"Equivalence" and the Recognition of Prior Learning in Universities[1]

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> Then I had a fair number [of students]...including of course the substantial number of wage earners one discovers, who at the third or fourth meeting produce their novel or autobiography, short stories or poems.[2]

> [Y]ou must improve academic standards, you must get written work, there must be no crossing of subject boundaries.[3]

Williams's experiences in convincing universities that he was "trying to create new standards of a different kind of work" differ little from what is involved in assessing recognition of prior learning (RPL)[4] applications based on uncredentialled learning.[5] Specific workplace projects and various non-assessed professional development activities have replaced "novels, autobiographies, short stories and poems" but they are still presented mostly not consistent with academic definitions of "written work" and often requiring that "subject boundaries" be crossed. Personal experience can never be completely described with words and it rarely happens in the neat and arbitrary packages that university learning gets presented. On what basis and what is involved in granting academic credit and/or exemptions for these personal achievements are the two main themes addressed here.

When an RPL application based on uncredentialled learning is made, the central issue is whether the applicant's previous experience(s)[6] resulted in learning that can be accepted as being equivalent to some specific and hoped-for learning that the university would normally require of students.

> The board may credit a candidate with a subject...on the basis of work experience which would have an educational value equivalent to the completion of that subject — Monash University, Faculty of Law.[7]

> Credit may be granted for...in-house programs offered by industry and for significant learning acquired through employment or other experience, provided that such units or in-house programs or significant learning...are of equivalent standard to units offered at the University — University of New England.[8]

RPL is a form of assessing learning and as such is replete with many of the general issues and problems inherent to assessing learning, for example, validity, reliability and what counts as evidence of learning. However, RPL applications based on uncredentialled learning raise some particularly difficult philosophical matters, not the least of which is when is learning equivalent.

"Equivalence"

One technical definition of "equivalence" is that it is a term which signifies that two propositions are so related that one is true if and only if the other is true.[9] On this definition the propositions 7+3=10 and 8+2=10 are equivalent if it is not possible to hold that 7+3=10 is true without 8+2=10 being true and vice versa.

The claim that these two propositions are equivalent will be acceptable to most readers of this paper because of shared understandings regarding the numbers and

symbols in them. The propositions would be considered equivalent because we assign particular and shared meanings about size and order to "2," "3," "7," "8," "10," about relation to "+" and "=" and assume that these meanings hold for both propositions. While such a technical definition of "equivalence" appears appropriate for tightly constructed languages like mathematics, how does it fare with ordinary language, the language that RPL applications are made in?

On first blush the definition seems not too far removed from ordinary language as it represents what I would consider one non-technical use of "equivalence": One thing is equivalent to another when it leads to the same thing, has the same results or consequence(s).[10] In the same way that "7+3" is non-technically equivalent[11] to "8+2" so too are the formal contributions required for a Ph.D. (for example, a dissertation) equivalent to the "informal" achievements recognized in the bestowing of an honorary doctorate (for example, for political leadership).[12] In the former case 7+3 and 8+2 lead to the same result — 10. In the latter case a dissertation and political leadership contribute towards the same consequence — a Ph.D.

But assessing RPL applications, especially those based on uncredentialled learning, is much more complex than adopting a particular definition of "equivalence" and then applying it to certain evidence — experiential and/or literal — in order to judge whether academic credit and/or exemptions can be given or not. Much of this complexity is due to the fact that whereas the mathematical example previously provided to explain one technical definition of "equivalence" hinges on common shared assumptions and meaning assignments, more often than not "equivalence" between uncredentialled learning and any identified academic requirements has to be *constructed*. RPL is often a site for meaning *assigning*. And a "meaning assignment to a language depends upon the environment of the language users and upon their perspective in that environment."[13]

Getting agreement on equivalence depends on purpose and inevitably, university staff will have varied views on the purpose of RPL and any activities associated with it. Definitions in use then are often both limited by and dependent on the hard realities inherent to interacting and communicating with people in specific contexts for particular purposes. Even "equivalence" as same result or consequence will be bound up with levels of interest in, and valuations of, the result or consequences. In other words, questions and answers of meaning are immersed in site-specific politics and purposes, inextricable from other personal assumptions, beliefs, and motives.

