whites refers to those enfranchised during apartheid) were denied access to 'white' universities. Black people who were admitted to 'white' universities were classified Indian or Coloured and had to apply for special permission and argue that the programme of study was not offered at any other university. Black Africans were not eligible to apply for such permission. There have been a range of policy and institutional changes since 1994 aimed at widening access to university for mainly young black students from diverse backgrounds. Increased numbers of black students have been admitted via alternative access routes and supported by academic development programmes, curriculum changes and state financial aid as well as scholarships.

A report from the Council on Higher Education indicates that for the period 1996 to 2010 the percentage of African black student enrollment has increased from 53% to 67%, whereas those of white students has decreased from 34% to 20%, for other minority groups these figures are; Indians from 7% to 6% and Coloureds from 6% to 7% over the same period. However pass rates differ with more white students passing than the other population groups. This discrepancy is attributed to the uneven quality of schooling and past inequities.

In 2004, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy became statutory for all Higher Education institutions in South Africa. The policy envisaged increased numbers of adult students in Higher Education and spoke of life-long learning, and skills development and was seen as a form of affirmative action. The policy, which is meant to 'open the doors of learning' (Freedom Charter, 1955), was initially

spearheaded by the trade union movement and progressive policy makers in the African National Congress (ANC), which is currently the ruling party.

However both policy and implementation varies across the country and even within universities. Life-long opportunities for learning for older workers in colleges, technikons and universities are largely absent and the post school education and training sector has not massified or modernized compared to other systems in the world (HSRC, 2003). In this process adult education and training has not been a priority.

In a joint paper with Cooper, we described the poor political will of universities and the state to provide resources to widen access and to allow mature adult education students to participate successfully in Higher Education by providing both financial and academic resources (Ismail and Cooper, 2011, p. 31). Elsewhere Walters (2004) argued that the main problem was that adult learners were not singled out as a group for special consideration. Ismail and Cooper (2011) agreed with the view that redress and equity issues have been progressively de-prioritised as the South African economy has become more enmeshed with the global economy (Du Toit, 2010).

In this article the focus is on RPL as seen as a process for including new voices with different cultures and orientations into the academy which were excluded under apartheid. During apartheid many oppressed people fought exclusionary policies and in many instances their learning was geared to their everyday reality and supported their daily struggles. Informal education and learning developed so that excluded groups did have some opportunity for learning. Learning took place in many different spaces, in

underground reading clubs, in the trade union movement, in protest action and many Non- governmental organisations provided literacy and other forms of informal learning. Thus the knowledge generated in these contexts as described by Cooper (2011, p. 48) is not neutral and is strongly political.

The RPL candidates are adult learners defined by life circumstances rather than by age; persons who have responsibility for themselves or may have a family / extended family; have a job and life experience. They are people denied access to education because of race during apartheid; class and/or material circumstances (Policy on RPL, 2004). They come from all sectors including social movements, industry, health, government, trade unions and non-government organisations.

Description and analysis of the case

The struggle to recognise the knowledge gained from the everyday experience, indigenous knowledge and from social movements is probably as old as colonialism in South Africa. The university under study is an institution which has held steadfastly to an approach to knowledge that has been critiqued as elitist, hierarchical and which reflects the dominant ideology that privileges individualism, merit and rationalist ways of knowing and disciplinary authority (Michelson, 2006; Grossman, 2007). This university is not alone in holding such a position. A review of the literature indicates that some academies have held onto their social and cultural capital in spite of the growth in interdisciplinary studies and also the intermingling of different disciplines in the corporate, technical and scientific worlds.

As noted above access via RPL has remained only a tiny proportion of admissions into this university, particularly at postgraduate level. This situation is not peculiar to South Africa. According to Harris (2006) who has also researched the subject in the UK, Australia and Canada, it is prevalent globally and similar struggles over the recognition of prior knowledge are ongoing in Higher Education in these countries.

