Enabling and disabling discourses in promoting RPLO policy and practice in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper captures and presents some of the powerful and sometimes contradictory discourses, which limit the diffusion and uptake of the recognition of prior learning outcomes (RPLO) in higher education: quality, funding, capacity, and student experience. Each of these is analysed and ‘opened up’ (Derrida, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). In doing so, it aims to ‘open up’ some of those discourses for practitioners and/or leaders to initiate or develop policy and practice in institutions further afield (Kemmis, 2008). The data that forms the basis of this paper was generated through various action research projects in a UK University and multiple development events in the UK.

Keywords


A starting point

In the genre of qualitative work that tries to make a difference to practice, this research paper is written in an informal style (Burman and MacLure, 2005; Pelias, 2004; Schostak and Schostak, 2007). It may appear unusual to some. I do this purposively, aiming to engage the reader with the ideas and notions about to be brought forward (Sparkes, 2007; Marshall, 2007; Derrida, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). It is subjective and biased, like professional contexts. Some may say postmodern, others may not. I write this from my perspective(s), as learning professional with various change agency roles – within a UK university,
a regional partnership of universities and colleges, and a national partnership of universities. Across these communities, colleagues and I have initiated extended discussions over the last three years around practices which we will label ‘the Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes’ (RPLO) here. This dialogue has been in the form of formal discussions with strategic leaders and practitioners, workshops, dissemination events and a national conference – all with the intent to promote/enhance/increase RPLO. As an action research ‘project’ (or more precisely cluster of them), then, it has contributed to the development of a new programme in a geographic region of the UK to facilitate RPLO, modules for the continuing professional development of practitioners, and changes in a UK university’s RPLO policy. Here is a story about this action research ‘project’.

**A space bulging with/of discourse**

RPLO has connected with many powerful policy-level discourses in the UK, including adult learning and education, widening access and participation, and lifelong learning. Within the last ten years, lifelong learning, flexible learning, employer engagement and work based learning discourses have become more prevalent in the UK. For example, the Leitch Report (2006) argued that UK Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] *needed* to develop more demand-led, flexible curricula – in order to ‘maximise’ ‘economic growth’ and ‘productivity’ and to ‘promote social justice and social inclusion’. Echoes of this were heard again at the end of 2008 (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008). Supported and directed by policy-level discourse, other discourses have been described in higher education research. For example, Deem’s (2003) research of ‘new managerialism’ in higher education articulates how professionalism is anchored in/on efficiency, productivity, external accountability and monitoring, standards, and value-for-money – with less opportunity for academic discretion. This revealed a significant shift from *back-grounding* to *fore-grounding* resource management (Halsey, 1992).

In addition to this managerial discourse, Barnett (2000a, b; 2003) describes a broader set of ‘ideologies’: academic freedom, entrepreneurialism, competitivism and competence. Here, he argues, lives a space with a multiplicity of competing and sometimes contradictory
belief and value systems, making it difficult to know what a university is. Within this site, what he calls a site of “super-complexity”; he argues that it is “impossible” to make “rational decisions” (2003: 7). He is not alone, as Sparkes (2007) and Lea and Callaghan (2008) offer provocative and poignant evidence of some of the symptomatic tensions of such discourses. But this all appears very one sided. Yes, discourses, as Foucault would argue, can constraint, restrain, limit, oppress - yet they can also ‘open up’. They can do this by providing new perspectives, pathways, directions, and opportunities for change. Moreover, as we are here striving to promote/enhance/increase RPLO policy and practice, in ‘super-complex’ sites, what are some of the specific discourses that influence diffusion and take up? More precisely, which discourses limit or disable change, and which enable it? I foreground four main themes below to explore this: Quality, Funding, Capacity and Student Experience. I use upper case letters intentionally, to indicate the importance of these words in the research sites.

“Quality”

Perhaps one of the most common words used during our action research project, ‘Quality’ was perhaps also one of the most unclear and mysterious. The word Quality was often used in discourse to disable an RPLO development, yet what that meant in terms that are more specific, was often difficult and complex to explore. Therefore, the line of thinking, and attitude of, "RPLO will sacrifice quality" represented a number of different rejections under the sphere programme design and institutional regulation, usually intertwined, and entangled with each other. One of these sub-themes was around the objectification and authority of regulatory limits to RPLO within a programme. In the UK, universities are responsible for setting their limits, and so decide a limit of RPLO through their regulations. Within the action research project, these regulatory limits were seen as fixed: "our limit is... this is the maximum we can offer". It was rare for this limit to be challenged, as there was a belief that if we ‘allowed’ more RPLO that we would be ‘giving away’ awards, which would damage the reputation of the institution. A poignant thought.
This was also bound up with concerns that RPLO would not allow the achievement of the UK’s Academic Infrastructure. There were two particular sub-themes to this – the concern about not “complying” with Subject Benchmark Statements (which guide the specific content of named awards, such as ‘History’ or ‘Business Management’) and the concern about “complying” with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (which guides institutions and programme designers around the progressional challenge of UK awards). The line/attitude “the students are better off just taking the module” was often fore-grounded. Yet, there was also an emergent ‘better off for whom?’ response from peers who had questioned whether it might be easier for the busy lecturer/teacher to facilitate if all RPLO students were in the same session, at the same time.

