

## **Recognition of Prior Learning as “Radical Pedagogy”: A case study of the Workers' College in South Africa**

## **La reconnaissance des acquis comme pédagogie radicale : étude du cas des Worker's College d'Afrique du Sud**

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Article abstract

This article argues that the model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in use at the Workers' College in South Africa may be seen as a form of “radical pedagogy.” Drawing on documentary sources, focus group interviews with staff, and observations, it describes an educational philosophy which aims to build the competencies of activists in labour and community organizations, facilitate their self-affirmation and dignity, and provide an access route to post-school education. It documents and attempts to theorize how this philosophy is enacted in classroom pedagogy, and explores some of the tensions and contradictions encountered. It concludes by acknowledging the unique contribution of these educational practices to an understanding of what RPL as radical pedagogy might look like.

# RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AS “RADICAL PEDAGOGY”: A CASE STUDY OF THE WORKERS’ COLLEGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**ABSTRACT.** This article argues that the model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in use at the Workers’ College in South Africa may be seen as a form of “radical pedagogy.” Drawing on documentary sources, focus group interviews with staff, and observations, it describes an educational philosophy which aims to build the competencies of activists in labour and community organizations, facilitate their self-affirmation and dignity, and provide an access route to post-school education. It documents and attempts to theorize how this philosophy is enacted in classroom pedagogy, and explores some of the tensions and contradictions encountered. It concludes by acknowledging the unique contribution of these educational practices to an understanding of what RPL as radical pedagogy might look like.

## LA RECONNAISSANCE DES ACQUIS COMME PÉDAGOGIE RADICALE : ÉTUDE DU CAS DES WORKER’S COLLEGE D’AFRIQUE DU SUD

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article soutient que le modèle de reconnaissance des acquis (RPL) utilisé au *Workers’ College* en Afrique du Sud peut être considéré comme une forme de « pédagogie radicale ». Le texte décrit une philosophie éducative en s’inspirant de sources documentaires, de groupes de discussion avec des employés et des observations. Cette vision vise à développer les compétences des partisans d’organisations ouvrières et communautaires, à favoriser leur affirmation de soi et leur dignité, ainsi qu’à offrir une voie d’accès à une éducation postsecondaire. L’article documente et tente d’élaborer une théorie sur la manière dont cette philosophie est appliquée en pédagogie et explore certaines des tensions et contradictions rencontrées. Il termine en reconnaissant la contribution unique de ces pratiques éducatives à l’élaboration d’une meilleure compréhension de la façon par laquelle le RPL peut présenter comme une pédagogie radicale.

*We taught one another what we knew, discovering each other's resourcefulness. We also learned how people with little or no formal education could not only themselves participate in education programmes but actually teach others a range of different insights and skills. The "University of Robben Island" was one of the best universities in the country... it also showed me that you don't need professors.* (Neville Alexander, cited in Magnien, 2012)<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to explore the model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in use at the Workers' College in South Africa. According to Harris & Wihak (2011)

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the practice of reviewing, evaluating and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that adults have gained through experiential, self-directed and /or informal learning, as well as through formal education. (p.1)

The study on which this article is based forms part of a larger four-year research project funded by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), entitled *Specialised pedagogy: A comparative study of RPL practices within the changing landscape of the NQF in South Africa*. One of four case studies,<sup>2</sup> the Workers' College study focuses specifically on how RPL practices are integrated into the College's pedagogy, the content of its programs, its educational materials and assessment tools.

RPL usually takes the form of an assessment practice which occurs before entry into a program of learning. The distinctive feature of the RPL practice at the College is that it takes place not only prior to entry, but also in the form of in-curriculum RPL; that is, it forms an integral part of the pedagogy of the College and within an educational agenda geared towards the benefit of the collectives from which the individual learners come, and through which they are recruited into the program. The College's program is aimed at activists in labour and community organizations and is located within a strong conceptual and ideological framework of critical Marxist theories and activist values. The College views RPL as a tool directed simultaneously at building the intellectual and organizational capacities of activists working for social transformation, facilitating their self-affirmation and dignity, and providing an access route into higher education. The aim of the College is not merely that the content and education process be informed by, and relate to, the experiences and practices of the individual learners, but that they are also responsive to the experiences of the labour and community organizations from which learners are drawn and are of collective benefit.

Individual experiences are not merely recruited but are interrogated through personal reflections, robust debates, group and class discussions, inputs and interventions by the facilitators, and through exposure to, and critical engagement with, texts, concepts, theories, and debates that circulate within activist organizations, as well as within mainstream academia.