Currently the student profile at the university is 42% black and 22% white and the remainder comprises international students 18%, and those who do not wish to classify themselves (Ismail and Cooper, 2011, p. 33). These figures are not disaggregated into undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In 2004, via the efforts of the Recognition of Prior Learning Working Group which was commissioned to draw up RPL policy, the university adopted an institution-wide policy on Recognition of Prior Learning (Policy on RPL, 2004). The policy committed the university to “redressing inequities and supporting lifelong learning through widening access to adult learners” based on a belief that “there are able people with valuable knowledge and experience in workplaces and communities who could benefit from university study” (Policy on RPL, 2004, p. 2). The policy states that:

RPL is based on a developmental model, not a deficit model of adult learning; it builds on knowledge and skills that adults have already acquired, and that RPL is part of the university’s broader commitment to be socially responsive to key social needs, and to significant constituencies in government and civil society (ibid, p. 4).

How does RPL work at the university under study?

RPL in the different faculties of the university

The Faculties and Departments within the university differ and their interaction with RPL which is part of the transformation agenda of the country is varied, dependent on their histories, leadership, location within the university and broader social context as well as their vision.

The Health Science Faculty is partly supported by the state and linked to hospital services so this faculty has to implement state policy to some degree and RPL is statutory. The majority of successful RPL applicants in this Faculty have been to postgraduate programmes, often in more applied fields such as in the Nursing and Disability Studies programme in the Health Science Faculty. Similarly in the School of Business and Media Studies adult students have been admitted into programmes that can easily utilize their work experience (Cooper and Harris, 2013).

The Science and Engineering Faculties have engaged with RPL in different ways. Some of the staff in these Faculties are concerned with the kinds of knowledge that a professional scientist might need in a developing country such as the need for innovative low cost housing solutions, sanitation, sustainable uses of energy and food production as well as medical solutions to various epidemics such as Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Therefore these Faculties are more amenable to consider RPL applications from candidates who are practitioners in these areas of work.

Admission via RPL in the Humanities Faculty has been more complex. One possible reason for this difference is

that this Faculty guards its disciplinary boundaries by excluding knowledge from the everyday and the workplace. Another argument for this discrepancy is that the cultures of faculties are different. In faculties where applied knowledge and evidence based practice is acceptable it is often easier to admit RPL candidates with the relevant work and research experience. Whereas in the Humanities and Sciences where a traditional disciplinary culture is more dominant, students may experience the hegemonic culture more forcefully thus silencing voices which are sometimes seen as foreign to it. In interviews undertaken by Cooper and Harris (2013) the views of both academic and administrative staff on the feasibility of RPL at the University were sought. A senior manager said that often the institution does not recognise knowledge that does not conform and blames the student for this. He put it this way:

You're not like us. To be like us, you would have had to have done such and such. Why haven't you?
(Senior manager on Transformation Committee, interview 2011).

Higher Education in South Africa also had to account for the role it played in apartheid times and testimonies given at various reconciliation forums have indicated that there are different encounters with culture, power and resistances in universities.

My involvement in RPL

In this section I describe my experiences and observations of RPL work in one faculty over a period of 14 years. I set

out my own involvement and reasons for embarking on this research as well as how the system is administered generally and then more specifically in the university under study.

My work in RPL began informally and was formalised in 2004 when due to the advocacy and research work of the RPL working group, the RPL policy was accepted by the Senate. I was a member of this group which is now named the Adult Learner Sub-Committee (ALSC). This committee oversees the implementation of the RPL policy throughout the university and identifies barriers to adult learning. My work with colleagues on the ALSC involved the implementation of RPL throughout the institution. I advised and supported RPL candidates, faculty and administrative staff through the admissions process. However in 2013, my RPL responsibilities changed as I moved to another Faculty. I remain a member of the Adult Learner Sub-Committee and support this committee's work in an advisory capacity.

In this work I see a contestation over the recognition of prior knowledge and it has emerged as a fertile ground for research. RPL illustrates a powerful contestation of whose and what knowledge should be affirmed and valued in the university. As one RPL student wrote about the process:

I felt so good to simply just claim a space and make myself heard and to make visible the multiple faces of my community into a domain that had suppressed and darkened its rich colour before (i.e. during apartheid) (Arend, 2014, p. 227).

This RPL candidate saw the RPL process as valuing the links between her and her community and affirmed that

knowledge production can be collective and communal rather than individual and insular (Arend, 2014, p. 227).

