Title: Re-cognising RPL – A Deleuzian enquiry into policy and practice of Recognition of Prior Learning

A thesis submitted towards award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

by

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SUMMARY

This enquiry addresses a gap in the literature in relation to the conceptual development of Recognition of Prior Learning. Generally, research in RPL comprises large inventories and audits of practice as this enquiry shows. Few qualitative studies are available and there is a dearth of theoretical development in the field. This thesis explores perspectives of claimants and university managers/practitioners to explicate the issues at stake and explore the value of RPL in education. Using the practical philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (DG), the conceptualization of RPL is explored in policy and practice and their concepts are employed to reimagine RPL for learning, and as pedagogy, in adult university education. A hybrid method of grounded and rhizomatic theory informs the research approach. This involves searching the complex and diffuse territory of RPL to seek affirmative options for RPL theory and practice.

Three case studies illustrate how different approaches to RPL offer different outcomes and were built on vague conceptualizations. In one setting, fifteen years of RPL claimant records is collated and analysed. Findings show that up to 70% of adult students in the case study had prior learning and gained exemptions. The data further indicates that RPL did not increase a student's chances of completing a degree. This contradicts findings from international research. The research also challenges fears expressed by university managers that RPL poses a risk to academic standards, as claimants may not have foundational knowledge to succeed in university. The data indicates, however, that on the contrary, claimants have extensive prior learning; much of it accredited at levels 6 and 7 and are thus college ready.

A model of learner directed RPL, used in another setting, is explored and theorized. This creative approach seamlessly integrates prior learning with new learning and thereby advances knowledge for the learner. The impact of the approach on the learner and learning is significant and offers new possibilities for RPL in education. It moves it on from the narrow purpose of reducing time in education and enhancing skills for employment. Accounts from participants in this enquiry show that they go to college to learn and they prize RPL most when it extends their knowledge – a dimension of RPL neglected in the literature.

The thesis concludes with some affirmative options for re-cognising RPL in adult education.

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My children and best friends Paul, Róisín, and Aoife. Aoife who taught me how to read the work of Deleuze and Gutarri and provided ongoing critique of my use of their work in this enquiry. Róisín who became my role model in the way she approached research and showed me that discipline and perseverance were required to see a study through. She gave me unwavering assurance when I felt like abandoning ship. Paul, who is a self-directed and independent scholar, showed me how learning is an ongoing process of 'becoming'. His ongoing search to express his knowings in art, activism and writing are inspirational.

My husband Jerome, who never read a word of this enquiry but listened to every word patiently and supportively. He provided unconditional love and has mine always.

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

APEL   Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning

APL   Accreditation of Prior Learning

PLAR   Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (Canada)

PLA   Prior Learning Assessment (US)

RPL   Recognition of Prior Learning (Ireland)

VPL   Validation of Prior Learning (Europe)

CAEL   Council for Adult Experiential Learning (US)

CAPLA   Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment

CBC   Conference Board of Canada

Cedefop   European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education

ECTS   European Credit Transfer System

EC   European Commission

EGFSN   Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

EUA   European Universities Association

HEA   Higher Education Authority

IUA   Irish Universities Association

LL   Lifelong Learning

NFQ   National Framework of Qualifications

QQI   Quality and Qualifications Ireland

RNFIL   Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

RPL PNI   RPL Practitioner Network Ireland

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Establishing the origins of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a formal practice is not clear-cut. It is widely thought to have started as an exercise for decommissioned soldiers who needed formal validation for learning gained in military service to facilitate progression in education and work. This initiative is traced to the US military and some commentators (Challis, 1993; Keeton 2002; Travers, 2011) locate its beginnings at the end of World War II while Michelson (2016) references the aftermath of World I as the starting point. However, Fejes and Andersson (2007) position the practice in a different context. They reference Swedish 17th Century Catechetical instructional settings as an early model of RPL practice where "the master of the household was to teach his children and his domestic servants the central parts of the Christian faith according to the catechism and to read"(ibid:4). These competencies received formal validation from a priest. Thus, the exact origins of RPL are open to dispute but it is clear, RPL has been around for a very long time. In Ireland, first reports of RPL appear in 1973 within the context of a government committee report on Adult Education. The committee recommended that when developing future programmes there "should be a facility to recognise prior work-based learning" (OECD Country Background Report, 2007:21).

After at least a century of practice and decades of policy development, international practice levels continue to be patchy. Europe has some exceptions. Finland, France and Spain have comprehensive strategies and legislation in place (Cedefop, 2014:5). In spite of this poor record, the Council of Europe issued a Recommendation in 2012 that all member states should have national policy in place by 2018. The level of practice in Irish universities, which is the context for this study, is of particular concern (Goggin *et al.*, 2015:33). It continues to be piecemeal although policy is in place in most institutions now (*ibid*: 2015:20). This raises an important question – why after one hundred years of practice internationally and almost half a century since it was introduced in Ireland, does practice continue to be low? This question is persistent and puzzling. I have placed it at the forefront of this enquiry.

I begin this thesis by examining the problem of low practice from inside my own professional experience. Through the retelling of my prior learning of RPL the ambiguities that exist in and

about practice are exposed and the thesis question emerges. I express my own doubts about RPL and discuss how they controlled my practice. I introduce a crowd of conceptual personae, in particular Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose ideas have shaped my thinking and the conceptual framework for this thesis. The chapter flows from life experience into the thesis questions and onwards towards the conceptual framework. It closes with a structural map for the remainder of the thesis. However, I begin with some general definitions of RPL and show the process and procedures involved in practice. I use the definition developed by National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI) in 2005 because this enquiry focuses on the Irish RPL practice.

1.1 Procedures for recognizing prior learning

A concerted effort to streamline RPL procedures and to agree definitions was undertaken in Ireland in 2005. The National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI) brought representatives from different education sectors together with key stakeholders to agree common definitions. In Europe, ten years later in 2015, The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) published European Guidelines and suggested a generic system for RPL in education and training. These practical developments were designed to support the work of practitioners and clarify procedures for claimants.

1.1.1 Process and definitions

Recognition of Prior Learning, from its inception, had a practical dimension. A hundred years ago, decommissioned soldiers needed to find employment and engage in education so they could re-integrate into society and make a livelihood for themselves and their families. RPL was a practical way of helping them to do so. Its purpose was to give formal value to bodies of knowledge gained outside 'official' (Breier, 2008) education and thus reduce time in education and repetition in learning. The main purpose of RPL is the same today. It involves a process whereby a person challenges the curriculum content by claiming that they have prior learning in a specific body of knowledge, equivalent to the syllabus or module. The goal is to gain exemptions from modules, courses or to advance in a programme to a higher level, so that students can save time and avoid repeating learning already acquired in other learning settings – formal, non-formal and informal. The different concepts of learning are defined as

- *Formal learning* is defined as learning that takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract

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awards;

- *Non-formal learning* takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed, but it does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning;

- *Informal learning* takes place through life and work experience (sometimes referred to as experiential learning). (Principles and Guidelines. NQAI, 2005).

To achieve recognition, a claimant presents evidence to subject specialists for assessment. If equivalence of learning is found, the claimant may receive one of the following: an exemption in a course/module; access to a programme or advanced standing in a programme (exempt from a year or more of study); or, in some instances, a full award. The following diagram illustrates the general system used in institutions though not all procedures may be available in every instance. How comprehensive the system is depends on many variables such as demand for RPL, resources available and level of system development in an institution. Generally, a four-stage process of identification, documentation, assessment and certification describe procedures in most domains (Cedefop European Guidelines, 2015:14). However, a claim does not always result in certification, as some claims may be unsuccessful. In the diagram below, I have added the possibility of an unsuccessful outcome and I suggest that in this instance claimants have the right to appeal. I have also identified a need for information. Members of the public cannot use RPL if they do not have information about it. This is, therefore, the first step in making a claim

Fig. 1 Diagram of RPL process
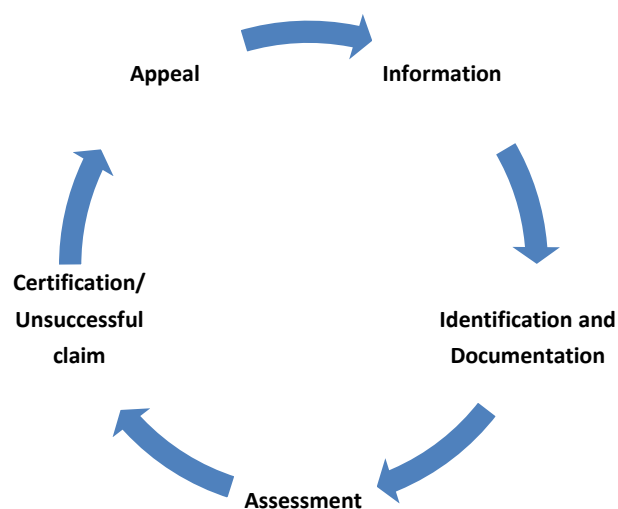
Each of these stages can be slightly different depending on the style of RPL practiced. In some institutions, mentoring is available at the identification stage but this practice is not universal. The diagram is designed to give a sense of the procedures involved, it is not a template for practice. The definitions and the diagram present RPL as an uncomplicated and easy process for claimants and practitioners – this is not so. The story of claimant experiences are a central part of this study and they emerge, in all their differences, in the accounts provided by participants. The experiences of practitioners can also be different from one setting to another. While their experiences are not central to this study, accounts from those working in the case study settings are used as appropriate. My own prior learning as a practitioner was paramount in motivating me to start this enquiry. What follows is the story of my practice experience.

1.2 Motivation for undertaking this enquiry

When I started work as an RPL practitioner in 2000 there was no separate system of support or guidance for claimants in my institution. I carried out all roles for almost ten years – administrator, adviser, and mentor and I was often an assessor too. I was 'a jack of all RPL trades'. Claimants on the other hand had little knowledge or experience of RPL. Many were without verified documentary evidence and did not have the capacity and skill to demonstrate their prior learning. Subject specialists, unused to RPL, sometimes struggled to create appropriate assessment and administrative procedures were cumbersome. These issues and others made my work difficult and time consuming. Most difficult of all were my own ambiguities about the value and purpose of RPL. The following story provides a snapshot of the conundrums I experienced; the vacillating positions I held and how these and other contingencies prejudiced my behaviour at the time.

1.2.1 Bonsai RPL

Formally recognising learning in all its variation, including learning in everyday living, suggests generosity and inclusiveness in its conceptualisation. When I first engaged with RPL practice, I was excited. I thought RPL signalled a massive perspective shift in education because the full extent of learning and its ubiquitous nature was finally and formally acknowledged. Thus for me, RPL offered new possibilities for education. Unfortunately, this early exuberance was soon overcome with doubts. Discourses abounded about quality assurance, costs, and resources bringing the overall value of RPL into question. Ambiguity seemed to permeate RPL.

As already noted, in my professional work, I held many different roles – practitioner, mentor, administrator, manager, assessor, policy maker and researcher. In all of them, I experienced conflicting perspectives. As a practitioner, I used a very restrictive model of RPL that was already in place when I took up my post. I attempted to broaden practice but as no resources were available to support development, I soon abandoned my efforts. Outside the context of my practice, there was little interest in RPL in the institution. As a manager, I found that RPL was poorly understood by academics and virtually unheard of in the public domain. In my role as an assessor, I struggled to create suitable assessment methods because I too had limited knowledge of RPL. Overall, practice was frustrating and consequently my uncertainty grew about its value in education and learning. I continually questioned if it was worth the work involved. Yet, I did not voice my misconceptions publically because I had no clear position myself. As an adult educator, I felt I needed a philosophical framework, but I had none. I harped back to experiential learning theory, but it did not satisfy the complexities of practice as I encountered them. In the meantime, I continued to operate within a restricted practice. The RPL model in use was like a bonsai tree, pruned to control widespread growth and to fit the credit transfer system that was most favoured. Demand too was bonsai-like – restricted by an absence of information. Few knew about RPL.

Each year, at recruitment time, I had an avalanche of enquiries about RPL. Course applicants wanted to learn about how to claim credit. They told me that they had little or no knowledge of RPL and only heard of it when they applied for the course. This was understandable. The lack of public information resulted in reduced demand, which in turn did nothing to motivate educational organisations, such as mine, to build systems, practice and quality assurance. I sometimes entertained myself by asking taxi drivers, shop assistants and other members of the public if they ever heard of Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL. The answers were often amusing but not one person I asked knew what it meant.

There was no specific state investment in RPL in Ireland. The pointed issue of who should pay for RPL, the individual or the institution, was an ongoing debate. Criticisms of the claim process itself were also a factor. A common perception existed amongst my colleagues that RPL was daunting for students. Compiling a portfolio of evidence to make a claim was difficult and, in the end, colleagues thought it would be easier for students to take the module rather than go to the trouble of making a claim. The high level of reflection required in the claim process seemed to me to be on the verge of counselling or therapy for claimants. I felt that such

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a process needed specialist skills in guidance counselling. My intuition was to resist this style of RPL. I did not want to ask students to expose their inner life to assessors for the sake of a few credits. These thoughts further compounded my doubts about the value of RPL. Yet, in my setting, I could see that module exemptions were beneficial to students. Adult students studying part-time struggled with competing priorities to raise children, work and care for family. Time was precious and module exemptions reduced time in college as well as financial cost. This was important to the students who often had to travel long distances after work to attend lectures. Outside of these practical benefits, I could see no other value in RPL.

1.2.2 A motivational encounter

In 2006, I was invited to act as rapporteur for an OECD research team to review Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) practice in the UK (Finn *et al*, 2008*).* The OECD had undertaken an international implementation audit across the OECD member states. The focus of the research was the practices used to facilitate recognition of experience in RPL. Credit transfer was not included because the OECD considered that it was already operating well.

As part of the fieldwork for the research, I visited research sites in England and Scotland. In Scotland, we visited a retirement home, where staff had designed an RPL process as part of their induction course for new social care workers. At the end of the visit, I met three young women, in their mid-twenties, who had recently completed the induction course. The course was offered to new staff. It was designed to enable new employees to build their competencies and to explore the work practices in the care home. The course was designed to engage new staff in reflective processes that would enable them to identify prior learning relevant to the new work environment. The testimonies of the three women about their experiences of the induction course gave me cause to re-evaluate my position on RPL.

All three had left school early. They had worked in restaurants, bars and the retail trade respectively. Growing tired of the long hours, low pay and absence of promotion routes in their jobs, they decided to make career changes. They were exuberant in their praise for the induction course. I asked them to describe it to me. Their accounts were impressive. They told me that the process had helped them to realize how much they had learned in experience and it showed them what they knew and could use from their prior learning in their new posts. One woman explained that during her induction interview she was invited to recall incidences that stood out

for her in her job as a pub manager. She described her job and the difficulties she sometimes encountered when, at the end of the day, some customers, plied with alcohol, could become aggressive and argumentative. She had learned to diffuse conflict situations and to manage difficult customers without incident. Through reflection, during the induction, she realised that she was good at managing people and good at negotiating in conflict situations.   She remarked that having her experiences valued through recognition made her feel confident and capable in her new job.

Overall, the most significant outcome of the induction was that it gave the women insight into the value of experience in itself and the role it played in shaping their lives. They began to wonder about the life experiences of the residents in the home and found themselves engaging in conversations with residents about their lives and memories. Then they explored the possibility of creating a space for residents in the home that would foster recollections of times past. They planned to decorate a room reminiscent of the 1940s/1950s where the residents could sit together to share life experiences and tell stories.

The education officer in the retirement home was very enthusiastic about the outcomes of the programme and seemed positive about the possibilities for the future. I was struck by the simplicity of the process and the significant reflection it generated. It was an impressive use of RPL.

The testimonies of the care workers highlighted the impact that RPL could have on individuals, in particular on individuals who professed to have little belief in themselves as learners. Through their stories, I could see potential in RPL as an educative process for personal growth, learning and creativity. If RPL could work in a work context, why not in education? I wondered about forms of practice that could make RPL into a different learning experience at a personal level but also in terms of formal academic learning. I reflected on how negative discourses had affected me and consequently controlled my practice. I realized, through this experience that RPL required further research.   While much research was already done, there was little advancement in the conceptualization of RPL. This problem stirred my interest. RPL theory was only emerging in 2010 when I undertook this enquiry. I felt it required new concepts that would open out new possibilities for practice. I sought answers in the experiential theoretical frameworks of adult education.

1.2.3 Personal Prior learning

In this section, I provide an autobiographical account of my prior learning and express how learning, as an internal activity developed my subjectivities. I have selected events, concepts and ideas that I feel are relevant to this thesis. I have chosen a number of authors or 'friends' who shaped my thinking not always because I agreed with their position but more because they made me think.

God, Jesus Christ and Mary his mother. I learned about them at home, in school, at mass, visiting relatives and my paternal grandmother. I learned that God was virtual and infallible. You could not argue with God. You prayed to him, begged him for things, favours and forgiveness. I went to Mass every Sunday and tried to go every day during Lent. I enjoyed my religion. It gave me a certainty and security about life. However, as I grew older global events – wars, famines, environment disasters and personal suffering led me to doubt God. Eventually, my beliefs were overturned completely and I now describe myself as a secular atheist. I came to this position slowly as I left adolescence and entered adulthood. It was a period of my life, where certainty vanished and the precariousness of existence became sharpened.

In the 1980s, I became a mother. I felt my world was changing in new and exciting ways. I was hungry for learning and new ideas. I wanted to further an earlier ambition to become a social worker. The local community school offered a range of adult education courses including one from the Centre of Adult and Community Education, St Patrick's College Maynooth. A course in Social and Human Studies fitted the bill and I signed up.

I loved it. I enjoyed meeting new people and the engagement with new ideas and concepts was exciting. The discursive methods and group work approach was new to me and I flourished in it. Social justice issues, already a passion of mine, came to the fore even more. I made many friends who taught me much. The course signalled the beginning of my adult education.

Over the next decade, I became involved in politics and community education, particularly women's groups and self-help groups. In these contexts, I learned much about power and disempowerment; poverty and exclusion; addiction and alienation. I often felt out of my depth in terms of knowledge and experience; I had a deep desire to widen my understanding. I started a degree course at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth in 1991. I studied Sociology and English with History in 1st year. Here I encountered new 'friends' who were the authors of acclaimed ideas. Karl Marx was among the first.

His concepts of class and his analysis of the capitalist 'means of production' were very significant for me. Using concepts of surplus profit, alienation and reification, the subtle nature of exploitation was explored. His assertion that the sustained processes of reification were submerged in the complex relations of modern market exchanges located power with controllers/owners of capital. In capitalist economies, workers become alienated from the surplus value their labour created and thus passively enabled the system to perpetuate itself. These ideas effected my thinking greatly. Engagement with the ideas of Marx left me with a sense of powerlessness.

When I became acquainted with the ideas of Michel Foucault my interest in power and the relations of power deepened. He identified 'unified sets of statements on particular themes' or epistemes present at particular moments in history. These 'epistemes' enter dialogue and emerge as discourses (Peillon, M. (1994) *Critical Theory*. 10th March, St Patrick's College Maynooth). Foucault was interested in how specific eras feed the discourses of the time "the intellectual activity of a given period obey the laws of a certain code of knowledge." (ibid) In particular, the epistemic transformation of the human subject and how knowledge of the subject, gathered over time, exerted power and regulated human behaviour to ensure that societal norms and values were upheld (Foucault 1984 cited in Ritzer, 1992:206). Foucault was interested in studying how humans internalize modes of submission and domination and become the subject of their own oppression and behaviour is 'disciplined' in the process (ibid). This resonated with me very deeply and to my own experience as a woman. The ideal type of woman handed down to me through religion was the Blessed Virgin. While I had grown to understand the oppressiveness of this image of womanhood, I had been blind to the subordination of women generally. For example in work (unequal pay and conditions), home (responsibilities for care and financial dependence on spouse or state) education (few women in science) and health (birth control). My feminist awakenings were caught up in experiences of life and body. Giving birth to children was a primary experience and locking my life into a traditional mode of existence and dependency was another. Reflection on women's histories in particular the histories of women in my family was also a catalyst for changing my thinking. Theoretically, engagement with Marx and Foucault was probably the beginning. I was greatly influenced by Helene Cixous's work and the following passage was a source of inspiration

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society. Well, we are living through this very period when the conceptual foundation of a millennial culture is in process of being undermined by a millions of a species of mole as yet not recognized. (Cixous,1988:289)

This powerful idea of Cixous encapsulates women's oppression and expresses a solidarity with all oppressed peoples. I reflected on my own experiences and how life had taught me much. I believed that education could do more but it had to be a different form of education – adult education, I believed offered possibilities to affect change.

In my professional studies in Adult Education, I found a way of doing education that spoke to my emerging position as a feminist adult educator. The democratic mode of education facilitated by group work and dialogue supported a liberating form of learning. This was contrasted with my schooling experience which was the opposite. The emphasis on equality, personal and collective agency, social justice and love in adult education offered hope. The movement away from teaching to facilitation was an expression of a desire to engage learners in processes that were fundamentally democratic. Experience was valued and welcomed as integral to the learning endeavour. This for me felt both natural and revolutionary. This interconnected way of learning was enriching and grounded virtual concepts in actual reality. Paulo Freire's work was pivotal. He attested that learning was not a process of "knowledge transfer" but instead a process for opening up "possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (1998:30). Prior learning according to Freire was a rich source of learning and "the fruit of lived experience of students and individuals" (1998:36). He conceptualized transformative learning as continuous rather than located in catalytic events or as seismic perspective transformations. The path of learning is "a permanent process of searching" (1998:21). I subscribe to this position and see learning as continually evolving as I become an adult educator.

This story names the ideas that influenced my worldview over time. I have named only a few but I hope it is enough to provide some insight into my position as an adult educator and RPL practitioner. I expect you will identify traces of my subjectivities throughout the thesis, in the

way I analyse, interpret and critique literature, research and data. This story together with my professional experience of RPL provide the foundations in the research loop of meaning making in this thesis.

1.3 The Research Problem

Adult experiential learning theory values the integration of learning from experience in education (Dewey (1938); Freire (1970); Knowles (1980, 1989); Mezirow (1981); Kolb (1984); Boud and Walker (1990); Usher, Bryant and Johnson (1997); Fenwick (2003); Semetsky (2006) and Michelson (2010, 2015). These theorists conceptualise the valuable role of experience in learning. They recognise that learning can take place anywhere. The value placed on experience provided a rationale to have it formally recognised. However, while experiential learning theory, as I understood it, provided an argument for RPL, it did not offer practical tools to expand implementation, and thus, for me, the theories were not grounded in RPL practice. Experiential learning theories are concerned with a different dimension of learning. They examine *how* we learn in experience while RPL is concerned with *what* we know and have learned. For example, learning in formal contexts allows us to say that we learned something in college – Sociology, French, History. These subjects describe the topics but not what is learned or known. Workplace learning, too, has potential to concretise experience as knowledge. Job titles alone assume an expertise in a specific area. Yet, who can say what is known, or what other experiences, thinking and reflection do to change knowledge. Learning, as I understand it and as I observed from my personal experience in adult education, is not concrete, it shifts and moves in and with experience. Yet RPL looks for concrete evidence that in turn denies the complexity of identifying what is known and understood. RPL assumes that excavating past learnings is a straightforward process of retrieving information from an ordered archive of data. It is as if RPL was designed with a robot in mind. Yet learning in experience or learning *per se* does not produce neat data sets. Learning is rhizomatic. It is unruly and the process involves rummaging through a messy mire of tangled memories, experiences and knowledge. RPL as a process is concerned with untangling the learning mess, in part at least. Theoretical development had not resulted in creating a distinctive conceptualisation for RPL and thus, the practice and the concept suffers from the absence of strong theoretical foundations. It seemed to me to have evolved very little from its early inception in 1918. RPL was becoming more and more tantalising as an area for research. The OECD research gave me insight into its promise when I saw another

side of the story. This experience and the conceptual puzzles embedded in RPL gave me the impetus to undertake this enquiry.

1.3.1 Research Questions and Process

The policy rhetoric in favour of RPL is strong. The recent European Commission's Recommendation 2012 indicates that policy makers believe in RPL. Yet, many problems persist – low practice, difficult procedures, no resources, no promotion and no funding. Why does policy development trundle on and continue to assert the importance of RPL to education? What evidence exists to support these policy developments? Yet theoretical development has been slow. The Scottish example above shows that RPL can also be a learning experience, why is this dimension of RPL under-developed? These questions are explored in this thesis.

Drawing on my own professional experience of RPL and utilising the 'pedagogy of the concept' offered by Deleuze and Guattari, this enquiry explores RPL as a concept. I set up a 'whole of the lived' (DG, 1994:34), or the state of affairs of RPL with its component parts, to identify the problems the concept was created to address and to find out if it functions and to what 'affect' (*ibid*.). I trace the concept in policy development and explore research to find evidence of its value in learning and education. I look at emergent theory and analyse its application in research and practice. I look at how the concept mutates as it passes through these territories of policy, research and theory. Using different case studies – two from Irish university adult education settings and one from a European context, the question "does RPL work?" is explored. In the process, an RPL multiplicity emerges and is analysed. Its contentious encounter with formal university education forms part of the analysis. The enquiry concludes with suggestions for reimagined concepts and pedagogies of RPL.

First, I lay out the conceptual framework I intend to use for reading the world of RPL in this enquiry.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

 As I began to develop a literature review for this enquiry, I recalled the ideas of theorists and re-engaged with their ideas to seek concepts that might open up new theoretical horizons for this thesis. Some were valuable such as experiential learning, self-directed learning and reflective practice. However, overall these theories did not fully address the conceptual and practical problems that RPL posed in identifying and evidencing prior learning.

I never studied philosophy expect through literary criticism and social theory. Generally, it was a subject I dipped into but had never studied formally in an academic setting. I was

searching for a conceptual framework for grounding RPL and browsing through the shelves of a bookshop when I stumbled across the writings of a couple of French philosophers, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (DG) and their work *A Thousand Plateau*s (1988). I began reading. I could not leave it down. It was perplexing but very compelling. I bought it and brought it home. This happenstance with DG offered new possibilities for this study and a key to new concepts for RPL. The book spoke to me in different ways and explicated my epistemological stance significantly.

Their work spoke to me. It spoke to my atheism. DG are philosophers of immanence, which means that they refute Platonic transcendence and its association with ideal forms of existence. Knowledge is not something that already exists awaiting discovery but something we create. Our perceived power to reason has led us to believe that we are separate from nature. DG say that we are integral to nature, and thus we have responsibilities to it and for its survival.   I ascribe to this position.

They spoke to my feminism and in particular the mind / body dualism. DG are practical philosophers and view the virtual and the actual as reality. The interior self and our external world effect each other. They do not separate the actual (or social) and virtual, they are one in the other and they are described as "inside of the outside" (Deleuze, 1988a:96-97 in Semetsky 2006:15). Relations with the self (the inside of the outside) or subjectivation in DG is energetic and intense.

The concept of the rhizome gave me an image for conceptualising learning and for visualising the complexity of the learning process. Thesis writing is a learning process. This definition from the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* is helpful in clarifying what DG mean by the rhizome:

> Rhizome means a sprawling network of roots. DG introduced this biological metaphor in contrasting opposition to another one – the Tree of Porphyry. The latter is tidy, with a trunk, branches and a fixed hierarchical order. In contrast, a rhizome is an untidy network with modes, knots, etc. The contrast symbolises different styles of thought and writing. The two authors stress especially that rhizomes differ from structures. Structures are definable; rhizomes are multidimensional and grow in an irregular manner, so that standard criteria of theoretical adequacy do not apply. (Mautner, 1996: 484-485).

Fig. 2. A rhizome is a root; it is a tuber or bulb.

FIG. 165.
Dried Rhizome of Caulophyllum thalictroides
(small size).
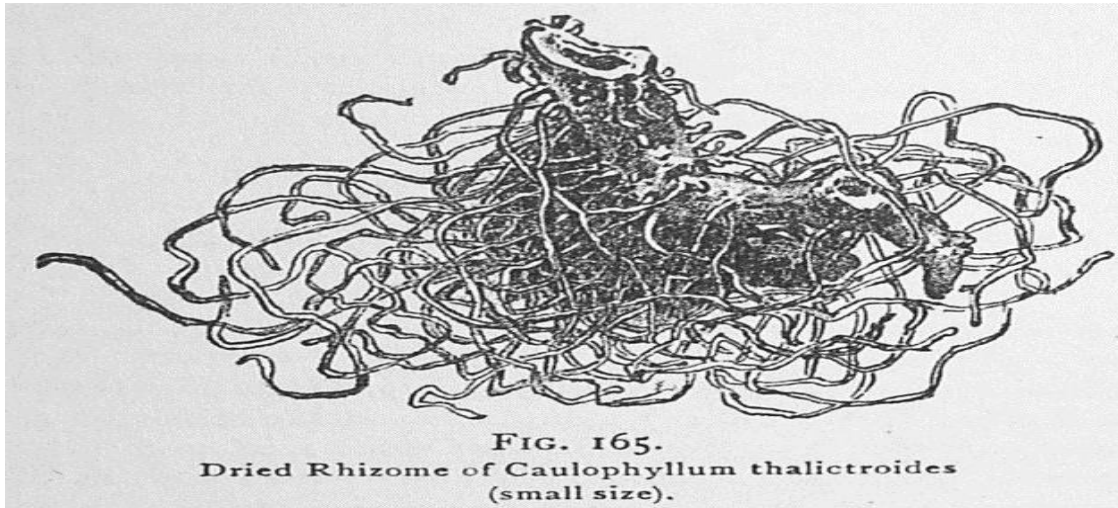
The definition suggests that the two metaphors, the tree and the rhizome, are opposites; however, this is not the case, they are just different and throw up a different image of thought. In the image of the rhizome, learning becomes an unruly mess characterized by multiple roots, overlapping, re-rooting, dead-ending, and flowering. The rhizome is a useful metaphor for imagining the internal processes at play in learning. We don't always know what we know, and it can be difficult to trace the 'seeds' or causes of learning because of its multi-dimensional nature. We are in the habit of assuming that learning is caused by the teacher's instruction, and thus in RPL we also expect to be able to locate the cause of learning, but this is immaterial as it is the effects of learning that are important. Retrieving and identifying specific learning is a complex and intricate process. Using the metaphor of the rhizome enabled me to consider the difficulties inherent in the conceptualisation of RPL.

1.5 Pedagogy of the concept

In my experience, multiple ambiguities and issues exist that hinder RPL practice. Conceptualisations of RPL do not address these complex problems. Thus, the principal purpose of this enquiry is to re-conceptualise RPL to enable practice to evolve and develop. I draw on DG's method of concept creation to support this process.

The principal problem that RPL tries to address is to create the conditions whereby learning gained outside formal education can achieve equal status with learning achieved in formal educational contexts. According to DG "all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning" (1994:16). RPL is connected to this problem but unfortunately, the problem is more complex and the concept does not reflect or address this complexity.

Hence, the challenge is to find concepts that work better. DG advise that concepts do not come ready made, they must be created (1994:5) in response to problems. Thus, in the context of this enquiry, conceptual analysis and creation are central.

Creating concepts involves 'assemblage' which is the process of

> arranging, organising and fitting together … complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning. (Livesey, cited in Parr, 2005:18)

In this case, the problem at stake is RPL and the thesis becomes an RPL 'assemblage'. The object is to seek out lines of departure that offer possibilities for a reconceptualization of RPL. I begin with an exploration of what exists in policy, theory and practice. This route is unpredictable and draws me into 'territories' of thought that connect RPL to concepts embedded in policy, research and theory. The path I follow is rhizomatic and concepts are 'deterritorialised' and 'reterritorialized' in the search for 'lines of flight' that I hope will deepen understanding and provide the creativity needed to form a different RPL assemblage that works for learning and education.

1.5.1 Deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation

Deterritorialisation is a process whereby a concept, idea, collectivity, indeed anything at all, leaves a territory (1988:559). Deterritorialisation is linked to the concept of 'lines of flight' which is to pursue new departures to enable the creation of new concepts. Unlike colonization, deterritorialisation can be positive, negative or both at the same time. In this process, deterritorialisation commences within the line of flight as new assemblages form. Processes of reterritorialization are also possible. This happens when a line of thought, a concept or idea reconnects with other assemblages and forms new territories. For example, RPL, I claim, is a line of flight that was deterritorialised in the assemblage of lifelong learning. It can fly again and be deterritorialised / reterritorialized into an adult education assemblage or to a different assemblage as lines converge. I use re/deterritorialisation to explain mutations in the conceptual development of RPL.

1.5.2 Multiplicity

DG express a philosophy of multiplicity. They use the concept in different ways throughout their work, but the concept of 'intensive multiplicities' is most pervasive. An intensive multiplicity is a "collection of parts" (Colebrook, 2002: xxvi) that do not make up a unified whole or essence. The components are disparate and linked.

In relation to this study, RPL is an intensive multiplicity. The RPL multiplicity has strong tracings of other multiplicities such as hegemonic discourses of neoliberal educational instrumentalism as well as humanist adult education. The bringing together of these components sparks a change in the composition or assemblage of the RPL multiplicity. The assemblage brought together in this thesis is a unique RPL multiplicity. The assemblage is constructed from component multiplicities that came together through selection, accident, convenience, opportunism and also in a planned way. They are interconnected with each other and combined through the personae and through me as the protagonist. The concepts mutate, changing the assemblage of the RPL multiplicity.

1.5.3 Plane of immanence

DG are philosophers of immanence, and according to them "there is philosophy wherever there is immanence" (1994: 42). In saying this, DG recognize that all of us are philosophers to some extent, although we may not engage in formal philosophical methods or even have knowledge of their processes. The concept of 'immanence' is important in this enquiry and it involves laying out 'a plane of immanence' for the conceptual problem. In undertaking the institution of a 'plane' I commit to the unpredictability of the rhizome and engage with points as they emerge in the enquiry. I carry my own experiences with me and use it as a reflective source to question and problematize RPL and to create links in the RPL rhizome. Thus, concepts created are self-positing and emerge from the 'whole of the lived' of RPL, including my own experience.

DG insist that to institute a plane of immanence we must 'clear' old conceptual idols if we are to create new concepts; and for DG: "each plane of immanence can only claim to be unique, to be the plane, by reconstituting the chaos it had to ward off" (1994:51). This involves selection of what and who to have on the plane.

DG suggest that conceptual personae guide us to institute a plane; they are "needed to create concepts" (1994:69). Personae, unlike characters in a novel, are thinkers: "solely thinkers, and their personalized features are closely linked to the diagrammatic features of thought and the intense features of concepts" (1994:69). To give an example, the work of Karl Marx provides a diagrammatic map of capitalist economics. He challenged Hegel's thought and his conceptual personae were the Capitalist and Proletarian. The component concepts of class, reification,

alienation, and means of production were conceived in relation to the problem of capitalism. Hence, conceptual personae can be a magnet for component concepts or the creation of new concepts. The plane of immanence of this study is made up of conceptual personae for the concept RPL and its component parts. I have chosen DG as the primary conceptual personae in this study, along with Dewey, Kolb, Michelson, Brookfield, Semetsky, Harris, Hume, Knowles, Fenwick, Andersson, Biesta, Colebrook, and others; various researchers who investigated practice to evaluate RPL; and the claimants, practitioners, policy makers and university managers who provide accounts from their experiences; these in turn provide the ground for new conceptualizations of RPL. The existing theories and their components are also on the plane; and DG's immanence, rhizome, assemblage, territories, multiplicity, affect, percept, pedagogy and becoming, provide the plane or ground for development. The following is a map (in list form) of the plane of immanence for this study.

The following diagrams illustrates a plane of immanence for this enquiry. Fig. 3 general structure; Fig. 4 the plane for this study; Fig. 5 RPL settings.

Fig. 3 Plane of Immanence

Concept

Conceptual personae

Concept creation
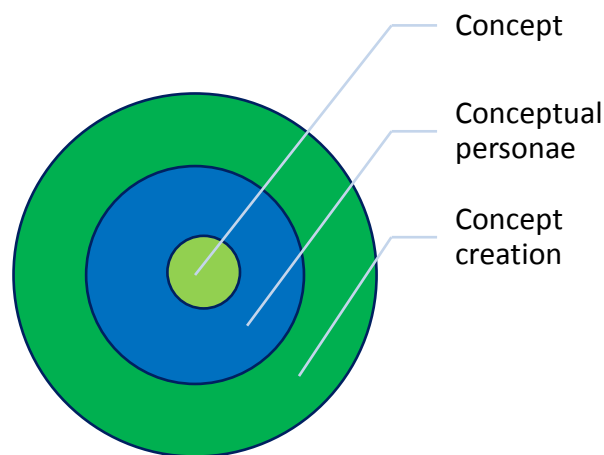
Fig. 4 The Plane of Immanence for this enquiry

Conceptual personae	Concepts	Zones of Actualization
Theorists Philosophers Researchers Practitioners Claimants, Administrators Policy makers University Managers Assessors Students Citizens Migrants Thesis supervisors Family Friends Colleagues	RPL Recognition Prior learning Experience Experiential learning Formal learning Non-formal learning Informal learning Assessment Measurement Repetition Time Standards Quality Credits Money Portfolio Self-directed learning Guidance Employment Work Skills Un-skilled Concepts Conceptual personae Body without Organs Multiplicity Assemblage Re/reterritorialization Rhizome Plateau Bridge Percept Affect Grounded theory Transcendental empiricism Immanence and Plane of immanence ….	Published papers Conference papers Published research Reports Research Policy Discussions in research groups Personal knowings Professional knowings Anecdotal information Observations Perceptions Personal beliefs and values of the thesis maker Subjectivity of the thesis maker

The lists have no order; it is simply the instituting of the plane. The conceptual personae, the concepts and the zones of actualization interact in the thesis making process.

Fig. 5 Assemblage of RPL Settings

Assemblage of RPL settings
Higher education
University education
Further Education
Adult Education
Lifelong Learning
Life in all its variety including working life
RPL Policy
RPL Research
RPL Practice

1.5.4 Thesis making as a lived experience

This thesis brings together my lived experience as an adult educator and an RPL practitioner, the learning gained in that process and from the exploration of RPL in this study. In a way, the entire venture becomes is RPL process in itself. My own prior learning stirred me to pursue this study. Thus, learning from the past emerges and infuses the learning unearthed in the research process. New knowledge and understandings of RPL are explored and possibilities are exposed. Thus, the study becomes a lived phenomenon about learning itself in all its forms and complexity.

1.6 Thesis Structure – Plateaus, a Bridge, Conclusions and an Epilogue

I devised a structure for this enquiry to reflect the conceptual framework and in particular the "plane of immanence" for this study. Laying out a plane requires a structure to facilitate it. In *A Thousand Plateaus* DG use a series of plateaus to lay out their plane. I like their approach because it carries the concept forward in a recurring way through the thesis. Each plateau is an assemblage offering multiple divergent connection to RPL in each one. Each Plateau "to a certain extent [can] … be read independently of one another, except the conclusion, which should be read at the end" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: xxi). Each plateau seeks out differentiated bodies of RPL in the various milieus – policy; research and theory; research procedures and accounts of participants. The thesis then becomes an assemblage of plateaus or territories offer vantage points where components of RPL function with other multiplicities … learning, experience, theories, concepts, policy, systems, practice … and most of all the experiences of claimants and others who engage with RPL practice. The enquiry becomes a survey of all the dimensions of RPL multiplicities seeking lines of flight out of the rhizomatic

confusions to new horizons for RPL. Chapters are like layers in Plateaus and are numbered to indicate co-ordinates or points of intersection.

1.6.1 First Plateau - Chapters II and III surveys the state of affairs and lays out the policy and research multiplicities.

Chapter II Policy development at European level and at national level in Ireland is explored to evaluate how it was formed, and what theories, if any, it functioned with. This chapter examines the wider role policy played in shaping RPL and how it built a conceptual framework through a process of deterritorialisation from Lifelong Learning (LL). I argue that RPL became part of the European modernisation of education project as a sub-set of LL. The purpose of LL in this project, it is argued, was to increase production of human capital for the labour market, and RPL was designed to increase efficiencies in this process. I conclude the chapter by examining RPL policy development and implementation in Ireland.

In Chapter III I explore the research domains seeking to find out what RPL does in practice nationally in Ireland, at European level and internationally. Theoretical developments in RPL are integrated with the research as relevant and where appropriate. The research highlights the issues at stake within specific contexts. In particular, it maps the implementation of RPL for different purposes – social inclusion, adult higher education and skills for work. I conclude this plateau by bringing together the salient ideas and concepts constructed in policy, theory and research.

1.6.2 A Bridge - Chapter IV lays out my approach and the tools I used to explore the perspectives of people engaged in RPL in Ireland and Europe. It is a bridge between two plateaus – the first that lays out the existing knowledge and the second, which is a plateau that opens out into experiences of those working with the concept RPL as practice and as claimants. The bridging Chapter IV explains how I engaged with the research participants, why I selected one method rather than another, and my decision to draw from grounded theory using a rhizomatic approach. The relationship between the methods used and my epistemological stance are discussed. Procedural details and a matrix of data sources is included.

1.6.3 The Second Plateau in Chapters V, VI, VII and VIII presents the different case studies and describing the styles of practice used in each setting. Using very different case

studies, two from Irish university adult education settings (CS1 and CS2) and one from a European context (CS3), the problems of RPL are analysed and discussed.

The longitudinal data collected from one institution (CS1) examines the impact of RPL, on student achievements over a 15 year period. The RPL student records from this institution relate specifically to my own practice which was limited, at the time, to credit transfer. This data provides some information relating to RPL in Irish university adult education degrees. Participants from another Irish institution in the same region, offers contrasting data based on a different approach to RPL. Divergent styles of practice are studied that express different stories of RPL and its effects.

Thus, a multiplicity of perspectives from different positions locate in this plateau. Accounts of conversations with RPL claimants who completed the process; with practitioner / researchers who guide, inform and co-ordinate practice; and with managers who control and create institutional policy express experiences from their point of view. I explore the conversations to ascertain where there is overlap, connection and 'lines of flight' to new territories of learning.

Concepts and discourses come to the surface and I use them as co-ordinates in mapping the flows and blockages of RPL in higher education. I pursue possibilities for future practice and I evaluate barriers and analyse them.

1.6.4 Conclusions – Chapter IX and Chapter X

Chapter IX offers different conceptualisations of RPL. This section expresses a movement towards a new conceptualisation of RPL through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. I use the emergent 'lines of flight' from the entire 'assemblage' to direct this work. The plateau drops off with a discussion about other possibilities for enquiry in the future.

FIRST PLATEAU

The first plateau offers an evaluation of the state of affairs of different RPL territories together with an exploration of their deterritorialisations and the consequent reverberations on bodies of policy, theory and practice.

CHAPTER II   POLICY BODY

&

CHAPTER III   BODIES of THEORY/PRACTICE

CHAPTER II

POLICY BODY

2.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the role policy plays in shaping the conceptual basis and particularly the purpose of RPL in education and work. Policy is examined to identify how the purpose, practice of LL and RPL are signified in official documents. I use Deleuze and Guattaris' (DG) concepts of territorialisation to elucidate how policy development devises 'lines of flight' for concepts into unplanned and unexpected contexts. RPL, I claim, is a line of flight that was deterritorialised in the LL assemblage and in turn, the concept LL mutated in policy development to become an education and training system and practice focused on employability. Other perspectives taken from policy development theory are utilised to analyse documents and draw conclusions. I explore the role of policy generally and discuss RPL's educational future based on current processes of policy development.