I will now expand on this view by arguing that individual professional judgments concerning equivalence are the result of complex and fluid translations of the applicant's experience into learning and the interpretation of the specific academic requirements that RPL is being claimed against. That whether a specific claim of equivalence is successful or not is primarily dependent on how well the translation of the applicant's personal experience into learning and the interpretation of specific academic requirements are accepted by the institution and its representative(s) who have some interest/stake in RPL and its implications. Hence, "equivalence" becomes a floating focal point that moves between these acts of translation and interpretation and always in the context of associated individual,

sometimes stable and sometimes temporary, assumptions, beliefs and values that are in some way relevant to RPL. That is, those concerning the role and purpose of universities; what counts as university standard learning; under what conditions this can occur; who should this learning be for; what can be accepted to confirm that such learning has occurred?

RPL JUDGMENTS AND TRANSLATION

Assessing RPL applications based on uncredentialled learning is not about assessing experience *per se*, but assessing the learning gained from experience. Assessing personal experience for evidence of any learning is also different from "experiential learning." Assessing RPL applications based on uncredentialled learning frequently does not involve gaining "access to prior learning experience"[14] because there was no "planned activity for learning."[15] It is about determining whether any relevant learning occurred at all in some specific personal experience; a personal experience where learning was neither intended or planned.

One place to start then in assessing RPL applications of this kind is to try and establish what learning occurred inherent to the personal experiences presented as the basis of the application. However, experience does not always make any learning self-evident. Sometimes we learn things in and from experience that we did not know we had. Sometimes, with hindsight, we "read back" into experience and find learning that was apparently not there before. Like changes to familiar songs and movies after reading reviews of them, new analyses of personal experience may result in learning that up until then remained un-named.

Determining whether learning occurred within the experience itself or because of new perspectives placed on that experience is an impossible task. Rather than attempting to take on such a task, professional judgments of equivalence are better understood by accepting that the assessment of someone's personal experience for evidence of any learning is an act of translation. That the applicant's experience must be considered as a text that is simultaneously written (the applicant's own story) and yet to be written (the story that university staff will tell of the applicant's experience).

Translation always involves two texts — the source text and the target text that the translation is to be heard in — and this is no less the case for RPL applications. For instance, in one scenario the applicant's previous experience can be considered as the source text where its translation into learning becomes the "(con)version of a text"[16] compared against the target text — the identified academic requirements that RPL is being claimed against. Eventually, a third text is created; the applicant's experience couched in mostly academic discourse terms relative to the identified academic requirements. This third text then forms the basis for the university to confer any academic credit and/or exemptions.[17]

Conceiving of assessing personal experience for evidence of prior learning as translation draws attention to how difficult professional judgments of equivalence can be, and especially so for university educators who act as RPL assessors. RPL has been and is likely to continue to be attractive to adult students (adults have plenty of personal experience to draw on) and RPL is increasingly being used by some

universities to attract them. However, there is a tension here for those university educators working with such adult students. If they are to act consistent with what is claimed to be fundamental to adult education — promoting the learner's self-directedness[18] — then they should stand back and encourage the applicant to be primarily responsible for this translation of their prior experience into learning. On the other hand, such staff could help applicants better prepare their RPL application because of their "inside" knowledge of university traditions, conventions and discourses.