However some students express an opposing view and argue that the pedagogy in the academy weakens their links with community knowledge and takes away their community voice. It silences them. They also say that the academic writing socialises them into a hierarchical order and 'is detached from the community and any emotional commitment' (Arend 2014, p. 231). Arend (ibid) concludes that the RPL process seems to throw out these contradictions and constructs a space by allowing contestations and disruptions and failures and that perhaps this risk taking has the potential to transform the classrooms in the academy into unpredictable magical spaces.

Description of a general RPL process

The recognition of prior learning is broadly defined as a practice of reviewing and evaluating the knowledge and skills that adults have gained through experiential, self-directed and /or informal learning as well as through formal education. The assessment of RPL is meant to be developmental and the candidate, if successful is then regarded as all other candidates but may require academic support in terms of writing skills or numerical skills and orientation to the academic environment.

I am going to describe a general process of selection as there is no standardized procedure and each Faculty or even Department may develop their own procedures. Generally, as in other contexts world-wide RPL assessment is implemented through developing a portfolio to assess prior learning experience, knowledge, skills and attitudes

(Harris, 2006). An adult education framework of experiential learning is usually applied to allow the candidate to describe their knowledge and learning and to reflect on this. The candidate is then given a number of reflective exercises. For example, the candidate has to trace his/her learning trajectory and isolate critical learning incidents, present a life history of learning and write a motivation for the particular course of study. The candidate may also be given a paper to critique in order to test their ability to summarise, to write a coherent argument and whether they have the ability to hold different viewpoints.

In the more scientific and technological programmes quantitative and academic literacy tests are given to assess numerical skills, cognitive ability, critical and writing skills.

The RPL assessor, who is often an academic in the faculty, writes a report recommending acceptance / rejection. If acceptance is recommended, the assessor identifies areas where the candidate may require academic support. The report is then sent to the relevant Head of Department/ Course Convener or Deputy Dean and when verified it goes to the Faculty Board for final approval and acceptance.

Acceptance into a programme is made by the academic staff of the particular programme as the RPL assessor may not be an expert in all the disciplines. Should the application not be successful then the candidate can appeal the decision and request a review. The successful applicant completes an application form and goes through the usual administrative processes. The administrative process can be confusing because there is no category/ tick box for RPL on the application form. As a result, in some cases administrative staff deny access to RPL

candidates as they are unaware of the nature of the application and the assessment outcome. If this is not picked up by the faculty staff or applicant, then the applicant forfeits his/her place. This situation has now been partly rectified since RPL as a category is on the registration form so we know who has been accepted. But as said above because there is no category on the application form which is different to the registration form (a form which is completed after acceptance into the faculty), therefore we do not know who has applied and been rejected.

In summary, this description suggests a rigorous procedure. It illustrates the time involved and also the many different contexts in which the candidate is assessed: in the portfolio exercise, then at department and faculty level and even in some cases judgment is made at an administrative level. It is at the nexus of the assessment between faculty and the RPL assessor where differences of academic judgment come to the fore. Firstly, faculty gatekeepers often demand rigid comparisons, rather than general equivalence between 'knowledges'. For example, to gain access at post graduate level, RPL candidates are expected to demonstrate that they have prior research experience which they will be unlikely to gain through typical work experience.

A further obstacle in some cases is the overturning of the RPL assessor's judgment. Although academics have carried out a lengthy RPL process and submitted a detailed report, their recommendations are turned down wholly or in part by the programme convenors or faculty managers who are senior academics. This happens in a context where there is a lack of explicit criteria, and a general

unwillingness to define access criteria for what constitutes academic capacity. There is also a serious lack of resources to do this work (Ismail and Cooper, 2011, p. 37).

Challenges to the implementation of RPL

The staff engaged in RPL admissions work have encountered considerable academic critique of RPL. One strand of critique emphasizes the differentiation of knowledge, and seriously questions whether knowledge gained experientially and which is embedded in specific contexts, is transferable across contexts, particularly into an academic context. Another line of critique stems from the argument that not all knowledge is equally valid or worthy, to argue otherwise leads us into relativism, and that there are codified bodies of knowledge that our society relies on that must form the basis of higher education curricula.

These arguments are often cited by leading academics at the university. The RPL staff have had to seek a way of engaging with these critiques, while maintaining the position that experiential, work and community based knowledge is an important category of knowledge that provides adult learners with the potential to succeed in academic study; and that 'everyday' knowledge can also act to enrich the academic knowledge archive (Ismail and Cooper, 2011, p. 37).