The College acknowledges that there is a body of conventional knowledge that resides in formal institutions of learning that has always been powerful and valued, while experiential knowledge is often dismissed as being less important. The College’s approach to RPL attempts to explore and – where necessary – challenge the relationship between formal knowledge in the academy and experiential knowledge. The educational philosophy of the College is to begin with learners’ *struggle knowledge*, to reflect on it, validate it through peer engagement, and link experiential knowledge to radical political theories of social change, as well as to the codified knowledge base of academia. In this process, *new knowledge* is generated with which the College aims to build an alternative knowledge base that can interact with, and enrich formal disciplinary knowledge bases, giving them greater relevance for College learners. Following on the traditions of Hart (1992) and Michelson (1996), this approach thus seeks to critically engage with dominant discourses and to challenge the hierarchies that lead to some kinds of knowledge being undervalued and unrecognized.

Over the years, the College has encouraged the recruitment and involvement in its educational programs of facilitators or educators from the broad landscape of trade union, community, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and academic backgrounds. Their experiences have contributed to a rich exchange of varied experiential knowledge which has shaped the educational events and discourse of the College. This exchange of experiential knowledge has also impacted on the organization itself and the way in which it interacts with learners and the broader constituency that it serves.

This article provides an overview of the educational philosophy of the College against the background of its history. It then explores in greater detail how this educational philosophy is enacted in classroom pedagogy and demonstrates the significance of activism as the organizing principle of its curriculum. It concludes by briefly reviewing learners’ experiences of the impact of the program and of the tensions, contradictions, and challenges that the College is grappling with, while acknowledging its unique contribution to an understanding of what “RPL as pedagogy” might look like.

## **BACKGROUND AND PHILOSOPHY OF THE WORKERS’ COLLEGE**

The College was established in 1991 originally as part of the University of Natal, Durban, (now the University of Kwa Zulu Natal [UKZN]), but has subsequently become independent. The decision to establish the College was born out of the realization that there were very few worker education organizations and institutions in South Africa that addressed the peculiar educational needs and realities of trade unions and community-based organizations. In addition, educational programs that were designed for trade union activists were usually in the form of seminars and workshops conducted over a few days, without any form of assessment, and with little or no continuity or follow-up. From

1992, the College started providing a variety of educational programs for trade unionists. These were designed as one-year certificate courses and, as the learners were working adults, only required attendance at classes once a week.

The decision to seek formal accreditation for the courses arose as a result of pressure on the College from various trade unions for formal recognition of their members' learning. Despite this development, it must be noted that the content and outcomes of the College's educational programs continued to be designed to meet the needs and challenges facing trade union organizations. Initially, an agreement around formal accreditation was reached between the College and Ruskin College in the United Kingdom,<sup>3</sup> but because of the geographical distance between the two institutions, the arrangement became impractical.

In 1997, an arrangement was established with UKZN, providing for an accreditation link in the following way: the four, one-year College diplomas received UKZN Senate approval as alternative access qualifications into a degree program. Learners' performance in the four diplomas was to be assessed on the basis of class participation, assignments, and written and, at times, oral examinations, moderated by UKZN. A joint Workers' College / UKZN diploma was to be awarded to all successful diploma graduates at a graduation ceremony held at UKZN.

In 2000, a part-time, five-year Bachelor of Social Science (B. Soc. Sci.) degree was designed for the College's diploma learners in collaboration with the Industrial and Working Life Project (IWLP) based at UKZN. On successful completion of the diploma course, learners would qualify to enrol for this degree. The diploma served as an entry qualification should learners not have a matriculation (matric) qualification, or, if they did have matric, then the diploma served as a 16-credit UKZN module. Previously, only trade union representatives served on the College's governing structures, but as of 2000, the College amended its constitution to include community representatives.

### *Philosophy*

As the College sees it, learning best takes place by connecting learners' experiential knowledge with broader theoretical concepts as well as academic knowledge. This pedagogy is rooted in an adult education approach, in this case with a specific focus on equipping trade union and community activists with the practical and theoretical capacities to strengthen their activism and their organizational practices. Not unique to the College, this approach forms part of a long, international tradition of radical worker education (see London, Tarr & Wilson, 1990; Lovett, 1998; Philips & Putnam, 1980; Welton, 1991) and of learning through social action (Foley, 1999; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2012; Newman, 1994). Additionally, it is also shaped by the College's own history as a worker-centred organization in civil society born out of the South African

liberation struggle and informed by a history of radical education against apartheid and long established traditions and practices of participatory, democratic educational practices (see e.g., Cooper, 2007; Morrow, Maaba & Pulumani, 2002; Motala & Vally, 2002; Nekhweva, 2002). As it grapples with the complexities and intricacies of South Africa’s present neo-liberal, democratic dispensation in a globalized world, its pedagogic practices are also informed by some of the current practices of civil society organizations and social movements (see, e.g., Endresen & von Kotze, 2005; Harley, 2013).