It is in this notion of similarity (or lack of difference) that an ‘opening up’ for promotion and development can happen. One of the difficulties in the above line/attitude is that there was a particular conception or understanding of RPLO. In many cases it was the ‘giving of credit for experience’, and that this ‘really wasn’t why I went into teaching – it doesn’t need teaching’. So this conception was gliding into the values and beliefs of what ‘being an academic’ was about. Interestingly, the European Guidelines (Cedefop, 2009) and Guidance offered by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) (2010) point towards seeing equalness/equality – around the concept of learning rather than teaching. More specifically, the QCDA (2010: 7) states:

“Principle 1… There is no difference between the achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a unit through prior learning and through a formal programme of study.”

“Principle 4… The award of credit through RPL will not be distinguished from any other credits awarded.”

“Principle 5… Assessment methods for RPL must be of equal rigour as other assessment methods, be fit for purpose and relate to the evidence of learning.”

This sends a strong signal of equality. In essence, this notion means RPLO can become Standard – or perhaps more radically – Standard can become RPLO. One
institution in the research is currently working through the notion that “all learning is equivalent; it might be the location, process and style that is different” in their own context. It is currently working through how it can articulate this across all parts of the institution, as the practitioners felt it impacted much more than their RPLO policy – affecting assessment and admissions policies, and perhaps their wider academic framework policy. It is an interesting to consider: if there is no distinction (between the Standard provision and RPLO), whether a separate RPLO policy is needed?

Returning to the entwined rejections, then, this notion enabled more positive linkages with the Subject Benchmark Statements\(^1\) and Framework for Higher Education Qualification – peers began to recognise that they could still meet these ‘requirements’. However, there were mixed responses to shifting the RPLO ‘limit’ with (quality) ‘risk aversion’ messages still prevalent. One institution did shift its limits from 33% to a maximum of 75%, but held on to the ‘reputation’ line/attitude. This prompts the question: to what extent did the institution believe in the principles above? Or did the competitivist discourse (in terms of perceived reputational risks) \textit{limit} policy formation? (Wall, 2010).

\textbf{“Funding”}

Another major theme that was prevalent during the research period was a line/attitude of “\textit{How can we possibly do RPLO if the Government doesn’t fund it?}” Within this line/attitude, Government funding choices, institutional priorities, as well as RPLO policy and practice are all held as static. The line/attitude also held various other assumptions: we have to rely on Government funding; we cannot deliver RPLO within current capacity/resource; and we cannot shuffle current capacity/resource. This view is entrenched within managerialist discourse, which shuts down the possibility of developing RPLO policy and practice, certainly at the institutional level – it is disabling. Within the subject teams, it can also significantly limit engagement with the discussions about RPLO development, but alternative discourses can emerge. Indeed, there was an alternative

\(^1\) For an overview of this approach, see \url{http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp}
line/attitude of "I want to find ways to fund RPLO". Here, there was an acknowledged gap in knowledge and understanding about what could be done with RPLO, but there was openness to exploring new ways of doing RPLO.

Within this alternative view/attitude, there was a strong discourse around competitivism and entrepreneurialism – that Government funding was not a constant, that the institution would need to be seeking new types of learning in different contexts (what was referred to as “future learners”), that there is an aging population, and that the ‘marketplace’ of learners see value in RPLO. The last two points, in particular, were powerful in constructing RPLO as a value-added, commercial activity, that could generate income, and hence link to ‘knowledge transfer’ agendas (and targets). This enabling line/attitude connected with multiple agendas, which enabled possibilities. One of the possibilities was the potential for RPLO to be seen as equivalent to ‘Standard’ provision – as described in Europe (Cedefop, 2009) and by the QCDA (2010). For the “Funding” theme, if there is no distinction (between the Standard provision and RPLO), then all of the learning is the same, and funding claims can be made, in the same way, to Government. This unsettles the disabling line/attitude above that Government will not fund RPLO.

Two of the organisations are working through this thinking at the moment to develop RPLO. Two important questions here will be: can those organisations describe the learning in a way to convince the Government? And will it matter anyway, if the “future learner” will be self-financing?