Staff and student critiques regarding the implementation of RPL

In this section I mainly draw on the interviews from the RPL study led by Harris and Cooper (2013). In their study

they report that academic staff who were passionate about RPL said that they did not look for the equivalence of knowledge but experiences which could afford the student epistemological access to the academy. In addition, they looked for a capacity to learn, to change, to accommodate new knowledge and skills, to become flexible and uncomfortable, to confront what they know and used to know. They also did not only recruit students on epistemological access but also other important attributes such as passion and motivation, and the ability to work hard. These attributes are signaled in the education literature as strong indicators for success.

A RPL student interviewed in the Harris and Cooper (2013) said:

I was open to challenge, my work experience helped me tremendously and provided a context. I could illustrate the theory with practices. I engulfed it and worked really hard, being an activist I learnt many skills to communicate, writing skills, media skills for my advocacy work, how to use resources creatively. I come from the apartheid era therefore I understood my subject from an equity point and a humanitarian of view. I am very passionate about learning, and am committed and motivated. (Aisha, RPL student interview, 2013).

The debate around whether learning from experience can be looked to as true knowledge is especially pertinent in feminist circles and amongst popular educators who work with experience and reflection in a learning cycle. Walters (1996) a feminist popular educator argues that experience

is the starting point of knowledge creation and that educators need to go beyond and to use experience as a basis for reflection and theoretical analysis. Audre Lorde (1995) adds that feelings and emotions and experience are sources of knowledge and power and help to deepen critical analysis, rebuild self-esteem and build solidarity amongst oppressed women.

The lecturers actively engaged with RPL see it as a transformative process for those who previously did not have opportunities to enter higher education. They feel that people bring with them experiences which are valuable to the academy. They understand that knowledge can be generated in many different places and that people can learn through different pathways and are competent. They argue that the academy is disconnected from the reality of life. These views confirm some student's comments e.g.

That in the real world nobody cares about academia, it is too theoretical and needs to be more applied to be useful (Debbie, RPL student interview, 2013).

Lecturers also said that RPL candidates bring new knowledge from new places. As one lecturer in the postgraduate programme in Disability Studies commented:

Their experience brought a holistic approach to the biomedical model by including the social and cultural lives of people (Senior academic, Health Science Faculty, interview, 2011).

Lecturers also said that social activists are familiar with debates and discussions in their areas of work, have strong oral skills, have a broad sociological understanding and are

critical. They also have experience of writing position papers and in developing policy. These skills are acquired through feminist groups, readings groups, advocacy work, negotiations with employers/state, social networking, using the internet, and engaging with those in authority, writing reports to funders and government ministers as well as their interaction with the media. Cox and Fominaya (2009, p. 3) who have researched knowledge generation in social movements agree that social activists are often able to discourse with great fluency on questions of global analysis and general theoretical understandings of the social world.

This demonstrates that some RPL students are equally capable of producing abstract forms of knowledge and wisdom which are of value across a range of contexts and which could contribute to the knowledge archives.

The social activists who gained access via RPL said that they needed a language to further their activism. They reported academic literacies taught them how to capture information, how to abstract and further their own language but that their experience taught them how to apply their knowledge in the workplace, in the community and in debates with government ministers. This view is supported by RPL students from more formal workplaces who said that not only did they gain a qualification but that their professional practice improved and they could serve the community in more effective ways. They also claimed that they turned some academics into activists. My own research supports this view:

Just as institutions need the political energy and grounded struggles that social action engenders, social movements need the resources of the academy (Ismail, 2006).

Other critical adult education and social movement learning theorists such as Choudry (2014), Cox and Fominaya (2009) also emphasise the social character of knowledge productions. For example Thapliyal (2014) argues:

...explicitly against the dominant academic tradition to categorise and compartmentalise knowledge into existing frameworks based on dichotomous and hierarchical thinking (p. 3).

Another frustration that lecturers experience is that the university's administration applies only one criterion for entrance to Masters or Postgraduate Diploma, i.e. that the applicant's experience be equivalent to an Honours or 4th year qualification. These lecturers respond in the following ways:

The system is frustrating and should be more trusting, it undermines academics, and one can't equate experience with qualifications;
Different programme looks for different things, not every programme looks for the same qualities and have different criteria;
You have to be part of the process to appreciate the evaluation;
Academics recognise certain forms of experience and not others like activism (Academic interviews, Health Science Faculty, 2011).