2.1 Emergence of RPL as a term in policy

LL was integral to the ambitious project to modernize the education system from the 1970s (Pépin, 2006; Rasmussen, 2014) and European RPL policy development began as an element of LL policy. The concept RPL gained wider importance in 1989 with the formation of The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This system allowed higher education to award "credits based on learning outcomes for non-formal and informal learning experiences" (Council of the European Union, 2012:2). A decade later the *Bologna Declaration* (1999:8) established a system where "credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning"; and later in a summit meeting in Leuven it was noted that "successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning" (2009:2). Thus, RPL in higher education became an element of LL conceptually, in practice and policy.

2.1.1 Early conceptualizations of Lifelong Learning

Rubenson (2002:243) traced the conceptual origins of LL to the 1960s and 70s. The first generation of LL was conceived by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and referred to as 'l'éducation permanente'. The concept was humanist in principle and considered education as an entitlement of each person and thus a human right. Paul Lengrand, the UNESCO theorist of 'l'éducation permanente' believed that his concept would transform education because it was the "first time [when] an element of freedom has been introduced into the educational universe…. [and] a new kind of learner… unique in his personality and rich in experience" (1986: 9). Lengrand envisaged that adults, with their wealth of experience, would enhance education and diversify the student body. Principles of democracy and egalitarianism underpinned the concept of 'l'éducation permanente'. However, the UNESCO version did not transfer into education policy. Lengrand's concept was reshaped as 'recurrent education' and thus 'deterritorialised' by the OECD and 'reterritorialised' as Rubenson points out in a 'second generation' of LL that emphasised economic considerations:

> The idea of recurrent education carried a less humanistic and more pragmatic accentuation. Recurrent education was commonly promoted as a system that would yield economic gains, benefit the labour market, lead to increased equality, and stimulate students' search for knowledge. (2002:243)

Thus, LL gained a very particular definition and was put forward as a solution to a range of different economic and societal issues to such an extent that in 2000, the European Commission published a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*. The Memorandum stated that:

> Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning. (2000:3)

The European Area for Lifelong Learning (2001) was a response to the Memorandum and The Copenhagen Process (2002) followed. Its purpose was to enhance cooperation in vocational education and training (VET) in Europe were

> Strategies for lifelong learning and mobility are essential to promote employability, active citizenship, social inclusion and personal development…... (Copenhagen Declaration, 2002:2).

These strategic memoranda formed part of the conditions for a metamorphosis in education throughout the member states resulting in the development of 'a compatible and comparable

European wide education system' (Communique at Leuven 2009:1). The outcome of these declarations and accords was the creation of an interlocking system enfolded in common principles including those of lifelong learning.

LL policy development deepened the connection between education and human capital and perpetuated a perspective that education was the key to economic growth. Murphy notes that "The concept of lifelong learning [became] ubiquitous in education policy and theory" (2000:166) and "merged with elements of economic human capital," (EAEA 2006:8) It should be noted that the EU is a primary organising regime with "governing arrangements constructed by states to coordinate their expectations and organise aspects of international behaviour in various issue-areas" (Wilson, 2000:256). The EU is an interlocking state system and policy development attempts to ensure levels of consistency and commonality across member states. For example, the European Qualifications Framework created an interlocking system in education. This provided the architecture for a common structure and set out the criteria for quality and standards and a credit system (European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). This sophisticated interlocking state system took almost two decades to build and LL with RPL, were integral parts of it. Two major accords effected the European modernisation of education policy.

The first of was the Bologna Process, which set out strategies for the alignment of higher education. The Process set about modernising and integrating higher education across Europe. The Lisbon Treaty set the goals for economic development with overarching structures for Europe to become:

> …the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (cited in European Commission, Education & Training 2010, 2004:7)

This shift came about as the overarching principles of the Lisbon Treaty and the Bologna Process interlocked and created a shared paradigm. In 2009, Bologna proclaimed a new paradigm for education that incorporated contradictory ideologies in a neoliberal schema:

> equitable access for all; lifelong learning with a focus on: widening participation, fostering partnerships between public authorities, students, employers and employees; recognition of prior learning; improving employability by embedding work placement in study programmes; student centered learning and teaching; research and innovation through interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes (2009: 2-3).

This policy paradigm seamlessly mixes social dimensions of learning with business interests. Work and equity are set together and promoted as mechanisms to create more equality in society. Education was key to achieving the ambitions of the Lisbon Treaty. The Commission's Education and Training 2010 document expresses clearly the interlocking nature of policy development when it states that:

> Human resources are the Union's main asset and it is now acknowledged that investment in this area is a determining factor of growth and productivity, in the same way as investment in capital and equipment (Education & Training 2010. 2004: 7).

Thus, divergent policies of emancipatory and inclusive education become linked, through LL, with work, employment, productivity and growth thereby creating a wholly neoliberal policy regime in Europe.

Much criticism was been leveled at adult education academics because they did not respond at the time. Walker refers to Mezirow's 1996 article where he accused the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education of neglecting social purpose education and stated that:

> All evidence points to abandonment of significant social goals…[a] failure of our historic promise to serve as a means of realizing democracy's full potential and the decline of a once idealistic movement to a collective free market mentality with a vested interest in serving only those who can afford to pay and in maintaining the social status (2).

There were many other critics including Field, 2000; Martin, 2001; Fenwick, 2003 and Walker who encapsulate the dominant critique that "adult educators and administrators internalised the 'free-market ethic' and offered for –profit and for – the – economy courses and programmes" (2012: 3). This criticism is justified to an extent, however it depends very much on what paradigm of lifelong learning is under discussion – UNESCO or OECD. Martin notes that there are different forms of LL – the kind that represents

> those ubiquitous ideological and economic forces, now seen in the global market, which seek to dominate, oppress and exploit ordinary people by turning them into the producers of other people's power, profit and privilege. These are also the forces which, I would contend, are now hegemonic within the current construction of lifelong learning as a universalised learning to labour, or learning for earning. This is not to deny that there are other more palatable and progressive versions of lifelong learning (2001:1).

However, the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning suggested a significant change in the structure of education, which I would argue, was long overdue. The rigid and elite traditional system did little to promote democracy and the concept of LL carried traces of emancipatory possibilities although, largely unrealized. However, exogenous factors had a role to play in the

particular path LL followed and as Wilson notes "factors like inflation, demographic changes, and urbanization… [can] act as a catalyst for change..." (2000:255). Peter Kerr (2002) used neo-evolutionary reasoning to explain state and political change (331:2002). In this schema, change is a complex convergence of ideas, interests and environmental conditions. It creates assemblages. According to Kerr, the neo-evolutionary approach offers:

> a processual, diachronic account of the historical development of whatever variables are under scrutiny. This entails viewing change as a continuous and ongoing process driven by a complex and unfolding array of different factors" (335:2002).

Neo-evolutionary theory has synergies with the Deleuzian rhizome. Disparate variables unfold and converge creating bulbous points of intersection in the rhizome thereby creating an assemblage of multiple concepts and interests – state, business, and education.   This convergence at points of intersection are not random or chance encounters according to Kerr but are the result of "goal oriented actors, working within the parameters of strategic and ideological heuristics, deliberately seek[ing] specific objectives" (2002:336).   Thus, interest groups form and in turn guide action. They create an 'assemblage' and draw concepts from relevant conceptual milieu (DG: 1988/2004:555), in this context, the educational milieu and lifelong learning.

2.2 Political and economic frameworks in Lifelong Learning

Murtagh notes that EU policy changed at "the end of the 20th Century and during the first part of the 21st Century, the emphasis shifted to growth and competitiveness, with education and training seen as key elements to developing human capital" (2014:36). Continuous professional development, re-training and upskilling became important to maintain careers or sustain employment. The modernisation process began in 1960s, and emphasised the needs of the labour market and these came to dominate policy development (O'Sullivan, 2005; Lynch 2012) and in particular LL policy.

The alignment of democratic ideological frameworks with an economic position that supports capitalism and promotes globalisation and the market economy is a core feature of neo-liberalism. Thus, thinking about learning in this context, as an ongoing lifelong process, matches the economic context in which people work and learn. In a setting where flexible and adaptable systems of work come to dominate, education equally changes and responds to the evolving necessity to keep the knowledge and skills of the workforce current in a fast-changing work environment. Lifelong Learning encompasses the kind of education required and policy develops in response to the dominant needs and as exogenous factors occur. Education and

training territories are thus deterritorialised as bodies of production for skills, competences and knowledge in the lifelong learning assemblage.

This correlation of human bodies as assets, resources, skill-holders, capital and equipment was an instrumental deterritorialisation process. Deleuze asserted that:

> One can envisage education becoming less and less a closed site differentiated from the workplace as another closed site, but both disappearing and giving way to frightful continual training, to continual monitoring of worker-schoolkids or bureaucrat-students. They try to present it as a reform of the school system, but it's really its dismantling. (1995:179, cited in Semetsky, 2008:ix)

In the Deleuzian vista, education is reduced to skills and knowledge acquisition for employment and education becomes a credential machine. O'Sullivan's observations are pertinent here when he notes that

> To have been certified as competent in the designated area by an authorised body is to be deemed to be employable…[and] resulted in work routines being subjected to standardisation, classification and naming as programmes of preparation are developed which aspire to transmitting a newly identified and calibrated skill and knowledge base of an area of economic activity. It further formalises the gatekeeping function performed by credentialisation in determining who is to be employed in the area… In the process it becomes newly differentiated and distinguishable, reworked in terms of skill, common knowledge and activity type, and exhibits varieties of collectivising and professionalising tendencies (2005:284).

Hence, demand for professional regulation expands and employability is contingent on formal education awards and credentials. Policy makers are influenced by these emerging changes and they

> … frame policies in order to make them politically acceptable ... In order for their policy programs to be adopted, political elites strategically craft frames and use them to legitimise their policies to the public and each other… (Campbell: 2002:27)

This "can result in privileging the success of certain types of change over others" (Wilson, 2000:236), depending on the priorities at the time. The globalising of education policy (Lingard B., and Ozga J, 2007:66) had an impact too. For instance, the Lisbon Agenda had an overarching mission for Europe to become:

> …the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.
> (Council of the European Union, Education & Training 2010, 2004:7)

A globalised 'knowledge-based economy' needs a knowledge-based workforce, and thus education's role is central in accomplishing this aim and creating the awards and credentials to

match regional and international demand. The desire to create a workforce that will match the labour market assumes that labour market itself is stable and unproblematic which belies its volatile nature and its vulnerability to economic boom and bust. Deleuze and Guattari use the concept Body Without Organs (BwO) – a concept that describes how undifferentiated macro ideas such as 'economic growth', 'capitalism', 'global markets' amongst others become embedded in state and systems until we believe that they underlie existence and must be sustained for life as we know it to continue. They become organised in policies and strategies and institutionalised in state organisations and political and economic bodies all of which relate to each other. Education does not escape and becomes another differentiated body out of this BwO. Thus, economic concerns form part of the educational rhizome and it is difficult to disentangle them education and embedded educati

2.2.1 Deterritorialisation of Lifelong Learning

The Bologna Process became the driver of education policy changes in Europe. It set out strategies for the alignment of education with the goals of the Lisbon Agenda and a process of modernising education across Europe began. In 2009, Bologna proclaimed a new paradigm for education:

> equitable access for all; lifelong learning with a focus on widening participation, fostering partnerships between public authorities, students, employers and employees; recognition of prior learning; improving employability by embedding work placement in study programmes; student-centred learning and teaching; research and innovation through interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral programmes. (2009: 2-3)

This policy paradigm seamlessly linked the divergent interests of emancipatory and inclusive education with work, employment, productivity and growth. It is as if work could liberate us from poverty. The Commission's *Education and Training 2010* strategy outlined in 2004 expressed clearly the interlocking nature of economic and education policy development when it stated that:

> Human resources are the Union's main asset and it is now acknowledged that investment in this area is a determining factor of growth and productivity, in the same way as investment in capital and equipment. (2004: 7)

Thus, education policy had developed strong neoliberal tones. Lynch *et al*. point out that neoliberalism "maps on a new set of goals to education … [where the] student is defined as an economic maximiser [and] education becomes just another consumption good (not a human right)" (2012:14, 22). Lifelong Learning became a substantial educational vehicle to achieve the Commission's economic goals. This was articulated in the *Memorandum for Lifelong*

Learning (2000) when it sought to adapt the education and training systems for the knowledge society (Rasmussen, 2014:330). Thus, LL was a key partner in achieving the ambitions of the Lisbon Agenda and as Rasmussen notes it became a "key concept in education policy" (*ibid*).

The importance of LL was further extolled in the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* when it stated that:

> Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning (2000:3).

Yet, there was no clear description of LL and the concept remained ambiguous and vague (Burke & Jackson, 2007:14). Although it was described as 'from cradle to grave', it was designed for adult learners, not children, and generally concerned with post school education settings or adult education territories such as vocational education, workplace education, professional development and community education arenas, and formal, non-formal and informal learning (Rasmussen 2014:330; Burke & Jackson, 2007:14). Without clear conceptualizations, LL was easy prey for reterritorialization to develop education and training policies for labour market need and accompanying practices such as RPL.

2.3 Deterritorialisation of Recognition of Prior Learning

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector was a strong advocate of RPL as a tool for upskilling individuals for work and progression in education. Since 1987, VET carried the educational load for vocational skills development and education for work in Europe. Between 75% - 90% of its budget was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) established under the Treaty of Rome to improve employment and the geographical and occupational mobility of workers (Murtagh, 2014:26; Rasmussen, 2014:328). Therefore, given its role, it is not surprising that the Commission appointed the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) to compile RPL inventories to ascertain where and for whom RPL was implemented. To date five inventories have been completed (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014) and in 2016 a synthesis report was published. In addition, a thematic report, *Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning (2016)* was published and the *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (2009)* was updated in 2015. Another inventory began in 2018. Thus, the reporting activity on RPL within Europe has been staggering.

The various audits undertaken by Cedefop, guidelines and other monitoring documents together with the eighteen policy documents that recommend the implementation of RPL over a 23 year period (1989-2011) led the European Commission to publish *Recommendations for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2012). RPL is defined in the document as a mechanism for enhancing employability, mobility and lifelong learning in order to improve the functioning of the labour market (2012:1). The Council of Europe agreed with the Recommendations and proposed that:

> the member states should … have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning … (2012:3)

Many member states have already complied with the 2012 Recommendations, to a greater or lesser extent, or are in the process of complying with this policy.

The *Recommendations* emphasise the benefits to those who are most marginalised: disadvantaged groups, individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment. These groups are most likely to benefit from validation arrangements since validation was seen to increase their participation in LL and their access to the labour market (2012:3/3c). However, the 2016 Cedefop inventory notes that much more work is required to develop RPL in this domain (pp. 19, 40), which indicates that it has not been very successful in promoting inclusion in RPL and education up to now. RPL claimants require specific capabilities to undergo the process. Research, presentation skills, good writing abilities and a highly attuned capacity for reflection are important for making a successful claim. Without deeper consideration of the processes required for achieving this end, RPL is more likely to benefit those who are already most educated in society. The issue of who benefits from RPL will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Generally, the inventories show that much work is needed to launch RPL in some countries. The following chart provides an overview of policy strategies and legislation for implementation in the member states.

Fig. 6 Overview of policy and legislation in European member states

FI, FR, ES	CZ, DK, EE, IT, IS, LU, LV, NO, NL, PL, RO
AT, BE-Flanders, CH, CY, DE, EL, LI, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK,TR	BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, HU, IE, SE, UK- E&NI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales
Strategy is in development	**No strategy in place**

Single legal framework for validation	**Multiple frameworks in place covering different sectors**
FR, MT, TR	AT, BE (Flanders & Wallonia), BG, CH, CZ, DK, FI, ES, EE, DE, IT, LT, LV, LU, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI
IS (Adult education), IE, HU (HE, Adult education), PT (HE and non-HE), RO, SK	CY, EL, HR, LI, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)
Legal framework for other initiatives also covers validation	**No legal framework covering validation**

AT – Austria, BE – Belgium , BG – Bulgaria, CY – Cyprus, CZ - Czech Republic, DK – Denmark, DE – Germany, EE – Estonia, ES – Spain, FI – Finland,, FR – France, GB - United Kingdom, GR – Greece, HU – Hungary, HR – Croatia, IE – Ireland, IT – Italy, LV – Latvia, LT – Lithuania, LU – Luxembourg, MT – Malta, NL – Netherlands, PO – Poland, PT – Portugal, RO – Romania, SE – Sweden, SI – Slovenia, SK – Slovakia

(CEDEFOP 2014:5 European Inventory for Validation)

The charts clearly demonstrate Ireland has no national strategy and no stand-alone legislation. However, Ireland is behind the RPL development curve compared with some other states in Europe, but only six states have emerged as leaders in the field with France being the only state to have a single legal framework and a comprehensive strategy in place.

The European Guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015) are aligned with the European Council *Recommendations for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* of 2012. The Guidelines name the "functional validation arrangements" for RPL and include:

(a) impartial and comprehensive information, guidance and counselling throughout the process;

(b) coordination of relevant actors at different levels and with different functions;

(c) linking validation arrangements to national qualifications frameworks and systems;

(d) referring to learning-outcomes-based standards, similar and/or equivalent to those used for formal education and training;

(e) creation of quality assurance mechanisms;

(f) provision of qualified professionals.   (2015:10).

The Guidelines provide a framework for professionalisation of work. They emphasise skills auditing and an individualised approach focused on the "needs and interests of individual learners, not according to the needs and interests of particular institutions and systems" (2015:37). Their focus is the adult education domain of vocational education and workplace training where much of the practice in Europe flourishes. Mention is made of higher education in the following passage:

> … higher education institutions have generally made limited use of the validation for awarding exemptions to part of a learning programme and rarely have full qualifications been awarded in this way. However, some of these processes are embedded into recognition of prior formal education and are ill prepared for learning acquired outside formal institutions. Further use of the learning outcomes approach, both for defining and describing programmes and as an element in European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), might increase the possibilities for validation on a longer-term basis (2015:37).

These comments point out that higher education has avoided RPL even though the *European Higher Education Area: Bologna Implementation Report 2012* states that 46 of the 47 regions in the area have complied with the Recommendation – 47% for access to programmes and 62% for credits (Crosier *et al*., 2012).

In general, EU member states will require resources to implement the *Recommendations* and many have not yet developed national strategies or legislation (see Fig. 6). Indications of a shift in position in higher education through the publication of policy strategies on college websites is not an indicator of practice. National policy, promotion strategies and resources to support implementation are required if implementation is to succeed. The *Recommendations* have been constructed without reference to these implications and also within a specific conceptualisation of RPL as a co-producer of human capital. The mechanistic approach locates RPL in a very narrow domain of practice. It is no more than a term, and a tool for shortening time in education and pointing out gaps in skills promoting further attainment of qualifications for work. In this context, RPL becomes a useful tool in the BwO economic growth machine and nothing more. I suggest later in this chapter that the slow implementation of RPL in Ireland

could be an advantage as it could give Ireland time to reflect on how RPL has been shaped elsewhere, learn from experience and create a different conceptualisation of RPL.

2.4 Irish RPL policy development

The term 'recognition of prior learning' in Ireland can be traced back to the government committee report on Adult Education in 1973 when the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) advocated for 'a facility to recognise prior work-based learning' (OECD, 2007:18). In the following years, policy was developed by the NCEA on 'work experience and experiential learning' (2007:21). Participation levels were very low as "higher education institutions were mainly concerned with accommodating increasing numbers of school leavers" (2007:21). Finally, in 1993, the NCEA published a policy on Prior Experiential Learning. Some practice was initiated in some institutions although practice in the university sector was confined to adult education and access programmes (2007:21). Another constraining element is perhaps the nature of adult education in Ireland. Adult Education is made up of a disparate and often nomadic collectivity of educators and carried out in a range of different settings. It is different to other forms of education sectors because it is not characterized in defined, coded and bounded ways such as, for example, school education. Adult Education flows in multiple territories including: community, further, vocational, prison, higher and youth education and training. It also incorporates continuing professional education and training or what is now called Lifelong Learning. As O'Sullivan points out "official thinking on adult education remained depressingly narrow and even regressive. In all, there was an uncertainty as to what adult education was and what was distinctive about it as a mode of learning" (2005:521). Lifelong learning is just one field of adult education not the entire plane yet it has been re-presented *as* adult education and in the process, I would argue, has had a regressive impact on the discipline itself. In Ireland, only one academic department of adult education exists and is located in Maynooth University. Thus, adult education has experienced a crisis of legitimacy and significant disempowerment leaving its territories open for de/reterritorialization in policy and practice. In consequence, RPL in Ireland was initiated through policy development and consequently there was little done to conceptualise it adequately or formulate workable modes of practice.

However, *Learning for Life: The White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) suggested some 'lines of flight' from which to conceptualise and practice RPL differently. The White Paper viewed LL as a series of changing life cycles for learners and included a 'life wide' dimension which

referred to 'the multiplicity of sites in which learning occurs … [and] encompasses the school or other conventional educational institutions, training centres, the home, the community and the workplace' (2000:32). To facilitate the introduction of a 'life wide' approach, the conceptualisation of LL offered in the White Paper (2000) emphasised the "life wide" dimension of learning as integral and not something separate or subsidiary in education. The conceptualization of LL in the White Paper indicates a different epistemological position. In this paradigm, all learning is valued no matter when or wherever it happens. It involves more than a supply of courses for adults, but also a recognition that learning is ongoing throughout all life experiences from the cradle to the grave. The fundamental conceptual difference is striking. However, the White Paper's concept of 'life wide' learning was not developed any further and the potential to re-conceptualise learning beyond the triad of informal, non-formal and formal was lost. The practice of RPL did not come to prominence in Ireland until 2003 when the Irish National Framework of Qualifications was established.

In 2005, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) published *Principles and Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training*. The NQAI took an integrated approach to the concept of RPL and included the recognition of all learning including experiential learning. The guidelines were intended to support institutions to build their own RPL policy, procedures and practice and to create a synergy in the system as it evolved. The principles underpinning the guidelines were:

- The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved.
- Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual.
- The recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context (2005:17).

A simple and open approach to implementation is reflected in these principles. They are underpinned by an ethic of inclusivity where all learning was valued equally. Workplace considerations are not dominant, which is noteworthy given the emphasis on these matters on the European side. The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* determined this early

legislation. The legislation articulated a commitment to RPL and thus educational institutions, governed by this legislation, had to comply.

The legislative domain has gained more ground in Ireland in recent years. The 2012 *Quality and Quality Assurance Act* established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and tasked them to "establish and publish policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression" (Section 56[1]), including policies on "credit and recognition of prior learning" (Section 56[3]). The *Universities Act 1997* specifies that one of the primary objects of universities is "to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education" (Part III, Section12 [j]). RPL is embedded in European LL, thus by default universities are committed to RPL whether they acknowledge it or not. Irish Universities are also signatories to a *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning* (2010) that had ten commitments, including Commitment 6: Recognition of Prior Learning (2010:6). It would appear that legislatively and at a level of European policy, Irish universities have made a commitment to advance the implementation of RPL. Policy is now in place in most higher education institutions. The implementation of these policies is however uneven with many universities showing a pronounced indifference to implementation as we will see in the Irish audit of RPL that follows (Fig. 8).

2.4.1 RPL Implementation in Irish higher education

There is a considerable disconnect between RPL policy and implementation in Ireland. To date, a considerable amount of time, energy and money has been devoted to policy development in Europe; it has had little impact in the Irish university sector. An overview of practice in higher education institutions was carried out in 2006, 2010 and again in 2015 as part of the Irish contribution to the European Inventories on RPL compiled by Cedefop. The Irish 2016 Inventory reports that so far, there is:

> … no single national strategy for validation in Ireland, but there have been positive developments towards a system for recognition of prior learning (RPL) and … a national recognition of prior learning practitioner network has been established to coordinate validation development across sectors: the inaugural meeting was held in 2015 (2017:6).

Ireland struggles to comply with EU directives, it is an uphill battle to implement them here. The following charts provide a useful comparative analysis of Irish policy and practice implementation over the past twelve years.

Fig.7   Overview of RPL practice in Ireland (2006)

2006	Total sample: 22 Higher Education Institutions
	11 institutions out of the sample surveyed had RPL policy and procedures in place
	3 out of the 11 institutions used RPL for access
	The other 11 institutions did not use RPL

(Geoghegan, 2006:310)

Fig. 8 Overview of RPL practice in Ireland (2010)

2010	Total sample: 26 Higher Education Institutions
	16 institutions had RPL policy and procedures documents on their websites
	9 institutions charged a fee for RPL and this ranged from €15-€100
	The other 10 institutions did not publish RPL policy or procedures on their websites

(Noonan, 2010)

The charts above show that policy development moves slowly in Irish higher education. Over a four year period, a trawl of Higher Education Institution (HEI) websites show only a small increase with a further five institutions with policy in place. Since the first recorded mention of RPL in NCEA policy in 1973, it took a further thirty-three years for 11 HEIs to put policy in place.

In 2015, the National Forum for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education commissioned another piece of research to review practice for the sector in Ireland. In total twenty-two representatives from the institutions were interviewed, a review of policy information was audited, policy makers at Quality and Qualifications Ireland were interviewed together with

nine representatives from employer and professional bodies. "Information relating to 35 of the possible 38 institutions was reviewed to ascertain the public facing information available regarding RPL "(ibid:20) The findings highlighted that while institutional policies are now in place in almost all institutions for RPL, it is not always accessible to the public.

Fig. 9 Inventory of RPL practice in Ireland (2015)

	University	IOT	Constituent college of university with Compact[4]	Other	Total number
Total research sample	7	14	3	14	38
Publicly available information on RPL	7	14	2	12	35
RPL policy publicly available	5	9		2	16

(Goggin *et al*., 2015:20)

The chart above shows that thirty-five out of a possible thirty-eight higher education institutions have policy in place (Goggin *et al*., 2015:20). Practice has also advanced with estimates that in fourteen institutions … "1,300 formal claims and 450 claims based on experiential learning" are now processed annually (*ibid*:54). However, it took over a decade for institutions to create policy. Implementation has increased but only 450 claims that include experience were processed across 38 HEIs who together had a population of 222,618 students registered in 2015 (HEA, 2016:6). RPL practice is extremely slow to develop in Irish Higher Education. This frustrates demand and without a national strategy to promote RPL, it is unlikely that demand will rise in the near future.

It is evident that a divergence exists within and between institutions related to policy and practice. For instance, practitioners noted that while a "high level of policy is in place, the autonomy of departments and schools in implementing this policy means that the practice varies considerably within and between institutions" (Goggin *et al.,*2015:55). Much of the limitations set by departments are due to the requirements set by professional bodies. The autonomy issue is not widely explored in the Forum Report (*ibid*).

Fig. 10 Styles of practice in Irish Higher Education (2015)
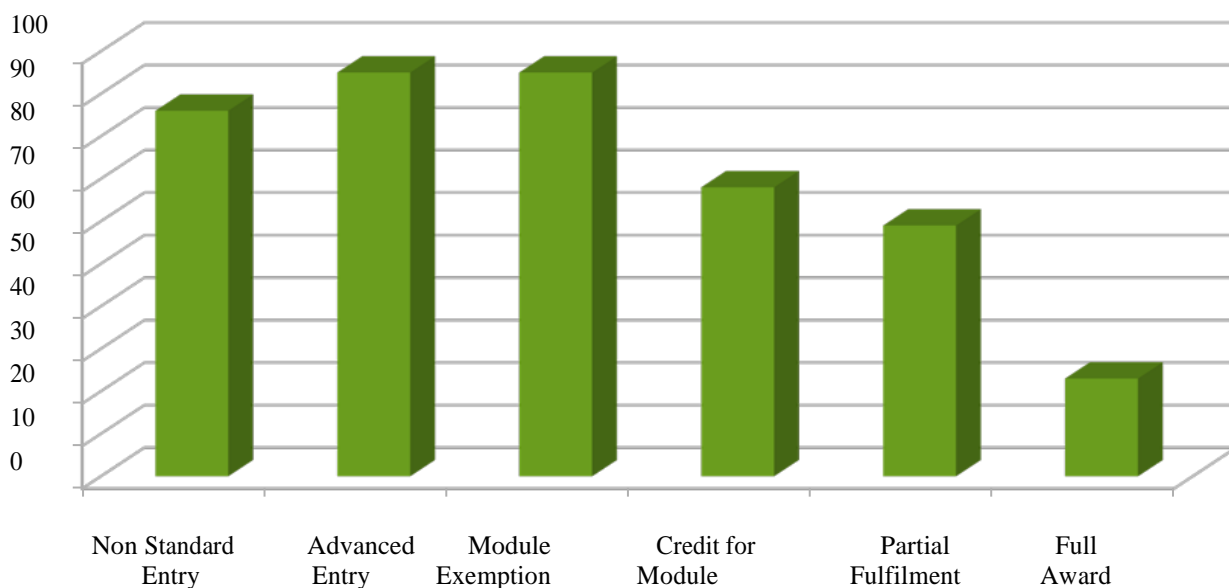
Practice continues to be low on a national scale, yet new activity is noted in a number of areas as shown in the chart above. The number of partial and full awards has grown, and access and advanced entry has improved. Exemptions and credits for modules are less popular while the access agenda appears to be emerging as a central purpose. The Report notes that problems exist regarding consistent and accurate categorization of data about RPL in institutions and in turn this raises issues about the overall accuracy of the data presented.

2.5 Levels of practice in Irish universities

The *Country Background Report* (CBR) for Ireland demonstrates that the "lack of discussion or debate at institutional level could mask resistance and or reflect a lack of awareness or lack of demand for RPL" (OECD 2007:46). There is also a perception that the universities in particular are resistant to practice because they wish to guard their own elite knowledge constructs and many perceive RPL as a threat to "quality assurance, and maintaining the integrity of its awards is rigorously guarded and the academic standards maintained" (OECD, 2007:46). Furthermore, the CBR noted the following:

> A fully implemented strategy will require a conceptual shift in understanding of the learned curriculum as well as the taught curriculum. It will also require conceptual shifts in approaches to assessment mechanisms, and to assessment criteria as they relate

to experiential learning, both prior and concurrent. It will also require a change in how prior experiential learning is dealt with in programmes, especially in cases where programmes are designed with, and for, companies, organisations, and adults in the workplace. This dimension of RPL requires both intellectual consideration and resourcing.   (OECD, 2007:47)

The complexity of the RPL practice is outlined here which is refreshing as much policy development ignores the problems of practice and the epistemological challenges of RPL in higher education. The conceptual shifts required are largely ignored and RPL is treated as something detached from education – a separate entity entirely. There is certainly a need for much reflection on RPL in higher education if it is to implement practice. As it stands, the university sector uses a conceptualisation based on the idea that "RPL assessment is carried out on the basis of achievement of, as appropriate, learning outcomes, curriculum and/or programme standards and objectives" (OECD, 2007:45). RPL is a technical assessment that has little or nothing to do with learning.

Geoghegan (2006) argues that specific conditions need to be in place in institutions if RPL is to flourish and has put forward two 'ideal types' of higher education institutions. The first is the 'liberating' type which is characterized by a responsiveness to social change and an ability to relate programmes to real world needs, and which emphasises multiple ways of knowledge making (2006:54). The second type outlines a 'constraining' institution that holds a tight control on the curriculum, perpetuates a discipline-specific model of course provision and lacks innovation. Geoghegan concludes that colleges with enabling policies are more likely to implement RPL, and that if RPL were fully resourced more universities would engage in its practice. This brings up the thorny issue of who pays. This issue is unresolved in Irish higher education. If, as Reid (2007) argues, institutions are to carry the costs, then it is unlikely that they will wish to attract applicants; and if students are to pay fees, that will affect their participation (2007:72). Geoghegan (2006) points out one other specific extraneous matter blocking RPL implementation – demand from students for recognition. She states that this was "due to the rapid expansion of higher education for school leavers …" (2006:70-71) and thus most institutions already had a sufficient level of students. Hence, there was no need to recruit students through RPL. At the time of her study, Ireland was moving through a period of economic growth with almost full employment and consequently levels of participation in higher education were high. In this context, there was little motivation for academic staff to champion RPL as they had sufficient students or all they could manage. This provided institutions with an 'opt out' clause. Information about RPL in the public arena in Ireland is

still almost non-existent. Strides to develop practice are useless without a strategy to raise public awareness about RPL and its purpose and value in education, and the development of an adequate funding model that will support implementation. This latter point is a contentious issue and at the time of this study, no specific resources were available for RPL in higher education.

In 2011, a report from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) reviewed RPL practice in Ireland and found that:

> RPL practice, however, is largely *ad hoc* and the level of activity can vary widely between education providers. A number of issues around further development of RPL were identified in consultations such as gaps in information and communication on RPL, lack of data on the costs and availability, limited evaluation of practice, lack of dedicated funding and uncertainty around relevant roles of actors. In short, a significant amount of positive experience has been amassed through a bottom-up approach, however, a national approach to RPL policy needs to be developed (2011:4).

These findings still pertain today which shows that RPL developments are not a priority for anyone except policy makers.

2.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, it was argued that LL evolved in response to demands from policy makers for a flexible education system that could address the need to up-skill the workforce in western labour markets. RPL is a companion concept in LL. I argued that RPL emerged from a market focused, lifelong learning assemblage in Europe, that 'deterritorialised' RPL to increase efficiencies in the production of human capital for the labour market. With this emphasis on the economic benefits RPL is a tool for the Body without Organs economic growth machine and thus is detached from the need for theoretical advancement unless it relates to education for work. In consequence, the RPL paradox remains – motivation for RPL is high in policy development while practice levels vary and are low in many member states and education sectors.

However, early conceptualizations of LL in Ireland show possibilities for the development of a different and more inclusive mode of RPL. The *White Paper* (2000) offered some interesting ideas about learning, and did not delineate them into categories as is the habit in most RPL policies. However, this opportunity for theoretical development of RPL was not progressed until it was taken up again in 2005 when the Irish *Guidelines* were published. These two policy

documents indicate possibilities for a more inclusive approach. However, implementation continues to be slow in Ireland, and especially in the university sector. Recent inventories for RPL in Ireland confirm that practice has not increased to any significant degree over the past decade.

Overall, Irish RPL has not developed very far since these reports were published. This may not be a bad thing given the instrumental deterritorialisation of RPL in Europe with its uncompromising focus on employability to sustain the BwO. Ireland has a chance to use RPL differently. Conceptualisation of RPL needs further development if we are to reterritorialize RPL and create a more emancipatory model in education. This matter is central to this enquiry and is pursued through an exploration of conceptualisations of RPL in other domains beyond Europe and Ireland, in theory and in case studies in this enquiry.

Thus, the following chapter explores conceptualisations of RPL in practice and theory. I follow research reports inside the European Union and in Canada, South Africa and the US to find out how RPL is working there. I specifically explore research from a French university, as France is the only country in Europe that has fully embraced RPL and where it is now a human right.

CHAPTER III

BODIES OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

3.0 Introduction

In Chapter ll, I discussed the instrumental deterritorialisation of RPL in policy development and looked at the conceptual formation of RPL as an instrument of neoliberal education.

In this chapter, I explore how conceptualisations evolved in practice and theory. Empirical evidence is reviewed to locate and evaluate the effects of RPL in different educational contexts and settings.

The empirical studies selected bring diverse dimensions of contexts and outcomes to the discussion. I use both qualitative and quantitative studies from different settings and regions. International studies chosen are principally from Canada, the United States of America and South Africa, and studies undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission. Accounts from smaller qualitative research pinpoint some deep struggles experienced by claimants and assessors. These provide insights at a micro level into the role of RPL in learning and in fostering social inclusion.

The chapter builds links between emergent and current RPL theoretical development with research from the field of practice. The research gives an external view of RPL while theory moves into the interior of the concept and explores its contours - contradictions, misconceptions, gaps and differences in practice/theory. I begin by analyzing the definitions used to describe RPL.

3.1 RPL definitions and critique

RPL in its definitions categorises learning into a conceptual triad of formal, non-formal and informal learning. These categorises have remained stable over time. However, lately, the conceptualization of formal learning as intentional learning is creeping into the definition of RPL (Ainsworth and Eaton: 2010 [video online]). The concept can be defined as "cognitive processes that have learning as a goal rather than an incidental outcome" (Berieter and Scardamalia, 1989:363). Intentional learning is generally concerned with ways of promoting

goal oriented learning in children and schools. The concept relates less well to RPL because as Berieter and Scardamalia note that 'lifelong learning' subsumes intentional learning because

> the lifelong learner appears to have more than a lively curiosity and a willingness to study, more even than a serious involvement in some subject matter. The lifelong learner treats learning itself as a valued part of life and structures other activities in life so that they will serve learning." (1989:362).

Livingstone's (2012) later analysis of a large Canadian study on formal and informal learning suggests that intentional learning takes place in all dimensions of adult life. Participants in the study showed "significant intentional learning in….household work" (2012:58) and in other informal learning settings such as volunteering and it was noted that " The vast majority of adults are spending still more substantial and recognizable amounts of time regularly in intentional informal learning pursuits related to paid and unpaid work as well as general interests" (ibid:61). Thus, the relationship of intentional learning to RPL in relation to adult education is flawed as adult learners are motivated, goal oriented and intentional learners anyway. In RPL the categorizations of learning as formal, informal and non-formal contrive divisions in learning that are also flawed.

In Ireland, each label has a definition, emphasising how they differ from each other. I provided the definitions earlier but I repeat them here for convenience.

- *Formal learning* is defined as learning that takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards;
- *non-formal learning* takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed, but it does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are: learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector or trade union and in community-based learning.
- *Informal learning* takes place through life and work experience (sometimes referred to as experiential learning).

(NQAI, 2005)

These learning divisions are common internationally and have become embedded concepts in RPL policy, research and practice. There are some interesting derivations. In Canada, the *National Quality Assurance Manual* (2015) collects them together in a single definition: "*life experience* may be formal, informal or non-formal" (2015:1). In the *European Guidelines for*

Validating Non-formal and Informal learning (2015) only two of the concepts are used and they are qualified by explaining them as "… learning frequently takes place outside formal education and training – at home, in the workplace or taught leisure time-activities" (Cedefop, 2015:15). The emphasis is on "making visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals" (*ibid*). In the Canadian version all forms of learning are deemed to take place through experience, while in the European version prior learning is specifically defined as not formal learning and in Ireland all three forms are included and have distinct definitions.

The exclusion of formal learning from the European definition is noteworthy as it indicates its removal from the RPL lexicon. This reflects a growing tendency to treat transfer of credit as separate from RPL. This is due to the distinctive nature of this component. It fits most easily within formal structures because the learning was gained at an equivalent standard in a similar institution. All formal learning is hence bundled together, conveniently removing associations with informal and non-formal categories. In practice, the division works to create different learning species under the genus 'formal learning'. The 'other' species or sub-species carry prefixes: *in*formal and *non*-formal. These prefixes indicate subordination in relation to the genus formal learning. The ensuing dichotomy locates RPL amidst an old battle between learning gained in experience and learning gained in formal education. Thus, RPL is located conceptually in an in-between space and as a divergent line from formal learning which in turn creates an epistemological clash amidst both. The definitions thus deepen existing oppositions by positioning prior learning RPL as 'other learning', and as somehow 'less than' learning derived from formal education. Theories of adult education problematise this position.

3.2 Adult experiential learning theory

Learning from and in experience is integral to adult education pedagogies, methods, research and practice. This position is reflected in the work of theorists such as Dewey (1938); Knowles (1980, 1989); Mezirow (1981); Freire (1970); Usher, Bryant and Johnson (1997); Boud and Walker (1990); Kolb (1984); Fenwick (2003); Michelson (2015) and Semetsky (2006). Collectively these theorists conceptualise, in different ways, the educative power of experience. Their work shows how experience and learning go together, hand in hand.

Experience is prized in adult education as a "resource of the highest value [and] … the adult learner's living textbook …already there waiting to be appropriated" (Lindeman, 1961:6-7.

cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999:222). The conditions for the practice of RPL emanated from experiential learning theory (Harris, 2010; Michelson 2015). The value placed on experience provided a rationale for RPL that insisted that learning gained in experience is valuable in education.

Knowles theorises the relationship between learning and experience in his thirteen principles of adult learning. The sixth principle states "learning should be related to and should make use of the students' experience" (1989:76). In a similar vein, Usher, Bryant and Johnson note that learning does not "simplistically derive from experience; rather experience and learning are mutually positioned in an interactive dynamic" (1997:107, cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999:228). The relationship between experience and learning is at the heart of making meaning and of knowledge development for adults (Brookfield, 1987; Freire, 1978; Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow pursues the construction of perspective formation and examines how we come to challenge our assumptions and transform our thinking. He claims that experience shapes our frames of reference which can sometimes limit our perspectives, and that adult education enables learners to rethink these assumptions and transform them (1997:6). Brookfield emphasises the role of personal crises, and how "discrepancies between expectation and actuality of people's lives" (1987:31) provides the foundations for learning and change. Inherent in the concept of learning from experience is the idea that knowledge making can take place anywhere, and adult education andragogy and critical pedagogies advocate for its integration in education processes. This pedagogical approach is sometimes termed 'rpl' (Breier, 2006:81). Adult education pedagogies value reflection on experience as a process in the action of learning, and it is used to identify our assumptions, to contribute to personal and group knowledge and as a resource from which to build new understanding and create new paradigms.

RPL is very different. It is effectively a deterritorialisation of 'rpl'. RPL is cut loose from its pedagogical and theoretical roots and detached from the complex philosophical problem of the nature of learning itself. While RPL emerged from adult experiential learning pedagogies, in my experience it emerged without strong theoretical roots of its own. Yet it has become a substantial paradigm in education and work. Challis (1996) makes an important distinction between experiential learning and 'RPL'. She notes that theories of adult experiential learning focus on how we learn in experience while RPL relates to what we know and have learned (cited in Fejes and Andersson, 2008:39). Nonetheless, both look at the process of learning

itself. In RPL the process focuses on the outcomes of learning. while research mostly examines the outcomes of RPL. In the previous chapter, I argued that RPL is most valued for its role in the labour market; research supports this position but also uncovers other benefits which will be explored in this chapter.

3.3 Recognising learning in experience

Canada along with the US is one of the founders of RPL internationally (Leney, Freitas and João, 2009:7). Practice has been in place in Canada since the early 1990s, albeit in many cases as pilot projects (Aarts *et al*., 2003:3). In 2001, the Conference Board of Canada (CBC), a not-for-profit research organization dedicated to economic and social research, carried out a survey called the *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada.*   The researchers surveyed 12,000 households to find out how the absence of opportunities for RPL affected their credential gaining prospects. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is the term used in Canada.

The CBC (2001) survey found that people identified as earning less and were engaged in work below their capabilities due to lack of PLAR opportunities. The study went on to evaluate the implications of non-recognition for employers and noted that they too lost out because the full abilities of staff was under-utilized.   The survey determined that this had implications at a national economic level because the state also lost out in productivity and incurred costs by delivering education and training to staff who might not need it (2001:4). The report suggests that if RPL were more widely available, individual staff, employers and the economy would benefit.

The chart below is a presentation of the findings from the study.