The issue of who shall perform such translation highlights that those university educators who get involved in assessing RPL applications enter an ethical minefield. "The ethics of translation is an ethics of responsibility"[19] and the translation inherent to RPL based on uncredentialled learning signifies conflicting responsibilities: Should such educators speak for applicants or encourage them to speak for themselves? While educators in general have a moral obligation to promote the autonomy of those in their care[20] and this often requires them "naming the world"[21] for themselves, in the case of RPL applications, educators practicing both these could end up working against the applicant's interests. Placing most of the responsibility on the applicant to "name" their experience in terms of learning and justifying any equivalence could well result in them giving up on the process altogether. What was once a prospective student becomes one student less. University educators can find themselves in the unenviable situation of being able to help applicants but doubting whether they should. "If anything, undecidability about who is "really" speaking in the translator's text re-doubles the bind the translator is in, since it increases her/his responsibility to, as well as for, the other who is heard and judged through her."[22]

RPL JUDGMENTS AND INTERPRETATION

Within RPL contexts, professional judgments of equivalence are often about equivalence (or not) between two often wildly different discourses mostly found within the same language. But judgments of equivalence within the same language are no less problematic because "No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference."[23]

Yet while we might not signify "exactly the same things" with the words and syntax we use, there must be some kind of close approximation if we are to communicate with one another, get things done and remain sane. An applicant's experience can not be named just anything, be translated into *any* learning if well justified professional judgments concerning equivalence are to be made.

The translation of personal experience into learning required for an RPL application based on uncredentialled learning can be considered as one side of the coin of semantic equivalence.[24] A major limiting factor on this translation of the personal experience into learning is the other side of the coin — the identified academic requirements that RPL is being claimed against. So while there is one focus on personal experience to determine if the claimed learning took place, there is another on the identified academic requirements. These requirements have to be

interpreted and interpretations, like translations, have a purpose and are not limit-less. The act of interpretation may well be a work of the imagination[25] but enacting what can be imagined has to be balanced with contextual limitations and possibili-ties. Interpretations of academic requirements are no different from translations in that there are questions of transmission and tradition involved.[26] The assessor is "both bound and not bound by the constraints of the particular language-cultures between which they work."[27]

Professional judgments of equivalence then are as dependent on how specific academic requirements get interpreted as the translation of the applicant's personal experience. Eventually both these become public acts as the RPL assessor has a responsibility towards both who he or she is translating *and* a responsibility towards those addressed by the translation. Even the most sympathetic translation of an applicant's experience and imaginative interpretation of specific academic require-ments has to be presented and accepted by those communities that have both contributed to and have a continuing investment in the "language-cultures" and discourses that comprise and contribute towards any particular professional judg-ment of equivalence. All those involved, including the assessor, will be variously committed to maintaining these discourses (for their daily survival and sanity) and changing discourses as new situations demand. A pro-active RPL assessor might well work towards shifting and stretching these various discourses. A different assessor might work towards shoring them up. RPL is a specific site then where it is obvious that "[s]ome judgments detect a difference; some make a difference. Some detect a similarity that already exists; others shape a resemblance where none had existed.[28]

The complex professional judgments that can be inherent to assessing RPL applications suggests to Thomson that RPL can hoist academics, specifically teacher educators, by their own petard.[29] It can force them to ask of themselves those fundamental questions that they frequently ask their students to consider: What counts as worthwhile learning; under what conditions this can occur; who should this learning be for; what can be accepted to confirm that such learning has occurred? A consequence of the coupling of RPL with competency-based and other "out-comes" approaches to education and training may well serve as a vehicle for university educators to (re)consider these questions, but while many conceptions in use of "competence" are beginning to move away from behaviorist and reductive ones[30] the emphasis on "outcomes" remains. This is a double-edged sword for university educators. On the one hand, it allows universities and staff to resist RPL by increasing the specificity of academic requirements. This would reduce the chances of a motor mechanic, say, gaining academic credit and/or exemptions for his or her workplace enriched "critical thinking skills." But on the other hand, increasing the specificity of academic requirements might also limit the teaching and learning activities inherent to the academic requirements that focused on critical thinking skills and perhaps contribute to what Popham thought was inane — "[t]o keep pruning the nature of the measured behavior so that we're assessing ever more trifling sorts of behavior."[31] A more univalent conception of "critical thinking skills" would presumably allow for contextual flexibility in teaching and learning but then

university educators would have to find alternative justifications for why RPL applications from motor mechanics based on workplace enriched "critical thinking skills" could not be accepted.