“Capacity”

Although apparently linked to the Finance theme, above, Capacity was not always linked directly to RPLO not being funded by the Government. It was another managerialist view/attitude, and again, a disabling line/attitude: “my staff are busy doing their day jobs” or “I am busy doing my day job”. So this was often located in the present, again with an assumed stable context. Specifically, it was the Capacity to ‘develop’ the ongoing capacity/capability to do RPLO as well as the actual ongoing ‘delivery’ of RPLO. Again, it is useful to refer to some of the conceptions and understandings of what RPLO was seen to be and involve for these value-j judgements to be made. Seeing RPLO as ‘giving credit for experience’ was not as valued as delivering teaching – what may be seen as being
important to ‘academic freedom’: “freedom to speak their own minds, to teach in accordance with their own interests, and to develop those interests according to their own research agenda” (Nixon, Marks, Rowland and Walker, 2001: 234). Indeed, throughout the research, Teachers (in higher education) described themselves as Lecturers and Academics, not facilitators or advisors. These words hold different value propositions and connotations. So, RPLO can challenge notions of self-identity/identifications (Burman and MacLure, 2005), especially and particularly when the learner drives the selection of what and how their learning should be assessed. The Lecturer/Academic may perceive to have ‘lost control’ over some aspects of their role that were very definitely theirs in the past – in a context where students have acquired the rights of “customers” in terms of Contract Law since the early 2000s. So, this was a disabling discourse.

Yet, at the same time, in another subject area, academic freedom seemed to marry up positively with entrepreneurial and work based learning discourses, when immediate client bases were located in this field. In these circumstances, rather than Capacity issues, the discourse was around “developing capability” within the team. Here, investment in time and energy was made to develop new approaches, which fitted into a programme framework. Indeed, after two action research cycles, the academic framework in which the RPLO featured broadened and expanded to enable more experiential and informal learning to be assessed. Additionally, they developed their own RPLO admissions processes to facilitate advice and guidance, and set their own RPLO admissions and assessment schedules to facilitate RPLO facilitation and assessment processes in the programme area. This subject team recognised capability was broader than staff, but also the infrastructural capabilities to support it. So was this a case of Standard becoming RPLO?

“Student Experience”

Whereas Finance (and Capacity to a lesser extent) can be seen as a relatively clear-cut disabler/enabler, Student Experience was similar to the Quality theme – relatively vague and mysterious. Again, the following type of statement would be used to block an RPLO development; “RPLO compromises the student experience”. In discussing this viewpoint, the notion of the “student not getting a
"university experience" may develop. This was laden with set notions (expectations, beliefs, values) about what a university experience should be. Historically, in many subjects in the UK, this has been three years full-time, in a didactic relationship between the Teacher (deliberately upper case), and the student. Yet this ‘university experience’ is contestable when viewed across subject areas, for example, the participatory modes of many performance arts subjects, were performance and lived experience is as important as Transmitted information. Other aspects or facets of this resistance were around students not ‘learning in groups’, and in the same vein, not ‘learning in the cohort’ – even though they could be seen as strategic choices (rather than ‘givens’) about how RPLO is designed academically and infrastructurally. For example, there are practices which enable groups of students to develop portfolios in cohorts and/or groups, but who are being assessed at different levels and in different topics. This is a similar construction as ‘the set’ in action learning.

Yet, all of these aspects unsettle the academic freedom, and to some extent managerialist, discourses that contribute to the perpetuation of large class sizes in higher education. So, is there an enabling discourse here? Some peers recognised the fragility of the notion of the ‘university experience’, and that the traditional experience might be seen as undesirable: “working students today want flexibility and recognition”. This line/attitude, based on a competitivist/entrepreneurial discourse, opens up and gives weight to a different experience. One that doesn’t involve the university or Lecturers/Academics in the first instance. One that is generated in-situ (what we might theoretically call situated learning), that is needs-based, and needs-driven; one that is relevant, but one that is legitimate higher learning, as described by national standards of higher education. These enabling discourses were prevalent in some institutions, which supported change. In others, the same discourses, particularly competitivist/entrepreneurial discourses could be contradictory – both enabling and disabling. The stories above demonstrates such contradictory forces at play.

**Where and what next?**

My intent through the stories above is to encourage practitioners to identify some of the discourses and
lines/attitudes that I/we have found over the last three years to either enable or disable change in RPLO policy and practice in the context of higher education. It is subjective – but so too is the context in which practitioners operate. The last three years have been an exciting stage of development for RPLO within higher education – a new programme to facilitate RPLO has been developed and will grow, perhaps spanning the UK. Modules for the continuing professional development of practitioners have been developed and may span the UK; and perhaps many more RPLO policies and practices will be radically overhauled. What is the premise behind the programme and modules? That all involved in RPLO policy and practice can choose to take a leadership role in the promotion/enhancement/increase of RPLO. This is a real choice. An individual practitioner may not have the direct responsibility, accountability or authority, but she/he can choose to influence. Once a conscious choice has been made, it is about skill in recognising and connecting to the discourses that are prevalent in a cultural setting, and about providing alternative discourses, which help to re-direct and re-shape the discourses into enabling, rather than disabling, ones. This may or may not be a team effort, so it can also be about connecting with those who can influence, most notably Deans, Pro-Vice Chancellors or Vice Chancellors – or other informal power holders – depending on the cultural setting. This is the premise behind making bigger waves in the policy and practice of RPLO.

References


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