Fig.11 Brain Gain – economic benefits of RPL in Canada (2001)
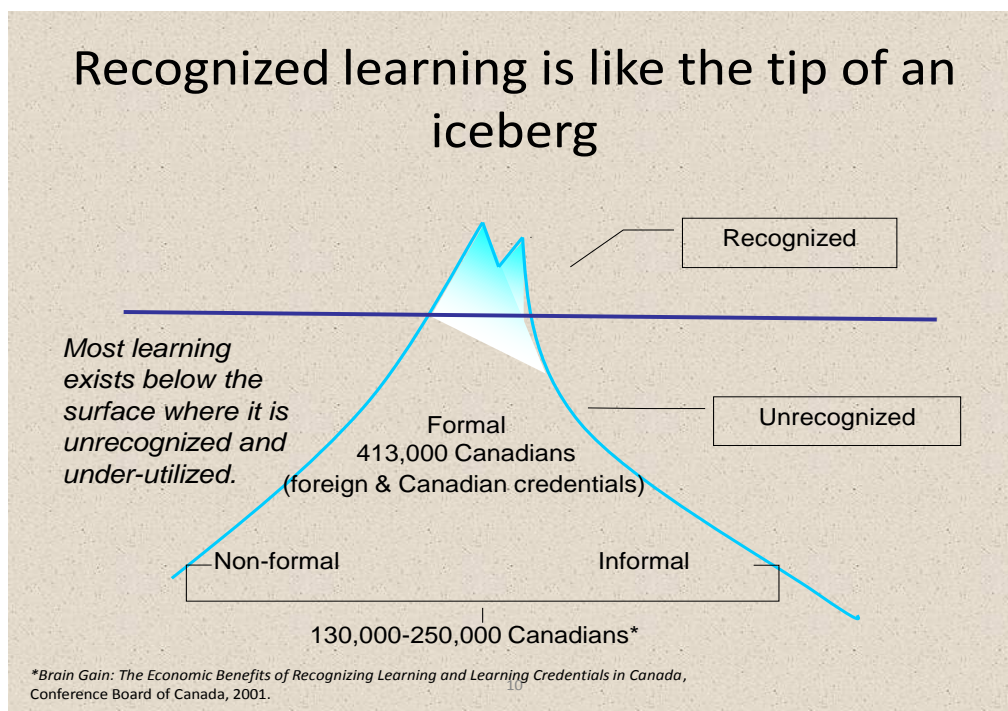
Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada, Conference Board of Canada 2001.

The *Brain Gain* study is market focused and extols the economic gains that PLAR can bring. The notion that experience is acknowledged as an actual 'brain gain' is interesting because it frames learning in experience very positively. Employers have traditionally acknowledged the value of experience and it is often a criterion for getting a job. This is in contrast with higher education contexts where learning from experience, while valued, struggles for recognition. As Osman notes "... the experience of RPL seemed to sharpen the distinction between academic and prior knowledge rather than bridging or blurring it" (2010:214). In the business world, there is no dichotomy; experience is valued.

The Brain Gain diagram presents an image of learning that is very powerful and compelling. The image suggests that non-formal and informal learning, located below the waterline, offer wider, stronger and deeper learning; while formal learning, forming the tip of the iceberg, is higher and forms into a narrow peak of what is formally recognized. Generally, the image offers a picture of problems at stake in RPL. The artificial separation of the learning types at the waterline is false. If we superimpose the image of the rhizome on the iceberg, we might

see how the material below the waterline flows upwards and outwards in an unruly way and this might give us a more accurate image of learning in general.

Yet the iceberg image is very helpful in explaining problems of RPL. According to Cedefop (2015), the job of RPL is to make invisible learning recognized and thus visible. Attaching award standards to experiential learning does this, and in so doing "makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large … [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market" (Werquin, 2010:7,48). Equally, the application of credit legitimizes knowledge made outside the academy and

> in giving that knowledge the status of a credit award … alters the relationship that students have to disciplinary knowledge … Indeed, opponents of APEL correctly maintain that APEL moves the academy in the direction of more fluid and open epistemic boundaries and destabilizes the logic of disciplines and curricula.
>
> (Michelson, 2015:116).

Michelson argues that the application of credit to experiential learning "reinstates the status of academic knowledge as the norm and academics as the judges of the value of knowledge" (*ibid*). RPL thus deterritorialises experiential learning at four points: i) it legitimizes and prioritizes formal knowledge; ii) it does nothing to change how experiential learning is conceptualized in higher education; iii) it does nothing to disrupt the logic of disciplines and curricula; iv) in the employment market education, it supports labour marketization. Other Canadian research indicates that claimants themselves value the economic advantages RPL delivers; however, there are indications that it carries personal benefits too.

3.4 The benefits of recognition

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) commissioned research in 1999 to explore claimant experiences of PLAR – *A slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning and Assessment and Recognition*, and a second study followed in 2003 - *A Second Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning and Recognition.* The studies focused on all PLAR activity including "extensive demographic, programme, course and academic performance" (Aarts *et al*., 2003:84).

The second study concentrated on the views of adult learners and their experiences. Seven higher education institutions engaged in this second study with 1,034 participants completing the survey of which 37% were PLAR learners and 39% non-PLAR learners. Learners cited that "work related motives rather than education-related motives" was the reason they returned to

education (2003: 36). 72% of participants stated that the opportunities offered by PLAR were "an important factor in their decisions to return to school" (2003: 38). The workplace was the most common source of prior learning; however, financial support from employers was low and the expected growth of PLAR in the workplace over the 8-year period of the two studies was disappointing with the exception of the Canadian military.

The chart below, drawn from the second study, is in descending priority, and I have adapted it and added a column of analysis to enable a clearer view of my interpretation of the benefits.

Fig.12 General benefits of RPL to students in Canada (2003)

What benefits did you receive from PLAR?	%	Benefits
Confirmed and gave value to my prior learning	73%	Economic
Did not have to sit through classes where I already knew the material	61%	Education
Helped me to move more quickly though program	57%	Economic
Improved self confidence	55%	Personal
Saved time and money in the long run	49%	Economic
Lightened course load	47%	Economic
Motivated me to finish the program	43%	Education
More time for family commitments, volunteer work, leisure	39%	Personal
Facilitated career advancement	39%	Economic
Increased self-awareness	36%	Personal
Helped me clarify goals and directions	33%	Personal
Helped me gain employment in my field of study	20%	Economic
Gained credit recognition with an association/organisation	13%	Economic
Took additional courses without lengthening program	10%	Education
Passed a previously failed course	6%	Education
Other	5%	
Helped me return to a civilian career	1%	Personal
Allowed me to be certified for military training	1%	Economic

(Chart modified from Aarts *et al*., 2003: 41)

Advantages most frequently mentioned were of an economic nature – time and money savings, career and work progression. However, personal benefits of self-confidence and increased self-awareness are high. Not repeating material covered already in other learning settings was the most important factor educationally. The study shows high levels of satisfaction with the processes and procedures in the seven institutions surveyed. Overall, the research found that the benefits of RPL were to "gain credit while working, save time and money and take fewer courses ... it also improves self-confidence, eliminates the need to sit through unnecessary classes ... and lightens the workload" (2003: xii-xiii). The CAPLA study thus confirms the

economic benefits of RPL, but it also indicates that RPL has personal benefits and educational advantages; these latter can get lost in the rhetoric of policy development.

3.5 Personal benefits and problems of reflection

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) provided a review of findings from large quantitative and qualitative studies carried out over the past four decades in universities and colleges in the United States (Travers, 2011). The intrinsic benefits were noted by Burris (1997) and Brown (1999) as cited in the study, and they report that learners experience changes in 'self-concept' as a result of reflection on prior learning (Travers, 2011: 268). The OECD Recognition of Non Formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) report also confirms the intrinsic value of RPL and states that formal recognition offered claimants a 'psychological boost' to self-esteem and stimulated motivation for education (Werquin, 2010:9). A European study showed that "Overall, learners seemed to feel that the experience of reflection and analysis was a very positive one and that it had helped in building their self-confidence" (Cleary *et al*, 2002:11). All this research highlights the outcomes of RPL but says nothing of the process itself. Mireille Pouget's research examines the experience of claimants in a university in France.

Pouget (2011) looks at RPL or Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) practice in a French university. In the Cedefop document *Monitoring the use of validation* (2016), France is "characterized as a mature system" (2011:15). Thus, Pouget's work provides an interesting case study.

She carried out her research at a small university with a student population of 8,000 (2011:68). The university was at the "forefront of VAE implementation ... in 2009 and … examined sixty portfolios, with forty-seven receiving a positive result" (2011: 68). Pouget's research is qualitative in nature using a life history approach. Her work provides a good insight into the claimant and staff experiences at the micro level of implementation.

The study illustrates that RPL is an overly complex process which makes big demands on claimants and staff. The research participants in her study complained that they had to make too many accommodations in the presentation of their 'knowings' from experience and that they felt they underwent a process of erasure of self in the procedure. This is a very disturbing statement and raises questions about findings from research that emphasise the benefits without

a closer investigation into the process itself. If claimants were aware at the start that the process was so difficult many would not make a claim at all. Pouget acknowledges that claimants approach the procedures from a positive position and they would not start "the difficult VAE road if they were not hopeful" (2011: 168). She comments on the high demands that the process places on the candidates and views this as what Edwards and Boreham call

> 'technologies of the self' [where] … the learner has to recreate her/himself according to the needs of the labour market, becoming in the process a consumer of learning in order to survive in a competitive and flexible labour market.
>
> (Edwards and Boreham, cited in Pouget. 2011:204)

There is no indication in Pouget's study that RPL is of any intrinsic value to individuals. As one candidate put it 'I don't think it [VAE] changed much that vision I have of myself' (2011:188). There is no great surge of learning or self -discovery for these research participants. This appears to contradict the experiences expressed in numerous US and the Canadian 2003 studies. The French research exposes reflection in RPL as a process of deterritorialisation of the 'self'. As Boud *et al* note "reflection is an inward journey and a 'processing phase' in learning" (1985:18, cited in Michelson 2016:30). In RPL, reflection is set within a bounded timeframe of assessment. In addition, the mode of reflection most commonly advocated in RPL is Kolb's learning cycle which has received extensive criticism. Reijo Miettinen (2000) complains that Kolb's theory is an 'eclectic' mix of concepts drawn from Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget.   He accuses him of using their work in a self-serving way to substantiate his Learning Style Inventory (LSI), and argues that:

> Kolb unites terms and concepts, extracting them from their idea-historical contexts and purposes and puts them to serve the motives of his own presentation. As a result, theoreticians with quite different backgrounds, motives and incompatible conceptions can be used as founders and 'supporters' of experiential learning (2000:56).

His theoretical framework was poorly conceptualised and is thus problematic. Kolb assumes that reflection is a series of steps towards an end. His model is very rational and according to Michelson has the effect of neutralising the power of experience itself. It assumes that reflection is organised and sequential. The following chart provides a reminder of the steps.

Fig. 13 Kolb's Learning Cycle
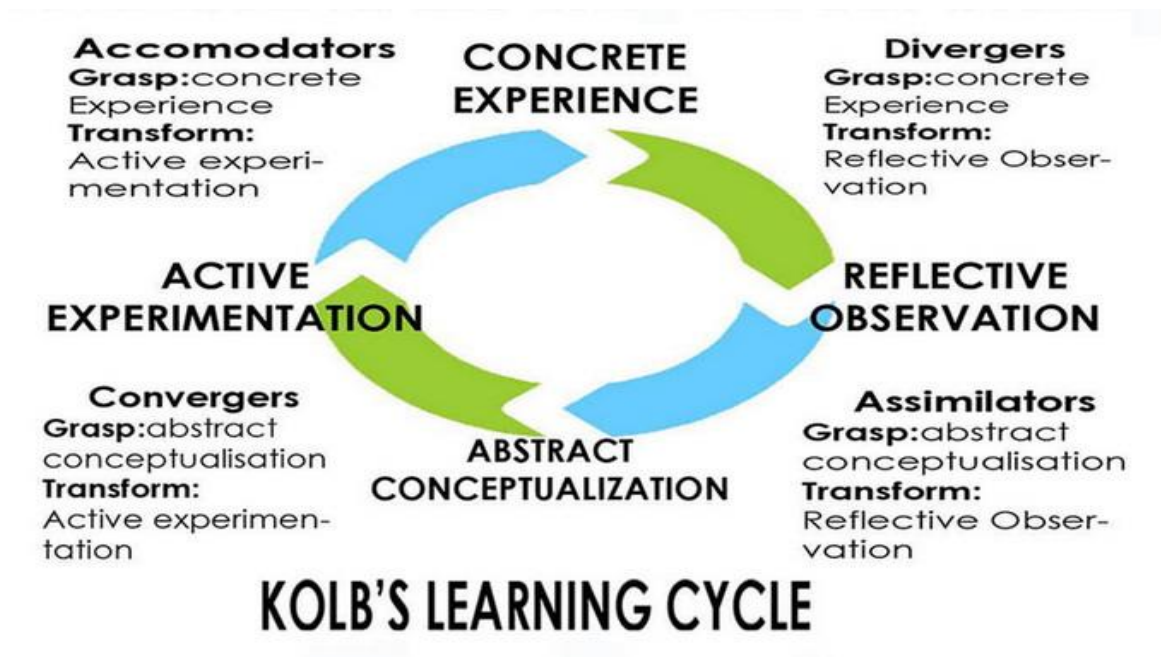
In his framework, reflection is something we do *on* not *with* or *in* experience. It assumes experience is concrete, visible and easily identified. His reflective cycle does not allow for the interplay between reflection, emotion and thought and how all these elements come to action in learning. As Boud and Walker note, reflection is an ongoing process that "happens in the midst of action and not only in the calm light of recollection at leisure!" (1995:75). Kolb in contrast sees it as something less fluid. Yet, while the cycle has limitations, claimants who have no prior knowledge of reflective processes need something to guide them. Kolb's simple four-step cycle provides a useful introduction although it is criticised most vociferously by a collection of RPL theorists (Michelson, 2016; Miettinen, 2000).

Michelson complains that approaches like Kolb's cycle result in a rationalisation of experience:

> [experience] can be transcended only through the application of sustained and self-conscious rational thought that, by encouraging distance and objectivity, will allow us to identify our prior assumptions, use our minds to critique them for validity and serviceability, and reconstruct them to make them more accurate, inclusive and empowering. Reflection is thus both ordered and ordering: it bestows meaning where there is none or else greater clarity where there was lesser. Through reflection, we are always getting better. Through reflection, we partake of the dream of reason, the Western tale of progress through rationality (2016: 30).

Michelson's critique of reflection expresses a process of rationalization of the lifeworld. Lamoreaux (2005, cited in Travers, 2011) found that students who completed a portfolio course

reported that the process affected their reflective practice in four ways: "(it affected) how they reflected on and articulated learning from their experiences; it increased 'self-questioning'; they questioned their assumptions; and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) enabled learners to recognize their own tacit knowledge". Furthermore, Lamoreaux stated that students seemed to be 'internalising the questioning process' as they completed their portfolios" (*ibid*: 270). He further noted that through narrative writing, students objectify their learning which in turn allowed them to 'clarify and organise their knowledge" (*ibid*:271). The outcomes described by Lamoreaux are consistent with the needs of reflection in RPL contexts which is to organize evidence for assessment in a way that makes sense to assessors. Hence, reflection must be a process that facilitates rational ordering in line with a curriculum so that it becomes measurable against academic standards. In RPL, reflection is purposeful, directed by learning outcomes and is completed within a specific timeframe. The results must be concrete otherwise no credit is applied. However as Fejes and Andersson suggest, the reflective process can also be a learning process. In their research with care workers in Sweden, they found that learning "takes place in the process of assessing the prior learning" (2008:50) and that "the recognition process was to a large extent based on reflection, for example, in the learning conversations. Such a process is not merely a process of recognition but also a process of learning" (ibid). Reflection and Kolb's cycle with all its limitations offers possibilities for learning. This is consistent with the experiences I had with care workers in Scotland too. Reflection has a role in learning and sometimes very powerful learning however, in RPL it is part of assessment and be organized to prove learning. This is a problem recognised by Dewey many years ago.

Dewey recognized that bringing experience into formal education is difficult and to do so, experience would need to be organized to align with subject matter. Thus he asked:

> How does subject matter function? Is there anything inherent in experience which tends towards progressive organisation of its contexts? What results follow when the materials of experience are not progressively organised? (1938: 20-21).

If experience is not organized, assessors are unable to assess it and as Harris observes, learning in experience needs to be organised in the curriculum (2010:51). Geoghegan identifies a further problem

> The notion that concrete experience can be extracted from its contexts and reflected on cognitively by de-contextualised individuals assumes such extracted individuals can operate as unitary, independent disembodied selves (2006:121)

Clearly a pedagogical problem exists about how to extract specific learning from experience, and although such reflective processes achieve outcomes it is at a cost. Equally, assessors, unaccustomed to assessing learning sourced outside a curriculum, struggle with the process.

3.6 Assessment processes

The assessment process outlined in Pouget's research is cumbersome and as one member of a jury notes: "it's a lot of work. When the portfolio is completed, it is transmitted for a month ... a dozen people from different departments look at it … they are the jury members. They are nominated. The Director of the IUT, the President of the commission, the Head of Department, the Head of the particular programme, the Senior Adviser of the VAE (French term for RPL) unit, me as a consultant, 12 in total" (2011: 190). The level of scrutiny suggests excessive rigour, and begs the question: why is such an intense level of examination necessary?

Pouget (2011) and Geoghegan (2006) observe that assessors are dissatisfied with the representation of the learning submitted and have concerns about its difference from learning achieved in conventional taught courses of study. One assessor in the French study noted that "typically, if you were doing the same things you do for your [*conventional*] students, I think there would be no validation. Students have 35 hours of classes, they receive lots of new stuff, but they are not operational. The person at work, s/he knows stuff for her/his small domain of application ... but not as much as the students. ... So you can't make the same rule. Otherwise, you're wasting your time" (2011: 192). Validation of learning gained outside the formal system is challenging for assessors and as Stenlund notes the "trustworthiness of decisions" (2013:1) are open to question. Stenlund's analysis of RPL validation in the education of vocational teachers in HE institutions in Sweden shows discrepancies in judgements between different institutions (2013:8). He recommends clear policy and consistent and transparent processes together with education for subject experts and assessors engaged in RPL (2013:13).

Validity is a problem for RPL. If it is 'less than' formal learning, and definitions make it so, then it could deplete the status of an award and in turn affect the reputation of the institution. RPL appears to carry quality assurance risks. Yet early European research on RPL showed that

> a significant proportion of RPL learners across the partner countries already achieved other academic qualifications … in Scotland 43% of learners had degrees, while in Finland, 62% had vocational diplomas; in France learners had achieved the Baccalaureate and were not studying at university (Cleary *et al* :2002:7).

This is important. Learners seeking RPL have significant prior learning, often including formal qualifications. In my experience, claims usually involve all learning gained in a multiplicity of sites and formed in work, education, community, self-directed study and from life in general. The division of learning into various categories alters how we perceive learning emphasising setting rather than learning.

In the French study, claimants refer to RPL as 'playing the game' and say 'since you have committed yourself to VAE you accept the rules of the game ... The system is like that, you have to do it; you have to go through it ...' (2011: 184). The portfolio, remarks Pouget, requires candidates to "re-centre what is essentially dispersed in interdependent relations at work and elsewhere" (2011:166). The portfolio structure means that these dispersed experiences must be ordered in a standardised way for assessment and judgement. Sandberg states "students do not fully understand the assessment process or how their prior learning was transformed into credits" (2012:351). He further notes that assessment in RPL is a process of assimilation that "reorders prior experiential grounded life-world experiences so that they fit the curricula (system)" (2012:353). Pouget sees it as an ordering of subjectivities into what she says is "a process of exploding their lives apart to tame them into docile representations on a flat piece of paper" (2011: 204). Geoghegan comments on the power dynamics embedded in the assessment process and sees that

> the adults experiential learning becomes managed by powerful others who have a pre-decided set of values which they impose on the experiential learning presented to them; extracting what is desirable in the context and disregarding other learning as valueless (2006:117)

Sandberg attempts to balance the exchange by applying Habermasian analysis to the process. In his research into the experience of students undergoing RPL interviews in a teacher education programme, he notes that RPL claimants did not understand the process at all or the criteria for the judgement (2012:362). Using Habermasian theory of communicative action he argues for creating the conditions for mutual understanding in RPL. He proposes that if mutual understanding is reached than the interviewer and claimant can engage in a truthful and sincere communication creating an ideal speech situation. However, this does not take into account the power differential that exists in the process and as Murphy and Fleming note

> all have equal power to question the ideas and justifications of others, to ask questions, all are equal in making the decision and reaching a conclusion, coercion is excluded and only power exercised is the power of the most reasonable argument (2009:8).

While communicative action denotes democratic social relations and mutual understanding, it is unlikely that this level of ideal speech can be reached in an RPL interview. Yet it is a useful tool for analyzing the interaction between claimants and assessors and a useful communicative ideal type for which to aspire. In his later research (2014), Sandberg returns to the problem of communication in his work with health care assistants who undertake RPL in placement settings. In this context, Sandberg argues that "when RPL is set in a worthwhile learning experience and conducted through mutual understanding, critical learning and change can potentially be achieved" (2014:686). His research showed that the experience of claimants was less fraught and participants reported that they were less conscious of the assessment and some did engage in critical learning. However, the process depends on the creation of positive relations between assessor and claimant and where the conditions for these good relations do not exist the claimant could be disadvantaged. A further problem arises if claimants forget that the definition of the situation is assessment and thus the unequal power relations while less explicit, persist in every case. As Fenwick notes power can "determine what is considered knowable and worth knowing, who is a recognizable knower and the conditions and meanings of experience" (2003:41). Overall, efforts to structure learning from experience into a rational, single and unified whole for assessment is difficult to achieve and every experiment and application of theory brings new challenges. Reflection is important for all involved however, this too is not without problems.

The imposition of rationality on experience through reflection results, according to Michelson, in "self-mastery" (2016:31). Reflection becomes self-regulation and a means of control of expression allowing us to choose what to say and what to silence. Claimants in Pouget's work appear to accept this and play the game according to the rules of the academy. However,

Kolb assumes a sequence of steps and provides a template to organise experience. It is a useful model for 'playing the game' although it does nothing to advance our understanding of the process claimants undergo in generating evidence to submit a claim. The most problematic concept in his theory is the nature of experience itself, which is conceptualised as 'concrete' and 'actual'. However, Kolb's theory is the framework for reflection used in one of the case studies in this enquiry and it supported student reflection to good effect. I will return to this topic in the findings from this enquiry.

Reflection in RPL is a short and intense experience. Pouget's research indicates that the process is problematic for claimants and, I would argue, it is a step towards a deterritorialisation of the inner 'self'. Yet, educational benefits have been identified as outcomes of RPL and offer advantages to adult learners. How the process is structured and the kind of supports available contribute to the overall outcomes.

3.7 Models and support structures

The recent Irish report (Goggin, 2015) acknowledged that RPL takes place at the level of the individual and articulates a need to "develop and support individual, contextualized, learning pathways as opposed to cohort approaches" (2015:2). In a European Erasmus study (2002) learners stated that support was very valuable and those who completed the process alone noted how isolated they felt (2002:14) which suggests an argument for 'group RPL'. Either way, claimants need advice and guidance. This role has its own challenges.

Pouget cites one advisor who comments that

> My role is to help him [candidate] to the maximum. I present his portfolio to the jury. It all depends on the sensitivities of the department ... My role is to convene. [*If*] it is a department [*where*]...the persons are very inclined towards the pure sciences, in relation to chemistry, for example, it is true that they're more 'rigorist' on the aspect of fundamental knowledge ... it is not the same discourses [*as in other departments]*"
>
> (2011; 152).

The role of the RPL guide can be multifaceted. They accompany claimants, advise, and guide them through assessment procedures. In Pouget's study an advisor reported that sometimes s/he had to advise a claimant that they had no chance of success and dissuade them from submitting a claim because she felt "I would be embarrassed to solicit, or for you to solicit a lecturer of the university, because … I have to be accountable to them" (2011: 147). The guide, as negotiator between claimant and assessor, may also become a gatekeeper because they are attuned to the potential risks of failure. This can work in diverse ways. Andersson and Osman (2008) in their research into the RPL experiences of immigrants in Sweden, found that guides or counselors advocate on behalf of the claimant. One counselor described the role as: "the candidate's defense attorney … my role is to protect the individual and I do it often" (2008:51). Guidance is vital in this difficult and tense process of reflection and assessment. Yet the purpose of guidance is unclear. They can become mediators/gatekeepers depending on the specifics of their roles and context. At some level, the outcomes for the claimant can rest with them and not the assessors who may not meet the claimant at all as in the first illustration above or find

themselves defending the claim in the Nordic examples. They carry a lot of the responsibility for inclusion/exclusion. Guidance is not available in all institutions, which means that claimant negotiates the claim without assistance. In this context, the outcomes may be less positive. Social inclusion through RPL is a priority in the European Council's *Recommendations* 2012. In Ireland, RPL guidance is a concern due to low levels of training in this area. Yet without support from guidance practitioners, who can negotiate on behalf of claimants, social inclusion is in jeopardy.

3.8 Social inclusion and RPL

The CEU *Recommendations for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* state that RPL "will be part of an inclusive approach to learning" and is "to provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression" (2012: 17). Implicit in this statement is an assumption that RPL as a practice facilitates social inclusion.

The Werquin RNFIL Report for the OECD (2010a) emphasizes the importance of RPL in democratising and building citizenship. It sees RPL as a means of offering disadvantaged groups, migrants and indigenous groups recognition opportunities which open up new educational pathways without having to gain pre-requisite entry requirements (p11). This is a worthy aspiration for RPL. It is widely used in Canada where migration is encouraged from all parts of the world. Each year immigration amounts to 1% of the Canadian population (Bloom, 2015). Recent increases in the migrant population to Europe means that RPL could fulfil a similar role if it became more widely acceptable in formal education. There was also a perception that "PLAR could appropriately help to shift some of the bottlenecks and barriers" (Aarts *et al*. 1999:8) that exist in access to higher education and to professional qualification for migrant groups in Canada. Certainly, the findings from the later *Brain Gain 2015* (2016) survey supports this position and holds high hopes for RPL as a mechanism for improving the career prospects of immigrants carrying international credentials.

Research also points out the usefulness of RPL as a mechanism to "rebalance equity between generations, since a much smaller cohort of older workers had access to higher education in the past than is the case today" (Werquin, 2010a:9). The Council of Europe *Recommendations* identifies the main target groups for RPL as 'young people' and the 'ageing population' (2012:1(2)). RPL could have a role in widening participation for excluded groups although the following case study from South Africa attests to the difficulties which can arise.

3.8.1 A case study of RPL and social inclusion

South Africa is a nation that has much experience of exclusion, and, since the abolition of apartheid, it has undergone a massive restructuring of its education system in the past two decades. RPL was integral to the new structure and viewed as a means to redress educational inequalities that existed there due of apartheid (Kgobe, 1997; Harris, 1999; Volbrecht 2009). Harris states that RPL was:

> … seen as having the capacity to widen access to education and training to enhance the qualification status of historically disadvantaged adults. It thus holds a restitutive promise which goes far beyond the equal opportunity discourses enshrined in other frameworks internationally. (Harris, 1999: 124).

RPL offered hope to those who were left out of formal education and who became "un-papered" or "un-certificated" (November & van Wyk, 2009: 8). It offered millions of South Africans, excluded from education under apartheid, opportunities to have their learning recognized. Knowledge, skills and competencies formed through experiences of political revolution, community activism and in education, trades, crafts, business, administration, medicine, arts and cultural contexts all required recognition. It was a mammoth task and the challenges were and still are great.

RPL took a number of different forms including:

> … access purposes only in which there is no assessment process to qualified acknowledgement (as in RPL via portfolio processes) to RPL for accreditation purposes or advanced standing (which usually involves challenge tests or demonstrations).
>
> (Breier, 2011:201)

The models of assessment were as varied as the contexts of practice. RPL was used widely in teacher education (at entry and to support advanced standing); in the workplace with metalworkers and mineworkers (Lugg *et al.,* 1998, cited in Breier, 2011:209-210), as well as being implemented in adult further and higher education and training contexts (Singh, UNESCO Report, 2015:121). The SA Qualifications Authority Acts (1995, 2012a, 2012b) underpin RPL policy and implementation strategies (Singh, 2015; Breier, 2011). National Guidelines have been published and principles of quality assurance designed (Singh: 2015:123).

The research indicates that initially RPL had varied levels of success in promoting social inclusion. However, policy and practice has changed since 2011 and much work has been done to develop and promote RPL. Many initiatives were implemented between 2010-2015 in work related areas including low paid and marginalized sectors such as seasonal workers in agriculture. The outcomes showed that only "some of the initiatives led to RPL candidates moving through the systems" (Bolton *et al,* 2017:110). Data collection into the long-term outcomes is ongoing at the research institute attached to the South African Quality Authority (SAQA). In 2012, 22 out of 26 HEIs had RPL policies in place (2017:112). The *Country Background Report* 'identified islands of good practice' and policy there is to learn from these 'islands' and to develop and upscale them (OECD, 2008). National policy with accompanying legislation is in place and funding is available for implementation. The South African Quality Authority has also established an institute for RPL research. So far, implementation is unbalanced. This questions the value of RPL in its current form, as a process for addressing conditions of social inclusion. RPL is difficult to implement when dealing with a population of citizens whose social exclusion was so brutal.

Mignonne Breier's work (2008, 2011) argues that in the context of apartheid, the starting point of candidates as well as the approach to RPL practiced is problematic. She notes that the RPL models were "borrowed from developed countries… [and] generally assume a basic level of formal education and literacy and numeracy, which cannot be presumed in South Africa" (2011: 201). These models are not appropriate in the context of South Africa. Many applying for RPL have little or no basic technical literacy skills (technology, numeracy, reading and writing) and thus little or no formal educational capital. Their experiences are different and can find little to relate to in formal education. In this context, RPL requires some reimagining to allow the differences in experience and the intense conditions of learning in that experience to find expression.

Breier provides an excellent example of such intense learning. She recounts one story where students attending a course in law pointed out anomalies in the legal system based on their experiences. The lecturers, trained in the discipline, were not familiar with the day-to-day problems of case law in the townships and responded by advising students to follow the general rule even though the 'general rule' of law was unworkable in the real-life example provided (2010:81, 82). This illustrates both how everyday knowledge can challenge rules and push neat laws and codes into the realm of the absurd, and how academics can automatically discount

such real, but inconvenient, knowledge. The importance of bringing in the 'lived of a problem' is important in disrupting the habit we have of thinking that the only 'right' kind of knowledge is university knowledge and it ranks above all other knowledges. RPL brings in the lived experience of problems. Unfortunately, this is held mostly in a portfolio, 'on a flat piece of paper' for assessment and then it is filed away. The epistemological basis of learning in experience is different. The French study and the case study above show that formal education is ill prepared for the challenges of RPL or what knowledge is carried from experience into formal education, and perhaps that, in part at least, is the reason why it is so often bound by cumbersome processes and procedures. The 2016 Cedefop inventory notes that in France "VAE remains a demanding and sometimes lengthy procedure for candidates in terms of time and effort, leaving them to exit the process before applications can be assessed" (2016:42). In a 'mature' system such as the one in operation in France, this is a concern. It appears that epistemological differences are difficult to resolve and learning in experience is still largely misunderstood.

3.9 The epistemological clash

Harris argues that RPL practitioners "embody a stance that is anti-formal knowledge and that this leads to silences, paradoxes and contradictions around knowledge and curriculum in RPL theory and practice" (2010:51). RPL, she claims, desires to remain distinctive and will not allow itself to be organised into a formal curriculum. Conversely, academic learning will not allow itself to break curricula borders and allow RPL in. The insistence that RPL be included in higher education has resulted in an 'epistemological clash' with one position silencing the other.

This epistemological position is underpinned by a notion that learners must follow a defined and incrementally stepped route to acquire higher knowledge. RPL's relationship with this ordered structure is one of interloper. Even when embedded in the system, the RPL processes have had to adapt to adhere to the rules, regulations and definitions as prescribed in the formal system. Thus, RPL and formal learning reach an impasse. Theorising in RPL has done little to mediate the situation.

These criticisms deny the existence of power differentials. Geoghegan's research (2006) provides a very useful analysis of the main barriers to implementation and the discourses that impede its development in Irish universities. A primary barrier to RPL, according to Geoghegan, is the power relations between the individual and the institutes of higher education.

Fejes and Andresson say that "questions of power and power relations are important aspects of learning processes" (2008:41). However, they are also as Geoghegan notes 'a site of moral struggle between power elite and the less powerful' (2006:7). The universities hold the power to define what knowledge is, consequently claimants have to adhere to the conventional definitions of knowledge. Geoghegan asserts that:

> The practice of AP(E)L challenges universities on many levels including contested epistemological notions of what constitutes legitimate university level knowledge, who the holders and owners of that knowledge are, and how such knowledge is acquired and how it is legitimated (2006:14).

These epistemological matters are major impediments to implementation. Higher education institutions hold the power and RPL practices have to conform. The low levels of conceptual development within RPL theory and practice has entrenched it in defensiveness. A few theorists and practitioners have made good efforts to conceptualise RPL, but the range is limited and the tendency to ground it in adult experiential learning theory dominates. Harris (2010) tries to move away from that approach by examining the barriers claimants experience in confronting the different language and knowledge structures generated by subject disciplines. She applies Basil Bernstein's typology of horizontal and vertical knowledge types to RPL (2010: 50-76).

Bernstein categorises knowledge into different types. He contends that different discourses realise different knowledge forms. What he terms horizontal discourse realises 'common sense' knowledge. It is characterised by an absence of one unifying and stable language or theory. It is usually "oral, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered and contradictory" (Bernstein 1999:159), and is concerned with how to do things. According to Bernstein, horizontal discourse cannot reach higher levels of critical reasoning because learning is fragmented in different contexts and experiences. In contrast, vertical discourse has a defined language; it is highly structured and is more akin to formal scientific knowledge. Formation of two distinct knowledge types are realised within vertical discourse – vertical knowledge structure of science and horizontal knowledge structure of social science and the humanities. These latter horizontal knowledge structures are more permeable and open to influence by discourses of everyday life and thus can find their way into knowledge structures and change their nature in the process. Practices such as ethnography, narrative and oral history are examples of how horizontal discourses find expression in horizontal knowledge structures (Williams & Wilson, 2010:427). The horizontal structures seek to construct new

understandings of phenomena and develop accompanying languages to describe them. Horizontal knowledge territories are nomadic and undergo reterritorialization as new concepts and experiences intersect each other. What counts in vertical knowledge structures is generalisation. Each idea is challenged and incorporated into something that encompasses and universalises it to "refute positions where possible, or to incorporate them in more general propositions" (Bernstein 1999:163). Learning in this context is characterised by a "strong grammar and unified language". This form can be more accessible for RPL claimants because the definitions are clear and they do not "have the problem of knowing whether s/he is speaking physics or writing physics, only the problem of correct usage" (Harris 2010:164). Harris argues that horizontal knowledge can be more problematic for RPL candidates due to the variations in language especially the specialist 'jargon' common in the social sciences. There is a logic in her reading of Bernstein that makes common sense. A report by the Irish National Forum for Teaching and Learning in 2015 supports her analysis. Case studies were provided in the report from professional bodies to illustrate RPL activity outside the education domain. The associations listed were: engineers, accountants, architects and auctioneers (Goggin, 2015:43-50). These professions typically have a more unified language making them more malleable to recognition. However, the French study (2011) identifies "the pure sciences…as more rigorist on the aspect of fundamental knowledge" which suggests these subjects are as difficult for claimants as other disciplines, thus contradicting the vertical/horizontal binary. William and Wilson's critique of Bernstein's theory has substance. They argue that the "difference between vertical and horizontal knowledge forms is overdetermined, that it is too rigid a differentiation" (2010:430). Knowledge is difficult to define and Bernstein's approach, like Kolb's theory, offers a simple formula that makes common sense and yet makes nonsense out of what is a very complex concept. Michelson further argues that Bernstein's approach is yet another dualism and "defines itself by what it excludes, namely, the everyday knowledge that obtains in specific sites of practice among embodied human beings" (2015:109). Bernstein's theory makes claims about the structure of learning that, I agrue, does not take into account the rhizomatic nature of learning in everyday experience. Dewey, in contrast, understood this very well.

For Dewey, we continuously use learning from prior experiences to extend knowledge (1946:199). He saw experience as part of the natural and inherent cycle and process of learning and deeply connected to the conditions of existence. As Semetsky notes:

> Dewey's naturalistic epistemology explicitly rejected the separation and isolation of the environing conditions from the whole of nature … nature signifies nothing less than the whole complex of the results of the interaction of man, with his memories and hopes, understanding and desire … (Semetsky, 2006: xxi)

For Dewey, nature is not only the physical natural world but also the world held within each of us. His idea that "learning in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow" (1938:35) reinforces the view that each of us has a store of knowledge that we call on, in an ongoing way, to make meaning and to do things. Abstract and concrete knowledge draw on each other; are one in the same knowledge. Semetsky juxtaposes Dewey's position with Deleuzian conceptualisations. The internal virtual world is not separate from the outside actual (or social) world, they are one *in* the other and are the 'inside of the outside of the fold' (Semetsky, 2006: xxii). Human experience is enfolded and unfolded in thought through relational interaction with worlds both virtual and actual:

> The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and folding that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside but precisely the inside of the outside ... The inside is an operation of the outside ... and inside ... is ... the fold of the outside.

> (Deleuze, 1988a:96-97, cited in Semetsky, 2006:15)

Experience is a continuous flow; it is enfolded and can be unfolded to new experiences. Adult education pedagogies unfold experience and enable learners to appropriate their experiences for learning. However, in RPL the unfolding process relates to a curriculum of established taught subject matter; RPL claimants are learning themselves in an unstructured, divergent curriculum consumed in politics, work practices, popular culture, social interaction, societal rules and personal experiences. Teacher-taught knowledge is different to self- taught/learned knowledge in RPL and thus different assessment procedures are required.

Michelson explores workplace knowledge in relation to RPL and argues that it is different because workplace knowledge is "*more* complex and conceptually compelling, and sophisticated than many forms of academic knowledge, certainly than the forms of academic knowledge generally expected of the undergraduates to whom APEL candidates are typically compared" (2015: 126-127). In her work, Michelson explores workplace learning and identifies how different knowledges are framed. She recognises the organic nature of how knowledge is used in practice and the unpredictability of what knowledge become relevant at

any given moment (2015:128). She critiques the construction of experiential knowledge or practice as "manual rather than intellectual, tacit rather than conscious, site specific rather than generalizable and concrete rather than abstract" (2015:127). She claims that these dualisms operate to debase practice or experiential learning as subsidiary to higher academic knowledge. She questions the difficulties often associated with assessment in RPL and the argument that insists that practice-based knowledge is difficult to assess. She provides a series of case studies that compare the different kinds of knowledge.

Of particular relevance is Breier's case study referred to earlier in this chapter. She notes that professors see precedence as means of generalising laws, and notes that one course professor stated that "your legal academic bases him or herself on the study of hundreds of cases. What happens in your one workplace or ten workplaces … is almost irrelevant" (Breier, 2003:6, cited in Michelson, 2015:126). In response one of the course participants pointed out that "if I should go according to rule and regulation guidelines … then I'd lose all my cases". Generalisations and abstract constructs are tested in the everyday of living in small and different ways. The ability to modify general theory into concrete and specific contexts is the work of practice and experience. Our intelligences (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, physical) are brought into action to deal with the complexities of practice. Assessment of the ongoing interplay between abstraction or virtual knowings and concrete or actual experiences is at the heart of RPL assessment.

Michelson suggests that the starting point in assessment is different in RPL and that the claimant is viewed as a "complex system of networks consisting of material, social, discursive, technological, and organisational relationships" (2015:131). The purpose of the assessment is not a "mapping and confirming of the familiar" (Starr-Glass, 2002:223, cited in Michelson, 2015:131) but an exploration of her network, and the relationships with other parts of that network in which she works (p.131). The role of the assessor in this approach is to create assessment questions that allow the claimant to show what she knows. The task of assessment is to formulate questions to create processes of "unfolding" so that the student can see her own experiences and then arrange them or create an assemblage that presents them as knowledge in its own right and knowledge that is different in its own right. The claim then becomes a negotiated encounter that invites a "sharing of epistemological authority" (2015:135). Whether this is a realistic solution or not is questionable given the divergence in power relations noted by Geoghegan above and acknowledged by Michelson. It is important to question

epistemologies of higher education because their legitimacy is so closely guarded by a quality and standards discourse; but can they stand on their own outside this protected environment and would they work in experience and practice? RPL needs to be reconceptualised, but also argue that higher education also needs reconceptualisation. The task is too great for this thesis but I will address the matter more fully in the Conclusions chapter.

3.10 Educational benefits

Research from the US shows some significant positive effects of RPL on completion rates in Higher Education. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) commissioned research in 2010 across 48 institutions offering Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the US (Klein-Collins, 2016:3). 62,475 students aged twenty-five and older were surveyed. The findings show that PLA students have "higher rates of degree completion than non-PLA students … (and) even if they did not complete their degrees, PLA students persisted for longer and took more credits than their counterparts". Overall the study shows that "PLA helps adults earn degrees and progress more quickly to their goals" (2010:267) and "of more than 60,000 students at 48 institutions surveyed, we found that more than half (56%) of students with PLA credit earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so. PLA students completed degrees at twice the rate of students with no PLA credit" (*ibid*: 267).

LeGrow *et al.* (2002, cited in Travers, 2011) compared the problem-solving performance of PLA and non-PLA students in business programmes. PLA students "consistently solved problems at a higher level of complexity and with more linkages than the classroom-based students, regardless of how much prior experience the student had in the field" (ibid:269).

The evidence from these two research surveys is impressive. If a socially inclusive model of RPL, with appropriate pedagogies and conceptualisations, could be developed, the advantages for education could be great. If this does not happen then RPL will become a mechanism whereby those with most education benefit most.

3.11 Non-participation in RPL

The Canadian (Aarts *et al*, 2003) study outlines reasons given by learners for non-participation in RPL and confirms that they often perceive it as difficult, costly and time consuming.

Fig.14 Reasons for non-participation in RPL in Canada (2003)

Why did you not proceed with PLAR?	%	
PLAR appeared to be too time consuming	38%	Not Economical
It was not a good time for my family and me	37%	Personal
PLAR appeared to be too complicated	33%	Too difficult
I thought having work experience would be sufficient evidence for a credit	22%	Too difficult
I did not have sufficient knowledge or skills to challenge a course	20%	No claim
I realised that it would not shorten my time at the College	18%	Not Economical
I learned that students must pay an additional fee for PLAR credit	10%	Not Economical
I received exemption based upon previous equivalent course completed	9%	Economic
Course learning outcomes changed and my learning no longer matched	8%	No claim
I worked out plan with professor/instructor to demonstrate my learning and stay in class	3%	Educational
I realised that more credits reduces my student status and affects my financial aid	2%	Not Economical
In my opinion college assessment process for ex-military was not satisfactory	2%	Complaint
Other	36%	

(Chart modified from Aarts *et al*., 2003: 51)

The most significant reason for seeking recognition, as illustrated in Fig. 12 was economic and it is also the most important reason for not seeking recognition. The data shows that for many participants, RPL was not economical in terms of time or it appeared too difficult.

A negative discourse that RPL is a cumbersome and often complex and resource heavy process dominates talk about practice. The European research carried out by Cleary et al in 2002, criticised the level of bureaucracy involved in RPL and the 'amount of time' it took to complete the process. RPL participants were concerned about the criteria used to assess their work, as it was not explicit to them in most cases. The lack of information about some aspects of the process resulted in unnecessary anxiety for some learners, and it was concluded that a 'clear structure of support and guidance' should be in place (2002:14).