While the College has tapped both into this history and various theoretical traditions, its educational practices have mainly been developed in the midst of action, shaped by practice, experience, and experiment, and informed by the ever-changing socio-economic and political landscape as well as the fluid and dynamic organizational environment of the labour movement and community organizations.

#### *Policies, program structure and purposes*

Learners who come onto the diploma course programs are drawn primarily from among those who occupy leadership positions in trade unions and community organizations — predominantly shop stewards, local office bearers, and local organizers — as well as rank and file members. There is a specific attempt to ensure that there is a gender balance in the selection of participants, including an equal spread of women and men in the Gender and Labour Studies Diploma to dispel the notion amongst trade unions and community organizations that gender is only about women. Learners are selected through the following processes:

*Notices and application forms.* These are sent to labour and community organizations which have an existing relationship with the College.

*Submission of the application form.* This form requests information on applicants’ personal details, prior education within their organizations and in educational institutions and programs, their organizational membership and positions held, and an undertaking from their organization to support their application.

*Invitation to write an assessment test.* Should the application be in order, applicants are invited to write a test. The test seeks to determine their ability to communicate in English as well as their understanding of their roles in their organization and broader society.

*Invitation to an interview.* After successful completion of the assessment test, applicants are invited to an interview which allows the College to get to know them, assess their verbal skills, understand their personal and organizational circumstances, provide information to them about the diploma program, determine which diploma is most suitable, explain some of the rules of the program and determine whether they can get time off work to attend the residential blocks, the revision program and examinations.

Although basic English literacy skills are considered in the entry test, emphasis is placed on experiences and capacities related to labour and community activism, and on a basic understanding of the historical and current social, economic, and political realities of South Africa. The RPL admission policy allows for applicants without matric to be considered, based on how they fared in the entry test, on recommendations from their organizations, and on their length of experience and the leadership position they hold in their organization.

The College offers four one-year diplomas equivalent to a level five National Qualifications Framework (NQF) qualification. The four diplomas are:

- Labour Studies Diploma (LSD)
- Labour Economics Diploma (LED)
- Political and Social Development Diploma (PSDD)
- Gender and Labour Studies Diploma (GLSD)

These are all recognized for the purposes of access (with limited credit) into the Bachelor of Social Science Degree, otherwise known as the Industrial and Working Life Programme (IWLP), at UKZN.

Each diploma program is structured into six modules with five modules delivered in five-day residential blocks. In a normal program, a day consists of four sessions: two in the morning with a tea break, then lunch followed by two sessions in the afternoon with a tea break. Quite often each module or block has extramural activities such as site visits, debates, guest speakers, sporting activities, and viewing of documentaries, which act as enrichment for the course. The sixth module is based on project work that is carried out in the activists' sites of practice.

In 2010, one of the six modules was designed to focus on activism, which has helped to further develop the College's approach to "in-curriculum" RPL. This activism module serves as a generic introduction to the themes and focus areas of the diploma programs. Its goal is to facilitate a process for learners to draw on their experiences, skills, and knowledge – including political, social, and economic concepts – acquired through life struggles and activism and to have such knowledge documented, acknowledged, and recognized as having value.

The themes and values adopted in the first module are threaded through the diploma programs and joint sessions with all the learners, engaging holistically with learners' experiences and informing their further engagement as activists in the workplace and the communities in which they live.

## **THE RESEARCH PROJECT: PROCESS AND FINDINGS**

The first phase of the research project sought to document the historical development and educational philosophy of the College, and this information

has been set out in the previous section. In the second phase, the research sought to obtain a more detailed picture of, and a critical “outsider” perspective on, forms of pedagogy in use at the College. It focused on both “curriculum as planned” as well as “curriculum in practice.” In particular, it focused on what experiences are valued and how they are recruited. This included a focus on the pedagogical methods used to recruit experiential knowledge, the teaching methodologies and tools of mediation used (Daniels, 2001), as well as teaching and learning materials and forms of assessment. The last phase of the research project involved a biographical study of a select group of the College’s participants.

Data collection took place during module three of the 2012 residential diploma programs and was carried out by two researchers who had no previous involvement with the College, but who were part of the larger SAQA RPL research project. Their research entailed observations of one session of each diploma program over two days; an observation of a supervision session for module six, where supervisors gave individual feedback to learners on the progress of their projects; two focus group interviews with College staff and facilitators; and a systematic analysis of course workbooks, readers and assignments from module three – the “curriculum as planned.” It is acknowledged that this was insufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of what experiential learning was recruited and how, but it did provide significant insight into one section of the planned curriculum and illuminated the pedagogical approaches of the different facilitators, as well as how RPL practices may have evolved since the first phase of data collection in 2010.