A student who went through the RPL assessment confirms this view. She said:

It was quite clear that they were looking for outcomes from my work experience which was similar to an undergraduate degree (Debbie, RPL student interview 2013).

Others say that RPL is a very rigorous process with lots of emotions, time and resources invested for both students and academics. One academic made this point:

In the context where efficiency in universities has become paramount the attention to progression and retention cannot ignore qualities other than formal education such as commitment, passion, experience, resilience – qualities which the academic project would be without much life if ignored (Senior academic, Education Faculty, interview 2011).

So far the RPL process is not encouraging with one academic describing it as a ‘helluva grudging one’ (Senior academic, Transformation Committee, interview, 2011). Another from the Arts and Humanities Faculty argued that in many cases one cannot apply a theory of vertical knowledge (Bernstein, 1996) to certain fields like ICTS and the Creative Arts. They feel that the university gatekeepers are looking for something but not clear what they are looking for. They would like more guidance on the criteria. In some cases the academic staff felt that it is a bureaucratic decision which protects the academy.

Some students reported that it was enriching to have both experience and knowledge in the class. They said of one programme:

Everybody brought their own knowledge into that space; it was very much applied and learning was action research based. It does require you to be independent and have structure. You do need to have a quest for knowledge and a desire to improve yourself (RPL student interviews, 2013).

Some RPL students in the post graduate programme in Disability Studies were admitted partly because of their activism in the Disability Social Movement. This movement comprises people who are activists and policy advocates in the disability rights movement nationally and on the African continent. One of the RPL students from this social movement did not accept the exclusive legitimacy of academic knowledge and felt that the university should integrate his knowledge and experience, saying that 'it is time for the university to learn something different' (Cooper, 2011, p. 52).

Many social movement activists who have been admitted via RPL into various programmes also connect with others in their workplace on a global scale so their knowledge is not only local. In their work they have learnt a body of knowledge and acquired conceptual skills in their activism to engage with knowledge and power. These features gave them a platform for learning at a university. Besides within the spaces of knowledge sharing there are also cultural exchanges, in these ways new knowledge is produced that is transnational. In these exchanges new forms of democracy arise which in turn develop new forms of political representation, and decision making. RPL is one way different knowledge cultures can contribute to enrich academic knowledge. However the university is reluctant to engage with these new forms or is not open about what it is

looking for in the assessment of RPL candidates.

One lecturer expressed the view that:

policy needs to be informed by practice and practice should reshape policy without that policy is disjointed from practice - then it becomes irrelevant (Academic, Humanities Faculty, interview 2011).

These academics say that the RPL process requires a certain level of generosity and for the university to be more elastic and open.

Most academics report that the progress and pass rate of the RPL candidates is good and it is similar to students who have come through the normal routes. Some RPL students reported they didn't feel any different and all of them had to work hard and the weaker ones dropped out. One said, 'I graduated cum laude' (Aisha, RPL student interview, 2013).

An analysis of this attitude and behaviour reflects the questions asked by Stenger (2008) e.g. 'What is the university protecting itself against? The outside?' Which, as Stenger alerts us to is not absolute, but includes a multiplicity of experiences. The other significant question is 'what does the university shelter?'

To this question a RPL student answers:

RPL is blocked by academics; the world of academia is protecting its own terrain. Education is about giving people their freedom and with increased levels of education comes some levels of freedom such as to choose different work and lifestyles and not to become stuck in one place (Sipho, RPL student interview, 2013).

This view that the university is guarding its terrain is also prevalent amongst a few academics who say that sometimes those in authority invoke the bureaucracy to act as gatekeepers.

Theorization about RPL and knowledge

I will now discuss the implications of the RPL policy and processes for the university and argue that as it has unfolded there has been a contestation over whose knowledge counts.

Some of this debate is captured in a recent paper by Harris and Cooper (2013) who primarily drew on concepts from Bernstein (1996) to explore the knowledge question through interviewing a range of academic staff across six faculties to determine the feasibility of RPL in their respective disciplines. Their research confirmed arguments that knowledge structure did affect the feasibility of RPL at the postgraduate level but that knowledge and knowledge differentiation were not as significant determinants as they had hypothesized. But equally important was the pedagogic agency of the academics who were committed to opening access and pathways of learning for those historically excluded. Some academics were open to designing different curricula and had innovative pedagogies and assessments to teach a more diverse academic class.