3.12 Legitimacy of RPL

The RNFIL Report (Werquin, 2010) confirms that both the status and the legitimacy society attributes to acquisition of awards in the formal system is important. The RNFIL Report acknowledges this as a common phenomenon in many of the OECD countries where the

achievement of higher education awards brings status and specialist knowledge (p.31). RPL supports individuals to accomplish formal education awards and therefore contributes to status and credential acquisition. However, the role of RPL in accruing credits goes largely unnoticed and unacknowledged unless it for a full award. RPL is currently outside the status sphere and consequently awards that include it are not attractive for many individuals.

The French enquiry points out that motivation for learning there is constructed within a hierarchical qualification framework, which in turn perpetuates a status-oriented motivation for awards. The move to Frameworks of Qualifications that offer a ladder of awards actively promotes a hierarchical culture which, in turn, is named by Pouget as one of the motivating forces in France for RPL. She illustrates this by quoting one RPL candidate:

> Diplomas are … so important in France! You can have all the competences, but if you haven't got a diploma ... There is a different weight given in the professional hierarchy ... according to which school [they come from], they get more responsibility ... In France much is made of your title ... (2011:187).

Pouget further suggests that "VAE could only have been born in France; a country where having a diploma does make all the difference" (2011:217). Part of the value of VAE in France is clearly the promise of status from obtaining a higher award.

In France, according to Pouget (2011), status is important and the primary indicators of professional competency are the level of qualifications held by individuals. She cites Suzanne Cirton (2008) who calls it 'élitisme républicain' the "collective unconscious which considers French society as a ladder to climb" (cited in Pouget, 2011:185). Pouget goes on to state that the French attitude to status is also critiqued by Bourdieu (1989) when he states that "the weight of social capital in the reproduction of a (republican) elite [comes] through the school system, notably through the elite schools (grandes écoles) from where most politicians or high-ranking civil servants emanate' (cited in Pouget, 2011: 185-186). This is so in many western societies. However, there is also the growing regulation of many professions and thus credentials are a growing concern for many workers who may not be able to keep their jobs if they do not have the required qualifications. Credentials may be important as a sign of status but in today's job market they may also be necessary for job security.

3.13 Summary

The complications and paradoxes embedded in RPL are many. In the construction of RPL little consideration was given to the relationship between practice and theory, and the focus on practice was at the cost of theory. In this context RPL has run riot, finding its way into many different learning domains but with no clear idea about its purpose. It has undergone layers of deterritorialising processes that have separated it from its roots in adult experiential learning to a position where it has become a feature of a market driven education for work.

The first point for deterritorialisation was the policy domain and the second point was the definitions phase. In the defining process RPL was subordinated in the education species and thus has to seek approval from academic judges to gain status in education.

The next point is a deterritorialisation of experience into the labour market where it is valued unquestioningly. An image is created by Canadian researchers (CBC) that depicts it as both deeper and wider albeit not higher than formal learning. Research clearly shows that RPL is valued by employers and students for its economic benefits and it is a very important mechanism in Canada for building a sustainable and flexible workforce.

In contrast with this effect of RPL, accounts from claimants in France tell a contradictory story of the struggle for recognition. The reflective modes offered by Kolb lead to an organization and ordering of learning from experience that fits with RPL. According to Michelson, this forces a super-abundance of self-discipline and control and effects a deterritorialisation of the self in the process.

Assessors too struggle with recognition processes and see little connection between teacher taught and self-taught learning. The validity of assessment and quality assurance matters are thus in question.

RPL and formal learning are embraced in an epistemological clash as differences between both mount up. Conceptualizations fall short as old battle grounds between experiential learning and formal learning become ever more salient. Attempts to collapse them by explaining knowledge in terms of horizontal and vertical types is brave but paradoxical as one piece of research in Ireland contradicts the findings from the other in France.

The aspiration of the European Council *Recommendations* (2012) that RPL will promote access and widen participation is dubious. Evidence from South Africa suggests that redressing the effects of exclusion is an uphill struggle, and that RPL can only ever be one small part of the response to the problems of inequality in education.

Nonetheless, there is hope. Research from the US shows some extraordinary benefits for students who successfully complete RPL. They stay longer in their courses, are better at problem posing and finish quicker than their counterparts. Other research indicates some excellent intrinsic benefits for building confidence and self-worth. Models of RPL that are integrated into adult learning appear to have good outcomes for disadvantaged groups as RPL is reterritorialized to 'rpl' again in a UK study.

Deleuzian thought brings the beginnings of some new ways of conceptualizing the effects of human experience to individual knowings. The concept of the 'fold' is introduced as an image of how experience is enfolded and unfolded in learning and how all are affected by thought – a dimension of learning excluded in RPL.

Overall, the task of reconceptualising RPL is perplexing. In the following chapters, I will try to create modes of practice and thought that offer a different conceptualization of RPL for learning.

A BRIDGE

CHAPTER IV   Research Procedures

The First Plateau provided an overview of the state of affairs of RPL and the Second Plateau moves to individual experiences of people engaged in RPL practice – claimants, managers and practitioners.   The Bridge provides stepping-stones that explain how the second plateau is constructed and indicates how the accounts of individuals are mapped to enable you to make your way through the data, engage with my positioning and form your own perspectives as you wish.

CHAPTER IV

Research Procedures

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of how I came to work with different groups of people to explore the practice of RPL. I will discuss why and how I came to engage with them and the methods I used to explore their perspectives. I will explain my general methodology and its relationship with my epistemological position.

Throughout this enquiry, I have used some Deleuze and Guattaris' (DG) concepts to critique dimensions of the RPL assemblage – policy development, empirical evidence and theoretical concepts. The methodology is another site where I use their concepts. The rhizome characterizes the methodology. I also employ the Deleuzian concept of transcendental empiricism as it provides further conceptual direction in the methodology. These are applied in conjunction with Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods (CGTM). Thus, CGTM and Deleuzian concepts of the rhizome and transcendental empiricism are at the centre of the methodology.

4.1 The research question

The enquiry explores different conceptualizations of RPL in policy, research and theory and explores how RPL, it is argued, became divested of theoretical development and consequently it was deterritorialised for narrow purposes to identify skills and educational gaps for learners, shorten time in education and reduce repetition in course content. The enquiry proposes to create concepts that advance its relevance in learning and in university adult education degrees in Ireland.

It is the unexpected, the surprises that change the nature of a research question. This is true of this enquiry. It began as an investigation of the experience of RPL claimants but it soon expanded and altered direction. The initial data analysis showed that RPL was making inroads into the complex nature of learning itself. Its relationship with adult experiential learning, in particular, brought RPL into contact with epistemological differences – formal, non-formal and informal. RPL confronts these differences. Thus, the thesis question became an enquiry about

the RPL concept itself. The enquiry follows the rhizomatic route of RPL concepts in and out of policy, research and practice and explores the sporadic work of conceptual development as it arose. The research so far has shown it to be a deterritorialised concept of adult education. The next few chapters focus on disinterring the concept RPL from the accounts provided by the research participants. Working with their experiences, I suggest a different conceptualization of RPL and offer thoughts about the future role of RPL in university education.

The research participants were selected from an interconnected loop: claimants who had successfully completed RPL explain how practice affected them and offer their critical reflections on the process and its outcomes; practitioners who were responsible for practice in the institutions provide an insight into their experiences; university managers with responsibility for procedures and institutional policy express the rationale for their policy decisions. In total three case settings are presented. The first is CS1 (is my practice setting); CS2 (other Irish university setting); CS3 (European university setting as benchmark). In the home university setting (CS1), 15 years of quantitative data from the university's Integrated Tracking System (ITS) was collated to measure the outcomes of RPL on participation and course completion rates. I collated qualitative data from six one-to-one conversations, and facilitated five discussion groups with research participants which amounted to over 30 hours of conversation. I used my own experience as a source of reflection.

4.2 Epistemological considerations

Thesis making is shaped by encounters with difference that force thinking to be "differentiated by what is not its own' (Colebrook, 2002:3). My research findings are not a copy or a representation of anything; they are a presentation of my thoughts constructed by me from encounters with RPL in my experience, engagement with research participants and with the writings of other conceptual personae (policy makers, theorists, researchers, practitioners). Together, they affected my perspectives and have hence influenced the analysis too. In the research process, I did not think alone but rather 'with' them as I endeavored to make sense of this research territory – actual and virtual.

4. 3 Research approach and procedures

Denzin recognizes that identification of an approach is a "politically charged space" (2008:28) which means that a researcher in selecting approaches is aware of the political resonances of research strategies and how these will, explicitly or implicitly, shape the research. I come from an inclusive and emancipatory position that rejects binary oppositions such as quantitative/qualitative and instead sees research as non-linear and rhizomatic. Thus, the rhizome is a core concept in this research as it adequately captures the "web-like and cyclical thinking" that facilitates the exploration of concepts and how they work. It is with this in mind that I face the qualitative researcher's crisis of choice.

Grounded theory methods (GTM) have an intrinsic rhizomatic aspect in them. They sit comfortably within a science/art research continuum and they accommodate data collection from both qualitative and quantitative methods. The methods were first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Their work was a response to an evolving sociological approach that viewed research as an opportunity to verify a theory. Grounded theory proposes to generate data first and develops theory from data. Glaser and Strauss note that:

> By making generation a legitimate enterprise and suggesting methods for it we hope to provide a defense against internalized professional mandates dictating that sociologists research and write in the verification rhetoric, and against the protests of colleagues who object to their freedom in research from the rigorous rules of verification (so stifling to the creative energies for discovering data) (1967:7).

Their approach overturned a long-standing convention in sociological research of using data to verify a property of a grand theory created by the 'grandfathers of sociology' such as Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Simnel and others. Instead of beginning with theory they wanted to create research practice that would generate it. Thus hypotheses, concepts and subsequent theory "not only came from data but are systematically worked out in relation to data during the course of the research … in fieldwork, general relations are often discovered *in vivo*; that is, the fieldworker literally sees them occur" (Glasser and Strauss,1967:6, 40). The researcher is not required to have a pre-requisite theory to verify or dispute, but rather she is required to follow the data and let it speak to unearth thoughts, perspectives and information. The data leads her to create theoretical properties and concepts.

Although Glaser and Strauss call for theories to be 'systematically worked out' they also acknowledge that as theories 'emerge, develop in abstraction and become related their accumulating interrelations form an integrated central theoretical framework' (1967:40). The

image of the rhizome is consistent with this description; however, points of departure are also evident.

In the early iterations of GTM, proclaiming an affiliation to specific theorists at the commencement of research would have been frowned upon. However, more recent developments, in particular writers from the Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods (CGTM) have critiqued Glaser and Strauss's insistence that researchers could not bring *a priori* knowledge or theoretical preferences to the research. The fear that this could influence theoretical development in a specific way resulting in a rehash of earlier theory is no longer a concern. Bryant and Charmaz (2011), for example, note that ignoring earlier research is an unrealistic option: "researchers have to demonstrate some knowledge of the field in the early and preliminary stages of the research process [otherwise] it places the researcher in a position of passivity and near vacuousness" (2011:221). Yet, Glaser and Strauss also note that:

> … the source of certain ideas, or even models, can come from sources other than the data. The biographies of scientists are replete with stories of occasional flashes of insight of seminal ideas, garnered from sources outside the data. But the generation of theory from such insights must be brought into relation to the data or there is a great danger that theory and the empirical world will mismatch (1967:6).

In a rhizomatic approach these 'seminal ideas and flashes of insight' are pursued and seen as 'lines of flight' that offer possibilities for the creation of new concepts. The researcher through an exploration of data unearths the thinking and concepts embedded there in the hope of discovering the seeds of new concepts. Constructivist GTM, while emphasizing the importance of 'rich' and 'thick' data, does not hold that data collection is superior to other aspects of the research process. It also acknowledges the researcher as having prior learning and experience, and accepts that this will influence the character of the research (Charmaz, 2009:10). There is an acceptance of the subjectivities inherent in research; and, rather than ignoring them, they can be explicitly included, and are not seen as a hindrance to the research outcomes. All aspects of the research process are influenced by the researcher's subjectivities: identification of the research question, selection of conceptual personae and research relevant to the question, type of methods used for data collection and processes of analysis. Constructivist GTM approaches champion a method that is open to possibilities.

> In the classic grounded theory works, Glaser and Strauss talk about discovering theory as emerging from data separate from the scientific observer. Unlike their position, I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past

and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices (Charmaz, 2006:10).

This approach resonates not just with research but with learning too, and in particular with RPL. It proposes that research is about ideas, interaction and practice and the same is true of learning. In terms of research, CGTM are wide open and allow the researcher the latitude necessary to explore, disclose and form thinking and concepts without predetermined strict rules of engagement. The constructivist position continues to support the concept of 'grounded' or 'grounding' theory in data or theory/data in a material reality, or data in theory. The image of the rhizome is a process of unearthing theory and data, and the job of work is to follow the flight and push the emergent idea towards new formations. The approach liberates the researcher from the strictures of one defined method or approach, and offers levels of flexibility that enable her to view research practice as a continuum and a moving, flowing process that forms and re-forms itself. Yet it must be acknowledged that the research process is bounded in time, text and topic. It must also be noted that while recognizing the power and the value of rhizomatic research, a thesis demands structure that facilitates a reader to follow lines of thought within it. Thus, applying the DG concept of the rhizome has implications for research.

The rhizome describes a gangly pathway full of twists and turns. In the two previous chapters I map out the deterritorialisation of RPL. Various texts and documents were analyzed and they show a path full of paradox and tension. The chapters presented "an account of the linkages and connections between various discursive plateaus" (Honan, 2007:531) in RPL policy, research, theory and practice. These plateaus were disparate with multiple effects. Tracing the RPL concept in the participant accounts requires a further mapping exercise to "map the connections between each of these discursive plateaus, to analyse the linkages that bring quite contradictory discourses together … to build provisional linkages … across discourse to produce coherent movements and flows between and across the discourses …" (*ibid*:537). The rhizome moves in all directions at once as it intersects with other shoots, continuously rooting and re-rooting in a chaotic frenzy of creativity without organization or predetermined pathways, without strategy or structure. The challenge in rhizomatic research is to locate shoots that promise new 'lines of flight' of possibility and hope. Thus, in the context of research, it is necessary to find ways of mapping a rhizomatic territory to source potential for new conceptual 'lines of flight'. Linking the rhizome to CGTM provides a workable approach in this research.

A well-used research framework draws on a wealth of research experience that provides a researcher with early insights into the roles of the researcher and the research participants, and problems with methods and possibilities for advancement. These matters are important and very useful, but as Charmaz notes the methods are open to adaptation and that is just what I have done. Writing a thesis requires structure and CGTM offer guidance about arranging the research. The latitude provided in the approach can accommodate the rhizomatic thinking that, in this enquiry, involves the process of unearthing concepts embedded in conversations and texts to find options that offer possibilities to create and/or restore concepts anew for the subject under study – in this instance, RPL in university education.

In epistemological terms, my approach tries to look behind perceptions and ideas to explore the concepts and their contours that lurk in the back stage. I try to transcend what appears obvious and examine what lies in the shadows. Given my commitment to immanence, this may seem as if I am falling away from my ontological stance. Thus, to clarify, I will wander back to Deleuze. In Deleuzian philosophy, transcendent and transcendental have different connotations. Both refer to what is 'beyond', but transcendental follows the order of enquiry, even critique, and is 'immanent', while transcendent implies 'beyond' human experience and is 'transcendent'. For Deleuze, empiricism refers to experience and he uses the concept to mean actual experience rather than observed experience only. Thus, it is possible for me to say, for the sake of ease in a field of very complex concepts, that transcendental empiricism for Deleuze is an enquiry of actual/virtual experience; "its object is experience … it is transcendental because empirical principles always 'leave outside themselves the elements of their own foundation (DR [Difference and Repetition] 328) and hence require a transcendental analysis of their implicit condition or presupposition" (Deleuze,1968:328, cited in Bogue, 1989:58). To give an example, quantitative data saying how many people went to school tells nothing about how much they learned or even why they went in the first place. All it delivers is statistics. I offer quantitative data in this enquiry and then I make an effort to explore what foundations exist behind this data through a series of conversations with participants counted in the statistics. This is my method in terms of conceptual analysis and a means of problematizing my own experience of practice and RPL. Transcendental empiricism then is a way of thinking about or problematising experience. The process links experience, thought and concepts.

4.4 Methods

Methods are implements that help the researcher extract meaning from chaos. They are selected in the process of research itself. In a rhizomatic approach nothing is discounted. There is no dispute about the value of one style over another. Quantitative methods are not set against those of qualitative approaches. If one form connects naturally with another in the rhizome, the line of enquiry is pursued. In rhizomatic research there is no prescription. It is an opportunity to learn from whatever sources are available.

In this enquiry, the primary qualitative data came in conversations with groups and individual participants. Burgess describes them as 'conversations with a purpose' (1984:102, cited in Mason, 2002:62). This is a useful description as it differentiates them from a natural social conversation that takes place in everyday life. Charmaz points out that the interviewer "asks the participant to describe and reflect upon his or her experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life' (2006:25).

The topic for discussion with the participants in this enquiry was not one they recalled or reflected on regularly in their daily lives, and was almost forgotten for many. The invitation to participate and the conversation processes rekindled memories that were rethought and retold anew. There are layers of translation present in the data – the participants give renditions of their past in the conversations; their renditions are transcribed from spoken word to text; I explore the data and select portions of text that in my judgement are important to this enquiry; you, the reader, read the selected portions of data, judge the rendition offer along with my analysis and perhaps have other insights to offer. Thus, data is always partial and subject to question.

4.4.1 Working with the rhizome

The role of interviewer is to open a space with participants where all can speak candidly about their experiences. I used conversation for its rhizomatic qualities as it is impossible to say where a conversation can go.

I began by imagining the session. I reminded myself that the participants, as conceptual personae, were experts in RPL though their own experience. My role was to provide space where we could share our knowledge and understanding. I realized that although the

participants were coming from the same university they could still be new to each other, and many did not know me. I created a social space by offering refreshments and food when they arrived. This worked well very quickly. We identified with each other, and sometimes there were moments of reminiscence by the participants, of times shared while undergraduates.

The session began with a round of introductions, general discussion about graduate status, credit exemptions and programmes taken. We agreed on some principles for engagement such as communication issues and time constraints, and, in particular, the group agreed that participants would maintain the confidentiality of the group in case someone made unplanned personal revelations. I had forgotten that many of the participants were used to adult education practice or were themselves adult educators; consequently, they were very aware of the need to listen, ask questions and to give everyone a chance to speak. This enabled the conversation to flow and everyone got involved in the discussions. I had developed a series of open-ended questions and also some key words that I thought we could draw on if we needed to animate discussion in the group, but we gelled well together. Much of what I prepared was redundant. The groups were very animated and the questions, comments and issues emerged in the flow of conversation. McCracken advocates for the interviewer to 'play dumb' which is very useful advice; however, it was sometimes impossible for me because in some groups, I knew many of the participants.

Generally, the conversation rolled on and around the topic. Each reminder of the past seemed to bring the research participants closer to the time when they were students and their experiences of RPL slowly came to life. Some ideas were brought to a natural plateau while other ideas took off in unpredictable directions. Not only did they offer stories about their experiences, they debated the difficulties inherent in assessing learning in experience itself. They pondered the big questions about the nature of learning in experience and they critiqued RPL as practiced in their institution. They mused on the role of RPL and offered insights from their position as student claimants. Overall, they appeared to trust each other and spoke frankly. They included me in the conversation rather than the other way around, and they did not hold back from challenging me about the procedures for RPL that I practiced when it had affected them. I had to be mindful not to see points raised as personal criticism of me and consider it in the context of the situation. I was after all the practitioner many of them had worked with in having their prior learning recognized. It felt natural that they should raise queries and I accepted this to be the case. I valued their point of view as it pointed out problems inherent in

that system. Although some participants spoke more than others I did not intervene and in many instances the group managed this themselves. Each session lasted three hours from start to finish. Participants sometimes seemed reluctant to leave. They hung around afterwards having another cup of tea to finish personal conversations or catch up with friends. The atmosphere we developed was relaxed and open.

Yet the role of the researcher is never benign. The group met at my behest and I determined the topic. However, the conversations facilitated co-creation of knowledge within the group. They were my companions in the research. My job as researcher was to ensure that the knowledge that was gathered with them was analysed with care and attention to details. Their thoughts, in all their multiplicity made this thesis.

4.5 Data saturation

In grounded theory, saturation is reached when there is nothing more to gain from further interviews. Thinking through the concept of multiplicity the idea of a 'saturation point' takes on a different meaning. As each person is a multiplicity then "there was already quite a crowd" (DG, 1987:3). This means that the emphasis on participant numbers is redundant, but finding ways to engage the multiplicity takes over. I approached this matter in the conversations themselves by stepping back and letting the conversations flow naturally. I used active listening techniques. McCracken states that:

> The careful listener must be listening not only for what exists in the interview but also what this material points to in the mind of the respondent. This is one of the most difficult strategies to formalize, for it comes usually in the form of an intuition. The investigator is suddenly aware that if the respondent thinks "x", he or she should also think "y' (1988:40).

Listening for all the nuanced indicators of thought through voice inflections, emphasis on words, sounds of emotion, intellectualizing, political positioning, etc. are all part of listening, observing and feeling the data. Intuition is important. I followed my intuition in the conversations, and where questions arose for me, I checked in with the participants for clarification and verification. Later, while reading and listening to our conversations as recorded from the meetings I could see differences in perspectives more clearly. The points raised contradicted some of the positions laid out in the literature review chapters. In the process, salient concepts emerged.

I spoke with three claimants on a one to one basis. I circulated transcripts to all participants for review. I was grateful for their insights. Thus, saturation was reached through thought itself in company with all the conceptual personae involved.

4.6 Puzzles of an embedded researcher

McCracken speaks of the need for 'distancing' especially if the interviewer is working in their own culture.

> Scholars working in another culture have a very great advantage over those working in their own. Virtually everything before them is, to some degree, mysterious. Those who work in their own culture do not have the critical distance from what they study. They carry with them a large number of assumptions that can create a treacherous sense of familiarity (1988:22).

The necessity to "manufacture distance in order to heighten critical awareness' (1988:23) is important according to McCracken. He suggests that this can be achieved by the sensation of surprise which occurs through violation of expectations. As I was carrying out the research in my own institution with research participants many of whom knew me, 'manufacturing distance' was, I felt, untenable. Instead, I trusted the research participants to make things strange with their thoughts, insights and analysis. McCracken emphasizes that 'surprise' is more pervasive when working in new cultural environments. In contrast, he asserts researchers working in their own culture can easily miss significant data through familiarity with the context. I think this depends on the approach. For those working in unfamiliar cultures it can be a struggle to find their feet in the specific cultural settings. Everything is a surprise because everything is new. Familiarity according to McCracken "has the advantage of giving the investigator an extraordinarily intimate acquaintance with the object of study. This acquaintance gives the researcher a fineness of touch and delicacy of insight that few ethnographers working in other cultures can hope to develop. This is an exceptional analytic advantage" (1988:32). While this enquiry is not an ethnographic study, some of the traces are present. I am an 'embedded' researcher as my own practice is a primary focus of this enquiry. However, in CS2, I have less experience and their practices are known to me only through the conversations with the research participants and through my experience when I was an external examiner, for the programme prior to carrying out the research. Thus, 'surprise' for me in this part of the research was an encounter with a different form of practice. I never had an ambition to become an objective outsider, looking at other institutions, critiquing their practice in the comfortable knowledge that my own work was not under scrutiny. I chose to reflect and examine RPL practice at home. This created another issue. I risked the accusation of collecting

data based on merits of convenience, practicality and accessibility but convenient data does not necessarily mean 'bad' data. The other matter was the particular form of RPL I had practiced. It was credit transfer which gave it a distinctive style. There is a growing discourse that credit transfer is not RPL at all. For me this made an exploration of my practice more central — is it RPL or not? What would those who participated in this narrow form of practice have to say about their experiences? What would they say about the absence of a more generous form of RPL that could recognize other forms of learning. Ignoring what was at my doorstep, I felt, would undermine my rhizomatic epistemology and the immanent ontology which I hold. The different styles of practice and their affects are explored with the research participants.

4.7 Data sources and case settings

The notion of a sample leads to thinking that the sample could be considered a representation of something more general. I make no claim to generalization. I selected case settings based on difference from each other but also difference in the purpose of practice. I looked at multiple cases. Using Thomas's triad of cases – "a key case, a local knowledge case and a special outlier case" (2011:1992) I opted to use all three. I chose them because they "belong to a specific family of phenomena" (Walton, 1992, cited in Ragin & Becker, 1993:14) of RPL and thus they offered the best option to open possibilities for new concepts or to make or remake theory (2011:92). The uniqueness of each case ensured that I could not fall into the habit of comparing and contrasting between them. Each style conceptualized RPL differently and the effects for claimants, practitioners and the institution itself were also different. Each process offered affirmative options to the claimants and in turn each style of practice was multiple and different. Thus I wanted to present them in their own right as "multiplicities that are interconnected through their affirmative option …[and] as constituent elements in accounts and records of practice" (Amorim & Ryan, 2005:581). The 'affirmative options' offered by RPL are embedded in participant accounts and were thus ungrounded in the analysis. These are of central importance in this study. The affirmative connections provide the material for reflection and critique and offer new lines of flight for theoretical development. The cases as exemplars are not all of the lived of RPL, they are samples that collectively provide a specific image of RPL characterized by the mode practiced.

The selection of data sources happened organically. I was in the rhizome in my practice and sought lines of connection to points where different practice from my own worked. Over time, the lines started to become clearer and the data sources emerged. I grasped the opportunities to

engage with another group of claimants in another institution when the opportunity came about. I had also engaged in RPL practice in this site, although in a different role. In this way, I began research where I stood – in the middle ground of my own practice.

4.7.1 Case setting 1 (CS1) A local knowledge case

CS1 is my home university setting. I elected to use this setting to explore the effects of the conceptualization of RPL as credit transfer on the claimants and the institutional position in relation to this narrow practice.

The data from this setting was both qualitative and quantitative. I facilitated four discussion groups including a pilot group. The process of selecting participants was a little protracted. University procedures for data protection meant that I had to send invitations to participants through the Student Records Office. I had no direct access to the records and consequently I experienced a couple of issues when distributing invitations. I had to provide clear criteria for the sample group. I could not include students who had unsuccessful claims because they were not identifiable on the system. There was no record of the application only the outcomes. If exemptions were granted they were included in the student's record; otherwise there was no record of the activity in the ITS (student records system).

I set the criteria for my sample. I wanted to invite students who had been awarded exemptions irrespective of the quantity of credits awarded. A complete list of students was sent to me but without first names or a gender identifier consequently I could not ensure an equal number of male and female participants. Student contact details were not available to me either which meant that the invitations were dispatched centrally. Thus, the sample was blind.

I followed the same procedures to recruit participants in each of the four discussion groups in CS1. In each phase, I prepared invitation documents and arranged to send then as per the conditions of my ethical approval (Appendix 1). Six respondents agreed to participate in the Pilot Focus Group (Group 1). The Groups 2 and 3 were drawn from students and graduates in the university's outreach campus while the Group 3 was selected from the cohort on the main campus. Some participants knew each other while others did not. The participants were a mix of people who had graduated, resigned or were continuing their studies. All had gone through

the RPL process although the level of credit exemption they received was different. These ranged from 10-60 credits.

In total 22 individuals participated in the discussion groups in CS1. Group 1, 3 and 4 session lasted three hours while the session with Group 2 was two hours. The following table gives a list of participants with names anonymized and shows the participants' role in RPL, their registration status at time of meetings if claimants, and the style of meeting used for conversation.

Fig.15 List of research participants (CS1)

Pseudonym	Role in RPL	Group number	**Registration status**
Freida	Claimant	Group1	Graduated
Annette	Claimant	Group1	Resigned
Monica	Claimant	Group1	Graduated
Bree	Claimant	Group1	Resigned
Gary	Claimant	Group1	Continuing
Rachel	Claimant	Group1	Graduated
John	Claimant	Group 2/Outreach	Resigned
Maura	Claimant	Group 2/Outreach	Graduated
Pauline	Claimant	Group 2/Outreach	Graduated
Nessa	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Graduated
Maria	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Graduated
Michael	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Continuing
Molly	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Continuing
Beatrice	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Continuing
Belinda	Claimant	Group 3/Outreach	Graduated
Bea	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Henry	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Catherine	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Pauline	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Pascal	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Priscella	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
Anicka	Claimant	Group 4	Graduated
George	University Manager	Individual meeting	
Declan	University Manager	Individual meeting	

Seventeen women and five men participated in the discussion groups in CS1.

Two research participants were managers of the university at CS1. I felt their perspective was important because they had both been involved in RPL practice and institutional policy development. I wanted to hear how they perceived RPL and whether they felt it worked well in university education. They agreed to meet with me separately to discuss RPL. Each conversation lasted one hour.

Coded names identify the research participants and their setting as follows:

Case Study 1/2/3=CS1/2/3;
Practitioner/Name and Case Study 1/2/3=Sophie/MarthaPCS1/2/3;
Claimant's name/ Case Study 1/2/3= Betty/CS1/2/3;
Name/ Manager, Case Study 1= George/Declan/MCS1/2.

4.7.2 Quantitative Data (CS1)

RPL in CS1 has been in operation since 1997. Over that time, much quantitative data was collected in the universities Integrated Tracking System (ITS). The institution agreed to make the data available to me. I used Microsoft Excel rather than SPSS as a tool for building analytic graphs. The process was simplified as this application automatically identifies trend lines making reading the data very straight forward. This data laid out some interesting findings about the affect RPL had on progression to terminal awards. The findings were then connected to relevant themes elicited from group meetings and interviews to provide a more striated analysis. These two forms of data comprise the first case study (CS1).

4.7.3 Case Study 2 (CS2) An outlier case

The selection of the second case setting came about due to my engagement with another institution as external examiner. The degree programme used RPL in two ways, as credit transfer and as part of educational projects called Independent Learning Projects (ILP). I found their approach very interesting and I was anxious to include the claimants in my research. When my term as examiner was over, I approached the course director and manager to ask if they would be willing to notify their graduates about my research. They were enthusiastic and actively supported the research. They agreed to send out a notice to their graduates inviting them to contact me if they were willing to become involved in the research.

Ten research participants contacted me and volunteered to take part in a group meeting. I later met one participant (Walter), separately to hear his experience in some detail as I found his story very provocative. I also had a conversation with the course manager who was also an

RPL practitioner to discuss her experiences of practice. The list of participants is outlined below. All participants had graduated from the programme at the time of interview.

Fig. 16 List of research participants (CS2)

Pseudonym	RPL type	Role in RPL	Meeting type
Gaynor	ILP/	Claimant	Group meeting
Gladis	ILP/	Claimant	Group meeting
Alice	ILP/	No claim	Group meeting
Madge	ILP/CT	Claimant	Group meeting
Tony	CT	Claimant	Group meeting
Shile	ILP/CT	Claimant	Group meeting
Bonnie	ILP	Claimant	Group meeting
Betty	ILP/CT	Claimant	Group meeting
Walter	ILP/CT	Claimant	Group meeting & individual meeting
Angela	ILP/	Claimant	Group meeting
Sophie		Practitioner	Individual meeting

Abbreviations: ILP = Independent Learning Project; CT = Credit Transfer.

The group meetings lasted three hours; the meetings with Walter (claimant) and with Sophie (Practitioner/Manager) lasted one and a half hours each respectively. Eight women and two men participated in the discussion group.

4.7.4 Case Study 3 (CS3) A key case

In Ireland one of the chief complaints about RPL is the low level of promotion and resources available to implement it. The third case study was selected because it was part of an initiative operated through the European Social Fund that received funding to raise the capacity of higher education to develop and implement RPL. The point of view from a key figure in RPL there, who is also a practitioner and researcher in a university involved in the scheme, is included. The thoughts of a student who availed of the process in the same institution complete the data from that setting. Their accounts are integrated into the findings. The style of RPL practiced there has been in development for some time. It includes all experiences from different learning situations.

Fig. 17 List of research participants (CS3)

Pseudonym	RPL context	Role in RPL	Meeting type	Programme	Registration
Laura	EU	Claimant	One-to-one	IT degree	Graduated
Martha	EU	Practitioner	One-to-one		

The three case settings offer different exemplars. The population of claimants can be loosely divided into two categories – a) those who transfer credit from one formal programme to another; and b) those who receive credit for informal, non-formal and formal learning gained in experience. RPL as practiced in Case Study 1 (CS1) is an exemplar of the first category; Case Study 2 (CS2) includes both categories but for the purposes of this study the focus in CS2 is on RPL and experience; Case Study 3 (CS3) includes all prescribed categories but the focus is on retrospective insights. The practitioner in this case was directly involved in the long process of implementing, embedding, researching and practicing RPL, and the claimant engaged in what is termed a 'mature' system of RPL.

4.8 Methods of Analysis

In CGTM coding is viewed as a "pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain this data" (Charmez, 2006:46). The recommendation is that the initial coding exercise should 'stick closely' to the data and examine it line by line. Care not to use 'pre-existing categories to the data' is advised and an effort should be made to use words that 'reflect action'. The coding process I used was designed to map conceptual co-ordinates in the data rhizome. I had no idea how to do this effectively and engaged in a process of experimentation.

I began by following the common procedure of having the recorded conversations from the discussion groups and the individual meetings transcribed. The transcriptions were then uploaded onto NVivo which is a software package for qualitative data analysis. NVivo operates in the same way as manual coding mechanisms but it is computer based. The software allowed me to read and listen to the transcripts simultaneously. The first trawl of coding was done quickly, almost without thinking. I found it to be very systematic. It was easy to create notes and memos. Codes could be singular or multiple. I coded line by line and even word by word in some instances. Yet it did not have a rhizomatic feel to it and I felt the process was deadening the data. I had not done what I had set out to do, which was to create a system of coding that would open up difference and identify affirmative options from the multiplicity. I was leaving the focus of the enquiry in the process. The systematic characteristics of NVivo had resulted in neat and well-ordered categories. It had ordered the chaos. This indicated to me that I hadn't charted the uncharted rhizomatic pathways of the RPL concept but had followed a system of

categorisation that led me to a dead end. In the end, I returned the data to its material home on paper and changed tactics.

Using Nvivo had some advantages. The lengthy process of organising the data meant that I knew it well making it possible to return to it easily. This resulted in the creation of points of difference and the location of multiple and often divergent themes in the data. The data was stored and encrypted for security purposes. A problem then arose of how to organize the multiplicity of findings.

4.9 Putting the rhizome to work

In considering data analysis, I realised very quickly that any process for analysis would result in an ordering of the rhizomes into some sort of text to elicit the ideas and concepts embedded in them. I elected to use close reading of the data to expose the concepts and thoughts embedded in it and to see what emerged.   I used my DG theoretical sensitivity to assemble a framework that would help the process. The emphasis was on ungrounding concepts that point up different positions, points of connection, affirmative options, becomings, concepts and paradoxes or points that make common sense strange. I followed Scott and Usher who say that:

> The contemporary situation is such that we now need to think loudly and publicly, not just about methods, outcomes and application, but about the research process itself: and to think in this way not after the event but during it (2010:10).

I tried to do this. I engaged in ongoing reflection about the process and kept tweaking it in an effort to bring it closer to a mapping process that would allow the voices of the participants to be heard clearly so that each reader could engage fully with their thoughts and in that way challenge my reading or make a reading of their own. Yet, my own close readings and intensive listening resulted in considerable notes and commentary, but I still did not have a way of presenting the findings.

4.9.1 Identifying difference in the data

Finding a way to present findings is another dilemma for researchers. Given my love of the rhizome, my problem was how to keep the data in flow while at the same time making the concepts embedded in it visible. I followed the technique used by Ryan in her work on Feminist Subjectivities termed 'interpretative discourse analysis' (Garvey, 1989; Hollway, 1989; Potter and Wetherell, 1987, cited in Ryan, 1997:178). I do not realise a discourse analysis but I thought the approach was useful for mapping concepts. I did not come to the analysis as she

does with dominant discourses identified, but I came with knowledge of deterritorialisation processes and how these affected RPL development. Linked to my position were numerous questions and conundrums about conceptualization of RPL that I wanted to unravel. I decided to use Ryan's method to select words, sentences, phrases that indicated particular conceptual thought in relation to RPL and other related ideas that influenced RPL practice. I decided to label these with numbers. The numbers signify lines of thinking in the text and chart reference points or co-ordinates in the rhizomes. The exercise is followed by a commentary with my accompanying lines of thought and analysis about each charted piece of text. I see this as a process of 'ungrounding' concepts and ideas from the text. 'Un-grounding' is a metaphor for digging up concepts from inside the data. It also relates well to grounded theory that is implicitly a process of disinterring data to create theory. The chapters conclude with a general overview and analysis of the data.

4.9.2 Quantitative Data analysis

The data from the ITS (student records database) was very useful. It was possible to count the number of students who successfully received exemptions. Bivariant analysis was carried out to examine whether there was a relationship between exemptions and completion rates. The relationship between these findings and those in the qualitiative data were also examined. All activities were done with the permission of the Registrar and in accordance with the University's data protection regulations and approved by the Ethics Committee of the university (Appendix 1).

4.10 Ethical considerations

Throughout the history of qualitative research, qualitative investigators have defined their work in terms of hopes and values (Vidich & Lyman, 2000:39, cited in Denzin & Lincoln 2008:18). Researchers produce things and producing 'things' always involves value - what to produce, what to name the productions, and what the relationship between the producers and the named things will be (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008:475). The Enlightenment arguments about personal freedom and moral responsibility haunt us still. Whether our judgment will be influenced by one thing over the other is never clear. Max Weber's contribution to the ethics debate is noteworthy. Christians describes it well:

> Weber distinguishes between value freedom and value relevance. He recognizes that in the discovery phase, "personal, cultural, moral, or political values cannot be eliminated …what social scientists choose to investigate … they choose on the basis of

values they expect their research to advance (Root, 1994, p.33). But he insists that social science be value-free in the presentation phase. Findings ought not to express any judgment of a moral or political character (Christians, 2011:63).

Weber's pronouncements influenced the formation of codes of ethics in the social sciences emphasising four core guidelines - informed consent, deception (opposition to deception), privacy and confidentiality, and accuracy (2011:65-67). These codes remain today to a lesser or greater extent; however, all have serious ambiguities attached to them and have been contested widely. This draws me to conclude that, as Mason advises, "a practical approach to ethics which involves asking yourself difficult questions – and pushing yourself hard to answer them – is particularly appropriate" (2013:42). In this enquiry, I try to integrate my ethical considerations at each phase of the research when appropriate.

I have an unusually close proximity to data in this thesis. I worked in both case studies settings. I was directly involved in the RPL processes that research participants completed in CS1. Thus the context of my practice brought ethical considerations into focus, as the researched and researcher had to negotiate the relationships that already exist between them. I had to be very clear about our roles. I made explicit the options open to them and emphasized that they could withdraw from the process at any time. I forwarded a description of the research and a Consent Form (Appendix 3) prior to our meetings and discussed their role in the research and the implications of their involvement at the commencement of each group meeting. Participants received copies of the interviews/discussion group transcripts and were invited to correct errors, make changes and provide reflections if they wished. None of participants responded with corrections to the transcripts.

I complied with the university's ethical policy guidelines. I submitted a proposal to the university's Ethics Approval Board (Appendix 1). In the proposal, I outlined the procedures for protecting participant confidentiality, data protection mechanisms and ethical approaches to participant involvement in the study. The Board reviewed my submission and granted approval.

Through the Ethics Approval process, I received permission from the Registrar of the day to gain access to quantitative data from the university's Integrated Tracking System in accordance with the University's data protection regulations.

This chapter discussed the complexities of selecting a methodology and explored the choices I made in building my approach. My commitment to thinking about the data as rhizomatic brought some complications to CGTM approach. Yet, CGTM has a commonality with DG in that the object of research is to create theory, and for DG the object of their philosophy is to create concepts. In both cases abstraction is called for; however, DG demand that 'concepts work' and thus concepts cannot be only virtual, they must also work in actuality. In the next three chapters we will explore extracts from the conversations from group meeting and individual meetings, and in the final chapters we will discuss affirmative options for RPL concept development and practice in university education.

SECOND PLATEAU

This plateau is formed by four layers called chapters. Together the chapters comprise a discursive plateau of primary data. The participant accounts continually move between the 'outside' and 'inside' experiences of participants. However, for the sake of clarity, I have organized them in a sequence that generally flows from the exteriority of quantitative data, styles and systems towards the inside and experiences of individual participants. The following is a short guide to the Plateau.

The first layer is **CHAPTER V**; it outlines the case studies and styles of practice in each setting followed by quantitative data available for each site.

CHAPTER V1 explores how concepts inform and shape institutional perspectives and positions and how these in turn affect the approach and style of practice offered in the case study settings and consequently the experiences of claimants.

CHAPTER VII journeys through the claimant perspectives on RPL noticing how they experience RPL – 'outside' and 'inside' – and the obstacles and resistances they encounter along the way.

In **CHAPTER VIII**, the enquiry follows a line of flight into the individual experiences of two participants exploring their 'inside' experience of RPL.

The chapters are assembled from two case studies (CS1/CS2) of university practice in Ireland and a third short case study (CS3) is from an institution in Northern Europe and is included because of the specificity of the RPL context there. The case studies are distinctively different due to their style of practice, ethos, policy and resource allocations.

CHAPTER V

Case Studies of RPL in University Adult Education Part-time Degrees

5.0 Introduction

The review of research and policy documents indicate that in Ireland, RPL is a peripheral practice in higher education, and generally, practice remains low internationally despite significant investment in some countries. The case studies reviewed in this enquiry explicate how the concept works in practice in positive and/or negative ways. In the process, I search for possibilities to release the RPL bonsai from the controlled and limited practice I experienced in my twenty years as a practitioner.

5.1 CASE STUDIES and QUANTITATIVE DATA

Each case study is described in the following sections and relevant quantitative available from each setting is presented.

5.2 Case Study 1 (CS1) – a local knowledge case

Case Study 1 (CS1) has a history of credit transfer dating back to 1997. The part-time BA degrees were offered to adult learners both on the main campus and at a small satellite campus situated some 80 miles away. These were fully modularised, credit-bearing programmes organised by semester and offered over a 5-year cycle, and were the first modular degrees offered at CS1. The degrees were interdisciplinary across the humanities and social sciences with eight departments participating in the two streams. Students had to satisfy the mature student entry requirement and be over 23 years of age on the 1st of January on the year of entry. They were eligible for the award of Diploma in Arts once they accumulated 90 credits and received a Level 8 Honours BA when they attained 180 credits. The ability to recognise prior learning through credit transfer was integral to the programmes.

In CS1, the focus is the practice of RPL in the BA part-time adult education programmes 1997-2012 inclusive. I joined the staff of the Department responsible for the academic and operational management of the BA programmes in 2000 as a Student/Staff Support Officer. The programmes were already running for three years and RPL was operating well as credit

transfer. No provision was available in the degree to recognise experience at that point. I had not prior knowledge of RPL until I took up this post.

When I began another new member of staff in a similar position was appointed at the university's outreach campus. We both had to learn about the process, understand the concept and support applicants to negotiate their claims. The applicants were unaccustomed to the concept and almost all, like me, had never heard of it until they applied for the course.

During recruitment periods numerous hours were spent explaining RPL to applicants on the phone, at course information sessions and during interviews. There was no central promotion of RPL by the university, the higher education sector or by the Department of Education at that time, nor has that changed up to the date of this study. It was a marginal activity at CS1 and was only of interest to the eight departments involved in the programmes and outside of that, there was no activity.