### *Curriculum as planned*

Findings revealed that RPL was functioning at different levels and in multiple ways at the College:

- at pre-entry, where admissions criteria prioritized certain types of activist experience;
- within the diploma programs themselves, where learners’ experiential knowledge provided the scaffolding for epistemological access to the College’s curriculum;
- and at the end of the program, as a route for successful learners from the diploma programs to access the specialist higher education Social Sciences degree at UKZN.

The outside observers / researchers noted that despite the stated intention of prioritizing activists’ experiential knowledge, the planned curriculum of the College – as characterized by course readers and resource packs – comprised mostly academic texts, which were conceptually dense and strongly conceptually oriented.<sup>4</sup> This apparent contradiction was raised with staff in the focus group interviews, and while it was acknowledged that some concepts were



quite complex, facilitators argued that many of the learners would have already encountered them in their organizational involvement, and so would have some familiarity with them. In other words, elements of critical social theory, and the specialized language associated with it, are already circulating within civil society organizations and are not the sole preserve of the academy. The College sees this conceptual knowledge as essential in enabling trade union and community workers to become better activists in their sites of practice. As the Director remarked: “The context of the education discourse in the Workers’ College is educating workers for the community and for the trade unions” (focus group interview [FGI] 15/06/2012).

### *Curriculum in practice*

Despite the theoretical orientation of the curriculum, in practice conceptual knowledge is largely mediated through learners’ experience. Observations of classroom practice showed that this process frequently begins in an inductive way, where facilitators draw on the learners’ experiential knowledge, and interpret and re-contextualize this in relation to conceptual knowledge. Following this, concepts are then relocated back in the real world: working deductively, the concepts are either applied to case studies or re-contextualized alongside learners’ experiences in order to deepen their understanding.

The dialectical movement between experiential knowledge and conceptual knowledge is facilitated through pedagogic methods such as:

- Role-plays and simulations of workplace, organizational, and community environments, which allow participants to relate the issues, concepts and theories explored in the diploma program to their experiences and struggles in these environments.
- Providing a platform for participants to share their own stories, journeys and struggles experienced in their communities, workplaces and organizations, through a medium of their choice, including drama, monologues, song, poetry, movement, pantomime, graphics and sketches. This allows participants to tap into forms of expression and modes of knowledge common within their own communities and organizations where non-formal and informal learning occur.
- Allowing participants to read and discuss case studies of strikes, community protests or campaigns and to relate these to their personal and organizational experiences. In selecting appropriate case studies, facilitators look at factors such as the organizational backgrounds of the participants, current or recent struggles, campaigns and topical issues in community and labour organizations and within broader society. In this sense, the educational agenda is influenced by the trade union, community organization, and broader sociopolitical landscape. At the same time, the educational agenda provides a tool for community and labour activists to critique this landscape.

- Drawing on the discussion and policy documents of some of the participating organizations, providing room for participants to critically engage with these policies and their implementation in their organizations. In this way, the curriculum draws on the culture, traditions and experiences of labour and community organizations, while at the same time critically interrogating these traditions.
- Drawing on the idioms, images, language and other forms of expression that participants use in their organizations and communities, and relating these to the concepts, issues and theories dealt with in the program.

Thus, the facilitator acts to mediate the engagement between learners’ individual and collective (organizational) experiential learning, and the conceptual knowledge of the curriculum. One of the facilitators remarked: “It’s about taking the learners from where they are and developing them further” and that, “we demystify concepts first, by describing them in experience, and then explore them in a more distanced, measured way, for example how globalization affects their daily lives” (FGI 15/06/2012). Working with learners’ experiential knowledge to arrive at more conceptual understandings gives learners a theoretical language of description. When the facilitator subsequently works backwards from abstract concepts to learners’ experiential knowledge, this helps them understand and critique their experiential learning, their assumptions, and their organizational, activist practice: “[we are] pulling them out of their context in order to put them back in again”(FGI 15/06/2012).

Facilitators emphasized that learning does not only take place in the classroom. The facilitators spoke of field trips that they had organized, such as to the informal traders’ market in Durban, where the learners could see “concepts in operation.” Poetry, drama, and other creative activities, such as drumming, were used to explore some concepts experientially (in the case of drumming, the issue of diversity).

The dialogical process of inductive recruitment of experience, that is relating experience to broader, analytical concepts, and then deductively relating these to particular contexts, seems to enable learners to “transcend their local context” and “access the academic and specialised knowledge that gives rise to abstract, specialised and context-independent knowledge structures that are the prerequisite for [formal] self-directed learning” (Haupt, 2005, p, 47).

### *Activism as the organizing principle for the curriculum*

A research study by an exchange student at UKZN, Elena Tillman, in which she sought to explore how the College develops in its learners a consciousness about their role as activists in transforming society, indicated that the notion of activism is clearly key to the purpose of education at the College, which is one of “developing critical and informed activists in civil society” (Tillman, 2012, p. 4). This topic was further explored in the focus group interviews with the

College facilitators and staff, to try and gain a more in-depth understanding of how this manifested in the diploma programs.