Elsewhere Cooper (2011) and Ralphs (2009) have argued for the voices and agency of RPL students to be exercised in negotiating the curriculum and Cooper (ibid) has written about the experiences of RPL students on the post graduate programme in Disability Studies. These students were admitted partly because of their activism in

the disability movement and exercised their agency in negotiating the academic discourse. This involved a mix of accommodation, resistance and challenge. Often activist students find it hard to write in an academic genre and their vibrancy generally does not hold sway in the academy. Similarly academics often research the knowledge of poor communities and activists and often this knowledge when theorised becomes unrecognisable to those researched. Thus both academics and activists could in dialogue learn how to keep their voices authentic and not forego theoretical work which would enhance the value of both forms of knowledge.

Others such as Michelson (2006); Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006); Andersson and Guo (2009); Grossman (2009) and Ralphs (2009) have also provided critical and radical perspectives on RPL arguing for a diversity of knowledge to be included in the academy.

These theorists argue that it is the unequal power relations of the traditional university that block access via RPL. Radical educators such as Grossman (2009) insist that this university recognises the lived experience of ordinary people and everyday knowledge as deeply social, useful, valuable and important.

So far in the university the RPL knowledge arguments have escaped the critiques of postcolonial theorists. The arguments revolve around whether formal knowledge or knowledge gained through experience should be prioritized, thus forgetting that both are subjective in a certain sense and that exclusion is produced by naming experiential knowledge subjective and local. I have chosen to use the theoretical work of Bruno Latour (2007), Isabelle Stengers (2008) and Nyamnjoh (2012) as well as others who have questioned the dominance of Western definitions of

epistemology. Their theories of knowledge link with RPL concerns as in their field of inquiry (Social Anthropology, a discipline deeply associated with colonialism) subjectivities are at the heart of their research and where representation is a vital factor in how their disciplinary knowledge is perceived and accepted by the academic canon.

Latour (2007), Stengers (2008), Negri and Hart (2009), Nyamnjoh (2012) and Breidlid (2013) may offer alternative perspectives to the knowledge question and in these new times may advance the struggle to give rise to new voices and arguments to incorporate knowledge from below into the academy. An idea of the alternatives suggested is captured in Latour's argument presented in 'Recall of Modernity' (2007) where he argues for a plurality of cultures and for an integrated relationship between science and culture. Stengers (2008) article addresses the question of the production of subjectivity and to reclaim it. Hart and Negri (2009) write about Anti-Modernity as resistance where they argue that modernity is institutional and goes well beyond the level of ideology, it is embodied and expressed throughout the administrative, economic and social arrangements of power. They also argue for the knowledge of the commons to be included in the academy to transform reality.

These authors argue that science is not objective but clothed in modernity and is an interpretation of the West and that science depends on representation 'and is presented as a matter of belief or ideology' (Green 2013, p. 2). Spivak (1994), whose work on representation of the subaltern initially put forward these views, went further to argue that Western science has violated the knowledge of those whom they study. She termed this epistemic violence. These views are important to consider in a context

in which education was imbued with racism and with the civilising mission of Christian missionaries which also instituted suspicions of all other forms of knowledge (Soudien 2013, p. 2) which was often presented as naïve, exotic or childlike.

Latour (2007, p. 11-15) argues that science as represented by the West as neutral, technical and efficient has split the world into nature and culture as though the one had no influence on the other and that science and nature were unchanging. This representation did not account for the changes brought about by colonialism, the destruction of nature for profits. He comes to the conclusion that we have never been modern, not if we continue to destroy nature and culture in the name of utilization and profits.

Nyamnjoh (2012, p. 129-130) who also writes on how colonialism has destroyed indigenous knowledge systems reminds us that formal institutions of learning in Africa has made infinite concessions to the outside and has emphasised the boundedness of cultural worlds, knowledge systems and values of the Western world thus impoverishing the complex reality of Africans and represses students.