A proposal was made by my colleague and I to the Course Management Team (CMT) of the degrees to extend RPL to include experience. The CMT approved the proposal on a pilot basis, as did the other relevant university committees. However, no additional resources were offered to help us implement it; thus, our appetite for extending the practice to include other forms of learning was quelled. We were concerned that as our workloads were already heavy, the implementation of our proposal without the guidance and supports necessary would be difficult. We agreed not to go ahead with our plans at that time. There was no objection voiced by members of the Course Management Team to our proposal being shelved.

In 2011, I re-activated the initiative and supported five claimants to make RPL claims based on experience. The claims were for access to various courses for which the claimants did not hold the pre-requisite entry qualifications. All five claims were successful.

In 2015 a formal university-wide RPL policy was approved by Academic Council (Appendix 6). It included procedures for recognition of all forms of learning.

5.2.1 Style of practice in CS1

In CS1, while attending to requirements as set out by national policy, the practice was constrained by resource limitations, which resulted in restricting practice to credit transfer.

The procedures were designed to deliver reliable, verified and valid credit transfer in exchange for module exemptions. The guidelines were specific (Appendix 5). Claimants submitted their claims in paper format. In the early years, most of the claims were for minor awards gained through participation in courses delivered by the department in which I worked at a wide variety of community outreach centres across the country. Awards from other institutions (national and international) came more slowly. Over time precedence was built up for courses from a variety of institutions in Ireland and internationally. As a result, the claim process became very efficient. This saved time and effort for everyone involved. Where no precedent was available, my colleague and I sourced relevant information on the web, and, when necessary, we contacted institutions directly.

Sometimes, claimants who may have had to leave their countries of origin under difficult circumstances (for example due to war or conflict) had scant documented evidence of their education. Generally, when claimants contacted their institutions directly they found it difficult to get the information they needed. Sometimes the front-line person asked technical questions that confused them. For example, institutions would mistakenly think that copies of assignments or letters from the rector/president or other senior officers were required, when all that was needed was a verified course transcript. The language too could be confusing for claimants. The term 'transcript' was often misunderstood. In the interests of efficiency for all concerned, we felt that it was easier for us to carry out the investigations ourselves. We carried out research using the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), followed by web research and sometimes direct communication with the institutions. This hands-on approach helped claimants greatly. There were only a handful of instances where this level of research was necessary. Academic subject specialists from the participating departments were always ready to help when called upon to do so. All claims were brought for approval to the Course Management Team which was made up of academic representatives from the participating departments, the Registrar or his representative; BA Managers and the Director of Programmes. The exemptions awarded were recorded for each student on the centralized university student records system (ITS) and the students were notified about the outcome of their claims in writing. The style of RPL offered in CS1 was claimant-centred but within an instrumental paradigm.

The procedures and policy for RPL are included in Appendix 5. In 1997, when the programmes

commenced, the practice of RPL was rare, and credit transfer was new as few courses were modular and credit bearing in Ireland.

Since 1997, the exemptions awarded were recorded on the university student record system providing some unique data on RPL. While RPL did not include learning gained in experience, the result of the claims were the same – credit exemptions due to recognition of prior learning. Thus, the data collated in this enquiry provides interesting information about the experience of students who gained exemptions. It also provides an overview of RPL activity in the part-time adult degree programmes. I used the data to elicit the level of practice in operation and the relationship between RPL and completion rates to see how RPL functions.

5.3 Quantitative data from CS1

Student records in CS1 are stored electronically on the university's Integrated Tracking System (ITS). I received permission to draw data from ITS for my research. I did not have direct access to the data but submitted the categories of data required to the data manager for Student Records, and she returned anonymised results to me. This data is used to show levels of participation in RPL, graduation figures, participation rates and the number of successful RPL claims recorded. The data shows the registration rates of RPL students over the 15-year period 1997-2012 inclusive and completion rates for students with/without exemptions 1999-2012. 1,749 module exemptions were awarded over that period.

5.3.1 New Entrants

The degrees commenced in the academic year 1997-1998. Records indicate the end of examining period and register students as 1998.

Fig. 18 CS1 New entrants (1998-2012)
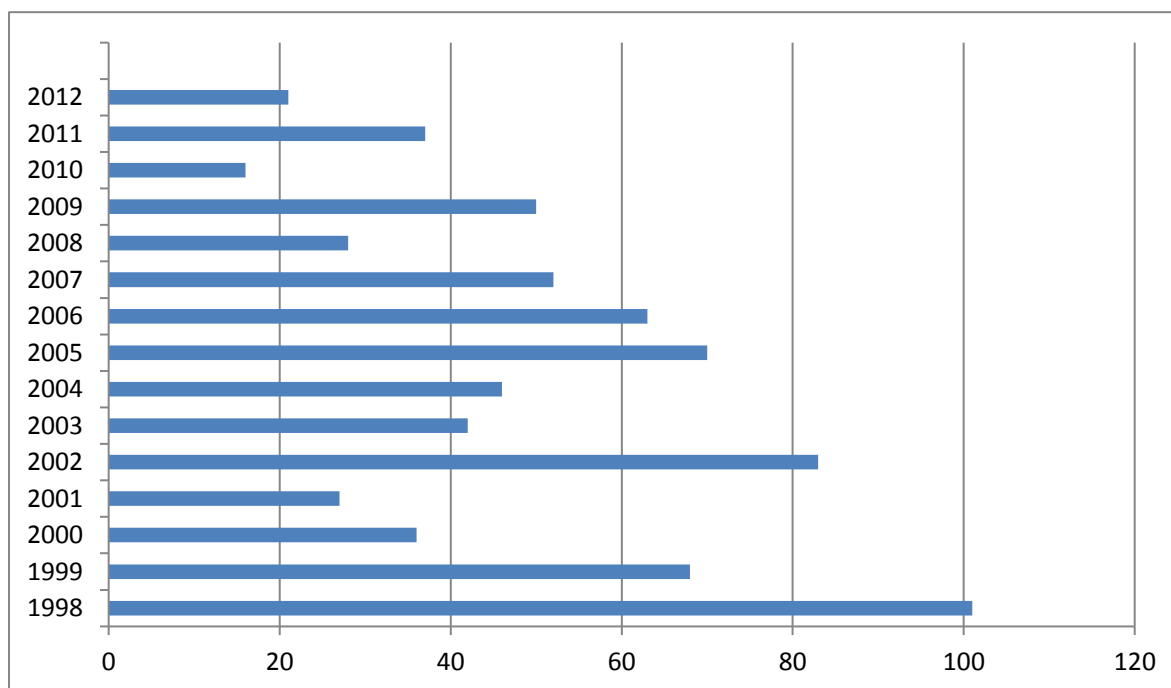
The largest intake of students was in the first year. Recruitment numbers were uneven after that until 2002 when numbers peaked again. This was due to an absence of recruitment in the main campus in 2001. The lowest rates of new entrants were recorded in 2010 which can be explained by lack of student finance due to the recession in Ireland.

5.3.2 Participation rates:

The following is an overview of participation rates up to and including 2012. Please note students who accumulated 90 credits received a diploma thus all students who graduated with a BA also held the award of diploma. Thus, the number of students who received a Diploma only is the total who received the Diploma less those who received BA.

Fig. 19 CS1 Overview of participation rates 1997-2012

Awards	N	Per cent
BA	297	40%
Diploma only	150	20%
Continuing/non completion	293	40%
Total	740	100%

Fig. 20 CS1 Module exemptions approved each year

N=740 Cumulative sum of students registered   1998-2012

Total unique students with exemptions   454 = 62%

Total non-exempt students   286 = 39%

Year	Exemptions
1998	41
1999	81
2000	41
2001	35
2002	53
2003	29
2004	23
2005	49
2006	39
2007	38
2008	23
2009	33
2010	13
2011	34
2012	16
Sum	548*

Total claims 548   (94 students made more than one claim)

Fig. 20a CS1 Graph of module exemptions approved each year

Number of Exemptions each year
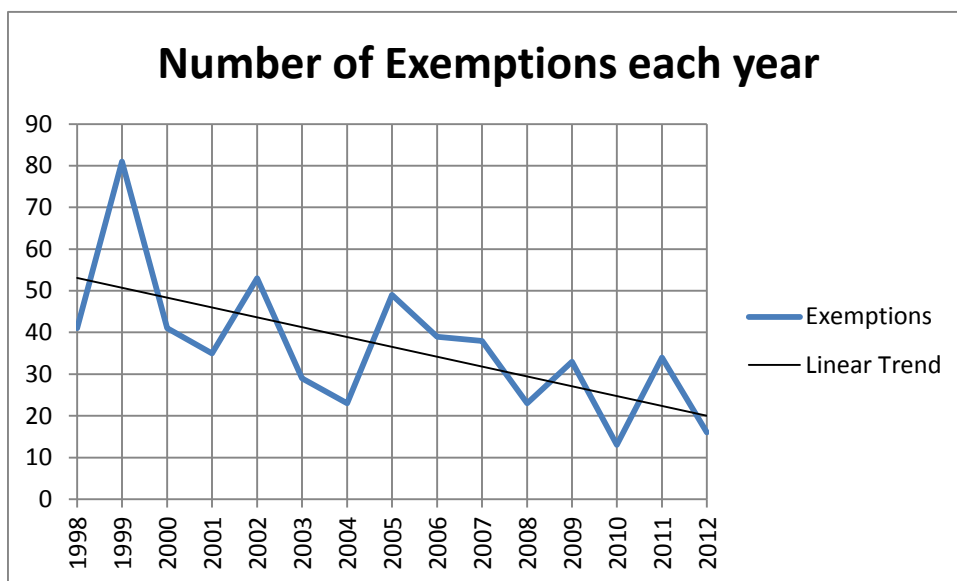
The linear trend shows a steady line of participation over the period with some notable peaks

and troughs. All of these correspond well with the number of new entrants except in 2004. Despite the high intake that year claims for RPL were low.

Fig. 21: CS1 Age and gender profile
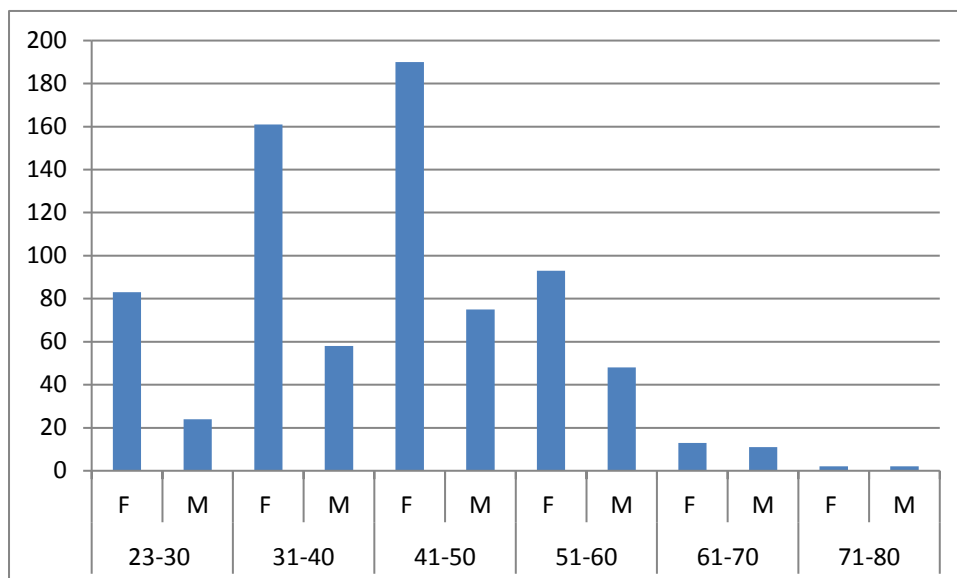
The data shows that the greatest number of students registered for the programmes were in the 41-50 and the 31-40 age groups respectively. The population of female students greatly outweighs those of men except in the 61-70 and 71-70 groups, when the differentiation reduces significantly and they are almost par with each other. Part-time degrees attract mostly women and a great number of them have prior learning to exchange for module exemptions. The greatest population of male students were in the 41-50 age brackets.

Fig. 22: CS1 Relationship between completion rates (diploma and degree) and exemptions

N=740

Total unique students with exemptions	**454 = 100% (n)**
Total exempt awarded degrees	205 = 45%
Total exempt awarded diplomas only	97 = 22%

Total carrying exemptions conferred with awards 302 = 67%

Total non-exempt students	**286 = 100%**
Total non-exempt awarded degrees	92 = 32%
Total non-exempt awarded diploma only	53 = 19%

Total conferred with awards without exemptions 145 = 51%

Fig. 23: Degrees and Diplomas awarded for exempt/non-exempt students
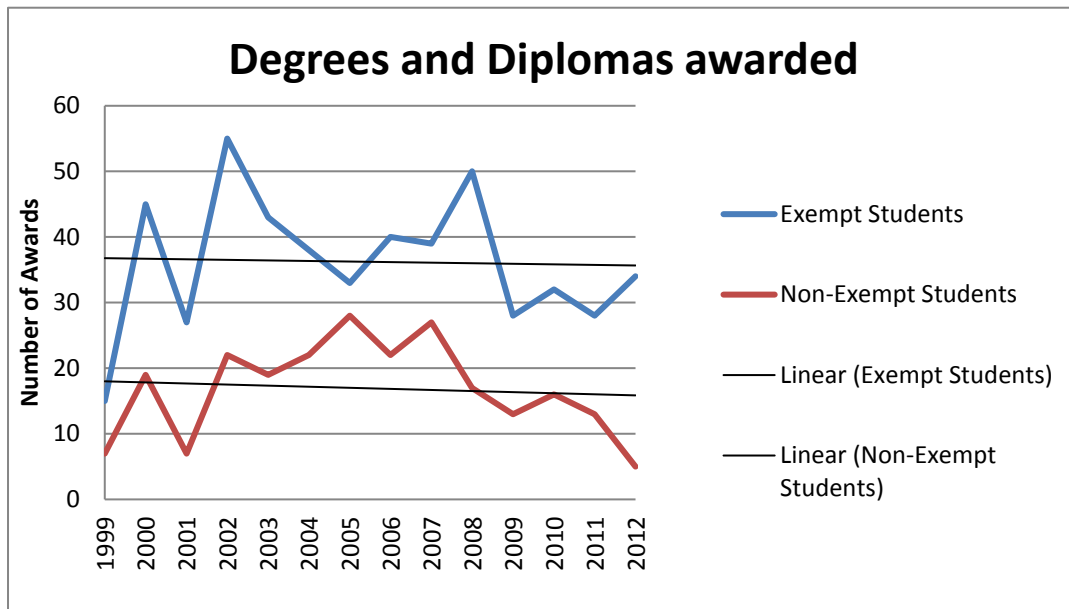
The bar graphs shows a consistently high level of exemptions and the trend line indicates that enrollment levels remain steady over the study period. The proportion of students with exemptions is evident and consequently, it is likely that a higher proportion who complete the degree will have exemptions.

Fig 24: Outcome of exemptions on completion rates 1999-2012

	Degree	**Diploma**	*Marginal Row Totals*
Exempt	205 (200.66) [0.09]	97 (101.34) [0.19]	302
Non-exempt	92 (96.34) [0.02]	53 (48.66) [.039]	145
Marginal Column Totals	297	150	447 (Grand Total)

The chi-square statistic is 0.8632. The p-value is.652831. This result is not significant at p<.05.

The chart shows that there is no significant difference in completion rates for those who have or do not have exemptions. This is an important finding as we might have expected that those holding RPL exemptions would have higher completion rates, as was the case in the US and Canadian research discussed already. There is no way of knowing if all the students with exemptions who received awards would have completed the degrees without RPL. The extent of motivation provided by RPL to commence degrees is unknown although some participants in this study named RPL opportunities as an advantage (Chapter VI). This is contrary to my

experience where almost all applicants for the BA in CS1 were unaware of RPL services in the institution before they applied.

Fig. 25: CS1 Graph relationship of exemptions to degrees awarded
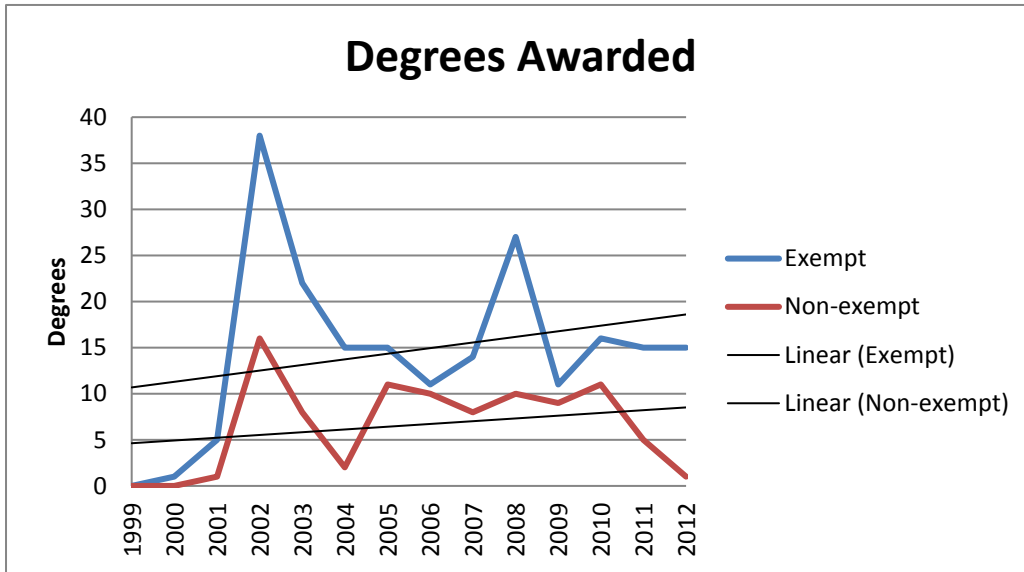
70% of the total degrees were awarded to students with exemptions but this is expected, as they comprise 62% of the student population. The number of degree graduates who carried exemptions peaked in 2002 and again in 2007 when the recession in Ireland officially began. Levels of awards tapered off after that point.

Fig. 26: CS1 Relationship of exemptions to diplomas awarded
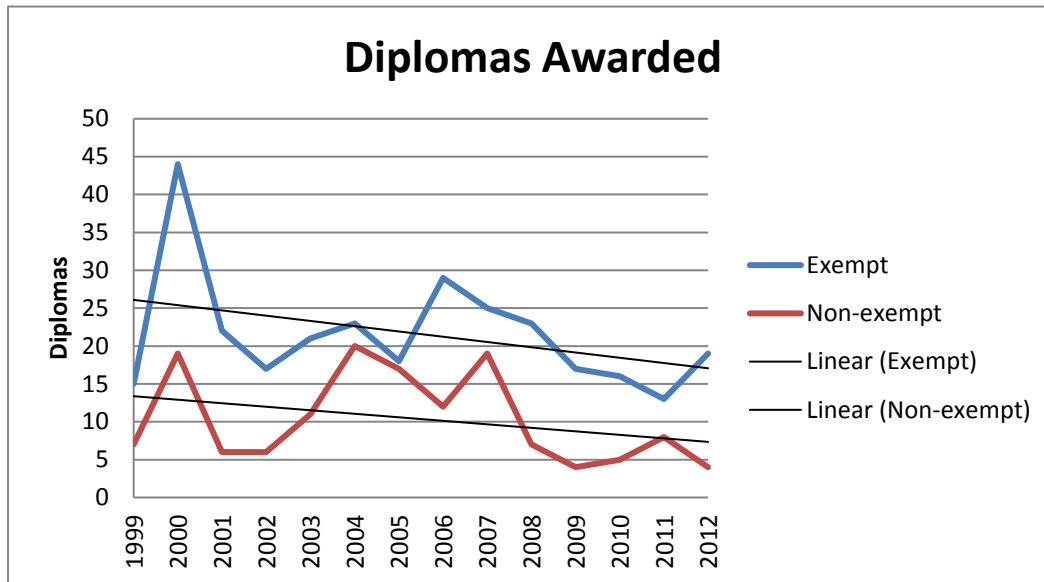
Of the total diplomas awarded students with exemptions comprise 70% of the population and again as in the degrees this is to be expected as they comprise the same number of registered students. The number of diploma graduates who carried exemptions peaked in 2000 but remained steady thereafter. RPL affects diploma graduation rates less than degrees but again it is reasonable to infer that RPL may have had a positive impact on dropout rates.

Fig. 27: CS1 Participation rates in designated degree programmes
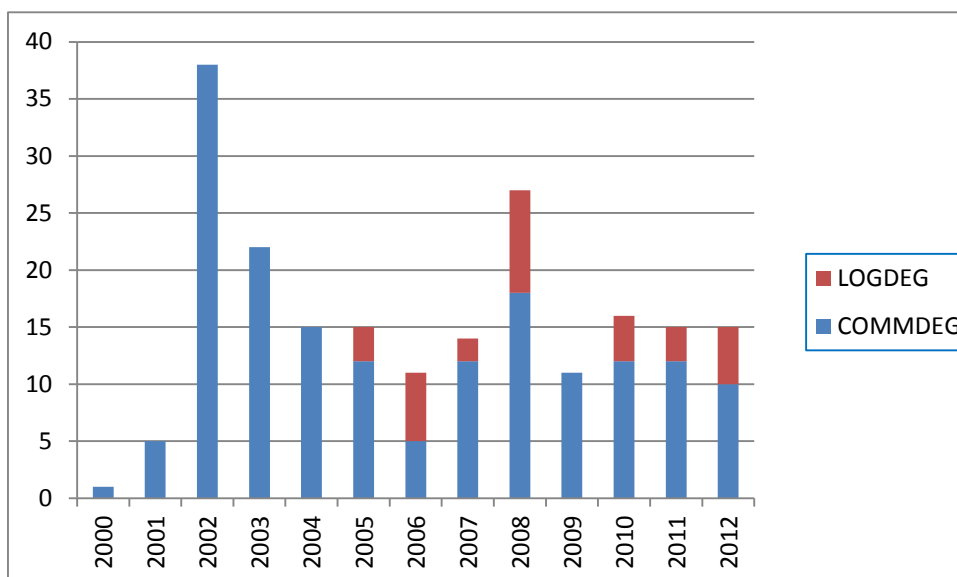
The degree programmes had a common title designation until 2005. After that the BA was separated into two defined degrees and data for the two streams is separated on the student records system. It is clear from the data that student numbers are higher on the Social Studies stream.

In relation to the Diploma both sets reacted the same when it came to taking this award. The following percentages show the range and level of exempt/non-exempt students.

Fig. 26 CS1 Proportion of students with exemptions on designated programmes

2005-2012	Social Studies	Humanities
% Exempt took Degree/Diploma	34%	6%
% Non-exempt took Degree/Diploma	25%	14%
% Total Degree/Diploma	31%	9%

Therefore, Social Studies programme had a higher proportion of students with RPL exemptions; the Humanities programme had fewer students with exemptions.

There are a number of variables that need to be considered in this context. As stated above, many of the students who transferred credit in the early years were graduates of the university's continuing education outreach programme. The majority of these courses were in the social sciences area at NUI Certificate level, and a substantial number of graduates from these Certificates progressed to the Social Studies programme, and thus transferred their prior learning. There was only one course offered as part of the outreach provision from the Humanities, which was a NUI Certificate in Local History. Thus, there was a far smaller pool of graduates from the institution's Certificate courses likely to progress to the Humanities programme.

Additionally, the average age of students on the Humanities programme tends to be older than on the Social Studies programme. While many of these older students have very significant prior learning, it is less likely to have been formally accredited and thus used for credit transfer.

5.4 CASE STUDY 2 (CS2) – AN OUTLIER CASE

In CS2 a part-time programme for adult learners was set up in 2007. CS2 was a private Catholic institution with strong links to a similar institution in the United States. The model for the degree was adapted from an innovative degree programme offered in the US institution. The

programme offered RPL to adult learners who wished to have their acquired competencies recognised. The programme was based on learning outcomes, with continuous assessment and the capacity to recognise all forms of prior learning as an integral part of the course design. Integral to the programme is an inventive style of RPL.

5.4.1 Style of Practice at CS2

Adult Education andragogy informed course design and delivery and informed their approach to RPL. Two versions of RPL were available.

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is built into the programme structure. Credit for prior formal learning can be transferred for the purposes of contributing to the completion of a maximum of 50% of the non-mandatory learning outcomes of the Level 7 degree. To be recognised, such formal prior learning must:

➢ Meet one of the (non-mandatory) programme learning outcomes (competences)
➢ Be accredited at a minimum of NFQ Level 6
➢ Carry a minimum of 5 ECTs, and
➢ Be awarded by an established educational provider or professional body.

Thus, **credit transfer** for formal learning was similar to that offered in CS1; however, students play a far more active role and are required to do all the work in terms of their claims.

The second option for claimants in CS2 is to apply for recognition for learning gained in experience. They offered this latter form through project work. Students could take on independent study, select a topic that relates to their prior learning and undertake an Independent Learning Project (ILP). Thus, they use their prior learning and advance it in the project work they undertake. Students design their own learning outcomes and thus they have control over their learning. Students undertaking ILPs have their proposal approved by academic management staff first. Support about the viability of their proposal is available and, once approved, an appropriate subject supervisor/assessor is appointed. Students could use ILPs to extend and deepen their knowledge. Typically, topics for ILPs came from the following experiences:

• An aspect of previous experience or expertise.
• A course of study that carried formal credit but not at the required level for direct credit transfer i.e. achieved at Level 5 or below.

- A course of study which you previously undertook but which was not assessed.

- An area in which you have a long-term interest, but which you have never formally studied, for example, a hobby, skill or interest.

- An aspect of a taught module you have completed in which you would like to go into further depth.

  (Doing an ILP: Explanatory Notes and Forms. CS2)

Essays, an artefact, oral report or presentations, oral examinations, a performance, or a combination of these were acceptable for assessment provided it was agreed in advance with their supervisor. All ILPs require a theoretical or literature-based context. The assignments submitted go through the normal examination and quality assurance procedures of the institution.

ILPs were also used as 'Final Projects' to trigger final grades for their BA awards.

5.4.2 Quantitative Data from CS2

The number of students registered on the BA part-time degrees (2009-2017) in CS2 was 209. The following chart shows the graduation levels during that period.

Fig. 29: CS2 Participation rates

YEAR	LEVEL 8 DEGREES	LEVEL 7 DEGREES	CERTIFICATES & DIPLOMAS	WITHDRAWN
2009-17	**84**	**66**	**19**	**40**

No data was available for the number of students who claimed credit transfer for learning outcomes. However, in 2017 a review of the programme was carried and the following data was extracted from the Review Report which is a public document.

85% had completed some form of largely vocationally-related further education and training, mainly at Level 5 (15%) or Level 6 (52%).

18% had completed a Level 7 course prior to entering the BA programme.

Thus 70% had prior learning at Level 6 or above.

15% had prior learning at Level 5

15% had no prior learning

46% of students with no prior learning gained a Level 8 degree

38% of students with Level 5 at entry gained a Level 8 degree

49% of students with Level 6 at entry gained a Level 8 degree

45% of students with Level 7 at entry gained a Level 8 degree

The highest number of students to withdraw from the course were those with a Level 5 award at entry followed by those with a Level 7 or above at entry. All students who had **no** prior learning at entry gained awards: 4% Certificates, 4% Diplomas, 46% Degrees at Level 7 and 46% Degrees at Level 8.

The data indicates that whether prior learning is recognized or not, it does not guarantee better completion rates in degree programmes. This is consistent with CS1, but out of kilter with the US data in Chapter 3 that shows that there were higher rates of completion amongst PLA students (Klein and Collins, 2010:267).

5.5 CASE STUDY 3 (CS3) – A KEY CASE

In Ireland, one of the chief complaints about RPL is the low level of investment and resources available to implement it. The third case study was selected because it was part of an initiative that received funding through the European Social Fund to raise the capacity of higher education to implement RPL.   I met with a researcher/practitioner from a university engaged in the project to hear her perspective about the process of introducing RPL in her institution. I also met with a student who availed of the process in the same institution. The accounts from these two meetings provide a distinctive perspective on RPL in university education. These accounts are integrated into the findings when they are relevant to the themes under discussion.

5.5.1 Style of practice

The practice in CS3 is very person-centred. Claims can be made anytime throughout their studies whenever a student recognises their own prior learning in the course and decides to make a claim. They receive guidance from trained guidance counsellors. Much of the technical work such as guidelines, portfolio templates and submission regulations are all online. Quality assurance and assessment board procedures are in place. Applicants may be assessed in a number of different ways including: application forms, tests, assignments and interviews. The STAR model is used in the application form. Applicants are asked to: describe the learning

Situation; describe the learning **T**ask in it; **A**nalyse what they have learned and **R**eflect on the experience. RPL is free for registered students.

5.5.2 RPL policy in CS3

Recognition is based on whether the acquired knowledge, skills and experience are suitable in content. Applying for RPL is free of charge for registered students and for those who apply for RPL when fulfilling the admission requirements. The following is considered suitable for recognition:

➢ Degree studies (courses) relevant to the curriculum

➢ Training, work and other experience relevant to the curriculum

➢ Experience that fulfils the admission requirements for MA and PhD

I do not have verified quantitative data for CS3 but during my conversation with the practitioner there (May 2013) she stated that between 400-500 claims were processed each year in her institution (Martha /PCS3).

5.6 Summary

In Case Studies 1 and 2, a significant number of entrants had prior learning above Level 6 (67% CS1 and 70% CS2). Given the high level of students with RPL it could be argued that RPL was an incentive for participation in both Irish settings.

In CS1 students taking the Social Studies programme were more likely to have prior formal learning due to the wide outreach provision of courses offered in this field of study. Students taking the degree in Humanities had less chance to gain prior learning as the outreach provision in this field of study was small. However, module exemptions did not enhance the chances of completing a programme. A high proportion of students were women in CS1.

In CS2 RPL is offered in two modes – credit transfer or Independent Learning Projects. Students undertake ILPs either for RPL or for their capstone project. Thus, all students undertake the RPL, however, it is embedded in the education process rather than separate from it. All students who completed the degree successfully completed an RPL process. The highest number of students to withdraw from the course were those with a Level 5 award. Only 15% of students had prior learning at this level. Interesting, those with a Level 7 or above at entry were also among the highest to withdraw from the programme. All students

who had **no** prior learning at entry in CS2 gained awards – 4% Certificates, 4% Diplomas, 46% Level 7 degrees and 46% Level 8 degrees.

The data indicates that whether prior learning is recognized or not, it does not guarantee better completion rates in degree programmes. This is consistent with CS1 but out of kilter with data from the US (Chapter III).

In CS 3, RPL is at a mature stage of development and implementation. Guidance and support is available for claimants and they can participate in RPL at any stage of their studies.

CHAPTER V1

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES ON RPL

6.0 Introduction

> Concepts are centres of vibrations, each in itself and everyone in relation to all others. This is why they all resonate rather than cohere or correspond with each other. There is no reason why concepts should cohere. As fragmentary totalities, concepts are not even the pieces of a puzzle, for their irregular contours do not correspond to each other. They do form a wall, but it is a drystone wall, and everything holds together only along diverging lines. Even bridges from one concept to another are still junctions, or detours, which do not define any discursive whole. They are movable bridges. (Deleuze and Guatteri, 1994:23)

RPL is caught in a milieu of contradictions. Research verifies that RPL is valued as a credit exchange mechanism in the educational credit market. Approaches to theorising focus on the difficulties associated with the process (reflection, language, guidance and assessment) and with the system (epistemological divergences, quality issues). Policy shows RPL to be deterritorialised for building human capital in a neoliberal paradigm. RPL has multiple dimensions and functions which are shaped by the context and the accompanying concepts and discourses dominant in the specific setting. This chapter explores the experiences of university managers and practitioners who consider the role of RPL in their institutions and claimants who provide accounts of their experience in these settings. Important issues such as quality and resources in higher education are examined and critiqued. Concepts that are fundamental to the rationale for practice such as time, repetition and financial benefits are explored and critiqued. These differential elements were identified by participants in this enquiry – practitioners, managers and claimants.

6. 1 Coding the Data

The data are coded to trace lines of thought and show how concepts are used in different ways to argue for or against RPL.

The participants comprise a mix of staff and claimants from the three case studies. In order to protect the anonymity of some of the participants who hold prominent roles in their institutions, I decided not to provide detailed profiles for them. Suffice to say that university managers and practitioners have all been engaged in developing institutional RPL policy and have had long careers in universities. Participants come from the three different case studies. The data is numbered as outlined in the Research Procedures chapter but I include some key points here again for your convenience. The following codes identify the various participants:

Case Study 1/2/3=CS1/2/3;

Name/Practitioner =Sophie/P

Claimant's name/ Case Study 1/2/3= Betty/CS1/2/3;

Name/Manager = George/M.

The data is analyzed at a micro level − words, sentences, phrases that indicated particular conceptual thought in relation to RPL and other related ideas that influenced RPL practice. I label these with numbers. The numbers signify lines of thinking in the text and chart reference points or co-ordinates in the rhizome. This is followed in a commentary with my own accompanying lines of thought and analysis about each charted piece of text. I see this as a process of 'ungrounding' or unearthing concepts from inside the data. It also relates well to grounded theory that is implicitly a process of disinterring data to create theory. The format is designed to provide you with insights into my reading of the accounts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the issues at stake.

Concepts that have had profound effects on RPL provide headings. Each slice of data has a sub heading; a quote from the participants that signals a point of view in response to the concepts used to shape RPL practice in their institutions. I begin with concepts used by the institutions to control RPL.

6.2 Quality and Standards

Universities see themselves as custodians of a system that guarantees, in a "community of trust" with citizens, government and communities, that graduates reach a specific higher level of knowledge. A university rests its reputation on concepts of quality and standards of research.

Quality is an uncompromising requirement of higher education. RPL is a new practice that challenges the epistemological position of universities because it insists that learning gained from experience be included as valid and valuable learning. This implies that learning can take place anywhere, including beyond the classrooms and lecture halls.

RPL in universities in Ireland is mostly credit transfer and this form fits into the university structures and is generally acceptable due to the expectation that quality standards are the same across education. In addition, it keeps experience out. However, suspicions arise when learning from experience seeks similar recognition. Academic staff, who have little knowledge of RPL, respond in different ways as illustrated by the quote in the sub-heading below. Academics are unpredictable and there is no way of knowing which route they will follow.

6.2.1 "Academics are like cats at a crossroad … you never know" (George/M)

… the process isn't well understood. [1] And there are some people who would be quite suspicious of the process. [2] And this really struck me [2a] when I tried to document the process for non-standard entrants, [3] and brought that through the … faculties for approval. [4] And in one faculty, there was a sort of a general discussion and a sense that people were happy with it. [5] In another there was a sense of outrage [6] that the system might be limiting the freedom of academic departments [7] to admit whoever they wanted, [8] because it would have to go through the registrar's office. [9] And… [in another] faculty there was horror that we would do this at all. [10] … and I thought, if these, if the strong voices in faculty B and faculty C could hear each other, [11] they would actually have very little common ground. [12] So the people for whom most of the students are coming directly from school, then to primary degree and then on to post grad. [13] find the idea of people sliding in without that pre-requisite knowledge [14] coming in a sequential manner, [15] they find that abhorrent. [16] And they're quite suspicious of it. [17] And I think would see it as an erosion of standards. [18] And the knock on of that is to devalue the awards that you're making to everyone [18a]. So that's the downside [18b]. And on the other side, the people who use it a lot [19] find the rigour of the process time consuming and annoying and intrusive. [19a] So there are clearly two sides. [20] But if you take away all those logistical and administrative things [21] and say what's the big risk, [21a] the big risk for a university in doing it is erosion of standards [21b] by allowing people in who don't have adequate foundations [21c], and then they either have difficulty [21d] or slow down the rest of the class, [21e] or you get to a point where you feel you need to pass them anyway and progress

them [22]… [if] the word on the street was sure anyone can get a degree there, [23] you need pull [1] to fail, [23a] anyone can get in; [23b] that would be a very damaging thing [24] … [the risk] of being branded as the university of the ghetto. [24a] (Declan/M).

Academics are like cats at a crossroads or sheep at a crossroads, you never know… [25] You have, on the one hand, [26] you have academics that are open to all sorts of ideas [27] and you've others that are enormously conservative. [28] Enormously conservative. [29] (laughs) (George/M)

I would say that it's no great value to the university. [43] The university has to keep up its standards [44] … there's always comparisons going on by the different universities [45] and such a university has standards and I would think that the President … wants to keep up the standard [46] … [and] have it up there with the rest [47]… [and] have no great time for this nonsense going through prior learning [48]…… if I was President … that's nearly how I'd look at it [49]… if the young people have to reach a certain standard to get employment [50] you know they're going to have to be able to jump the top bar [51] … the President of a college should have to say that my students, [52] no matter what field they go out into, [53] whatever profession, that they can compete with the best.[53a] (John/CS1)

I would be slightly concerned [54] … would it weaken the strength of the degree itself. [55] … would there be a diluting effect? [55a] (Michael/CS1)

6.2.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The data indicates that perspectives and opinions are mixed in the academic community. Negative dimensions of RPL were emphasised by Declan who framed his experience in the response from faculty members some of whom opposed RPL depending on their ideological positions [2, 2a, 6, 9, 13, 16, 17, 19a, 26, 27]. Yet he tempered his perspectives with positive attitudes expressed by one faculty [5, 25] and identified a disparity between faculties with a conservative ethos and those with a more liberal approach. This has traces of Geoghegan's analysis which sets up two 'ideal types' of higher education institutions – the 'liberating' type and the 'constraining' type (2006;54). Her conclusion is that 'liberating' colleges that build

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[1] 'Pull' is an Irish slang word indicating nepotism.

enabling policies are more likely to successfully implement RPL. We will come back to this point later.

Declan framed RPL as non-standard entry [2], a term used in association with access. RPL thus becomes another aspect of access rather than a practice in its own right. This practice of using RPL for access to programmes controls the infiltration of learning in experience into the curriculum by keeping it outside the door and prior to entry. It also implies a desire for consistency where RPL is tied together with disparate heterogeneous others and "assures the consolidation of fuzzy aggregates" (DG, 1988:558) of access. Things that look similar are joined together and in consequence become part of the same body. RPL is assimilated into other practices that already exist and appear to do the same work. In the latest European Guidelines (2015), an adjustment to the definition of RPL was made and formal learning was removed from the lexicon (Cedefop, 2015:15). Hence, the terms used to define RPL are malleable and can be changed by the controllers of RPL depending on their perspective. In consequence, some of the practices linked to RPL are erased thereby setting further limitations on practice.

Student scenarios are imagined by Declan and he articulates a view held by some faculty members that RPL is a mechanism that will facilitate students, who may not have "adequate foundations" [21c] or the pre-requisite knowledge, to "slide in" to the university [13, 14]. RPL is positioned as a backdoor into higher education where applicants engage in subterfuge by "sliding in" [14] to university as opposed to walking in with the 'right' pre-requisites and qualifications. RPL is constructed around imagined scenarios that describe non-traditional entry, but worryingly RPL is specified as unfair and a risky dimension of non-traditional entry. These imagined scenarios spread fear and gain credibility although they have no empirical basis. All the research in Chapter IV shows that RPL claimants are, by and large, well prepared for higher education. The unfounded presuppositions about the risks of RPL are unchallenged because they prevail in underground discourses and are not voiced openly in academic committees. This is interesting as RPL in CS1 is largely credit transfer, which means that claimants have acquired their prior learning in formal education and to Level 6 and above. This indicates that students are prepared to a higher level than secondary school students whose award is at level 4/5 and are framed as without risk. The empirical evidence provided in the previous chapter and in the quantitative data from this enquiry points out that students with RPL do well (Aarts *et al.*, 2003; CAEL, 2010). 68% of claimants in the CAPLA research (Aarts

et al., 1999 & 2003) had already participated in higher education and completed minor awards before going on to complete degrees. 67% of students in CS1 and 80% of students in CS 2 had previous formal qualifications. There is no evidence that those who use RPL are educationally disadvantaged or would 'slow down' [21e] a class. In reality, it is important to pace a class according to the needs of the group.   When class sizes are small, awareness of student needs are more visible, but in universities classes can have up to 400 students; it would be nearly impossible to identify what slows or speeds up learning in higher education – the class size or individual students.

However, there is a concern in RPL that those who already have the most education will gain the greatest advantage, and the low level of participation by non-traditional or educationally disadvantaged students is a concern, which is why the Council of Europe *Recommendations for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2012) specifically targets those who are unemployed or under-employed. (CEU, 2012 3(c)).

The world of work dominates RPL. Claimants too have concerns about the quality standards especially in relation to employment [53,53a,54,55,55a]. The accounts illustrate that RPL is of no value to students or the institution if it, in any way, negatively affects the value and status of the awards. Students go to university to improve their career prospects which is one of the functions of a good education. In the Canadian study, students stated that they did not opt for RPL because of a fear of not reaching a high standard in their studies. They were concerned that RPL might militate against them in the job market. Biesta, in his analysis of socialisation processes in university education, argues that students become acculturated into a particular ideology and they "become part of particular social, cultural and political orders" (2009:20-21). Students gain an expanded professional identity and develop certain dispositions and attributes associated with becoming a graduate and an educated person. Qualification is a significant purpose for students who move from learning to "do something … very specific ... to the much more general" (2009:19-20). The link between education and work is well established in policy and used to promote higher education. This purpose has come to dominate higher education. I have complained vociferously about it in relation to RPL in the policy chapter as its dominance subordinates all the other purposes associated with becoming an educated person.

The description of academics as "cats at a crossroads" [25] gives an interesting insight into the world of academia. If academics don't know which way to turn, then controllers of the system quickly relieve them from involvement in decision making and reduce their autonomy with regard to claims. In this instance, it is difficult to determine whether the resistance is to RPL or to the process of centralization [8] or even if they care at all about RPL. Accounts from an interview with a practitioner/researcher in European university (CS3), below, show how her colleagues responded when RPL was introduced there. The institution was part of a European Commission funded initiative to promote RPL. Financial and human resources to implement it were thus available.

6.2.3 "the university never felt the need for [RPL]" (Martha/P)

> *The initiative [for RPL] never came from the university [31] ... the university never felt the need for it [32] ... universities never felt that they need to work in this area. [33] ... It was seen as another one of those Bologna process [initiatives] [34] ... They tick the box and say it is okay [35] ... there was great resistance [36] ... especially from the academic's part [37] ... [understanding of RPL] was fragmented and instrumental [38] ... [now] it is just there [39] ... it is a normal part of the university [40] ... they [the academics] are not interested to know more [41] ... lots of limitation put on RPL [42]*   *(Martha /PCS3)*

6.2.4 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The universities did not initiate RPL and the account shows that the effects of the imposition of policy can lead to resistance followed by benign indifference [31]. Neither was there any demand from the universities for it [32]. Hence, there was great 'resistance' to it in the institution [36]. While the policy was eventually implemented in the university, the academics never engaged much with practice and are positioned as unconcerned about it as they saw no positive value in it [39]. This perspective is reflected in the data above where a claimant said that it is of 'no great value to the university' [43].