As explained by the College's staff, all four diploma courses start with a common "activism" module (module one) in which learners' experience of activism is explored in relation to their life, community, and work, and forms the basis for all further learning at College. Activism is defined in this module as "when an individual or community or organization engages in activities... to address challenges facing their respective constituencies... and all forms of oppression and exploitation based on class, race, gender... for the betterment / improvement of their livelihood" (Workers' College, 2012, p. 1). The module explores and exposes the learners to different values, as "people may be walking the same road but have different values" (FGI 15/06/2012), and it shows how their values are shaped by the predominant values of their organizations. It must be noted that there are different forms of trade unions, those that want to bring about social change and those that confine their work to addressing "bread and butter issues" within the workplace, working within the system. Not all the learners have an awareness of themselves as activists for change when they come to the College, "but we make them into activists" (FGI 15/06/2012).

The diplomas, therefore, expose the learners to activist discourses, especially socialist perspectives on oppression and exploitation, the interrelationships between various forms of activism and between the issues and causes advanced by these forms, and related activist strategies for action. Activism is explored broadly in relation to their personal life struggles (drawing on personal experience), as well as more specifically in relation to their organizational experience (drawing on their activist experience), from the perspectives of the four different diplomas respectively. A facilitator explained that: "The discussions help raise their (learners') consciousness and embrace other perspectives and understandings – for example, looking at homophobia and "corrective rape," how this is a violation of personal rights, and how in a similar way workers' rights are abused in the workplace" (FGI, 15/06/2012). Learners are urged to develop a balanced perspective and to challenge existing ideologies and knowledge – their own and those of others in academia, in the trade unions and in their communities – but are also constantly reminded to respect difference.

The Director noted that all sessions are geared towards building understanding not only of social structure but also of agency, so that the learners deepen their understanding of their role as agents in their organizations, which further "heightens their consciousness" (FGI, 15/06/2012). It was clear that this notion of "consciousness" is an important one at the College, in particular, consciousness of being an activist and what this means. The curriculum of the first module outlines how learners are explicitly oriented to the principles, values, and ethics of activism, which they then apply in the context of the

College, actively learning these roles in social interactions and “conscientizing others not to oppress them” (FGI, 15/06/2012).

Of key importance is that participants learn to think critically, to “turn the lens on themselves” (FGI, 14/06/2012) from the outset. It was explained, for example, that learners are asked the same questions at the beginning and again at the end of this first module, and they then reflect on how their perspectives have shifted during this short time. The diploma programs also emphasize collective learning through group work as well as peer review of one another’s assignments. As the Director remarked: “collectivism has become an underlying theme and value, which is reflected in how they help each other” (FGI, 15/06/2012). Learners from all four diploma programs participate together in the first four sessions of the activism module, and so from the start they are introduced to collective and collaborative learning and activist values. These values are also woven through all other sessions, learning activities and social interactions. It would seem that the activism module, and especially the first four sessions, act as an RPL module in itself, locating learning within learners’ experiences and initiating them into the regulative discourse of the College. In the other modules RPL is integrated into the learning activities, which are based on the diploma-specific subject matter. The discourse of critical activism, with its embedded values, principles, and ethics for social change, therefore appears to be the “golden thread” running through all four diploma curricula, and all social interaction at the College.

Activist values become embedded in the facilitators as well, as they learn from each other and from the learners, sharing their own experiences and struggles with the learners in a collective fashion. It was explained that facilitators’ collective experiences range from experiences of police harassment, detention and imprisonment, exploitative labour conditions, casual labour, single parenting, involvement in trade unionism, community work, cultural activism, and student activism at different periods in history. By referring to their own experiences, facilitators enable participants to be more open in sharing similar experiences and struggles. For example, one facilitator’s narration of his experiences in organizing people in a peri-urban township to initiate and sustain community projects, not only helped to put faces and names to theories about community organizing, but also prompted one participant to share his own story of his struggles to draw community, primary care-workers into a trade union for informal workers. This led to an open discussion where people contributed their own recruitment and organizing strategies in the context of the union, and served as a useful introduction to a group activity exploring how community organizing and Asset-Based Community Development could be used by labour and community organizations to promote workers’ control and people’s power.

This mutual interaction has the effect of shifting and equalizing power relations and eliminating “the disjuncture between the values of the lecturer and what they are teaching” (FGI 15/06/2012), which is so often evident in higher education institutions. An example of egalitarian social relations between learners and staff, and collective identification as activists was observed on two occasions when all the learners and facilitators were assembling for a late afternoon seminar, and some learners spontaneously started singing “struggle” chants. Within minutes, all the learners, staff and facilitators present were chanting, whistling, and “toyi-toying” (a form of collective singing and dancing to protest or send a message) in solidarity.