Universities could also resist RPL and the contributions that it might make to improving equity and access by incorporating RPL into existing conventional and traditional practices in ways that suit well established ends, often couched in terms of "maintaining standards." There are all kinds of standards in addition to academic ones of course and the standards that are as likely to be maintained by universities incorporating RPL thusly would include: That university standard learning should occur in universities; this learning should be administered and overseen by someone tertiary prepared for this; written submissions in academic discourse demonstrating appropriate structure, syntax and academic cap-doffing is the best way of demonstrating that university standard learning has occurred; generally, only those possessing the right cultural capital are fit to acquire the rewards that university learning can offer. And even when more "non-traditional" students are successful with their RPL application they will have to be careful that once "inside" their rich and varied learning from non formal sources will not become progressively trivialized and discounted as they become increasingly proficient in academic discourse(s). They will have to be on their guard that the university they are enrolled with does not treat them like Williams believed the university treated the adult learners he worked with: "Do you suffer from class-consciousness? Come to Oxford and be cured."[32]

CONCLUSION

Professional judgments of equivalence concerning RPL applications based on uncredentialled learning are not simple linear processes where the identified academic requirement(s) are "read off" against "named" personal experience or vice versa. As Thomson asserts, it is not just a matter of treating each specific academic requirement as a check list and [ticking] each one that is covered by [the applicant's] narrative and statements.[33] However, this does not preclude that this may well happen due to resistance to, or ignorance of, what good, informed and justified professional judgments of equivalence demand.

Answering the question: When is learning equivalent? requires those involved also asking what Kripke calls Wittgenstein's second-order question: "What is the role, and the utility, in our lives of our practice of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions."[34] Translations of experience into learning, interpretations of specific academic requirements and professional judgments of equivalence are informed by various "past facts" of all those involved because "judgments, unlike skills, are minuscule versions of the persons who perform them...We are our judgments and they are us."[35]

Professional judgments of equivalence concerning RPL applications based on uncredentialled learning are, if done well, complex and difficult judgments of translation and interpretation. The translation of personal experience into learning is always relative to interpretations of specific institutional academic requirements and vice versa. The gap(s) and difference(s) between the discourses used to describe

personal experience and specific academic requirements can be enormous and therefore specific judgments of equivalence can be considered as various degrees of denial or acceptance of a special case of Quine's sameness of meaning, where both compared expressions are verbally complex.[36] Interpretations of the identified academic requirement(s) and the applicant's experience translated into learning are constructed, presented and re-presented to create various degrees of "sameness of meaning," culminating in one that all parties involved must eventually accept in order for the institution to grant any academic credit and/or exemptions. Both the translation and interpretation are bounded by how far the results stand a chance of being accepted by the university and its representatives who have some interest in RPL and its consequences. RPL is a specific and concrete example of Foucault's "power/knowledge."[37] The naming of the applicant's experience, the interpretation of specific academic requirements and any final judgments of equivalence (including lack of) can not be understood independent of the respective power possessed by all those involved and the workplace politics of each unique site where such power gets expressed.

Nonetheless, RPL could well serve as one specific means for allowing "precisely what has to be heard and valued if we are to learn from one another."[38] It could act as a bridge that crosses "boundaries between discourses."[39] However, encouraging the adoption of RPL in universities also puts those involved at the forefront of institutional workplace politics and change and the personal discomfort this brings. It also puts them in the thick of some very questionable philosophical matters that may well explain and justify university resistance to RPL.

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1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper published in the *Australian Vocational Education Review* 3, no. 2 (1996).

2. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Interviews with the New Left Review, 1979), 78.

3. S.G. Raybould in Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 80.

4. Alternatives to RPL include APL (Assessment of Previous or Prior Learning) and AEL (Assessment of Experiential Learning).