Young (2008) argues that universities are characterised by a growing neo-conservatism that has come about in response to the ever-increasing controls and regulations imposed on them by policy developments and financial cutbacks. Academic departments are asked to change, but the forms of change proposed are mechanisms that they perceive as undermining their autonomy. They respond by safeguarding "their independence, their disinterested research

ethic, their role as independent commentators/critics, and their status as the guardians of high quality learning" (Taylor, 1996:293, cited in Harris, 2006:55). Threats to their academic freedom have led to resistance to change and pushed some academics towards a protectionist neo-conservative stance. The dominance of neoliberal economic social orders in financing arrangements and in education policy is one reason for opposition, while others simply desire to hold with tradition and not change anything or introduce anything new. This attitude of indifference may be part of the reason why RPL is limited. This bodes badly for the Irish context where policy is imposed from outside too. Understanding of RPL is already low in Irish universities. Dissemination of information is slow and without it, it is unlikely that practice will become widespread. Academics need education and information to enable them to make informed decisions about RPL. Clearly, this situation needs attention if RPL is to develop in Irish universities.

Universities are custodians of quality and standards of awards but their principle role is as learning institutions and not examining bureaucracies. The most efficient method of determining quality is to create the conditions for effective learning through small class size, appropriate learning methodologies and research. Academics are responsible for this layer of quality assurance. Their information about RPL is limited and as a result their autonomy in the matter is removed. The data also suggests that RPL students are not perceived as quality students and thus need to be screened differently. These perceptions indicate that higher education itself is becoming deterritorialised as education for work and needs new concepts to support its development into the future.

6.3 DISCIPLINARY CONTROLS

The next accounts provide two different rationales for the exclusion of RPL in some disciplinary areas.

6.3.1 "the nature of the learning in a technical area is so different" *(George/M)*

...relatively few [mature students] come into the technical areas [99] and it's because, I suppose, the nature of the learning in a technical area is so different. [100] So people will read about History, they'll read English, they're read about stuff. [101] People who live in a society pick up information about how society works and other things like that. [101a] Even bits, as you mature, [101b] you know, you have kids, you develop some sort of sense of

> *psychology, [101c] whether it's good or bad [102] at least you develop some sort of sense [103] People don't tend to pick up Mathematics, [104] you know if you don't use it, even stuff that they got from school, they'll have lost [105] ... it tends not to develop [105a]. So the areas in which people tend to have done this [RPL] are in those kind of disciplines [106] and I'm just not sure how it's measured or how you'd measure it. [107] So I guess it's mostly ignorance on my part. [108] (George/M)*
>
> *We've occasionally had people, one or two people [109] ... they were very heavily involved in hypnotherapy [110] in the Association and all of that. [111] And in our conversations with them, we said they could use that if they were doing ILPs right, [112] but they wanted us to give them formal RPL for it, [113] like so they wouldn't have to do the work again you know. [114] And I did some investigation ... with [names colleague] in the Psychology Department [115] and she said that in psychology and even the medical area, to steer very clear of it. [116] (Sophie/ P)*

6.3.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The first account is infused with a mature student discourse about low participation in technical subjects. Mathematics is such a course and it is defined by its difference from the humanities and social sciences that are seen to be a better fit for RPL.

RPL instigates concerns that errors will ensue if RPL is practiced in certain subjects, thus boundaries that barricade RPL into very specific contexts and predefined subject areas are proposed [104]. Mathematics is viewed as a subject that cannot be learned in experience and knowledge of the subject cannot be advanced if it is not used [104, 105, 105a]. The rationalisation for this situation is articulated by the use of scenarios about how people learn in experience [101, 101a, 101b]. These examples are juxtaposed with the problem of difference forms of learning accorded to Mathematics, Psychology and Medicine [106]. The possibility of including Mathematics in RPL appears inconceivable, although the basis of this supposition is not explained. Bernstein's concepts of horizontal and vertical knowledge structures are pertinent here. The idea that vertical knowledge could be learned outside the curriculum is unimaginable. Yet, Harris suggests that vertical knowledge is characterised by a 'strong grammar and unified language' for example a student in this setting "does not have the problem of knowing whether she/he is speaking physics or writing physics, only the problem of correct usage" (2010:164). Harris goes on to state that Bernstein's approach is a useful analytical tool

"developed precisely to facilitate the analysis of inter-relationships [between polarities]" (*ibid*: 69). These polarities in perspectives about disciplinary knowledge are explicit in the accounts offered above.

In a similar vein, Sophie, specifies particular fields of knowledge that require protection from RPL. The assumption is that professional bodies might object to RPL which insinuates a lowering of quality through the use of RPL. This should be questioned in every case, not just in relation to specific fields of study. In my experience, many professional bodies are already engaged in RPL. For example, the recent Irish Report on RPL in higher education (Goggin *et al*., 2015) shows that it has most success in the field of engineering and Margaret Hynds O'Flanagan, gave an excellent paper at the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland Conference (2016), where she described the process of professional recognition offered through RPL by the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland. These two technical professions are engaged in RPL which shows that RPL can be applied in these kinds of disciplines.

Harris (2006) in her application of Bernstein's typology emphasizes the erroneous challenge for RPL in technical disciplines. Vertical knowledge, with its defined language and its particular epistemological base is less well suited to RPL, and, according to Harris, it could be easier to claim credit against than the horizontal knowledge fields of humanities and social sciences. The excerpts from the data show that practitioners themselves have no clear conceptual perspective in relation to RPL and act as gatekeepers in specific discipline areas. Martha's (P) account that academics are indifferent to RPL and know very little about it [35, 38] is hampered further by the taken for granted position held by some practitioners about its limits.

Unchallenged conceptualisations lurk in the shadows of RPL and undermine practice. These need to be examined and critiqued as do conceptualisations of university learning that also requires challenge and reconceptualization.

6.4 SUPPORT

One of the recurring issues raised about RPL in institutions is its high resource implications. Accompanying the resource issue is a quality assurance concern that assumes that if adequate support is not available, then quality will be further compromised. This was one of my own

fears. I had completely bought into this discourse and I was worried that, if I took on the process myself, I would not be able to support claimants sufficiently to make their claims. There is evidence that concerns about resources created barriers in CS1.

In the following extracts, participants explain about the supports provided to facilitate the completion of Independent Learning Projects (ILPs) — the specific form of RPL practiced in CS2.

6.4.1 "No, you just did it yourself" (Betty/CS2)

Did you have a lot of support with it [ILP]? Did you have support in a group or was a mentor assigned? (me) [9]

...No, you just did it yourself. [10] (Betty/CS2)

You just did it yourself? ... go off and do it and come back when it's done? (me in surprised voice) [11]

And then you went off ... yeah and then if you ... And you'd go through outcomes and decide which one you'd meet ... (me in disbelief) [12]

Yes. It took a long time to figure out which one to do really [ILP] ... And you'd go down a few blind alleys to begin with ... you know. I remember considering doing the migration of birds across from here to Iceland and Greenland or something, and then I thought ah I don't think I'd maintain enough interest in that though, you know it's one of those things you kind of think would be interesting but when I actually sat down and read a few bits about it I thought ... naw. [14] So that was a waste of time, but ... so that's part of the problem, trying to figure out which horse to back, you know (Gladis/CS2) [15]

And you can do them at any point in the programme? (me in surprised voice)

Yes.[16]

But they did need to be approved before they started ... (Gaynor/CS2)[13]

Before you did it yeah. (Betty/CS2)

That's right yeah. (Gladis/CS2)

> *... so you went to the head of the strand [2] and you presented, 'This is what I'm thinking of doing' and well I know for me I got lots of feedback on the yes's and the no's so ... and I needed that [17] because otherwise you could go anywhere. (Gladis/CS2) [18]*

6.4.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Adult education is full of discourses about the support needs of adult learners. The support needs range from learning difficulties and academic skills to strategies for balancing study with other life commitments. Many higher education institutions in Ireland have designated Mature Student Officers, whose job is to supply necessary support for this cohort of non-traditional students. In the context of RPL Independent Learning Projects (ILPs) in CS2, a support discourse was surprisingly absent. There were no complaints and a pronounced disinterest in speaking about support matters in the CS2 discussion group. This does not fit with the discourses that criticise RPL for being resource heavy. In contrast, the participants from CS2 were very relaxed and confident about their RPL experiences [10, 11]. Gladis appeared to know what support she needed and indicated that she received all she needed when she asked for it [17].

The participants did not profess any issue with what was required to fulfil learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are pivotal to the degree programme in CS2 so students had a lot of experience of using them and even writing them. Thus, they understood them well [11, 12].

Exploration of prior learning was the basis for the identification of topics for ILPs. Gladis indicated that she selected a topic based on a strong desire to advance her knowledge of the subject and one that would sustain her interest to the end of the project [14, 15].

The emphasis on Kolb's learning cycle in CS2 would indicate an ethos of humanism and liberal adult education. There were no complaints about the model of reflection used.

Resource implications for ILPs are negligible. Students explore their prior learning to source topics of interest where they wish to advance their knowledge and understanding. In this context, the focus of RPL is learning and not for personal development alone but also to extend subject knowledge. It is no longer an instrumental process but one where knowledge

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[2] 'head of strand' describes a person who has academic responsibility for a range of modules that are grouped together to create a specific strand of learning in the degree in CS2.

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aquisition is at the centre of the learning. Participants explore their multiplicities to discover topics of interest. This form of RPL offers possibilities for a different conceptualisation of RPL. It could have a very wide application. In CS2 it is used to build on prior learning and advance knowledge. The approach has potential in contexts where a person is claiming knowledge but has little proof or evidence of formal credentials. They could undertake an ILP or a series of ILPs to support their claim and in the process could expand their knowledge. The approach would need to be tested in this context and the model adapted accordingly.

6.5 REPETITION

A concept deeply connected with RPL is repetition. A primary purpose of RPL is to reduce the experience of repetition in course content for students.

Canadian research (Aarts *et al.,* 2003) provides some very compelling data to support the benefits of RPL in reducing repetition. 61% of research participants said one of the foremost benefits was the reduction in repetition of course content due to RPL. The promise of no repetition is a motivating factor for RPL as the 2003 study shows (Ch.3). Research participants in this enquiry had much to say about the demotivating effect of unnecessary repetition. This concept of repetition is well understood in RPL and it is assumed that reduction of repetition is a good thing. The concept is not widely problematised.

Repetition and repeating is infused in university education with negative precepts. There is little enthusiasm for repeating and the dominant signifier is failure. The concept of repeating is connected with poor performance. Repeating holds students back, takes up their time and costs money. Repetition in RPL also has negative connotations.

The following extract come from a manager in the university who acted as an assessor for a claim when he was Head of Department. He shared his reflections on the process in our conversation together.

6.5.1 "[repetition] effectively is cutting people off from education" (Declan /M)

The principle was, **[56]** *if you say to somebody mid-career,* **[57]** *with a lot of experience [57a] and a lot of writing experience [57b] and analytical experience, [57c] that in order to do something at Masters level they have to go right back to the beginning and start with a degree, [58] or even maybe do a return to learning course in order to get access to a degree,*

[58a] that effectively is cutting people off from education. [59] Because for practical reasons they just can't do that. [60] And somebody who's working at that level [61] isn't really in a position to spend 4 or 5 years potentially getting to the point of having a part-time degree [62] in order to be able to do the Masters, [63] which is what they really need to do for the level they're at. [64] So in principle, I thought it was a really important access route. [65] In practice, there were two sides to the problem [66] One side is that by giving somebody access directly into a Masters, [67] you miss the regular experience of academic writing. [68a] And you also miss the grounding in the formal parts of the discipline. [68b] So somebody normally coming in with a qualification in education [69] would have had an exposure to a bit of psychology, a bit of curriculum, the principles of learning in a formal way. [70] If someone is coming in from work experience [71] might have tacit knowledge of all those things [71a] but not necessarily have the words. [71b] By not having the words, sometimes it means they haven't actually formalised the concepts in their heads, [72] and so this could be at a disadvantage later. [73] So my concern was by lifting somebody up [74] to the point where they can get access to what they need, [75] are we actually putting them in a place where they don't have adequate foundations to do well in it ?[76]... no-one in the [names department] department seemed to have done it before, [77] and I certainly hadn't done it before. [78] And the process wasn't very clearly documented, [79] or at least I didn't know where to find it if it was. [80] I didn't actually know how to do it. [81] And as the new head of department, [82] I didn't want to do something which was making a promise I couldn't keep. [83] So I didn't want to sign off on something without knowing exactly whether I could or I couldn't, [84] and I found it was a bit of a voyage of discovery [85] to find out what I could and couldn't do [86] and how the process should work. [86a] (Declan/MCS1)

6.5.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The account indicates that Declan had a good understanding of the purpose of RPL and the value it offers in reducing time and repetition of learning [58, 58a, 59, 60]. He also articulates a concern about wrong footing claimants or the institution [83] and complains about the lack of policy and knowledge in the university [77, 86a].

Declan's struggle with practice provides a good argument for creating policy, procedures and educational training for RPL and education for staff in all institutions who wish to offer it. He also identifies some of the problems inherent in RPL which is that learning in experience may

not equip claimants with the technical skills and knowledge required in universities. RPL is framed as a mechanism for advanced entry to courses.

The assumption that reducing repetition is in the interests of learning is challenged by Declan account above but paradoxically he also acknowledges the positive advantages that a reduction in repetition offers.

6.5.3"Repetition makes education appear ridiculous" (Declan /M)

So, for me, it just got me nearer to my degree much more quickly and without having ... like I said, to repeat, [1] because I had investigated other degrees, and had I done a degree in adult education, [2] I would have had to repeat and repeat and repeat stuff that I had done [already] [3] ... So I would say if they hadn't recognised it I wouldn't have a degree now because I would (laughs) have backed out, [4] I would have gotten fed up, or maybe [taken] a degree in something else [5] (Síle CS2)

They [RPL staff in CS2] were fond of saying that they don't expect an adult to sit there and be taught what they already know. [6] (Gladis CS2)

I'd been working in an office for years and years and years [7] so they let me sit the exam for the IT module and the deal was if you passed the exam you don't have to do the module and that sounded sweet to me [8] because I really didn't want to sit down and have to go through every Tuesday night something that I've been working on for years, you know. [9] So in that way it's a good thing [9] (Gladis CS2)

Personally speaking, I felt one of the exemptions I got I felt I'd invested so much time and energy myself in it and that when I achieved it I felt a lifetime's work has gone into this particular credit that I got [10], it would have been sheer torture for me (laughter), [11] exactly as Síle said, it would actually have been a disincentive to me to have to experience it again [12] ... (Madge CS2)

And really, I think most people that did it [IT Module] found it quite tedious and we already knew the stuff. (Monica CS1) [4b]

> *It [RPL] avoids situations where people are forced to study the same thing twice, or should avoid that. [4c] And I mean, the concern there is that it makes education appear ridiculous. [13] It demoralises a student, the learner, [10a] it demoralises the educator, [14] if somebody is expert at something and is forced to go through learning the basics of it at a very primitive level, simply because of some educational structure that's in place. [15] (Declan/M)*
>
> *... in first year where we've got students who come in to our, say, first year Science course, who've done the Honours course in Leaving Cert, done probably fairly well, [500] and they're ... I wouldn't quite say they're wasting their time [501] but they're certainly coasting the course. [502] Right? There're others who come in who didn't have that who find it a struggle. [503] Okay? So I've often kind of thought that if we had a structure where we could do like what they do in the States [504], give them a proficiency out of this thing, [505] it would be a useful thing. [506] Because I think they get bored. They get switched off. [507] So, having somebody do something again unnecessarily, [508] I think, is a disincentive to learning. [509] So I think that would be my primary thing. On the other hand, of course, we don't want them completely disconnected from it either [510] because that's not good either, [511] because you do need an engagement of some type with the subject. [512] But, you know, why would you have somebody do something again when they've already got the confidence? [513] I think it's just a waste of time for both sides.514] And I think it just switches people off. [517] It's more attractive to come into something where you don't have to do that. [518] (George/M)*

6.5.4 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The overwhelming concern about repetition in these accounts further reinforces a rationale for RPL [3, 5, 12]. Exemptions facilitate a reduction in repetition and the accounts show that repetition is a deterrent to learning and a de-motivating factor; [12] concern that students could become bored and frustrated if they have to repeat is strong. This is consistent with the rationale for offering RPL. Furthermore, those who are committed to avoiding repetition are attracted to courses that offer RPL [2] because there is an assumption that absence of repetition means that they will attain a degree sooner [1]. In support of the need to avoid repetition, Declan also perceives it as something to be avoided at all costs because it makes education 'ridiculous' [13].

These extracts express a deep and emotional conviction that repetition is a problem in education. Lifelong learning and the move to modularisation, learning outcomes and credit-based systems created a structure for students to learn incrementally – piece by piece. The structure affords the accumulation of segments of learning before students take on full degrees. This perspective is contested by Bob Brecher when he argues that content can become fragmented in the modernisation project:

> the very idea of knowledge comes to be understood as an unconnected series of fragments, familiarity with which is of solely instrumental value. The critical element disappears, since that requires reflection, reconsideration and revisiting – together with all the other inconveniences of intellectual development. (Brecher, 2005: 74)

This argument asserts that modernisation has resulted in hardening content and stabilising it. In this context, content is designed to appeal to customers and module outcomes must be consistent across a programme. Modernisation makes courses more generic. Young (2008) agrees and sees it as part of the neoliberal agenda and a move to interdisciplinary courses. This creates a 'hybrid' curriculum that offers generic skills and a broad knowledge across a range of disciplines. Young argues that the hybrid form panders to the economic needs of society and describes it as "techni-instrumentalist" approach. Brecher goes on to argue that:

> ... [students] come in to 'do' their modules just as they might 'do' this or that work shift. The confidence, trust and responsibility that come with being part of a body of students, enjoying a collective educational challenge, is entirely undermined when there is no settled group, and each student is just one among a collection of individuals each pursuing their individual choices (*ibid.*).

This leads to a pick and choose mentality that creates the conditions for separation and isolation of students from each other and from the learning itself. Cynicism can result as students identify education as an accreditation machine and begin to use it as such. The focus is the qualification, and finding a career path for their award. Thus, desire for learning is replaced by desire for a qualification.

As Colebrook notes:

> in capitalism it does not matter what we believe or desire so long as the form of our desire can be channelled into the flow of a general value [money]; we must be able to see all desired objects as signs of some underlying general quantity; all goods are reducible to capital ... (2002:48).

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Education has become a product. Higher education as a site of critical thinking appears to be helpless to overturn this process. Students are affected by it and respond likewise by seeing the goal of learning as employment and career. In a model of education that succumbs to pressure from state and EU policy to make work the primary focus of education, generic course content grows and learning becomes even more standardised. In this context repetition is unnecessary. Some research participants express a deep and emotional conviction about repetition, and voice a strong and emotional aversion to "repeat and repeat and repeat" [3, 5, 12].

Nevertheless, quantitative data from CS1 and CS2 contradicts this position. RPL does not affect course completion in these case studies - students with RPL are no more likely to complete than those without it (Chapter VI). Yet, it has a role in motivating students to begin to study in the first place as we have seen from the US study. However, course fees in the US can be very high. Fees are a considerable factor when measuring the value of RPL in regions where education is fully marketised in the economy. Part-time degrees in Ireland are not funded by the state and so students pay tuition fees. Exemptions offer a financial gain for students, and that alone can be a motivating consideration for students to take the RPL route.

The potential of RPL for school leavers [500] is also pondered by George when he makes some remarks about its relevance to this cohort and mentions how they get 'switched off' [502, 507, 517, 514]. Young students come into degrees with a very advanced knowledge of mathematics and might benefit from RPL, as repeating what they already know holds them back as they have the 'confidence' [513] and the 'proficiency' [505] to progress at a faster pace. George makes a strong case for RPL and values a reduction in repetition for those who enter higher education in the traditional way – post secondary school.

There is strong case made by participants that repetition is not good for learning and that it could be a demotivating factor for students. Thus, RPL in programmes is attractive because it promises to reduce repetition.

Conversely, other accounts from research participants critique the taken for granted benefits associated with lack of repetition.

6.5.5 "You'd always learn something" (Nessa/ CS1)

I would have been really put out if I hadn't done it because it was extremely comprehensive, good and valuable. It was terrific. [17] But I have no regrets about not having been allocated credits for it except perhaps the financial end of it (laughs)... [18] if you haven't been involved [over time] in this area of study you're not tuned into the level or the depth or the breadth of study and research that is happening, [19] (Annette, CS1)

But I chose to go in to do whatever workshops, day or afternoon workshops were offered, because I was very happy to get the credits and to not have to pay the fees [module exemption] *[20] but in actual fact I felt I needed to get some extra mastery of study skills [21] because I hadn't actually done anything since college, you know a gap of 35 years. [22] (Annette, CS1)*

I think they did offer us an exemption on the IT because I would have had experience of that, but I didn't take it up because I said I was here and I may as well do it, that was my point of view on that. [23] (John, CS1)

I got an exemption from the Study Skills [module]. But actually I sat in on it [23a] (Bree,CS1)

... at the end of the day you do actually learn so much by doing these modules if you go in and do them. [24] And you could know everything about it but I don't think anyone has ever sat into a class and we said 'Jesus this is so boring, what the hell was I thinking doing this, ah will it ever be over'. I don't think anyone has ever done that. [25] Whether they know the subject intimately or not. [23a] (Michael, CS1)

You'd always learn something [29] (Nessa,CS1)

6.5.6 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The accounts here show no desire to oust repetition from course content. Engagement with prior knowledge in a new situation for this group is not a de-motivating factor [17, 23, 23a]. On the contrary, they are enthusiastic for new learning and to extend what they already know [24, 25, 25a, 26]. They are happy to get a credit exemption with the resulting reduction in fees, yet may still choose to attend the module from which they have been exempted [20, 21, 23, 23A]. The accounts express an understanding of the unending nature of learning and how important it is to avail of opportunities that facilitate learning experiences because "you'd always learn something" [Nessa, 29].

These accounts are in keeping with Deleuzian thought where repetition is viewed as always beginning again. As Parr, a Deleuzian commentator, notes "to repeat is to begin again: to affirm the power of the new and the unforeseeable" (2005:225). Deleuze conceives repetition as an opportunity to see differently. For instance, old rejected ideas may emerge again in repeat learning and when reviewed in new constellations with other thoughts, actions and practices, may become something different. This potential value is unacknowledged in the RPL literature, research and policy. Learning events act to disturb, unsettle and disrupt habits of thought, and invite us to rethink standpoints and concepts that have been shaping our learning and even our lives. Participants complained that their desire to repeat was sometimes foiled by the allocation of exemptions for modules they wished to revisit (21, 22, 23, 24). Adult learners can seek out repetition, as they know it has potential to enhance learning in a positive way.

Whether repetition acts against learning or not is largely unexplored, but increases in repetition in education are conceptualized negatively and the basis of this position is questioned in this enquiry. If content has become generic due to modernization then there is cause to decrease repetition and promote RPL. If learning in higher education is a process of engagement between lecturer and students within a context of the contemporary world in which they exist then repetition allows students and lecturers to 'look again' at the context of their lived experiences and learn anew as Brew notes:

> looking again means always being open to seeing anew and differently. By revisiting the same issues time and time again, the objective is to see, in the sense of getting a true intuitive grasp or understanding of a phenomenon (1993:92).

This suggests a visitation to the same material can be different and make things different. Consequently, the content should always be changing and while there may be some elements that are familiar it is likely that there will be much that is different. The accounts confirm this and acknowledge that ongoing involvement in subject learning deepens knowledge. [19].

The accounts describe how perspectives and opinions developed in prior learning can be partial and biased. Exemptions can lead students away from learning situations that support attitudinal change and from a site where 'habits of thought' can be reflected on, developed, changed and even unlearned. Adult students are keen to learn. Their entry to third level is usually a considered decision. Thus, formal education is an opportunity to learn [24] and repetition, for some at least, does not hamper but rather enhances learning [26].

Yet there is a clear concern that the financial advantage is lost [18,20] as exemptions are equated with financial gain and are accepted even when learning from the modules was needed.

These accounts show that desire to learn can over-ride the perceived advantages of RPL. Repetition is positive, it enhances, develops and advances learning. RPL is not concerned with learning and hence there is a distinct lack of enthusiasm for RPL in these extracts. This point of difference is mute in RPL research although there is an awareness and acknowledgement that RPL offers significant economic advantages. The role of RPL in saving time was also a point for discussion by participants.

6.6 TIME/MONEY

Practical benefits are valued highly by claimants who are often time poor due to care and work commitments, and can be financially stretched if they have to pay fees. Course fees apply in CS1 and CS2 because part-time degrees in Ireland do not qualify for government grant aid. The following excerpts from our conversations provide illustrations of the attitudes of claimants to the benefits of RPL in this regard.

6.6.1 "the time thing" (Maura/ CS1)

The time really. [76] There was no financial benefit to me because I had to pay the same to do the one-year certificate courses that I would have had to pay for the equivalent 20 credits, much of a muchness anyway, it might be slightly less. [77] But definitely the time. [76] The sitting in traffic time (laughs) you know. [78] (Rachel,CS1)

> *... the time thing [76a] because I think every single one of us were working at least part-time [79] and I think nearly everybody had family or other commitments of one kind or another [80] so the time [76a] and the financial thing [81]*   *(Maura, CS1).*
>
> *The financial [81a] and time were the major benefits for me. Yes, especially time, [76b] it meant I could do the degree in the 4 years. [82] And obviously the financial aspect was good, I mean that's, yeah, it's €425 x 4 [per semester] [81a]*   *(Monica, CS1)...*
>
> *I'm on a modest income [82] and I've kids to rear [83] so the fact that I had 30 less credits to pay for to be honest was a huge bonus for me [81b] and also because I work full-time [79a] ... for me it meant a whole year less so for me [76c] that was quite a big deal because just with family life, it's just where my kids are in their schooling, if I hadn't got it I'd be doing my thesis and my daughter would be doing her Junior Cert and my son would be doing his Leaving Cert and my poor husband would be (laughter) ... he'd move into the shed. So for me it was kind of a big deal to have the year less ... [76c]*   *(Maura, CS1)*
>
> *Finance. [81d]*   *(Annette,CS1).[*
>
> *It's a big financial [commitment] for someone like me, I have a one-year old child at home [84] and I'm trying to work full-time .... I went into my bank and with a bit of negotiating I was able to borrow a €10,000 loan which meant that I only had to pay back €50 a week and then I put that into a separate account which meant that every time a module came up I took it out of that, paid for the module, end of story. [81e]*   *(Michael,CS1*

6.6.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The conditions of students' lives where they manage family, work, care, leisure and study result in competing priorities that can require aggressive time and organisational management. Busyness is a feature of life for many in the 21st century.   The accounts show the level of complexity in the lives of the participants. In my experience, adult students are also subject to unexpected incidences that challenge their routines and disrupt their educational progression. Generally, work commitments, care and time pressures are an ongoing battle [79a, 82, 84].

The time [76, 76a, 76b, 76c] and money advantages offered by RPL are highlighted and sometimes the two elements are linked together in the data. This is reflected in the Canadian study in Chapter IV where more time was listed as a benefit and saving money was viewed as

important although not on par with each other. These two elements have become increasingly connected in modern work environments and life.

Barbara Adams, a "time" analysist notes that "today the time-is-money assumption permeates every aspect of daily life as naturalised and unquestioned fact" (2004:125). Money has overshadowed time since the industrial revolution; however, 'time poverty' has become a popular term today, which is odd given the time saving promise of the technological revolution. Adams comments on how 'clock time' has inserted concepts of efficiency into consciousness where "fast means profitable efficiency, slow inefficiency and backwardness" (p.122). She contends that "the clock ... changed the meaning of time ... to an economic resource that could be allocated, spent or saved" (p114-115). This may have been an unintended consequence, but it is certainly one that has had an enormous impact on how we live our lives. The earlier discussion about the ability of students to learn at speed carries echoes of this idea. In western capitalist culture, efficiency or the lack of it are deeply connected in our minds to poor planning and organisation. There is also a suggestion that less time in college means more time to carry out care, home and work responsibilities, and more time for study [80]. Thought and critical thinking require time to effect learning. This is essential for meaningful education.

In terms of fees, un-grounding the connection between fees paid for courses completed prior to entry and credit transfer is strong in the data [77, 81, 81a, 81b, 81d, 81e]. Based on the equivalence principle, if fees were already paid for the learning in an earlier course, then RPL doesn't save money at all; it just ensures that students don't pay for the same learning twice. In other studies it appears that the participants are not aware of the fee anomaly. RPL is a means of rebalancing this inequity in course costs.

Part-time fees discriminate against students who want to learn but can only do so on a part-time basis. At time of writing part-time degrees in CS1 cost students €4,584 per 60 credits while full time students pay €3,159 per 60 credits per year (2018). Part-time education is expensive in Ireland, but for some it is the only way to gain a third level education. RPL as credit transfer provides many participants with an unexpected survival line enabling them to reduce costs, travel and save time. RPL was described as "a lifesaver for people" (John, CS1).

Adult learners look for ways to keep everything going and therefore seek time efficiencies to allow everything to continue at once. They struggle to balance conflicting priorities, experience time shortages and seek ways to save time by cutting back on travel, attendance at lectures and

study time. Yet studying requires a great deal of time not just for lectures, reading, writing and assignment completion but also time for contemplation. Students often ask at the beginning of a degree: 'how much study time do I need?' Time is vital to adult learners as all activities have to be scheduled. Yet time cannot be stored up and saved for future use, there is no bank where time can be deposited and kept in safe keeping. As Elizabeth Groz observes

> Time is an excess, for it can never use itself up, and yet it is the only resource we cannot protect, save up, share or divide. It is not directly controllable, it cannot be harnessed for profit or convenience, yet it affects everything, transforms all objects, processes, events with its relentless passage. (2005: 3-4).

Groz asserts that time cannot be used for profit, yet she views time as 'irreplaceably precious' (*ibid*.), which in itself gives it a value. Awareness of the value of time is strong in the world of work because our working lives are measured in time – hours of work, vacation, working life, retirement from work. Individual lives are colonised for work and labour thus time and money are connected. RPL claimants, aware of the preciousness of time, wish to 'save' or, more accurately, use time well to ensure a fully lived life. RPL supports them to do this.

RPL exposes a learning economy where learning is exchanged for credit and the accompanying gain is time and/or money. If fees were already paid for prior formal courses or modules then there is little or no financial gain from RPL.

6.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored a number of component concepts of RPL and the different and complex effects they have on education. The concepts mutate in the data in a divergent continuum of contrasting positions. This exposes a state of flux in the positionality of the participants in relation to RPL and it swings seamlessly in the dialogue from one position to another. Some positions are based on fictitious scenarios while others arise from deterritorialisation through the prism of capitalist consciousness. For example the relationship between time and money and value of RPL in reducing repetition of content and consequently creating efficiencies in education. The tendency to connect RPL with access activities makes it part of non-standard entry routes The following summary offers a synopsis of these positions.

An outstanding finding in this chapter is that RPL produces fear of erosion of quality and standards in universities. Empirical evidence from international studies shows the contrary –

RPL claimants are university ready and do well in their studies thus quality is not compromised by RPL. The participants in this study show that they are as concerned as the institutions are about quality and standards, but their conceptualisation of them is different. They are interested in grounding their learning through hard work and effort in order to make themselves worthy of the recognition they seek. They hope that they will move into a deeper level of learning rather than a higher one. Awards also carry status which is a pivotal finding in the French research. Biesta's analysis of the role education plays in the acculturation of students into the status of an educated person is valued and thus all involved students and managers alike are invested in protecting quality and standards of university institutions. University awards have been conferred with high status in society. It's as if gaining a university award is a mark of higher intelligence, an attribute that is socially and culturally valued. Yet we have had centuries of education and the outcome for humanity today is bleak – we have not protected our planet and our environment. It's as if the capitalist 'Body without Organs' has progressively seeped into the education body eating away at its potential. This is dangerous because eventually all that may remain is a skeletal bureaucracy held together by quality and standards, awards frameworks, learning outcomes and other procedures. RPL attacks these procedures because it brings their validity into question. Universities reply by blocking its progression rather than examining its potential. Not all academics share this position but most of those with most power do, and they control its use in university education.

Concerns about the modernization of higher education are related to RPL in the data. This may be due in part to its association with part-time students. Young's (2008) analysis suggests that the move to more interdisciplinary programmes is a concern for many academics who view the changes as an erosion of subject boundaries. This, coupled with a reduction in funding, has pushed them towards conservativism or neo-conservative positions. New practices, such as RPL, are viewed as another dimension of the modernisation project. Some academics have concerns that this project erodes departmental autonomy, thus anything connected with it is viewed with suspicion. This form of analysis indicates that there is a growing crisis in universities about their autonomy, and reveals a weakness in the emerging conceptualization of higher education in itself.

The notion that RPL would prove more challenging in some technical and scientific disciplines than the social sciences and humanities is hard to rationalise. The recent Irish Report on RPL in higher education (Goggin *et al*., 2015) shows that it has most success in the field of

engineering, and the architects' professional association in Ireland also has an RPL process in place. Unlike the humanities and social sciences where learning is spread across a range of experience it is likely that technical knowledge is gained through intentional learning in very specific contexts, making it easier to assess in these disciplines.

Some participants view repetition as a demotivating factor in education. It also appears to be inefficient as "it makes education seem ridiculous". However, others see its value, and welcome repetition in content because they believe they will always learn something new. Some participants were clear that the extension of learning could be blocked by accepting exemptions, and for them repetition was positive because it advanced learning. They showed a very considered and evolved understanding of what learning is and can be. In line with Brew they saw that revisiting prior learning involves opportunities for 'looking again' (1993). This alternative position is mute in RPL research.

Different styles of RPL require different levels of support. The style used in the French study, for example, appears to need a great deal of support. However, the particular style used in CS2 requires little support and claimants hardly mentioned it in our conversations. The model of RPL used through Independent Learning Projects has a focus on subject learning and offers potential for a new conceptualization of RPL.

The concept of time has been deterritorialised into a capitalist conceptualisation of time = money. This is problematic, and many claimants and proponents of RPL have internalized this conceptualization and extol RPL for its financial and time saving value. However, other things are in play here that are ignored. The struggle to juggle living and learning can be challenging and reducing time in college may not mean reducing time in study. Overall, using time well might offer a chance of a more balanced life.

Claimants in this enquiry were all part-time students. In Ireland, this cohort of students are required to pay tuition fees although their full-time counterparts pay only a registration fee. Thus, they suffer discrimination because of their part-time status. Paying fees, care costs, transport, books and materials can stretch a budget to the limits. Students who do not have access to financial credit can find themselves excluded from education, not on the basis of their ability to learn but on their ability to pay.   In cases of credit transfer, where claimants have paid for similar courses already, they use RPL not to save money but to ensure that they do not

have to pay twice for the same tuition. The motivation for RPL in this context is principally financial but in many cases it is for money owed not saved.

Generally, and in contrast with the US study, the quantitative data from the CS1 study shows that RPL does not determine whether students completed their degrees or not. Due to the high proportion of graduates with RPL it can be inferred that it did reduce drop out and given the propensity of RPL in the social science degree it appears that RPL students had excellent foundational knowledge of their chosen subject. They have already put in huge effort to make themselves ready through attending formal courses or reflecting on what they know relevant to their target topic.

Overall, the accounts indicate that the priority of students is learning. They are interested in deepening understanding of subject domains to enable them to make sense of their existence, to read their world and to become different in the process.

The next two chapters deepen analysis by exploring, in more detail, the role of recognition of prior learning in learning.

CHAPTER VII

BRINGING INSIDE LEARNING OUT

7.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I move in another direction to explore the role of RPL in learning itself, and its effects on individual and group learning.

The participant experiences and perceptions in this chapter relate to CS1 and CS2 settings apart from one comment from Laura in CS3. They are mature students and have studied part-time in degree programmes designed for adult learners. Thus, the learning was facilitated in small/medium sized groups. It is rare for a group to extend beyond 40 students and groups of 20-30 are most common. Lecturers use adult education dialogical methods of practice that invite students to draw on their life experience to test, experiment and reflect on knowledge as it unfolds in the group. Lecturers in this situation do not view themselves as experts but rather as facilitators who collaborate with the group in an exchange of ideas, critical reflection and thought.

In the evidence presented in this chapter, participants recognise the value of prior learning and the power of self-recognition of prior learning. They also value prior learning as a means to advance knowledge for individuals and groups; and critique formal recognition and how it can steal some of the richness of group learning, and reduce the range of different expert perspectives.

7.1 SELF RECOGNITION

Knowledge gained in experience may not be in action every day; it can be at rest or still. Nevertheless, knowledge is present; what is unknown is what encounter will awaken it.

7.1.1 "You're a fully functioning human being; you've come to this place at this time, you have prior learning" (Madge/CS2)

… acknowledgement, personal acknowledgement of prior learning, I don't think it comes to you as an epiphany. [1] I think it's something that evolves in the first couple of months when you're engaging in the foundation modules within [named programme], [*2] that actually for*

the first time that eureka moment goes off and you go 'Oh God, I did this before' and sometimes you've forgotten you've even done it [3] ... and so in learning maybe ... maybe just to say to students coming in that there is prior learning in your life if you're coming as a mature adult. [4] But that it won't be self kind of ... it won't become obvious straight away, be kind to yourself and give yourself some time to reflect as you immerse yourself in this journey to have a self-realisation of saying 'Oh yes I did this' and a bit like the connecting the dots dynamic.[5] So that's something maybe to tell people, is to be kind to yourself when you're starting this process and then that it'll be revealed to you down the line [6] ... and some people might say 'God I've no prior learning', you're going to say 'Listen, you're a fully functioning human being; you've come to this place at this time, you have prior learning [7] but it may not actually have revealed itself to you, as yet, relating to whatever topics you're interested in'[8] (Madge-CS2)

7.1.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The account suggests that interaction between past and present learning facilitates the assemblage of past 'knowings' in relation to curricula. Madge recognises that this internal knowledge is sourced differently [5]. It depends on 'encounters' that trigger a process of 'connecting the dots' [5]. There is no epiphany [1]; over time knowledge is revealed in an immanent way; it is a natural and organic process.

Madge's differentiation between acknowledgement *per se* and self-acknowledgement or self-recognition implies an awareness that there are many forms of recognition. This is not documented in the research on RPL; the emphasis is on institutional recognition. From a learning point of view the realisation that something is already known brings with it a sense of achievement and acknowledgement of self as knower. If, as Deleuze and Guattari propose, reality is multiple and every concept is a multiplicity, and the self itself consists of a continent of multiplicities, the account above shows tracings of multiplicities. The interiority is a vast well of knowledge or multiplicities of knowings, some of which are unrealised [5,6].

RPL does not always work well at the commencement of study. Students need time to realise their prior learning. Madge has an awareness of the slow process involved in sourcing past knowings [2, 6]. Learners should wait for the seeds of past knowings to be revealed rather than pressurising themselves to find them. Self-recognition brings students into relationship with themselves as knowers. Opportunities for self-recognition are prevalent in adult education because experience is valued, and opportunities to engage students with past learning and to

reuse it in the new learning situation are encouraged. Madge presumes that the learning is present in all 'fully functioning human beings' [7, 8]. She makes a link between age and experience, [4] and implicit in this is a notion that with age comes knowledge and wisdom. This is a foundational concept in RPL.

The tone of the extract advocates peaceful and stress-free engagement with RPL. There is no sense of a rush to make claims. This also infers an ethos of the institution in which Madge studies where students have learned that there is no urgency about RPL claims — they can do it any time.

RPL can be a natural process of recognition that needs time and space for the prior learning to reveal itself and self-care is important in the process because sourcing prior learning can be stressful. The data suggests that there are different forms of recognition of prior learning – self-recognition, group recognition and public recognition. These all function differently although one is not greater than the other.

7.2 BRINGING OUT INTERIOR LEARNING IN GROUPS

The CS1 discussion group participants had many concerns about how RPL, if practiced more extensively, might disrupt learning at an individual level and collective level. They voiced their insights based on their experiences of the pedagogies used by lecturers on BA programmes. Their primary desire was for learning.

7.2.1 'rpl'

In the accounts from participants there was a very strong sense of the diversity of experience in adult learning groups and the richness that those bring to learning for everyone. The idea that 'life experience is worth any number of certificates' (John, CS1) was a strong theme in all the discussion groups. Learning in groups, where students generously share their insights, life stories and experiences, was viewed as an important aspect of the overall learning experience. Thus, group learning was deeply respected and treasured and was positively viewed as a resource that advanced understanding and knowledge.

7.2.2 "the student gave the lecture the following week" (Bree/CS1)

> ... there was one student in my year who actually was working in the Ordinance Survey, and during the module, which was on maps and landscapes, the lecturer just said next week he [the student] is going to take you through the Ordinance Survey and the

> *foundations of it and everything else **[46]** ... and it was a win / win situation for the lecturer, for him, for the group, for everybody; and the student gave the lecture the following week on the Ordinance Survey because this is where he worked all his life**. [47]** ... And I mean he was in his element and I thought it was very clever of the lecturer ... he literally handed it over to him **[48]** ... I mean he exposed us then to all these barony maps of the 1600s which I didn't even know existed ... He came in with copies for all of us in the audience, we all got the barony we wanted, we got copies of these barony maps from 1654. **[49]** (Bree, CSI)*

7.2.3 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The accounts in this section are short but powerful showing the power of recognition in itself, and the value of using the experiences of group members as a resource for group learning [46, 47, 48]. Yet there is another dynamic underway. The teacher and the group have recognised their colleague's expertise, and the teacher steps in and reinforces its value by handing over the class to the student. Axel Honneth (1992) writes about the power of recognition and acknowledges that recognition by others plays an influential role in identity formation. He states that "recognition is mediated by the experience of struggle – as an inner worldly process occurring under contingent condition of human socialisation … [and] human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition" (1992:67, 71). In the intersubjective engagement of recognition, the student can gain great status, "one is somebody, one has a non-instrumental worth or dignity superior to the value of mere things" (Schmidt am Busch, 2010:30). This recognition was multifaceted – peers, lecturer and self. Learning events, such as this, are common in adult education where students and lecturer engage in reciprocal learning. There is a continuous flow of knowledge sharing and all knowledge is respected nothing above and nothing below. Human experience is enfolded and unfolded through relational interaction with experiential worlds (virtual and actual) of all the group members, equally.

7.2.4 "We were all sitting there at the end of the night and we all knew we had experienced something different" (Maura/CS1)

> *... he [the lecturer] was terrific at encouraging us to use our experience, **[27]** and certainly we did one particular module that we had to do little plays at the end, **[28]** and it was*

really very powerful the way he encouraged us to use our own opinions and views, [27a] so at the end the little plays that we did [29] were just magic, they really were, and you know at the end of the night we were all stunned at what we had produced. [30] And just the breadth [31] ... I would be very conservative in my views in terms of abortion for example [32] but the other group did a little play [33] ...their thing was the different aspects of pregnancy, [34] and one of the ones they did was they read out a letter from somebody who had had an abortion [35] which would be completely against my own beliefs [36] but at the same time the particular letter they chose ... it stopped[me] [37] ... it made me sort of say, right okay, I can't just ... I can still keep my own beliefs but I can't be as black about it, [38] that people have different points of view or whatever about it. [39] So for me I think particularly that module, there was a whole different level of learning, [40] which was fabulous, it really was. [40a] We were all sitting there at the end of the night and we all knew we had experienced something different, [41] do you know what I mean? [42] Yeah, it was terrific. It was absolutely terrific and it was learning at a very deep kind of level I think. [43] (Maura, CS1).

7.2.5 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The learning encounter described above shows that participation in modules can bring unexpected outcomes. The role of education is to challenge our perspectives and beyond what Hume refers to as the 'habits of thought' (Kemerling, 2011) we have acquired over time. Learning from experience is not without problems. When we have deep-found convictions based on religious belief or political ideology, perspectives can become rigid and dogmatic [36]. Dewey calls this mis-educative:

> Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted. (1938:25-26).