Following feminist critiques of experiential learning theories for their separation of the mind and body, and of the personal from the political (see Michelson, 1998), the College strives for a holistic approach to learning. Drawing on learners’ personal experiences as the starting point for creating knowledge is seen by facilitators as particularly significant as a means of empowering learners; as emphasized by the Director of the College, “the hierarchical structures of the unions disallows the personal” (FGI 14/06/2012). The College’s emphasis on the personal is seen as important in strengthening an activist identity: “If you can’t transform yourself you cannot transform broader society” (FGI 14/06/2012). The recruitment of learners’ personal experiences is also seen as facilitating their assimilation of theoretical knowledge: “they appropriate the knowledge for themselves and can operationalize it, they are not just acquiring it” (FGI 15/06/2012).

The College’s pedagogy also encompasses the emotion and the body. The theme of healing appeared several times in the course of the research: the restoration of people’s humanity was considered as a vital outcome of the diplomas, helping learners to overcome feelings of inferiority in terms of their educational backgrounds and knowledge capital. As the Director pointed out:

Healing happens quite naturally within the class, because of what they do. Their story comes through in the broader story of the collective – they locate themselves in a context through their stories: “I am an activist because....” These stories are then located in the broader histories and current contexts of activism, and the values that bring them all together. (FGI 15/06/2012)

As Tillman (2012) observed: “once the humanity of the oppressed is restored then it follows that they will recognize themselves as agents and will act to effect change and transform their environment, essentially what the College sets out to do” (p. 8).

## **CRITICAL REFLECTIONS**

The research pursued two lines of critical evaluation of the College’s pedagogy: firstly, biographical interviews with a selection of five learners sought to explore their experiences of the College’s program, as well as their views on its impact;

and secondly, critical discussions between outside observers and facilitators elucidated some of the pedagogic challenges faced in developing a program that brings non-formal traditions of radical worker education together with creating an access route into higher education.

### *Impact of the program on learners’ lives*

Amongst other features, the biographical study found that in comparison with their previous learning experiences, learners found the College environment and culture friendly and non-threatening. They were particularly encouraged by the manner in which the facilitators and staff at the College presented themselves as fellow comrades and their equals. Learners felt that the activist identities of the facilitators allowed them to do well in a learning environment that was centred on activism. The interactive nature of the educational practice strengthened this idea that all were equal and their experiences received equal recognition. In particular, learners highlighted the fact that the program was centred on socialist principles and values, and that it focused on current issues relating to race, gender, class and ecology.

Another aspect of the College’s practice and culture referred to by all of the learners was its non-discriminatory ethos. They felt that concerted efforts were made at the College to make everyone feel respected and accepted irrespective of their gender, political affiliation, age or position in their organizations, or status in society. Regarding the pedagogic traditions at the College, all five of the learners interviewed mentioned that they had found the educational practice participative and centred on acknowledging and recognizing their experiences and *struggle knowledge*. They valued opportunities and spaces to reflect on, and critique their life histories and experiences.

All those interviewed indicated that the program had impacted on their personal lives and on how they conducted themselves in the community and at the workplace. It had enhanced and affirmed their agency as activists, empowered them with different skills and strategies that they could apply in different social contexts, raised levels of understanding and skill, broadened and changed perspectives, built their confidence, and inculcated socialist principles and values. They provided several examples of how they applied the knowledge and skills in their workplaces and in their organizations. For example, one participant from a community organization narrated how in his organization people did not usually continue with a meeting when the chairperson was absent. However, after his educational experience at the College, he took the initiative to facilitate discussions and chair meetings. He attributed his assertiveness and confidence to his experience of participating in group discussions, facilitating some group activities, and being taught to value his own experiences and opinions. He also explained how, as a result of the activist consciousness and confidence gained at the College, he was able to stand up to a manager who

referred to him as a “driver,” which according to him was demeaning and dehumanizing, insisting instead on being called by his name.

One of the community activists felt that in her leadership role in her organization, she had learned to be democratic and not just make decisions on her own. The College’s program had helped her to change her perspectives: she had learned that there are many points of view and no one view is correct. The program had also taught her the importance of tolerance and respect for others and the need to listen to others.

when I came here this notion of being a leader, sort of like, strengthened me – coming here strengthened my leadership, strengthened the way I thought, and strengthened the way I looked at the things in all angles of life... Here I learnt more of leadership. I learnt of being democratic. [What] I learnt strengthened my passion. (Learner interview 1, 7/4/2013)

### *Some tensions and challenges*

The two outside observers raised questions concerning two apparent tensions or disjunctures which they had observed, and these were discussed together with staff in the focus group interviews. One concerned the question of how effectively to integrate text-based tools of mediation into the curriculum. The other concerned the tension between the espoused educational philosophy of the College, and the nature of the tools of assessment, that is, assignments and exams.

