Chapter 10

Considerations of Self in Recognising Prior Learning and Credentialing

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ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8856-8.ch010
learning is flexible, negotiated and suited to each person’s needs. It is characterized by open entry-open exit courses, and the courses begin and end when the student is ready” (p. 358). More insightfully, and more relevantly, they later alluded to more significant dimensions of flexible learning, referring to “... hybrid combinations of distance and traditional education in the form of distributed learning, networked learning or flexible learning in which multiple intelligences are addressed through various modes of information retrieval” (p. 358). These writers especially appreciate their reference to “multiple intelligences” in the sense that learners’ diverse strengths and learning styles are accommodated by a variety of means. Of particular interest to this chapter is the inclusion of the notion of “different ways of knowing” which denotes, to these writers, flexibility in learning practices.

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

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

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

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

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

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