Dewey's term of 'mis-educative' and students' acts against 'becoming other' (Semetsky, 2006:13), which is about expansion of thought and questioning how these perspectives were formed in the first place. The questioning process should bring the learner into new territories of concepts and knowledge.

> Once one steps outside what's been thought before, once one ventures outside what's familiar and reassuring, once one has to invent new concepts for unknown lands, then

methods and moral systems break down and thinking becomes, as Foucault puts it, a "perilous act", a violence, whose first victim is oneself. (Deleuze, 1995:103)

Creating learning environments that bring us outside the familiar and challenge us to engage with thought for unknown lands is the real and concrete purpose of education in my experience. Biesta also sees this as a central purpose of education. Engaging students in educational modes that promote consciousness-raising, critique and reflexivity and enable a human being to 'come into presence' (2009: 20-21) of themselves and others, on their own and with others is part a process of 'subjectification' ... "[where] the individual is not simply a specimen of a more encompassing order … [but] open towards the future and intrinsically democratic" (2009:105). Biesta contends that the beginning of the creation of different subjectivities is necessary, and engagement with those "who are not like us ... those who have nothing in common" (Lingis, 1994, in Biesta, 2006a:49) is a first step. Bringing concepts of difference into the educational arena is important. Higher education in particular needs to facilitate engagements with and 'in difference itself' by supporting students to recognise difference in and with themselves as a natural consequence of being human, and to view it as valuable in developing thought that can surpass the limiting standards set by higher education. Articulating specific differences is one dimension that can influence the creation of critical subjectivity, but thinking 'difference' in and of itself can locate difference in a new framework. Diversity in this scenario is not oppositional or dualistic but a means to pursue lines of thought that draw us toward what might become. This is consistent with Deleuzian concepts of difference. Maura offers us an insight into these possibilities. She engaged with difference in the encounter and felt the power of thinking differently as a result. She started to become democratic and accepted the difference of others and in turn became 'other' herself.

The passage above shows how powerful group learning can be. Drawing on singular experiences using performance as learning methodology supports learning [27, 28, 40, 40a]. The collaboration of the group in the learning process extended thought and reflection enfolding it inward [31]. It is as if Maura soaked up the learning from the experience [27a, 29, 43] as the outside became the inside in the moment that she describes as 'magic' [30]. Her prejudices were challenged and disrupted [36, 37] in the learning event, and she experienced dissonance, and a becoming other is called up in the imagination. [43] Although the 'becoming' is cut, traces from the experience have been stored.

Adults can carry strong prejudiced opinions built over time through experience. These positions can be entrenched and difficult to shift. They can block personal change and growth. The mode of learning, through performance, brought this learner into relations with different experiences, perspectives and ideological positions of others. It is an argument for 'rpl' and how it can be an instrument of change in group learning.

Experience can be used in groups to enable reflection on habits of thought and prejudices. Engaging students in experiential learning brings them into relationship with difference and becoming 'other'; unlearning is an ongoing part of all learning and sometimes comes with repetition; group learning triggers 'rpl' because it connects students with their prior learning and helps them to evaluate it in light of new experiences; the power of group learning is under-estimated and undervalued in formal RPL.

7.2.6 "I told myself just to shut up and not to talk that much, because it seemed to me that I'm interfering with the educator" (Laura/ CS3).

It was a small group. [61] So sometimes if they, they had one course where I didn't attend, but I really helped them with Skype. Because they needed something and it was totally my field. And I was, we had Skype, I was helping them actually with homework and stuff like that. [62] It's nice that you put it that way, that maybe I could give something to others also, or maybe to teach. [63] But I'm not sure, maybe it's more like they also needed a different experience and study without me talking all the time ... [64] I told myself just to shut up and not to talk that much, because it seemed to me that I'm interfering with the educator ... [65] I thought more about not interfering with the educator than giving something myself to the course, I think. I'm not sure. It really is in the educator. If the educator lets the person share the experience, and how they react to that. [66] And for the courses I went to, I can say that there were some educators who didn't like it at all that anyone was talking about their experience and what they knew about. [67] (Laura, CS3)

Yeah and I mean I always find that if I'm ... like I know I do, if I was sitting beside somebody who I know is really knowledgeable in that, it can kind of intimidate them a little bit, that person, well I would be ... [43] I'd be less inclined to say ask a question about that subject, I'd say well she'll think I'm stupid, do you know, so you wouldn't like to think ... to

> *be putting two different levels in the same class like that you know because you could intimate somebody.* **[44]** *(Betty:CS2)*

7.2.7 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The first account shows strong traces of a didactic approach to education where the educator has autonomy and controls the group [64]. In this approach sharing prior learning and experience is not part of the pedagogical approach. Laura's knowledge is subordinated so that it is the educator alone who holds the position of expert [65]. However, Laura begins to recognize that this is a problem of the competence of the lecturer rather than the responsibility of the group [66, 67]. She hints that something is not working in the pedagogical approach used in the classroom. The 'inside' of her learning is controlled and cannot be given expression in this environment. There are many components to this encounter. Some of them relate to structures of knowledge within higher education itself.

The existing disciplinary model promotes the status of subject disciplines, and of the lecturer as subject expert, "and their status as the guardians of high quality learning" (Taylor, 1996:293, cited in Harris, 2010:55). Students expect the lecturer to be the holder of knowledge, and accord that supposed status due respect, but peers who share a similar standard of knowledge as the lecturer are 'intimidating' [43, 44]. The expectation is that all students in a group should be of the same standard in terms of subject knowledge. RPL is a device that supports the standardisation of group knowledge to some extent in that is takes those who know more out of the classroom. The earlier accounts from Bree (7.2.2) describe how a different pedagogy works to enhance learning that contributes to the advancement of knowledge for the entire group including the lecturer.

It is hard to see how pedagogical development can advance in this context. I have argued that the conceptual basis of RPL is weak; however, there appears to be an equivalent weakness in the conceptual contours of higher education itself. This extract certainly hints at it; the testimonies of assessors in the French study do too when it was found that academic assessors did not understand learning in experience or value it. In this context, students grow silent and suppress what they know and have learned [67]. However, students are resourceful and they find ways, if not in the classroom than outside it, to help each other [62].

Higher education does not value prior learning as a resource for group learning because, generally, it is not a creative site in which all learning is valued in the knowledge making process.

7.2.8 "[Experienced peers] can often be the reason that the class will do well... "(John/ CS1)

I think that if you're gone too much out of class it's like if we were to do a project together, and there was two other people in the group and they're exempt, so we form a little team and I know what I can rely on from [names student], what I can rely on from you, what you can rely on me for ... and let's say in the next term we come in and there's two more added in [the group] and there can be a tendency to kind of, you know, well, we're sticking together, we did well last year (laughs) and we're sticking together, you know that way ... And I've seen that happen you know [48] ... (John, CS1)

So people who have exemptions from modules and are not part of a cohort, a group cohort, may find themselves excluded in some way? [49] (me)

It's great when you get an exemption, and I can understand it from a point of view of the money aspect and the time aspect of it, [50] but what I would also say is that there's a huge loss to the class if the person isn't there, [51] because they are sometimes ... you could go into a lecture ... and they can't get the point across and somebody beside you who knows the stuff can have you told in 20 seconds [52] but if they're exempt they're not there. [51a] (laughs) ... And what I would say is sometimes the exemption exempts you from helping [53] ... they [experienced peers] can often be the reason that the class will do well or they will bring the class out or they can bring people's ideas or concepts or whatever out. [54] (John CS1)

In fact this is the same thing as you had [Maura], your point of view on abortion [32a] ... well, if there wasn't somebody in the class who was willing to go not directly opposite to you, but to give a different view point that caused you to change [55] ... not to change your opinion, but to change the way you look at it at the same time [56]... and I think if you have people in the class, if they have the experience, they have the ability to be able to do that ... [57] (John CS1)

... if you have people in who have a reasonable understanding of what's going on ... I think it enriches the class. [46a] But again, if somebody effectively has it all, you know, there's a cost to them just to be there to do that. [53a] (SE2/CS2)

I think the whole point of we'll say the likes of us studying [58] is what we bring to the class, we bring as much as the tutor does. [58] (Molly, CS1)

Absolutely (All)

We're all learning from each other really... you know, so I think our life experience is very relevant. [62] (Molly, CS1)

*The classroom was a very safe place and everybody shared something, and sometimes it was emotional, and sometimes it was light, but the fact that people were prepared to share it illustrated what you were learning and made it all so real, **[36]** and then suddenly it would spark something in yourself. 'I know what she's talking about now' because somebody would have passed a comment that would suddenly bring something up for me and I would say 'Oh yeah, I do know what that's about now' or 'I can see it in a different light'; and that everybody sharing their previous learning and their previous experiences was invaluable to me as a learning tool **[37]** (Gaynor, CS2)*

7.2.9 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The value of prior learning is experienced in profound ways by learning groups. Their asides tell the same story, but point out different angles and ways of seeing it. There is an intensity in the points of view offered. Loss of learning and camaraderie is a strong motif in this piece, and tampering with the group dynamic is viewed as risky as learning itself is lost. Students absent from the group are missed; absent students lose out; those who could be absent but are not are therefore at a financial loss [46a, 47, 51, 51a, 53, 53a, 58]. Those with exemptions can become outsiders; those in the consistent group cohort become bonded in the shared learning experience and can even become protective of their relationships [48].

These accounts attest that intense learning can take place in groups because they provide safe space for groups to share concepts, knowledge, experiences and even prejudices [32a, 55]. Thoughts are explored together and examined in a collaborative process [58, 59, 60].

The excerpt describes a desire to protect learning against the vagaries of RPL. Exemptions denote potential loss of learning from individuals who hold different perspectives and who can argue from a position of prior learning expertise.

The integrity of the group cohort is sacred. Learning space where trust and companionship leads to sharing and collaboration of knowledge, skills and resources requires protection.

The commitment to learning is impressive, especially in an educational environment that has been greatly changed and modernised in the last two decades, as noted earlier; where students come to 'do' modules, and Brecher (2005) notes the conditions are created for separation and even isolation from each other and from learning itself. The experiences of students in these extracts tell a story that goes against his analysis, and they articulate a position that the overall model such as flexible learning, modular systems, inter-disciplinarity, are secondary to pedagogical considerations. This approach can operate in a variety of structures offering a powerful learning environment wherever it is fostered.

Adult education discourses about the importance of creating safe learning spaces to facilitate open dialogue are echoed in this passage [36]. The flow of group learning unfolds here with participants sharing experiences and insights to bring learning out for the group and in to the self [37]. Sharing is part of learning. Learning spaces that facilitate the flow of expression, emotion and thought nurture learning in adult education, and sharing prior and different learning is an intrinsic part of that experience. In these spaces students are free to "bring something to life, to free life from where it's trapped, to trace lines of flight" (Deleuze, 1995:141).

7.3 LEARNING IN INFORMAL GROUPS

There is one final if short point that needs to be included. Group learning can be facilitated in the classroom but it can also be equally as active outside the classroom. I raise this point as I want to recognize all the valuable sites of learning in groups.

7.3.1 "Well for me, the learning went on outside of the classroom" (Bonnie/CS2)

Well for me, the learning went on outside of the classroom because our first class was from 6.00 to 7.30, and then there was a break, and whatever you were doing in the classroom

continued through the break time, and you sat in little groups, or you'd sit in one big group ... but generally whatever the conversation was in the classroom carried into the coffee dock and then the next lecture was 8.00 to 9.30, and after that you could stand in the car park for another half an hour discussing it. **[38]** *(Bonnie-CS2)*

7.3.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

This account of informal group learning [38] indicates that it is more than a term to describe a component of RPL. Here it is described as active, purposeful and pervasive. Participants from CS2 did not appear to be as invested in group learning as students from CS1 and their need for formal learning groups is weaker. Generally, adult learners value group knowledge, and they find ways to engage with each other to share knowledge inside and/or outside the classroom.

7.4 Summary

Adult students are interested in learning, and they expect to put in the effort required to advance their knowledge in formal education. They put a higher value on experience, and understand that learning in experience is better than anything they will ever learn in formal education. This does not diminish how they value formal education. They see it as a means of questioning, deepening, broadening and expanding learning; a process for unravelling bias and prejudice and giving them the chance to rethink or unlearn some of their prior habits of thinking.

The term 'mulitplicity' springs to mind when thinking about the participants' perceptions about learning. DG use the concept in different ways throughout their work, but the concept of intensive multiplicities is most pervasive. An intensive multiplicity is a "collection of parts" (Colebrook 2002: xxvi) that do not make up a unified whole or essence. The components are disparate and linked. They can sometimes become absorbed into each other but are permanently open to new possibilities and potential futures. Roffe likens the concept to a patchwork: "it is an ensemble without becoming a totality or whole" (Roffe, 2010: 181). The valuing of learning as articulated by the participants in this study echo this description of what learning is or should be. In this analysis learning is never complete, always partial and open to new learnings. There are no boundaries on learning other than the need to re-learn and even unlearn some things.

There is an outstanding question arising from these accounts about the capacity of lecturers to facilitate learning from experience, and whether educators can create conducive environments where students can engage together in the 'collective challenge' of learning.

The participants in this study stress a strong desire for learning above all else. This is consistent with adults who enter higher education later in life. They are generally very committed to their studies; having waited so long, they are loath to miss learning opportunities.

CHAPTER VIII

USING PRIOR LEARNING FOR LEARNING

8.0 Introduction

A singularity is a "conceptual island" floating alone and unconnected to other concepts. Policy and research suggest that RPL can be a conceptual island that has little or no connection with learning. However, accounts presented from research participants in this enquiry so far tell a different story. In this section, participants accounts deepen my conviction that prior learning and recognition involves a highly sophisticated form of learning where learners pursue 'lines of flight' from their prior learning and use it to research and advance their knowledge independently. The process they undergo is one of deep engagement in their own multiplicities resulting in intense learning that brings prior knowledge into relationship with concurrent learning. Accounts in this chapter show that learning and experience are not separate components of knowledge creation but are bonded and indivisible.

8.1 Independent Learning Projects [ILPs]

Independent Learning Projects [ILPs] offered in CS2 provide students with the opportunity to recognise their prior learning and identify topics or subjects from their prior learning where they wish to broaden their knowledge. In CS2 students who wish to gain recognition for prior learning gained in experience can do so through the completion of Independent Learning Projects (ILPs). Students design the ILP themselves. They choose subject areas relevant to the programme of study, propose learning outcomes for their project and submit their proposal to a subject tutor for approval. If successful, they complete the project and submit it for examination. ILPs do not involve class time although students do receive some mentoring from a subject tutor.

The list of ILPs is impressive. In the discussion group, participants named ten different topics including apartheid, human migration, feminism / patchwork, storytelling, aesthetics, music, Spanish, pastoral ministry, migration of birds.

In this chapter, I explore participant experiences of ILP. I begin with general experiences and then two individual cases are explored – Bonnie and Walter. Bonnie's story came about in the group conversations. Her account stood out from the others due to the detail she gave about her experience. Walter also spoke about his experience of RPL in the group discussion, but unlike

Bonnie there was not enough time to tease out his experience in an in-depth way. He had completed three ILPs so I arranged to interview him on his own. I begin by providing a selection of comments from the group conversations followed by Bonne and Walter's stories.

One of the most striking features of the participant accounts from CS2 is the multiplicity of ways the participants talk about learning in RPL. This is uncommon in the research where the discussion mainly focuses on issues related to the value of RPL as a confidence-building tool, and as a time saving mechanism which reduces repetition while saving money. In the accounts that follow a different role for RPL is exposed.

8.1.1 "I learned how to go about validating my opinions or challenging them, depending on what came up in your research" (Gaynor/CS2)

... like I came into the degree feeling that this was something elusive that I'd never had the chance to do, [25] and I thought everybody who has a degree must know something that I don't know, and I'm going to know it all when I'm finished [laughter] [26] ... and then I learned very quickly that I'm not going to know it all when it's finished [laughter] [27]. But doing an ILP taught me that if there's something I don't know I now know how to learn it, research it and validate it. [28a] [Gaynor]

How to validate it? [28b] [me]

Yeah. [laughs][Rs]

And that's why it was worth putting the effort in. For me, it wasn't about the 5 ECTS at all, it was about me, and that's the way I took the degree from the start. My motivation going for this particular degree was that it was about me as opposed to doing something for an employer, like if I went and did Accountancy or Business Studies or something, that's for an employer, it's not about me. [29] This degree was about me, and that was the attraction for me, and I felt that it equipped me to go and research in the future, or I learned how to go about validating my opinions or challenging them, depending on what came up in your research. [28c] But like keep delving into it and if you get a reference go further with it and challenge yourself. What I believe, is that actually correct? And it was kind of challenging my own notions, and that's what it taught me that was probably more valuable than actually the 5 ECTS ... [30] [Gaynor]

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It was more indulgent of yourself as well to do an ILP than a credit transfer, because you indulge your own interests more so than with just a credit transfer; because with the credit transfer, you brought it in, you found the outcome that you said that it matched and if they agreed, well then, job done. But with the ILP you had to work at it a little bit more to actually convince yourself [laughs] ... **[33]** *[Betty]*

Sell it, yeah.[R]

... that you actually do meet the outcome ... [Betty]

And them. [laughter] [R]

... and then you had to convince them. But you could indulge your own interests as well, because, I mean, Bonnie did the patchwork quilt and there was no limit, your own imagination was the only limit to what you could do your ILP on. **[33a]** *[Betty]*

8.1.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Reading through these accounts was like reading the testimonial of one person rather than many. I was surprised at the experiences in common, and how, in the process of doing ILPs, they learned how to research, critique and self-direct their own learning. The desire for learning was strong [28c, 30].

Unlike a lot of the research from other studies that looks at RPL from the perspective of the institution and as an assessment mechanism, Gaynor rejects hegemonies that perpetuate discourses of educational instrumentalism [31, 32]. She articulates an excitement about learning, and the privilege it is to be able to learn for 'me' rather than learning to gain skills for work [29]. She also de-territorialises the concept of validation from its RPL instrumentalist position and re-territorialises it as a learning event. Validation in RPL is conceptualised as something external, a recognition conferred and controlled by the institution. Gaynor turns this on its head and takes the power into her own hands. She sees validation as a learning challenge, but one which she controls [28c]. She sees herself as a becoming researcher, and one who knows how to challenge and validate her learning [28a, b, c].

The learning gained from ILPs was impressive. Expressions of critical thinking are strong [30,

33]. It's as if the ILP opened up learning for them, and they become autonomous learners in the experience. The entire degree was not about a career move, but about the pursuit of personal interests and learning [29]. Betty also expresses learning as an emancipatory creative process. There is a sense of freedom in what is expressed [33, 33a].

Prior learning in this extract is something you use for learning and you thus honour the learning yourself. There is movement in and out of prior learning – it can provide the stimulus or become the topic for an ILP. It is more than mere credit transfer [33]. In this context,

> prior learning and new learning is purposefully intertwined in a process of assessment and learning. In this case, validation becomes a part of a process that comes close to adult education ideals of starting from and building upon participants' prior experiences and knowledge (Andersson, 2017:121).

ILPs offer an option for what Andersson suggests. Students engage in independent study under the mentorship of a subject specialist and engage in processes to become researchers, critical thinkers, self-validators, independent learners, emancipated learners. ILPs initiate becoming. At the end of an ILP a student has started to become a knowledge maker in her right.

8.1.3 "It was a nightmare." [Laughter] "A real, real nightmare." (Walter/CS2)

It was a nightmare. [Laughter] [300] A real, real nightmare. [301]

Did you have trouble? [302] [me]

Yeah, a nightmare. [301a]

Did you not like them? [304] [me]

*I liked starting them, [304] but realising when I was starting them **how** much work there was involved ...* (Others indicate agreement here) *[305] ... and there was no ... you really can't get guidelines for an ILP. [306] You know ILPs can go from an essay, 10,000 words [laughs] or 8,000 words [307] to something that would take months ... [308] you're into the unknown [309] and you come up against problems [310] within that [311] ... of your own making of course! [312] ... and you have to think on how you get around it [313]. That's where your prior learning comes in, [314] you know what I mean, [315] it could be something that you learned before [316] that suddenly just kicks in, [317] you know what I mean. [315a] You know, something you could have learned in school a couple of years back [318] and that kicks in [319]*

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*and then you get inspiration probably from your mentor or from your colleagues **[320]**. [Walter, CS2].*

*It was a kind of a self-delivery of a module **[321]** ... So in some ways I agree **[322]** that you don't go into it lightly **[323]** ... where you have the bonus of prior learning **[324]** is that if you can map it against something **[325]**, if you've done something in a career basis **[326]** or you've had a hobby or an interest in that particular area **[326a]**, then you can bring that prior learning to it **[327]**. So, that's effectively what an ILP is ... **[328]** (Madge, CS2)*

*It was so alone **[329]**, whereas when you are in a class or you're doing a module you've got the support of your peers **[330]**, you have a tutor **[331]**, you can bounce it [your ideas] on them, **[332]** but alone it is much harder. **[333]** You have to dig deep in your own confidence **[334]**, in your own ability to present **[335]** and then we presented our ILPs didn't we? **[336]** (Gladis, CS2)*

*And that was stressful [laughter] **[337]**, that was so stressful. **[338]** "This is my piece of my work and this is my ..." **[339]** and it really was, it built my confidence **[340]** in my own achievements **[341]** but it was much harder work than doing just set modules **[342]** (Gladis CS2)*

8.1.4 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The accounts indicate that ILPs are very challenging and a struggle for students [300, 301, 301a]. The idea of ILPs appeals to students, [304] but the reality is different [305].   ILPs are unpredictable; there is no way of knowing what they will involve [306, 307, 308, 309, 323].

The description is striking. It calls up the image of a rhizome.   It is interesting that time concerns are absent and that efficiency has nothing to do with ILPs. They are about learning for 'me'. Difficult and intense learning cannot have a time frame [309, 310, 311, 312, 313].

When a problem is encountered, prior learning emerges [310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318]. The learning is unexpectedly ungrounded from some deep-rooted place of Walter's interior resource of knowledge, something that came in through 'school' learning or with the help of a mentor or colleague [319]. Madge's approach is to 'map' [325] prior knowledge onto to current learning, and each element is a co-ordinate of the other testing its range in different realities – virtual and material [324, 325, 326, 326a]. The learning is organic and intra-experiential as prior and concurrent learning are brought into relationship with each other [327].

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Learning alone is isolating [337]. A recurring dilemma in RPL for students is whether to take the module or make a claim [342] because of the effort required by them to compile evidence and present it and await judgement. They perceive it as too much effort for too small a return. However, there is a difference in an ILP. The prior learning is not directed at an established curriculum, but one which the students invent for themselves. The power is weighted on their side, but so is the responsibility for the curriculum and for the research [321]. It can be analysed in a number of ways. The student holds the power for a greater proportion of her learning; the lecturer abdicates her traditional teacher responsibilities and becomes an assessor, and the value and use of group learning becomes negated in the process. The result would be more cost-effective teaching; fewer students on campus; less staff required; lighter resources and consequently cheaper education. This would serve the neoliberal agenda. Independent study is becoming more the norm in web-based learning environments (formal and informal), and perhaps self-directed learning is an inevitable consequence of 21st Century education, or at least in neoliberal education systems.

Whatever the long-term outcome of this form of learning, deep and powerful learning is expressed in these extracts about ILPs. The participants were very animated in their descriptions, and spoke with passion and conviction about the value of independent study. The compulsion to follow a line of research made them willing to take a risk and pursue the unknown ILP territory [337, 338]. In this territory, their ideas are set in motion by the problems in their ideas, and these tease the intellect, emotions drawing them into a challenging learning experience [300, 301, 301a, 337, 338]. The suffering was articulated almost as martyrdom. It's as if suffering and hardship is required and equated with learning. Yet as Semstsky notes, "the line of greatest slope … is the line of flight, simultaneously the most painful and the most healing" (2008:88). This is so for many intense experiences of learning where suffering and renewal go together as we tussle to pursue 'lines of flight' to new learning horizons.

ILPs lead learners into the 'unknown' and guidelines are of no value. I was impressed by the trust the participants had in themselves as learners and their confidence in the ILP process. They were in no doubt that prior learning would 'kick in' when required, and that no effort was needed. They knew that knowing is buried in each of us and it would surface when required. The IPLs normalise self-directed learning. I felt the students understood learning and how knowledge is made, and had confidence in their own capacity for learning and knowledge

making, which was impressive. The sense of achievement and pride in their own learning was enormous [339, 340, 341].

8.2 BONNIE'S STORY– a singular experience

Bonnie pursued two ILPs: one on feminism and the other on apartheid. Bonnie is a woman in her early 40s who came to the programme with a desire to change careers.

8.2.1 "I found it changed my view"

I found the two ILPs, being let run on my own, was a fantastic experience, and the whole thing took legs to the point I found it changed my view, [14] ... like I've a huge interest in hand crafts so one was around the history of patchworking, but it changed my whole view of how women were seen [15] and feminism, and whereas I became a feminist through [the degree, names the programme] *definitely, or found that I was a feminist [16] I suppose, and a lot of feminists kind of tied sewing with keeping women in their position in society, [17] ... and I discovered this through the journey of creativity in the patchworking ... was what feminism failed to recognise was the creativity of women in patchworking and what they managed to express, like it's not just patchworking but they express so many critical ideas through their patchworking that this was a journey and I was able to tie in the whole thing. [18] We done a bit of Marx in some of the social classes and I was able to tie that in so it brought a huge amount of what I was actually learning, then it made sense in the context of patchworking, even though per se it was looking at bits of fabric, it wasn't. [19]*

So the other one I did was on apartheid, and again I was able to tie that in with world history and sort of events coming together in other countries where prejudices were being broken down [20] but because I could ... now I read probably far more than I ever put into the assignment but it was a huge learning curve. I mean my imagination ran riot [laughter] and it was very positive. I loved it and I had nobody kind of hemming me in and saying 'This is what we want from you'. We did have set criteria that you had to work to in your assignment, but there was nobody hemming me in and saying this is the amount of work you have to do for this week, I could do as much as I wanted and I found that very empowering. [21]

It started off very generally, yeah. It started off very generally. [22] I was kind of researching the idea of patchwork and where it came from, and then as I began to do that and there was plenty of writing, particularly from America, on it even though it didn't originate out there and

most of the books would tell you the opposite, but I found that the actual art of patchworking expressed political ideas that women weren't allowed, didn't have a political voice at the time, so you would get political views on slavery, political views on say transport to the colonies, you will get political views on slavery coming from indigenous patchwork when slaves came to America. [23] So a huge amount of that. A huge amount of fundraising done to it, like women's contribution to society, surely as fundraisers, to this day continues and that's unrecognised. [24] So it was that, and then plus keeping the crafts alive which have died in the last generation with feminism nearly. I mean people don't know how to go about sewing, they don't know how to sew on a button, so to me it was that whole social history that came to life for me doing it. [26]

So you thought it was a worthwhile experience? [me]

Oh absolutely. I mean I discovered things ... as I say, because it wasn't limited to just what you were taught in the classroom, because I could read so much even though I mightn't have used it all, I kind of followed up every single lead I found in a book I was reading, the original material ... [27] [Bonnie]

8.2.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The experiences raised by Bonnie resonate with the experiences expressed by other participants who completed ILPs [Madge, Gladis, Gaynor, Angela, Walter].

Bonnie describes a sense of boundlessness in learning [14]. It's 'as if' she is free falling into learning [14, 21]. Relations with feminist thought are constructed in the interaction with patchwork, theory, history [15, 17, 18], and with the feminist tracings that she 'found' in herself [16] moving her to become feminist. Her studies did not make her a feminist, she found her feminism and entered an 'intense multiplicity' of feminisms [23, 27].

Bonnie's honest account shows some naivety. For example, she seems unaware of the connection between patchwork and other sewing crafts in feminism theory [18] (Witzling, 2009). If she was learning as part of a group, perhaps this avenue of feminist thinking may have been opened up to her through the collective knowledge of the group and by the facilitator. Yet, her awareness grows as her creativity is activated and she realises that patchwork was more than just 'bits of fabric' [19]. In her accusation that sewing is no longer done [24], 'past idols', old subjectivities and discourses, learned habits of thought surface; and she returns to gendered 'habits of thought' about sewing crafts and women. This shows how difficult it is to

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clear our learning 'plane of immanence' of past idols, and how they can work against the realisation of a new 'line of flight'.

Her account of learning in ILPs is joyful, liberating and empowering [21]. This is in stark contrast with the earlier description of the 'nightmare'. Her learning is not 'hemmed in' by timeframes, other agendas and directives from lecturers [21]. She is free to learn, in her own way and in her own time.

The final piece shows how her feminist multiplicity is continually being un-grounded [27]. She criticises the lack of recognition for women's work in the public domain. This statement indicates the ongoing nature of becoming. Feminism is not a static state, Bonnie is not the totality of all feminism but in a dynamic process of becoming. There is no way for us to know what dimension of the feminist multiplicity will become most intense for her, or what other incidences, experiences, encounters, politics will influence her becoming - this is unknown.

For the purposes of this enquiry, her imperfect route to becoming a feminist and changing her perspective to become someone different gives much to ponder about experiential learning and the 'fold' with its spaces in between. It suggests there is always something more to be learned. ILPs appear to offer students a whole learning experience that engages them in an embodied way with learning. They locate different subjectivities through the pursuit of interests located in their learning prior and continuing [25].

Bonnie's account expresses learning as movement in and out of past knowings and present learning. It is a powerful description of becoming other through multiple relations on a 'plane of immanence'.

Her patchwork is an excellent analogy for learning and one used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe concept creation, but it is equally a good way of thinking about learning:

> … a Harlequin's jacket or patchwork, made up of solid part and voids, blocks and ruptures, attractions and divisions, nuances and bluntnesses, conjunctions and separations, alternations and interweavings, additions which never reach a total and subtractions whose remainder is never finished ... This geography of relations penetrate and corrupt everything, undermine being ... The AND subtends all relations ... The AND as extra-being, inter-being.
> [Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:55-57, cited in Semetsky 2006:4].

Bonnie's patchwork is an 'image of thought' she constructs about her experiences of becoming feminist. It is also a good image of thought for the dynamic experience of learning itself.

ILPs provide opportunities for students to pursue 'lines of flight' in learning. The learning experiences are emancipating and empowering and engagement with art making brings students into embodied relations with abstract concepts. However, working within on your own can mean that 'past idols' [learned in experience as 'habits of thought'] are not cleared from the 'plane of immanence' and can return to disrupt lines of flight, restricting the speed and un-grounding nature of becoming other. ILPs create the conditions for becoming. They create the conditions for flights of imagination and promote creativity of thought in learning, and they create relations between past knowings and present learnings in emergent thought of becoming at a singular level.

8.3 WALTER'S STORY – a singular experience

Walter had a background in mechanical engineering. He became redundant when the company he worked for closed. He had completed an apprenticeship as a mechanic, and then completed further studies in the workplace and in higher education institutions. He gained a good deal of accredited awards but not a degree. A government fund was set up for those made redundant from his company. Walter availed of it to pursue the CS2 degree.

8.3.1 New possibilities for learning

Walter found he had potentialities that he was unaware of until he pursued an ILP. His awareness of the learning process itself is striking. He describes it as both exhilarating and "hell". Walter recounts the interiority of his experiences. He begins his explanations of learning using an example from everyday life.

> *Say for argument's sake you had an issue at home, we'll say your cooker went on fire or something like that. [45] You can ask yourself 'how am I going to put it out',[46] now your brain has to think [46a] ... then you are going to say, well what have I about the house that will quench this fire? [47] [Walter, CS2]*

8.3.2 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

The appeal of this extract is its everydayness. An event like this, a sudden fire [45] is a problem. Thought is swift and action speedy. The event described is grounded in material reality, [47] but the response is firstly virtual and un-grounded [47] creating an assemblage of past knowings [46] and what is at hand in the situated territory of the fire.

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Walter uses a domestic problem [45] to express how he understands the process of problem solving. He illustrates awareness about what thought does to experience – thought can solve problems or provide direction about how to solve them [46, 46a]. He provides details, slowing time and space to explain the steps of thought [47]. In the physical situation, the thoughts would have passed through his mind at speed. He expresses how learning is made showing the importance of sourcing problems to solve or questions to answer to excite engagement with learning – thoughts, skills, experiences, thoughts of others, objects and ingenuities to solve problems.

His description is close to the DG process of concept creation: "All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which themselves can only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges" [1994:16]. Walter is of course not creating concepts, but he is seeking solutions and describes very well the pre-conceptual phase of drawing on past knowings to find a solution; but also looking 'about the house', what components of the Harlequin's jacket are available to him?

Walter's account provides some insight into the complex process of drawing on prior learning to address current problems. Problems ignite prior learning and the past knowings are recalled in relation to problems. Thought moves at speed; problems slow thought down.

8.3.3 Learning affects

Now you might ask the question why [he decided to do sculptures], okay the reason why I decided to do this, is because I am very ... I love aesthetics, I love design and I love thinking outside the box of how to put something together. **[48]** *Like you know, I could write an essay ... But I find that, that if I have to do something constructive,* **[49]** *I have to put more thought into it and you have to challenge yourself because as you go along [the ILP] it's going to create more challenges.* **[50]**

I had experience making trailers before ... I designed them, I made them in the past. **[51]** *If I was a great artist, I wouldn't have brought in the trailer, I would have brought in something of beauty.* **[52]**

> *I used hair pins because they related to the female audience. **[50]** ... and there is a link between the hair pin and what you see every day ... I was trying to link it to something of beauty **...** **[53]** [Walter, CS2]*

8.3.4 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Walter's desire to create things of beauty is related to his knowledge of making trailers [48]. [49] He uses constructivist discourses to describe how he understands learning. He is unafraid of entering the terrain of art, he is compelled to use his existing skills to make art [48]. In so doing, he rejects conventional assessment methods [49]. It's 'as if' he wants to experiment with the artistic dimension of himself to explore the "combinations that inhabit us" (Deleuze, 1987:7, cited in Semestsky 2008:88). In the 'problematic situation' [Dewey, 1934/1980:85, cited in Semetsky, 2008:86] he recognises that he is an inexperienced artist but this does not deter him [52]. His engagement with his own multiplicity surfaces as he calls up his skills as a mechanical engineer, his interest in design, and his thoughts and intuition to make art that he hopes will affect a gender mixed audience [53]. He did not construct something that pandered to a conventional notion of aesthetics such as something from nature [50, 53]. Desire for experimentation is a powerful motivator for learning.

8.3.5 The man on a bicycle

> *If anything came out of it was that one [second ILP —The man on a bicycle – a story telling course], I put it in as from start to finish that particular piece we will call it as a journey right.**[54]** Now while I say that, the journey in that particular incidence is that I plotted it right**, [55]** I didn't know what the journey would entail, what would it present something that I would never finish**. [56]** What kind of ... was I a total and utter nutcase to do that in the first place? **[57]** ... and first and last of all, would I get any benefit from it**? [58]** I mean why would somebody do such a strident piece of work, and so much time and dedication and plot it and plan it **[59]** and yet I was told time and time again, Walter it's only going to be worth five points. Why do you bother, write an essay **[60]**. [Walter, CS2]*

8.3.6 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Most people when they set out on a journey map their progress from origin to destination. In this extract Walter shows how we use experience as our first destination [54, 55]. He questions

his own desires [57, 58] and the risks of doing an ILP – would he finish it? The learning route he follows is unpredictable [56]. This suggests a shaky start to this ILP, and his peers recognise this and warn him [60]. The effort it will take is emphasised again, and he returns to his theme that ILPs involve suffering and martyrdom [59].

Learning is commonly thought of as a journey from one point on a map to a destination, a point where the journey ends. It is a metaphor for a course of study too, which of course has a beginning point and an end. In education, there is an assumption that in the beginning the person is a blank slate, ready to be written on by the teacher. Walter, against all the advice of his peers, wants to write or make his own learning. The desire to do so 'corrupts' his path and he follows his desire, taking charge of his own learning [55].

Learning is full of risks and challenges and sometimes the process can feel irrational and following uncharted learning territories requires courage.

The ILPs in CS2, on the other hand, seem to bring students into relationship with their creative abilities.

8.3.7 A degree adds more to the learning bowl

*You seem to have an interest in art work ... Have you continued with that? **[61]** [me]*

*No, I haven't no, no. No, I haven't, I don't know why **[62]**, it doesn't say to me at any given time that I [hesitates] if someone said to me, will you design something for me or create something of beauty, or create anything that would be of artistic value, I could. **[63]** But I'd have to go back, I'd have to go back, we will call it to the forest to be blunt about it, **[64]** I'd have to go back into the forest and challenge my thinking again. **[65]** You have to go back into the forest and bring what you've learnt in the past and the fact now that I've learnt a lot in my degree, would add more to the bowl. **[66]***

8.3.8 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Walter's story constructs creativity differently. For him, it was not about becoming an artist; he did not see himself as an artist but rather a person that has artistic capacity as a component of his multiplicity.

He uses the metaphor of the forest to describe the location of his multiple knowings where concepts, past idols, habits of thought, creativities, skills, histories, are stored [64]. Even though

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he created two pieces of art, he does not see himself as an artist [62] but he might be – the door to creative possibilities is open; perhaps he could become an artist [64]. He suggests that, he knows where to go to find out. He uses the metaphor of the 'forest' to describe where the interiority of knowledge and his experience resides [65, 66]. The site of all personal knowledge and desire - what we know we know, what we do not know we know; and our desire to know more and solve problems, the site of multiplicities, our rhizome. DG refer to it as 'immanence', Braidotti' 'figuration' and Guatarri as the 'continent of consciousness'.

Generally, we are unsure what we know and can do, and seek solutions and answers within ourselves above all else.

8.3.9 Self learning

Okay well, first of all, what I did find out about myself was that, one that why he [his mentor] asked the question why do I challenge myself? [69] I mean why did I challenge myself to do something where I could have found an easier way out? You know I could have a very easy way out. I could have made something, I could have decided something, I could have composed something, I could have done something. [69a] So I asked myself why, why did I go down that direction, what made me do that? [70] And the answer is you know my mind is saying okay that if I don't do it, I won't get the answers ... So it's something that you are saying now right, if I don't do something, well I'm not going to know can I do it; or if I do something and I'm going to learn about failure here. I'm going to learn something, that okay I failed, [71] because if I fail I'll say well hold on, where did I fail [72]

8.3.10 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

Given the work involved in doing ILPs and the fact that there is no guarantee of a pass, it does require deep conviction on the part of the student that they are worthwhile. Walter has conviction but also doubts [69, 70]. The imagined outcome brings learning whether he will pass or fail [72]. His desire to learn is intense enough to survive failure. The learning is for himself, what he can do and what he cannot do [71]. This is uncommon in learning situations where students set targets for themselves regarding grades and achievements.

Assessment is highly contentious in RPL with assessors complaining that they are not equipped to assess learning gained in experience because the evidence offered is different from conventional assessments.

8.3.11 Assessors can miss the boat

> *It's very hard, it is kind of a two sided question, because it's easy, okay, to put it down, but ... a guy that's an academic and he's going to mark it ... especially when there's only a pass and fail ... you get this feeling that they've missed the boat*. **[73]**

8.3.12 Un-grounding concepts and accompanying lines of thought and analysis

International research is littered with assessment issues, and accounts from Declan and George in this study also refer to them. Walter recognises that ILP assessment is diverse and difficult, and requires different skills, perspectives and positions – they can easily 'miss the boat' [73]. This is reflected in other research on conventional RPL, especially in Pouget's work in a French university context. The academics there stated that the work was different "if you were doing the same things you do for your [traditional] students, I think there would be no validation" (2011:192).

Walter's story shows that he had a desire to engage with the aesthetic [art making] and produce something of beauty, and his desire to tell a story though art, demonstrates Deleuze's notation of 'multiplicities'. We are not one thing but many. The different dimensions of Walter found expression in the ILPs which he undertook. The lines of flight brought him to new horizons each time and challenged him to conceptualise, design and create. He was confident he would learn even if the learning was about failure. He valued his own power to ask 'why'?

8.4 Summary

Students undertaking ILPs as RPL are not 'hemmed in' by the demands of a curriculum, which means that they can explore horizons of research and thought, and make writings, art works, performances etc. that show their learning. RPL in this scenario is an intrinsic part of learning. It operates alongside all other knowings, and is utilised as a tool for deepening and expanding learning. It is intrinsic to all of the known of the problem, not something separate that is compartmentalised as 'prior to' only. Yet it is 'prior to', concurrent and simultaneous at the same time, and recognition / validation is part of the whole experience of learning. ILPs show that prior learning is an integral part of the complex system and embodied experience of learning within each person.

Conceptualisations of self-directed learning according to Boud are caught up in "notions of freedom and autonomy for the learner" (1989:42). He defines it in terms of three different forms of autonomy. The first is autonomy as a goal in its own right. In this exemplar, the student develops the capacity to "reach their own understandings and make their own decisions without being unduly influenced by others" (*ibid.*:43). This type of autonomy depicts what it is to be an educated person and is a goal of many educational institutions. The second type of autonomy describes a teaching method where students are facilitated to direct their own learning either by selecting and researching a topic by themselves or by having an active input in shaping the curriculum for their course. The final type outlined by Boud is where a student through his/her own effort develops autonomy with "respect to a given body of knowledge and skills, i.e. they are able to make their own judgements about facts and opinions and they can appreciate and apply criteria for assessment of what is and is not appropriate in the given area" (*ibid.*). These forms of autonomous learning are described in relation to traditional formal learning. They are context specific according to Boud, who acknowledges that different knowledge structures akin to those outlined by Bernstein need different activities. The accounts from Walter and Bonnie refute this, and show how technical skill can be used to create art, and how horizontal knowledge of feminist theory can be expressed in material and practical ways in a patchwork quilt. A key premise of RPL is that individuals learn and direct their own learning autonomously outside the context of formal education. The concept of intentional learning is in some ways related to this in as far as adults are intentional learners and recognise learning as a lifelong process (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1989:362). They are motivated to learn and do so in all of life's contexts and formally and informally as well (Livingstone:2012). Sometimes accidentally or unintentionally and it is in this context that the motivation for further study can occur and a new path to learning opens which is often self-directed. In any case, self-directed learning is a skill we learn as children and develop throughout our lives. The level of sophistication varies, and while it is often associated with maturity, autonomous learning is utilised throughout the life cycle.

Brookfield argues that self-directed learning does not mean totally independent. He states that "even though individuals may single-mindedly explore a skill or knowledge area, in a highly isolated, individualistic manner, this does not mean they are not affected by others" (1988:18). I agree with his analysis. We can appear to be alone, but we engage a vast range of conceptual personae when we learn. Relationships are built with peers, colleagues, research participants and supervisors in the process, but also with authors and their ideas. The autonomous student

does not learn alone, but learns away from the formal classroom and the educator but often needs and seeks out informal learning groups for support and dialogue. The accounts refer to personae and the level of research involved (Bonnie 19, 21 / Walter 59). The learners selected the process, plan and assessment method.

The world we live in demands self-directedness more and more. There was a time when a new technology, such as a computer or mobile phone, was purchased, a handbook would accompany it laying out the directions for use. Now most technical devices refer customers to the internet with the advice that if you run into a problem you should 'Google it'. These small demands for self-directed learning are becoming ubiquitous in modern day living, they can sometimes be time consuming and challenging. The same is true of self-directed learning in formal education. Taught courses provide content and guidance about where to learn more about a topic. This is a great starting point for students. Beginning a study based on a personal desire to learn something independently requires strong motivation and determination. Part of the critique of self-directed learning is that it requires educational capital to do it; it is not for the novice learner who may be unaccustomed to the language and conventions of the subject under study. I would dispute this position. A learner new to education could begin with a project suitable to her capacity. She would not begin by presenting a 20,000 word dissertation, for example. The role of the educator at this initial phase is important. In a self-directed learning context, the role of the educator changes and becomes different, as does the role of the student.