Classroom pedagogy at the College draws substantially on oral and visual tools of mediation that are familiar to learners. However, it was noted earlier that the pedagogy also relies heavily on texts that are often conceptually dense. A common problem experienced by facilitators, and raised in one of the focus group interviews, was the difficulty learners have in coping with the text-based material, not only struggling to read, but also to understand the texts. This may be understood against the background that most students come from working-class backgrounds where their schooling was poor, and, for most, English is their second or third language. The facilitators discussed various strategies for dealing with this, mainly focusing on the reading of texts in class. It was acknowledged, however, that while these strategies may enhance learning, they were also time-consuming. Facilitators suggested that local written accounts of case studies should be sought as far as possible for interrogation and critique, as this would make it easier for learners to access the readings. Nevertheless, the issue of text-based tools of mediation presents a challenge to that dimension of RPL at the College which seeks to enable access for learners to higher education where learners are required to engage confidently with academic texts.<sup>5</sup>

The second tension or disjuncture lay between “RPL as radical pedagogy” and the nature of the assignments and exams. The final mark for each of the first

five modules completed for each diploma is comprised of: exam - 50%; assignment - 40%; and participation - 10%. The fieldwork module, module six, is marked incrementally, as the different stages are completed. To the outside observers, the assignments in the learner workbooks appeared very academic in nature, with a focus on testing understanding of general, abstract concepts and contextual issues, and not explicitly drawing on experiential knowledge in any way. Similarly, there seemed to be a disjuncture between having a formal “exam” at the end of each of the first five modules, and the experiential pedagogical approach that characterized classroom practice at the College.

In the focus group interviews, however, facilitators expressed the view that the assignments were based on issues that affect learners in the community, in their organizations, and in the workplace, and that they were given “the tools to critically reflect and critique these” in the diplomas. They argued that because of the way the learners process this knowledge in class through “RPL pedagogy” and in terms of their own trade union and organizational experiences, they are able to interpret the questions in the assignments and exams and to use examples from their own lives to answer them. It was emphasized that the aim of the diploma programs is for the learners to acquire “a way of interrogating the world” that highlights their own values and places these values under scrutiny, rather than acquiring knowledge for its own sake. However, it remains an interesting challenge as to how to devise creative approaches to assessment that are compatible with, and that promote “RPL as radical pedagogy.”

Staff agreed that to accomplish this would require a variety of creative and innovative forms that were not restricted to written and oral exams and assignments. There is a need to look at forms of assessment that not only enlists prior learning experiences, but also explores modes of knowledge and expression embedded in working-class community cultures, history of struggle, knowledge systems, and anti-racist idioms and aesthetics. At present the College is exploring different forms of assessment, integrating formal and creative forms. For example, in 2013, the participants were asked to make a presentation of their final fieldwork report through creative modes of expression such as graphics, talk-shows, monologues, drama, statues / pantomime, and were offered the choice of presenting as individuals or in groups.

#### **WORKERS’ COLLEGE PEDAGOGY: TOWARDS SOME THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The Workers’ College case study raises some interesting theoretical issues, challenging some of the assumptions often made in the literature about “experiential learning,” as well as putting pressure on dualist models of pedagogy.

Traditional theorizations of RPL draw largely on adult and experiential learning theories (Andersson & Harris, 2006). The classic experiential learning cycle



of Kolb (1984) starts with experience, and proceeds to abstraction from that experience in a fairly “open” way, that is, drawing preliminary lessons, understandings and concepts from that experience. These understandings or concepts are seen as having primary relevance for the individual learner concerned. In this model, after this initial process of conceptualization, ideas, concepts or information from outside of learners’ experience are brought in to deepen or challenge understanding. The resultant ideas / understandings are then used to inform practice. As noted earlier, experiential learning theories have been critiqued by poststructuralist feminists for, amongst other things, their rather mechanistic and “idealised mode of disembodied, context-independent contemplation” (Michelson, 1998, p. 227).

With the College, a close analysis of the lesson plans in the learners’ workbooks, as well as the pedagogy in the classroom, shows a different pattern. Generally speaking, experience is first recruited in an open inductive fashion (where no specific conclusions are pre-figured), followed by a move towards “closed,” inductive recruitment of experience, where learners engage in individual and collective dialogue between their experiential knowledge and the conceptual and theoretical content of the curriculum. There is therefore a dialectical movement between “theory” and “experience” often ending with the application of concepts back to concrete experience, in order to deepen understanding of the concepts or to re-organize and re-interpret experiential knowledge.

It seems that the model of experiential learning in use at the College is not that of the humanist, Kolb, but rather that of the more materialist thinker and educationalist, Vygotsky. Both models actually provide a role for theoretical concepts. In Kolb’s (1984) model however, these are secondary and brought in later to test or enrich experiential knowledge. It is everyday concepts, organically derived from personal experience, that are given primacy.