In this case both academic staff who support RPL policy and RPL students have argued for the redress of past inequities, to recognise and restore indigenous knowledge systems, as well as to recognise that those who were excluded from participating in formal education have gained valuable knowledge through social activism or in their places of work.

It therefore seems fair to say that careful consideration should be given to debates arguing for a superiority of disciplinary knowledge over experiential knowledge. In

addition, this investigation shows that those in power continue to have the ability to define what scientific knowledge is and on this basis exclude students whom they determine as not having the required knowledge and competencies for university study.

Latour (2007), Stengers (2008), Nyamnjoh (2012) and Breidlid (2013) point out that such a system is not sustainable in the face of a previous system of exclusion and that subjective knowledge should be seen as supplementary and not equivalent. They argue that it is important in any assessment of epistemological access and competency to know how people make sense of the world and what they have learnt and to realise people's potential. They propose a paradigm shift away from Western epistemology as education is not so much about surviving the course but it is about building a sustainable world.

The evidence from the research suggests that the university include 'the social and cultural lives of the people' and adds to Stengers argument (2008, pp. 38 -59) that knowledge of the pre-modern which provides an assemblage of feeling, understanding and connections for the practitioner to the real world be included into the academy. She asks pertinent questions such as 'what are abstractions to us?' and 'what are they blinding us against?' She goes further and argues for multiple modernities and to reclaim subjectivity which has been silenced or derided and to unsettle definitions which have been taken for granted. Reclaiming subjectivity for Stengers (ibid) is about healing, learning what was devastated, or confiscated, to restore life where it has been poisoned, to learn and teach again reflexively and creatively. Such a project of transformation is essential in South African Higher education system. Hart and Negri (2009, pp. 69-71)

point to a version of modernity which includes resistances – the anti-colonial struggles which were about private property and defined as power relations. They argue that exclusion is a racist ideology based on material institutional practices and that the structures of power as is indicate a persistence of racism. Some RPL candidates do report that they experience the exclusion of their ideas and knowledge as a form of racism.

Nyanmnjoh (2012, p.131) too derides a form of education that subscribes to rigid dichotomies and incites us to use popular epistemologies to build bridges between so called natural and supernatural and to explore that which is not visible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable with the emphasis on the whole and how truth is negotiated (pp.131-132). His ideas are in sync with those academic staff who said that they include passion, commitment and motivation in their assessment of RPL candidates and that often the criteria for RPL are not visible. They also echo RPL student views who question the boundaries that academic knowledge impose on them.

Stengers (2008, p. 43) urges us to have the power to hesitate about our own conditions of thought, for a line of flight and to escape the modern.

Breidlid (2013, pp. 22-26) points out that in an era of globalization there are fewer boundaries and that knowledge also has porous borders and is produced in more than one space and place. He is of the viewpoint that education institutions can move away from the entrenched categorization of knowledge and open up new horizons. He is aware of the complexity of knowledge and does not want to underrate Western epistemology but his research shows that a naive belief in rationality to the exclusion of

alternative epistemologies has meant the demise of ecological sustainability. Latour (2007) emphasises that globalisation has done away with the West and has put others in the lead.

The evidence presented in this study supports the postcolonial theorists' argument for a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted interpretation of a text even if these are in conflict with each other as these different perspectives bring in new meanings and shifts in knowledge production and systems. They argue for the permeability of education institutions and for negotiation and engagement with different knowledge cultures and to recognise varied pathways to intellectual achievement.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented evidence from a case study, supported by evidence from my observations and research which is affirmed by postcolonial theory to challenge academics to value voices from the everyday, from work, community and political knowledge. A further challenge is to view these as important categories of knowledge in themselves and to argue for different ways of knowing.

In this way I have added to the RPL literature and furthered the debates within this field. I hope by doing so it will strengthen the RPL system and may provide a basis for mature learners to succeed in academic study and thereby provide an environment to have social justice through epistemological access.

Further research is needed which includes categories of race, gender and class as these appear to be absent from the literature on RPL. I hope to explore what it means to be

the subject of RPL to further highlight challenges in the RPL process. Already small scale studies (Arend 2013; Pokorny 2012; Cooper 2011; Breier 2006; Cliff 2006) indicate that there are multiple student experiences which are dependent on the nature of the RPL assessment and how experiential knowledge is recruited and acted on in the curriculum and in the classroom.

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