5. RPL is also sometimes used to refer to the assessment of prior *credentialled* learning, learning that resulted in formal awards, such as, certificates, diplomas, degrees. The assessment of prior *uncredentialled* learning encompasses intended (such as professional development activities) and unintended learning. Here, I will be limiting my analysis to RPL based on prior uncredentialled learning that was *not* intended or planned for.

6. One of the difficulties associated with assessing RPL applications is that applicants sometimes claim that different personal experiences have resulted in learning that could be "added together" to justify a claim of equivalence with a specific institutional requirement. RPL is not always and simply a "one-for-one" (learning) comparison. Having acknowledged such, I will herewith use only the singular expression of "experience."

7. Ruth Cohen, Rick Flowers, Rod McDonald and Hank Schaafsma, *Learning From Experience Counts: Recognition of Prior Learning in Australian Universities* (Sydney: University of Technology, 1992), 10.

8. Ibid., 11.

9. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 5: 64.

10. If a man dies of a heart attack and another from a beating, one same result or consequence eventuates — death. But it might be argued that there are important differences between the two deaths that a use of "equivalence" that focuses on the same result or consequence misses. If I was a pathologist seeking

to establish the cause of death, then this might be true. If I was processing the death certificates of each person, then it might not be. In the first example there might be good reasons for not using "equivalence" as suggested. In the second example these reasons might not apply. In both examples, the value or usefulness (or lack of) of the suggested definition is dependent on both purpose of use and context. This is one of the underlying themes of this paper.

11. It is important to note that I am not referring to propositions now in making this move from a technical definition of "equivalence" to an ordinary language one. "7+3" is not the proposition "7+3=10."

12. An honorary doctorate could well be considered as the "highest" form of RPL.

13. T. Tymoczko, "Translation and Meaning" in *Meaning and Translation*, eds. F. Geunthner and M. Geunthner-Reitter (London: Duckworth, 1978), 34.

14. J.P. Powell "Autobiographical Learning," in *Reflection: Turning Experience Into Learning*, eds. David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker (New York: Kogan Page, 1985), 41.

15. Margaret Pearson and David Smith, "Debriefing in Experience-Based Learning," in Boud et al., *Reflection: Turning Experience Into Learning*, 69.

16. Eve T. Bannet, *Postcultural Theory: Critical Theory after the Marxist Paradigm*. (London: McMillan, 1993), 164.

17. Another scenario would be that the source text would be the identified academic requirements and the target text the applicant's experience translated into learning. I am not suggesting that it is one scenario or the other. It could be either or both. In the latter case the texts would be examined concomitantly, reciprocally, and dialogically.

18. For example: Stephen D. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986) and Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (New York: Follett, 1980).

19. Bannet, *Postcultural Theory,* 174.

20. For example: John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Toronto: McMillan, 1944); Richard Pratte, *Philosophy of Education: Two Traditions*, (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1992); Donald Vandenberg, *Human Rights in Education* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983).

21. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1985), 61.

22. Bannet, *Postcultural Theory,* 166.

23. George Steiner in Bannet, *Postcultural Theory,* 170.

24. *Encyclopedia of Language*, ed. David Crystal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 344.

25. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 245.

26. Bannet, *Postcultural Theory,* 167.

27. Ibid., 169.

28. Matthew Lippman in Paul Hagar, "Relational Realism and Professional Performance" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 28, no. 1 (1996): 109.

29. Peter Thomson, *The School of Hard Knocks* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1994), 8.

30. See Paul Hager, "Philosophical Underpinnings of the Integrated Conception of Competence," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 27, no. 1 (1995).

31. W.J. Popham, "Specifying the Domain of Content or Behaviors," in *A Guide to Criterion-Referenced Test Construction*, ed. Ronald Berk (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 39.

32. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 79.

33. Thomson, *The School of Hard Knocks*, 18.

34. Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 73.

35. Lippman, "Relational Realism and Professional Performance," 113.

36. William van O. Quine, *Word & Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 61.

37. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Parthenon, 1980).

38. Bannet, *Postcultural Theory,* 171.

39. Roland A. Champagne, *Jacques Derrida* (New York: Twan, 1995), 17.