Vygotsky presents a far stronger role for systematized theory, while also retaining a role for “everyday concepts.” Vygotsky (1986) differentiated between two kinds of concepts (or processes of concept formation) which represent two different forms of reasoning: what he called “scientific concepts” (that is, systematized theory) that are developed through instruction and “spontaneous concepts” (or “everyday” concepts) that develop through experience. Although their paths of development are different they are related and constantly influence each other; the process is essentially a unitary one. Both systematized theory and “everyday” concepts have a developmental curve; but the development of systematized concepts leads the development of spontaneous concepts. According to Vygotsky (1986), “systematic reasoning, being initially acquired in the sphere of scientific concepts, later transfers its structural organization into spontaneous concepts, remodelling them from above” (p. 172).

The Workers’ College case study seems to present a fruitful example of how a systematized body of theory (what Vygotsky would have called “scientific

concepts”) derived mainly from Marxist / neo-marxist, critical and feminist theories is mediated to learners (although it is noted that some activists are already familiar with elements of these theories from discussions and debates within their organizations). Initially, everyday experience is drawn on selectively to illustrate the meaning of concepts. Thereafter, these conceptual tools are used to recontextualize “everyday” concepts that activists bring with them, deepening their understanding and, most importantly, systematizing their everyday thinking. This process seems to act as a good springboard for a form of RPL that is both inclusive of everyday, experiential knowledge but also prepares learners for the demands of academic study.<sup>6</sup>

In accounting for this approach, a key factor seems to be the strong contextual purpose of the College curriculum and its notion that the task of bringing about radical social change is served by providing learners with a strong set of conceptual resources. However, these theoretical resources, while tending to be general and abstract in form, must at the same time be meaningful and useful to learners as social activists. Furthermore, the College’s philosophy is clearly one which does not regard established conceptual frames as remaining untouched in this process: The College explicitly holds the view that in the process of re-contextualizing learners’ experiences, these experiences may also, in turn, act to challenge or change established theory.

## CONCLUSION

“RPL as radical pedagogy” as practiced within the Workers’ College attempts to mediate between the *struggle knowledge* of activists who come into the diploma programs, and a set of theoretical frameworks whose concepts relate to such experiences, directly or indirectly. It also attempts to facilitate a process for activists to understand their current existence and develop their own independent worldview in opposition to the dominant knowledge system and culture that prevails in our globalized society. With the embedding of RPL as “radical pedagogy” within an accredited program, however, it also seeks to provide an access route to the academy, and therefore a way into the dominant knowledge system which may challenge activists’ experiences and worldview. The College has to work within this tension, all the while strengthening the confidence of its learners to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms.

The radical approach to pedagogy by the College is not new in South Africa, especially in adult education and within organizations that work towards social change. There are many such organizations that have and continue to mediate between experiential and theoretical knowledge in an attempt to find new and alternative solutions. Education must be seen in the broad context of bringing about change in intellectual understanding, contributing and developing new knowledge, and responding creatively to the conditions and realities of society. The RPL practice within the College and other similar institutions is

not primarily one of credit-seeking but rather one of liberating the individual and communities. This liberatory pedagogy should be integral to wider pedagogical discourses and education practices.

This case study has cast light on the College's RPL practices and provided an opportunity for the College to address the challenges identified and to build on the innovations identified by the study. The research will strengthen the College's attempts to develop best practices of RPL in the context of a developing country where the struggle to achieve equality, redress, restoration of dignity and social cohesion is of utmost importance.

## NOTES

1. Former revolutionary and struggle hero Neville Edward Alexander (22 October 1936 – 27 August 2012) was best known as a proponent of a multilingual South Africa. He was a co-founder of the National Liberation Front and a director of the South African Committee for Higher Education.
2. The other three case studies focus on RPL in relation to undergraduate study and postgraduate study at two South African universities respectively, and on a private provider of RPL services to the corporate sector. The research project as a whole is funded by SAQA.
3. Ruskin College was originally established in 1899 specifically to provide university-standard education for working-class people so that they could act more effectively on behalf of working-class communities and organizations: trade unions, political parties, co-operative societies, working men's institutes and so on.
4. For example, they dealt with concepts such as privatization, nationalization, globalization, capitalism, Marxist perspectives on law, colonialism and neo-colonialism, imperialism, people's power, socialization, the state, underdevelopment, civil society, gender, precarious labour.
5. For further discussion on the role of tools of mediation in RPL in relation to workers' education, see Cooper (2006).
6. It has been argued that this model of pedagogic practice is not unique to the Workers' College, but is a commonly adopted approach in trade union and worker education in South Africa (see Cooper, 2007, pp.188-189).

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