Facilitating independent, autonomous or self-directed learning is a different form of education. The educator takes on a more benign position in the process. They relinquish their directing role and have to trust the student to direct their own studies. Given the singular nature of this form of study, students can demand more time. As Brookfield notes "the amount of time needed to negotiate contracts or to meet for regular discussion concerning the progress of an individual project, means that students probably see far more of faculty … than would ever be the case in a traditional lecture format" (1988:34). He goes on to note that there are many pitfalls in self-directed learning and he sees it as "over simplified". Lecturers are uncomfortable too with the prospect of including experience as we have seen in the French and South African research (Pouget, 2011; Breier, 2010). Their accounts and the account above suggest that the educator's role would have to change dramatically if experiential learning were included as an integral part of education, as would other things if education's purpose was to change from instruction to facilitation of learning.

Students too find it challenging. As Brookfield notes "far from acquiescing in the joyful release of latent talents for self-directedness, many adults stubbornly resisted our efforts. Others were visibly intimidated by injunctions to take control of their own learning" (1988:27). This is not surprising if the exemplar a student has of education is the conventional didactic approach generally delivered in universities, schools and in some adult education settings. Biesta explores this process of educative socialisation. He defines it as "the many ways in which through education, we become part of particular social, cultural and political orders" (2009:20-21). Students are acculturated into this ideology and discourse. Students know that at the end of the self-directed learning project they will have to submit work, that although they have evaluated it themselves, they will now need ratification by the institution if accreditation is involved. Conventions learned in formal settings are difficult to dispel. So much is at stake. Qualification is a significant purpose of education. Qualifications are a major priority for students and they are fearful of anything that might jeopardise this. Yet the purpose of education is broader than this. Dewey, writing in the 1930s, states that:

> The history of educational theory is marked by oppositions between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowment and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure (1938:17).

Facilitating the development of more critical subjectivities would require, in the first instance, the disturbance of binary and oppositional taxonomies in education. The ground of thought would have to be different - it would have to become different. This is the challenge of higher education. New concepts need to be created for pedagogies that promote active learning in collective study within multiplicities for one or many. I will explore this idea further in the next chapter.

CONCLUSIONS

Plateaus "to a certain extent, [can] … be read independently of one another, except the conclusion, which should be read at the end"

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2004: xxi)

The conclusion to this enquiry is made up of two concluding chapters:

Chapter IX draws on two DG concepts of affect and percept. Affects are becomings … and describe the forces behind all forms of social production (Coleman, 2005:11-13). A Percept is a way of exploring how we become in the world … the percept challenges conventional notions of forms and subjects (Marks, 2005:204-205).

CHAPTER IX

So what problem does RPL address and does it work?
Affirmative Options for RPL

9.0 Introduction

I began this thesis with a story of my experiences of RPL practice. I outlined the quandaries that compelled me to undertake this enquiry and led me to question the purpose of RPL and the educational problem it tries to address. I then evaluated the concept to see if it works. As I reach the finish line, I have some conclusions to share. In the following pages, I draw on the ideas encountered in writing this thesis based on the information explored, participant accounts and the ideas from other conceptual personae who accompanied me. Together we explored the state of affairs of RPL and drawing on their contributions, I offer some ideas and concepts to advance the conceptual development and practice of RPL and more generally higher education.

The chapter utilises the grounded theory approach further. I reflect on the affects / becomings experienced in the disturbances encountered in the enquiry and relate them to DG concepts to advance thinking. This confluence of different threads shape percepts that "challenge conventional notions" (Marks, 2005:204-205) of RPL and higher education to provide the ground for the formation of a different pedagogical paradigm for a different RPL.

9.1 Affects

"Affects are not the meaning of experiences but the response it prompts"

(Colebrook, 2002:xix).

9.1.1 Policy affects

RPL in policy development is an integral part of an education for work strategy. Chapter II explored how the concept mutated as it passed through different LL policy territories that influenced RPL in fundamental ways. RPL became part of the assemblage of intense multiplicities of macro strategies and accords that had explicit prescribed goals such as those articulated in the Lisbon Agenda and Europe 2020. In this context, RPL and education policy finds acceptance if it conforms to the hegemonic interests of these agendas. Strong tracings of hegemonic neoliberal educational instrumentalism thus affected policy development of LL and RPL. LL steered towards education for work and RPL veered towards skills audits and into an efficiency machine in education and training. The recent Council of Europe *Recommendations* (2012) has set out an agenda that frames RPL as part of the solution for youth unemployment,

upskilling low skilled workers and addressing other serious and complex issues of inclusion in work and education. Educational strategies applied over decades have done little to redress educational inequalities; it is unrealistic to expect that RPL could do so. In addition, the resources required to implement the Recommendations are not included in the strategy – a common feature of policy development in LL and RPL. Policy is thus highly problematic and creates affects in the practice domain that operate to limit practice especially in universities.

9.1.2 Epistemological affects

The problems of RPL practice in universities are multiple. Much has been said in earlier chapters about the perceived lack of need for RPL as student numbers remain high and continue to grow. While this situation persists, little will be done to address a central problem of RPL in university education – the epistemological difference that pertains to experiential learning and in consequence RPL. The current approach to RPL upholds the universities' authority by clinging to hierarchies and gives higher education power as gatekeepers of knowledge. Universities retreat into a defensive position about quality and standards when new concepts of learning, such as those inferred by RPL, threaten its power by challenging its epistemological stance. The overarching epistemological position is founded on traditional ways of doing education – teacher led and assessment and grade focused. This approach affects RPL and claimant experience. Claimants struggle with assessment because their learning is different, and assessors struggle as they often find that learning gained in experience is incompatible with learning in formal contexts (Chapter III, VI). This shows that there is a deep division between life learning and academic learning. In universities, knowledge is treated as an entity and hence it reifies knowledge from the world. Academic knowledge is thus beyond life while RPL knowledge is immanent and in life. RPL posits a different position which is that all learning is gained in experience; formal education is only one dimension of that experience (Chapters III, IV, V, VI, VII and VIII). This is the basis of an epistemological battle in relation to RPL and more generally prior experiential learning in higher education. Yet recently experiential learning in terms of placements, internships and research initiatives has become popular. When they are an integral part of a curriculum, they are relatively unproblematic; however, when RPL claims arise, it is a different story. Concerns about quality and status of awards dominate RPL discourse and are aligned with issues of costs and resources (Chapter VI). This smoke screen protects the institution from addressing the problems of RPL practice and the challenges it raises. However, where RPL is an approved learning process in itself such as in CS2, concerns about costs and resources seem to disappear and epistemological wars are abandoned (Chapters

VII and VIII). If RPL practice is to advance, then universities need to advance ontologically, epistemologically and pedagogically. The pedagogy of immanence proposed later in this chapter provides affirmative options to advance thinking on these matters.

9.1.3 Practical affects

RPL is valued by the research participants as a mechanism to shorten time in education and save money (Chapters II, III, VI). Adult students struggle to pay fees and juggle competing priorities making the practical affects invaluable. They are grateful for the exemptions, but largely unaware that what is bestowed as an exemption and fee waiver has already been paid for in learning, time and in many cases in hard cash as well. Exemptions in this context are a right. If prior learning was accredited at the same level on the Framework of Qualifications with similar content, then why should any student have to pay again to take a subject? Affording learners the opportunity to audit the relevant modules (if they so wished) would allow them to re-visit and perhaps deepen and broaden the learning without "double-paying".

The value of RPL in terms of supporting students to complete programmes is a contested outcome in this enquiry. The primary case studies showed that gaining credit exemptions though RPL is no guarantee that a student will complete a programme of study. In the US, where the costs of education are high and more flexible models of education are offered, RPL has better outcomes in this respect, and completion rates rise accordingly. Yet the degree programmes in the case studies were structured on American models of education. The degree in CS2 was built with the support of a US university and the model is comparable. The degree in CS1 is highly flexible and cyclical and unlike many degrees in Ireland uses a version of a grade point average system. Both degrees have tuition fees attached. Although fees are somewhat lower in Ireland the same logic applies – students avail of financial advantages where available. If the fees are very high, as in the US fee waivers could have a stronger motivational factor. On the other hand, if fees are not especially high and other priorities take over, it could be easier to drop out. Either way the quantitative data from both regions (Ireland and US) although not fully comparable, indicates that RPL as an instrumental process has instrumental outcomes and education can become commodified in the process.

RPL is framed as an instrumental procedure in policy development, and it is deeply connected with learning for work. Yet, it is impossible to ignore its potential as a learning process. Given the position of many practitioners, who may do RPL in addition to an already heavy workload, it is difficult to say if they will be able to develop practice in this way. Many RPL practitioners are not part of faculty and thus find it difficult to engage academics on such developmental matters. However, for those who can do so, a move towards the type of ILPs used in CS2 could be a good start. It could be of particular value to those learners who may have little documented evidence of their prior learning and need new ways of presenting their knowledge.

Concerns were voiced about standards and that RPL could jeopardise the perceived status of final awards in the public domain (Chapter VI). This is not the fault of RPL but a problem with the conceptualization of academic knowledge itself. Higher education, like RPL needs theorizing as it is in itself poorly conceived. I feel strongly that universities need to rethink their epistemological basis. Curriculum reviews are common in universities in Ireland; however, pedagogical reviews are rare. Universities must reconsider their approach to education; established practices are not working well enough to create new concepts and paradigms for the challenges that are now immanent.

The accounts from this enquiry show that the primary concern of adult students is to learn. They were interested in saving time and money only when learning is not compromised in the process (Chapters VII and VIII). Accounts by university managers made no mention of a role for learning in the RPL process itself. They valued RPL primarily as a process that can enhance individual confidence and support motivation for study (Chapter VI). In contrast, the accounts of participants / claimants provided an extraordinary insight into the nature of learning and showed that participants understood their own internal learning processes very well.

9.1.4 Independent learning affects

The model of RPL used in CS2 is impressive. Independent Learning Projects (ILPs) offer students the chance to integrate prior learning explicitly into the process of research and assessment. The outcomes are staggering in terms of the deep levels of learning experienced by students. All students in CS2 use ILPs either for RPL or as the capstone for their awards. The model is not without problems. In particular, the isolation of students working alone is a concern. Their learning could be enhanced if they were part of a group who could question,

problematize and critique the projects together. Being part of a learning group offers powerful learning as shown in Chapter VII.

Generally, the participant / claimant accounts express a skepticism about the wider consequences of RPL on learning. Participants were concerned that RPL would block learning by removing peer experts from groups and thereby reduce the power for the group as a result. In as much as they wanted to protect the integrity of the learning experience, participants also valued the power of RPL as a motivational mechanism. The desire for the new and the unforeseen in learning is motivating while to "repeat, repeat" deadens desire and consequently deadens learning. Managers agreed with the rationale that reducing repetition would increase motivation. On the other hand, accounts also show that the participants viewed repetition as positive because "you'd always learning something" (Nessa, CS1 [29]). The role of repetition in learning was valued as an opportunity to unlearn and to learn anew. In this context, repetition was part of learning and a means for evaluating prior learning and building on it in a more considered way.

9.2 Percepts

"Imagine a novel that describes a certain light: we may not see the light but we are presented with what it would be to perceive such light, or what such a perception is regardless of who perceives; this is a percept…"   (Colebrook. 2002: xx)

In this section, I select concepts and work with them to create conceptualizations for RPL and higher education that open up possibilities about what education could become. Immanence underpins the approach.

9.2.1 Ideal forms of learning

A strong finding from this enquiry is that RPL, with its emphasis on experiential learning, contests the epistemological premise and ontological structures of university education. Academic knowledge sets the standard against which learning is measured and in so doing becomes the ideal form of knowledge. The validity of learning depends on how closely it approximates to this 'ideal form'. This is mimetic of Plato's philosophy of transcendence which greatly influenced western thinking, and thus influenced conceptualizations of

education. The Platonic Forms are "the absolute and changeless objects and standards of knowledge against which all human knowledge is but an inferior copy" (Stagoll, 2005:53). This way of conceptualizing learning does not connect it with "the richness of lived experience" (*ibid*.) and the insight, reflexivity, critique and raw experiences that shape understanding. If we are to seek out new paradigms and concepts "they cannot be thought apart from the circumstances of their production and so be hypothetical or conceived a priori" (*ibid*.).   Thus, a central challenge for education is to find alternative ways of thinking about knowledge beyond the Platonic ideal forms and to ensure that experience is valued as an integral dimension of learning as described in the accounts from CS2 participants (Chapters VII and VIII). Deleuze and Guatteri (DG) sought out foundations for thought that help us to conceive such possibilities.

9.2.2 RPL and {immanence}

So what problem does immanence address in RPL?

The concept of immanence helps to address the problem of presuppositions of transcendence, and the resultant creation of hierarchies of learning in educational contexts; an unacknowledged but powerful barrier for recognizing the role of experience in learning and in RPL. Using immanence in thinking about learning in experience positions learning as an immanent process and links it to experiences of living every day. We learn at all levels - physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual, and in practical ways and most of all through our senses. We learn outside and inside classrooms, in interaction with others and in contemplation and solitude with our own thoughts and those of others. We learn through suffering as well as in happiness. Learning is ubiquitous and inherent to each person. It is intrinsic to prevailing thought. Thus, immanence offers an alternative image of thought from transcendence and so provides a useful image or ground for the concept of learning and the learning selves in RPL. If we use this as our starting point, then it is natural to include experience in learning at all levels, not only in RPL processes. This is a core principle of adult education where experience is "the adult learner's living textbook" (Lindeman, 1961:6-7).   Accounts from claimants in this study show that they are involved in 'becoming'; that living itself is transforming, and formal education is only one dimension of learning, not the 'whole' of a learning life. Using experience in learning creates a new conceptualization of learning and sees it as self-positing, thoughtful, critical and creative. Learning in and with experience engages a constellation of different contingencies

that provokes us to think anew about inherited ideas and concepts. Thus, the concept immanence is an affirmative option for RPL and education.

9.2.3 Habits of thought and {cause and effects} in RPL

So what problem does cause and effect address for RPL?

The problem of identifying specific learning gained in experience is central to RPL. I use Hume's philosophy of cause and effects to explore this problem further.

The practice of presenting documented evidence (such as copies of awards, employer references, curriculum vitae) is still strong in RPL practice. The purpose of documented evidence is to authenticate the claim by locating the cause of learning. Hume's cause and effect principles help to re-conceptualise this aspect of RPL practice.

Hume claims that we all understand the world through our perceptions of it gained through experience (Kemerling, 2011). These perceptions provide us with impressions that influence thought and create habits of thinking (ibid). Hume gives an example of a game of billiards. When a pink billiard ball collides with a blue ball, we expect that the pink ball will set the blue ball in motion. Thus, we infer that one event will cause another. We learn this in experience through the repetition of a sequence of events that customarily follow each other (Temple, 1984:203). We infer effects through habits of thought acquired in experience. Thus, in RPL, documentation is important to ascertain the cause of the learning and, depending on the evidence, the learning effects are assumed. Yet, documents in their own right tell us very little about what a claimant knows. Methods such as ILPs, problem-based learning and critical questioning could reduce the need for documents and allow claimants to show what they know. The problem of isolation identified in Chapter VII could be tackled if small peer learning groups were established. This does not deflect from the recommendation in the Irish research (Goggin, 2015) that RPL is quite individualistic but groups offer peer support in what can be a very demanding process. Learning in groups and self-directed learning are highly valued in the accounts of participants in this study (Chapter VI, VII and VIII) and both work to effect powerful learning.

9.2.4 Claimants as {multiplicities}

So what problem does the concept multiplicity address in RPL?

The multiplicity offers a mode of understanding about how we learn. The Cartesian cogito 'I' suggests the primacy of the subject as a united self as expressed by 'I' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 24-25). Thinking of the self as unitary allows us to utilize self as having a stable core, an identity that is immutable; for example, a horse is a horse, a house a house and so forth. The signifier denotes the signified; there is no ambiguity. Under these conditions, the self becomes easily identifiable; it is one unit. The 'I' in DG is not unitary (1994:32). Thus, the concept 'I' in DG is a multiplicity, a "collection of parts" (Colebrook 2002: xxvi) that do not make up a unified whole or essence such as described in cogito 'I'. This sometimes makes the expression of our learning foreign to us because it is drawn from a collective and not just 'I'. It happens too when we write, paint or perform; we can feel that we have made ourselves strange. The experience Maura describes when she underwent a learning event in relation to her perceptions of abortion (CS1[27-43], Chapter VII) is a good example. The multiplicity can be brought into crisis by a line of thought that is different from itself; thought that cuts into the interiority in a self-referent way and brings thought into critical action (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 32). The tracings of learnings gained in all aspects of the experience of living make up the interiority of the multiplicity. The components are disparate, sometimes linked but also permanently open to new becomings and potential futures. Walter understood this. His achievement in creating a sculpture did not lead him to believe that he could "create something of beauty", but he understood that he could return to the multiplicity or the 'forest' where potentials for new learning and creativity lay. Thus, multiplicities have endless resources for becomings and as Walter notes, education adds more to the 'bowl' of creative possibilities for becoming other and different in the process. The learning environment needs to be conducive if this kind of learning is to be achieved. Unfortunately, RPL claimants arrive in settings that are constrained by habits of thought that separate concepts of the actual from the virtual and their memories of past learning become lost in the contingencies of the RPL claim. RPL is squeezed by epistemological assumptions about learning and rigid systems funneled by desire to control standards in ideal forms of knowledge. Claimants are caught amidst power differentials and epistemological confusion. They are in the middle between the outside and the inside. Demands of representational thought require a portfolio of a unitary subject with a stable self with learning that can be pinpointed and presented to prove they possess learning equivalent to course learning outcomes. It is no wonder the process is reported by them as difficult and challenging as discussed in Chapter III. RPL can be much more. It can be a learning experience in its own right and offers many possibilities for unravelling the ongoing quandary about the nature of learning in itself.

9.2.5 Prior Learning from {memory}

So what problem is addressed by considering the role of memory?

In the process of recognising prior learning, the claimant enquires into their personal empirical data drawing out knowledge from memory for the purpose of assessment. Much of what we know is immersed in memories. Powerful stimuli are required to trigger memory and open up the knowledge store for scrutiny. Walter provides a practical example. He recognised that crises or emergencies provide good stimuli. They draw us into our store of knowledge and expose what we know. In an intense situation, such as a fire in a house, we have to find a solution quickly so we ask "what have I about the house that will quench this fire" (CS2 [45-47]). We refer to our knowledge of fire to find a solution. The store of knowledge can be activated in many different ways. Bogue recounts the Deleuzian example from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. He recounts the incident when Marcel (the principle character in the story) dips a madeleine (almond biscuit) into a cup of tea and in the process, ignites memories of times past …

> in a moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water lilies of the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surrounds, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, towns and gardens alike from my cup of tea" (Bogue, R. 1982:51).

This for Proust is a process of recovering lost time. It is unplanned and unexpected and yet this chance moment opens up a flood of memory. The 'cup of tea' for Marcel is the event that acts to recall the past. It shows the power of memory to unfold time to a "living entity in formation" (Bogue, 2008:5). The past becomes present and alive again and the madeleine is the sensory sign that provokes memory. Bogue explores the nature of memory further when he considers Bergson's notion of the virtual past. He notes that:

> Bergson argues that memory is not simply a faded or less complex version of an experience that once was present but something qualitatively distinct from any present experience. The past is a single domain in which all past events coexist with one another. This domain is real, though it is virtual rather than actual … when we try to remember something we leap into the virtual past as if entering a different medium. Once we find the memory we are seeking, we bring it back into the present, but usually in such a way that the memory is made to fit in with our actual, common sense purpose and activities. As a result, the virtual character of the memory tends to escape our awareness. Only in dreams, moments of déjà-vu and other unusual experiences are we able to perceive the virtual past as it exists in itself (*ibid*.: 3).

This analysis seems to talk to the experience of the French claimants who, having gone through the RPL process, no longer recognised himself or herself or the person who was looking back at them from their portfolio. The process of RPL calls for students to make their learning from experience common sense, and to fit it in with the actual prescribed learning of curricula. The analysis of Bergson's thought by Bogue suggests that we make our memory "fit in with our actual, common sense purpose and activities". Claimants have to 'fix' their learning from experience to 'fit' with learning outcomes in order to play the RPL game. However, there is a different percept offered by Bogue when he recounts the Deleuzian challenge to Bergson's analysis that insists that memory is not only reminiscences.

> The first is the illusion that the object emitting the sign holds the secret of the sign, as if, for example, the madeleine itself somehow possessed the virtual Combray within its physical being. To make such an illusory attribution is unavoidable, for "everything encourages us to do so; perception, passion, intelligence, even self-esteem … we think that the 'object' itself has the secret of the signs it emits. We scrutinize the object, we return to it in order to decipher the sign" (Deleuze, 2000:27). Yet once Marcel overcomes this illusion, he falls into a second, the belief that the secret of the sign is merely a matter of subjective association. The problem here is that with subjective association, anything goes. Any object may be associated with any other object, in which case signs are merely symptoms of their interpreters. What Marcel must finally realise is that the truth of signs is neither in the objects that emit them or in the subjects who interpret them but in the differences that are immanent in object and subject alike. Art leads Marcel to this truth since in each great art work a unique world is disclosed from a specific point of view, but in such a way that the artist-subject is produced by the point of view rather than himself or herself bringing the point of view into existence. Hence, if the world revealed by the great art work is a city, its revealing point of view is like a tower from which an anonymous and impersonal "one" views the dynamic unfolding of the city and the artist-subject below, and that "one" is difference itself in a process of self-differentiations" (Bogue, 2008: 6).

The implications of this piece for RPL are significant. In the second case study (CS2) claimants engage in art as a means of expressing their learning in experience. They use different mediums including patchwork, sculpture, painting and other forms. The art gives expression to experience. The work is inspired by signs in their virtual reality: in Walter's story the sculpture was inspired by the man on the bicycle, and Bonnie expressed her becoming feminist by creating patchwork. The illustration provided in Chapter 1 about the Scottish care workers also indicates how memory, when called on, can inspire new becomings. RPL draws people into the 'forest' of memory and thought. The new recruits in that case openly stated that they had no experience in the field of social care. The RPL practitioners invited them to recall moments when they were able to act in the social world to care for others, alleviate tension or conflict and manage complex situations through care. The memories stimulated creativity and

self-recognition of understanding and learning. The new recruits worked to create strategies that enhanced their work and the lives of those living in the care home. RPL is a virtual process. Claimants recall learning through memory. RPL processes need to bring claimants into relationship with their own experiences so that they may see and show what they didn't know they knew.

9.2.6 Pedagogies of RPL {Lines of Flight}

Lines of flight describe mutations that come about through movement of thought as rhizomes connect at points or at intersections between points and create links that change each other into something else or even something new. Complexity theory offers some insights.

Fenwick notes that "the systems represented by person and context are inseparable, and change occurs from emerging systems affected by the intentional tinkering of one with the other, particularly in the disturbances created by their interactions" (Fenwick, 2003:34-35). Semetsky observes that "a single cause may in fact lead to a multiplicity of effects; conversely, a single effect may be produced by a multiplicity of causes" (2008:84). The system has a heightened sensitivity to disturbances in any part it. Semetsky explores the nature of these disturbances further: "the dynamics of complex systems are first and foremost relational" (2008:84). The "unit of enquiry thus is interaction" within and between systems in relation, "exploring how different parts of the system, both small and large, interact and change and how these affect the system as a whole" (*ibid*.:86). In this scenario, relationship grounds learning in the dynamism of human interaction. Humans are both part of a wider ecological system and are complex systems themselves.

In the multiplicity the complexity of the individual is recognised. Human beings are part of a complex and natural eco system; they are not separate from it. The multiplicity posits an ecological stance and looks at the 'whole' as inter-related components "connected to each other through multiple, recursive, nonlinear feedback loops" (Sanger and Giddings, 2012: 371).

Semetsky explores the interactions in and the 'betweenness' of these worlds that provide useful concepts for learning and by default experiential learning and RPL. Learning is indivisible and divisions are contrivances that reinforce hierarchical planes of knowledge and limit learning in consequence. Claimant accounts in this enquiry show that the primary interest of adult learners is learning. Their accounts show that they understand the process at a very deep level and have an awareness that learning takes place in experiences in groups and on your own, but that both

are always in relationship with others in our virtual or actual worlds. Learning is a challenging process and, as Walter notes, independent learning can be "a nightmare". Yet most of the claimant research participants seem to trust the self-positing dynamic that is underway in learning as the transactions of the 'outside' and 'inside' create learning. The continuous and emergent nature of learning brings learners into becoming different. The concept of becoming different is fundamental to the formation of pedagogies that integrate experience in learning. A pedagogy of RPL accepts the inter-relatedness and the multiple effects of learning. The challenge of a paradigm of immanence is to enable learners to bring past learning to life in new learning endeavors and use it to open up possibilities in all their difference and variety.

9.2.7 {Becoming different} through RPL

In the accounts from this enquiry, there is an acceptance that the learning is there already; as Madge states: "you're a fully functioning human being: you've come to this at this time, you have prior learning but it may not actually have revealed itself to you as yet" (CS2). Walter says that experience just "kicks in"; you don't have to work on it, it's a natural reality of our existence. What is learned cannot be categorised in neat computer files; it is, as I have argued, rhizomatic. In academia it is assumed that learning can be categorised according to a common logic of thought that is shared by all. It assumes that behind thought there is a standard thinker of good will and common sense. Deleuze's stance calls for thinking to be difference and he explores how to think difference as Colebrook notes:

> Thinking, Deleuze insists, is an event that happens to us. It is not something that is grounded on a decision; thinking is not the cataloguing of different external objects. Thinking invades us. Indeed, there is no 'us', no subject or individual, that precedes and controls the act of thought. There is thinking, and it is from events of thought that we assume that there was some subject, or common sense, that was their author (2002:3).

Madge, Walter, Bonnie and others feel this and express it in their accounts in this study (Chapter VII, VIII), just as I am experiencing it as I write this thesis. Ideas come naturally in thought as I engaged with each different account, concept and ideas of conceptual personae. The perspectives emerged from the differences I encountered. Our uniqueness makes us different beings and challenges our habit of always returning to a generic idea and what differences have in common. As Deleuze notes:

> The greatest difference is always an opposition, but of all the forms of opposition, which is the most perfect, the most complete, is that which 'agrees' best (Deleuze, 1968:38).

Bringing difference into the educational arena is important. For Deleuze, difference engages all levels of thought; without difference, thought is impossible and without thought, there is no being. He refers to and expresses a uniqueness in being itself: "difference as particular to each thing, moment, perception, conception" (*ibid*.: 75). This is a radical conceptualisation of being and difference but timely. Difference is a concept high on the agenda of higher education now. Encounters with difference in society have spiralled modes of 'othering' those who are perceived to be different and has led to xenophobia and exclusion. Higher education needs to facilitate difference at all levels – learning, assessment and knowledge. Supporting students to recognise difference in and with themselves as a natural consequence of being human is valuable. Articulating differences can influence the creation of critical subjectivity and thinking. Diversity in this scenario is not oppositional or dualistic but a means to pursue lines of thought that embrace 'difference in itself' and facilitates the development of more critical subjectivities. Biesta contends that to create different subjectivities an engagement with those "who are not like us ... those who have nothing in common" (Lingis, 1994, cited in Biesta, 2006a: 49) is the first step. In Biesta's schema, the purpose is to engage students in educational modes that promote consciousness raising, critique and reflexivity, and enable a human being to 'come into presence' of themselves and others, on their own and with others. We do this through encounters with difference – our own and those of others. The Deleuzian position emphasises difference as a disrupting motion in subjectification and as the dimension that enlivens and challenges us to become different. There is a confluence in these concepts of subjectification, difference, concept creation and action that point to a powerful educational purpose that is smothered by current models of education. Deleuze's idea of becoming different has no end, it is not directed towards any achievement or end point but an ongoing and lifetime process of becoming different. This line of flight is full of possibilities.

9.2.8 {Repetition}

Thinking difference disrupts ways of thinking and forces thought to engage critique and creativity. Biesta notes Arendt's position. She characterises human beings as in a process of "initium: a beginning and a beginner" (Arendt 1977, cited in Biesta, 2009: 170). This relates to the Deleuzian concept of repetition that he sees as a means to discovering difference and describes it as "begin again; to affirm the power of the new and the unforeseeable" (Parr, 2005: 225). Deleuzian repetition is not concerned with resemblance to what went before but is concerned with prior knowledge and using it to experiment and create new concepts. Thus, repetition provides possibilities for critical thinking and raising political consciousness by

offering a new beginning or 'initium' where critical subjectivities become different or 'come into presence'. Arendt's concept of 'natality' is similar - being born again into a political sphere such as feminist, anti-racist, environmental campaigner is a process of becoming different. Bonnie's story is a good example. She undergoes a process of 'natality' when she engages with feminist ideas. Her story reflects my own experience when I engaged with feminist thought. Arendt like Deleuze claims that we all have the potential to contribute new ideas, words and deeds to the world, and that the articulation of these through action is freedom. Action for Arendt "is an end in itself and its defining quality is freedom" (cited in Biesta, 2009: 81).

9.2.9 RPL as a {line of flight}

So what problem does the line of flight address?

In *Deleuze and the Political*, Patton suggests that the "sudden shift towards another quality of life or towards a life which is lived at another degree of intensity is one possible outcome of what they call a 'line of flight'; it is in this kind of line that critical freedom is manifest" (Patton, 2000: 12). Invention and creativity are normalised and DG's concept of 'multiplicity' comes alive. Education becomes action to release multiple potentialities, to pursue lines of flight in multiple directions (collectively or personally) rather than to support one-dimensional identities or the production of graduates that resemble each other. The purpose of the curriculum then is to locate intersections and to draw students into critique and critical thought in relation to them; and to seek directions that bring thought into relationship with diversity, and with difference from and in itself. The work of the philosopher is to create concepts; part of the role of education could be to awaken students' capacity to invent concepts and pursue critical subjectification.

9.2.10 {Different} epistemologies

So what kind of epistemologies can release RPL from its bonsai form?

RPL creates an epistemological challenge for higher education. The dominant hegemony in Irish state education is infused by an Enlightenment epistemology of transcendental rationality which Michelson (2015) spoke of in (Chapter III). A deep habit of thought about educational standards has been formed in the collective subjectivity of white western capitalist democracies and in their institutions, including in the focus on standards that has created its own educational 'Body without Organs'. There is an explicit fear in the case studies in this enquiry that RPL

could dilute standards. The data shows that in addition to this little is understood about RPL in universities.

Deleuze offers images of thought that can help us to conceptualise further the nature of thought and thinking required to create new concepts for education and RPL.   He uses board games - chess and Go. [3] The complexity of Go makes it a useful tool for comparisons in the complex zone of learning and education.   Hence, I use the games chess and Go to contrast different epistemologies, but also to suggest changes needed to develop our thinking about education. D&G describe it in the following way:

> Chess is a game of State, or of the court: the emperor of China played it. Chess pieces are coded; they have an internal nature and intrinsic properties from which their movements, situation and confrontations derive. They have qualities; a knight remains a knight, a pawn a pawn, a bishop a bishop. Each is like a subject of the statement endowed with a relative power and these relative powers combine in a subject of enunciation, that is, the chess player or the game's form of interiority. Go pieces, in contrast, are pellets, disks, third-person function: "it" makes a move. "It" could be a man, a woman, a louse, an elephant. Go pieces are elements of non-subjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones. (Deleuze and Guattari,1988/2004: 389)

The description, and more especially the image it brings to mind, is useful. The chess game describes a highly ordered structure where all roles are clearly defined with singular identities. This is how university education was and, in some ways, still is structured. It's as if it is bound by Enlightenment logic of science. A chess game is a competition in hierarchical rational thinking. In contrast the game of GO is process led and dynamic. The competition ends in mutual agreement when the outcome of a set of moves results in the occupation of territories greater than the opponent's lot.   GO then is a system of play where changing situational contingencies affect the game moment by moment. Stones are placed on points of intersection and territories are gained through encirclement of these points on the board, thus "a single go piece can synchronically destroy a whole constellation" (*ibid*.: 29). Thus GO is both hopeful and scary. The pieces are nomadic and depending on their strategic abilities they can gain domination. Let us look for a moment at how these games can be used to represent theoretical

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[3] Chess is a game commonly played in most regions of the world however, Go is especially popular in Asia and the world champion, Ke Jie came from China. Go is considered the world's most "sophisticated board game" (New York Times May 25, 2017. Online). However, a Go tournament between a Google computer known as AlphaGo beat Ke Jie in 2017. It was the last board game to be beaten by a computer

> AlphaGo's victory…simply reinforced the progress and power of artificial intelligence to handle specific but highly complex tasks. Because of the sheer number of possible moves in Go, computer scientists thought until recently that it would be a decade before a machine could play better than a human master. (New York Times May 25, 2017. Online).

regimes. I have adapted Anne B. Ryan's typology (2014) from her class materials to show how the games can be used to imagine different epistemologies. The chart serves as the basis for discussion about the changing nature of education and the demand for it to change and adapt further.

Fig. 30: Different epistemologies for higher education

Modern (Chess)	Postmodern / hypermodern / most modern / late modern (Chess and becoming GO)	Ecological postmodern (Becoming GO)
Learning takes place in school and college in a course of study;	Academic learning subdivided into modular formats with learning outcomes, frameworks of qualifications;	Learning and experience connected features of knowledge advancement and creation;
Facts and information focused;	Learning and doing come together when useful to skills development for the economy for example internships, placements;	Focus on emergent and different knowledges and possibilities for concept creation;
Sit-down examinations the norm;	Continuous assessment and sit-down examinations the norm;	Assessment changes & individual becomes evaluator of own becoming; peer assessment; assessment of progress – how far travelled.
Self as solid centre of single;	Self decentring and identities becoming multiple; Focus on career opportunities.	Self replaced with subjectivities that are in a continuous state of becoming and open to new ways of living;
Discourses of sameness and control;	Discourses of difference emerging.	Discourses of diversity and flow;
Education for the elite - closed system;	Mass education for work – opening up	Education for learning and for anyone who wants it. Self-education – online, in groups and singular.
Actual and virtual reality separate	Actual and Virtual reality in dialogue	Actual and virtual reality assimilated - one in the other

Moving toward a more ecological focus is a central need of education for the future. For this we need, according to Guattari, 'ecosophy' - a line of thinking that connects three ecologies: environmental, social and mental into an eco-logic (1989: 27). Guattari states that bringing these three ecologies into presence will need a different belief systems and states that:

> The twenty first century must be atheist in the best sense: a positive disbelief in God, concerned only with and respectful of terrestrial life! It will require a development of

an immanent materialist ethics, coupled with an atheist awareness of finitude, of the mortality of the species, the planet and the entire universe, and not an illusory disbelief in immortality which is only a misplaced contempt for life" (*ibid*.:12).

Guatarri's analysis is focused on the effects of global capitalist Body without Organs on the environment and on social, cultural and mental life. His proposed 'ecosophy' requires radical changes in the way we live, work and engage with each other and nature. This calls for transformation in the way we live, and courage and political action to bring about these changes. According to Deleuze and Guattari this involves inventing "new concepts as a means of creating new descriptions" (Patton, 2000:12). The tasks of education are great and new descriptions are needed if it is to develop to become a site for new thinking for radical ecological and political change. RPL is a miniscule dimension of this project but an important one as the practice, in its nature, has raised important questions about the ontological basis of higher education and found it to be an impoverished one in the face of these challenges.

9.3 Closing thoughts

Overall, the experience of working in RPL and pondering its conceptual basis has led me in many new directions. Engagement with conceptual personae who were "thinkers, solely thinkers" (DG 1994:69) helped me to think through the conundrums of RPL and to broaden my thinking into other problems of education, policy development and theory. It made me realise that now more than ever we need thinkers … "concepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created" (*ibid*.: 5).

The stimulus for this thesis was RPL – a minuscule and peripheral practice within a massive educational territory. It opened up a line of questioning that propelled me to explore the nature of learning itself, leading me to new horizons of learning and thought. I hope this thesis does the same for you and that you find something – an idea, thought or concept that broadens your understanding and takes you on a line of flight that re-cognises RPL anew in learning and education.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Form

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee

Protocol for Ethical Review of a Research Project Involving Participation of Humans

The purpose of this review process is to draw attention to the ethical dimensions of research and to inspire and assist researchers to design their research in the most ethically appropriate way. It is a university requirement that research projects involving humans carried out by NUIM staff, postdoctoral researchers, and MSc / MLitt / PhD students must undergo this review before data collection begins. It is the conviction of this committee, as members of NUIM's academic community, that collegial review of our protocols for carrying out research in an ethical manner is a constructive process that will lead to better research.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please complete all sections below. Place your cursor inside the box that follows each question and begin to type – the box will expand as you type. While attachments may be appended, it is important that you do not simply refer to them, but that you fully address all points here in the text of this form – do not leave any section blank. Please keep in mind that your protocol could be read by someone who is not a specialist in your field, so it is important to make your explanations as clear and thorough as possible. Please submit this completed form, with all supporting documentation, to the NUIM Research Support Office Ethics Committee Secretariat: research.ethics@nuim.ie

1. Information about the researcher(s)
Name:

Josephine Finn

Qualifications:

BA (Hons), HDip Adult and Community Education

Appointment or position held:

Lecturer

Department:

Adult and Community Education

Contact details (must provide NUIM details):

E-mail:	Josephine.w.finn@nuim.ie	Telephone:	01-7083601

(If there are additional researchers, please copy the above fields and paste here as needed)

2. **If the researcher is a postgraduate student:**
    Name of supervisor:

Dr Anne B. Ryan

Supervisor's appointment or position held:

Lecturer

Supervisor's department:

Adult and Community Education

Supervisor's contact details (must provide NUIM details):

E-mail:	Anne.b.ryan@nuim.ie	Telephone:	01-7083308

NOTE: If the researcher is a student, a letter from the supervisor must be included outlining how the student is suitably prepared and will have adequate support to carry out the type of research proposed.

3. **Title.** Brief title of the research project:

Why is learning from experience (informal learning) under recognised in recognition of prior learning (RPL) practice in Ireland?

   Glossary of terms:

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged….The term 'prior learning' is learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal routes." (NQAI: 2006).

Formal learning takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards,

Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification;

informal learning takes place through life and work experience (sometimes referred to as experiential learning (NQAI:2006).

Claimants are course applicants or students who seek to claim eligibility to enter a course of study without the prerequisite qualifications and/or module exemptions based on their prior learning.

4. Funding agency (if applicable):

N/A

5. Other ethical review.

a. Is the research project being, or has it been already, reviewed by any other institutional ethics committee or board?　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[ ] Yes　[X] No

b. If yes, please list the other committees(s) or board(s) involved, and attach relevant documentation.

N/A

6. Research Objectives. Please summarize briefly the objective(s) of the research, including relevant details such as purpose, research question, hypothesis, etc. (about 150 words).

RPL in Irish universities is mostly a technical process that allows claimants to transfer credit from one formal education programme to another eg module exemptions. OECD (2006) research on RPL practice in Ireland shows that very few claims include informal learning. This in contrast to other countries in Europe and in the US and Canada where informal learning is an integral part of the RPL process. Base line evidence from initial contacts with RPL practitioners in HEIs in Ireland confirms this. Some anecdotal comments suggest that claimants present a prevalence of formal and non-formal learning in their evidence because: (a) institutions understand these forms of learning best (b) it costs very little to process these kind of claims (c) the policy and practice currently in place in Irish institutions place the burden of responsibility for the claim on the individual (d) higher education core funding does not include RPL thus there is little or no resources available to promote and develop RPL so that a greater proportion of informal learning may be included. Is this the reality? Should more be done to accommodate the inclusion of informal learning? How could this be done?

What are the risks? What are the benefits?

Research Objectives:

My aim is to explore the underlying causes for the under recognition of informal learning in recognition of prior learning (RPL) practice in Ireland. This will be achieved through pursuing the following research objectives:

- Examining the evolution of recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy and practice in Ireland;
- Presenting a case study of NUI Maynooth;
- Exploring claimant experience of RPL at NUI Maynooth;
- Comparing approaches to RPL practice in Ireland and internationally;
- Comparing claimant experiences;
- Creating a theoretical framework for RPL practice.

7. Methodology.

a. Where will the research be carried out?

The research will be carried out in Ireland and in two locations outside Ireland (Estonia and possibly the US or Canada). NUIM will provide the primary case study. Models of practice in use in the 3U institutions and two HE institutions outside Ireland will be used for comparative purposes. Interviews

with claimants, practitioners, senior officers engaged in RPL in universities and in relevant state education agencies will be carried out.

b. What is the timeframe of the research project?

Data collection: 2012-2013
Draft 1 completed : March 2014
Final Draft completed: October 2014

c. Please describe briefly the overall methodological design of the project.

The **data collection** will be carried out in phases:

Phase 1 - NUIM Data:

- Audit of RPL at NUIM – statistical data will be collated from ITS and practice described;
- NUIM claimants will be contacted and invited to participate in group meetings
- Key personal at NUIM will be interviewed;
- Individual interviews with a selection of NUIM claimants will take place;
- Much of RPL practice at NUIM has been an integral part of my work over the past 15 years thus my own reflexive practice will provide a parallel narrative.

Phase 2 - National Context:
- Interview with a representative from NQAI;
- Interview with a representative from HEA;
- Interview with a representative from Department of Education and Skills;
- Interviews with RPL practitioners in the 3U Partnership;
- Interviews with RPL claimants in the 3U Partnership;
- Interview with RPL champions in the sector.

Phase 2 - International Data:
It is proposed to include practice and experience from abroad. Through my work in RPL to date I have made many international connections in particular in Estonia, US and Canada. A request for interviews at Tallinn University was received very positively. I have not pursued the issues with my colleagues in other locations to date but initial conversations about my research indicate a wiliness to facilitate data collection as part of my comparative study.
- Key personal will be contacted to request interviews;
- Request will be made to interview claimants;
- Claimant interviews will be scheduled if permission is granted and claimants agree;
- Interviews will take place online where visits are not feasible however it is likely that I will travel to the selected destinations to carry out the interviews.

Phase 3 - Data will be transcribed.
Phase 4 - Data analysis will be carried out.

d. Depending on the methods/techniques to be used, please elaborate upon the research context(s), potential questions / issues to be explored, tasks/tests/measures,
frequency/duration of sessions, process of analysis to be used, as appropriate.

I propose to take a grounded theory approach. The challenge for my research is to create a conceptual framework for RPL, this has not been done to date. According to Casell & Symon grounded theory is a kind of theory generated from the data collected. The researcher's task is not to produce a perfect description of the area he or she wishes to understand but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behaviour (2004:242). By using NUIM as the primary case study and the other cases

(international and 3U) to provide comparative analysis it is hoped that sufficient data will be collected on which to create a conceptual framework and develop theory. Ragin and Becker note that: the processes of coming to grips with a particular empirical instance, of reflecting on what it is a case of and contrasting it with other case models, are all practical steps toward constructing theoretical interpretations (1992:129).

Some Questions

Phase 1a- NUIM : (ITS database, sample questions)

- Gender, age, region
- How many claimants have used the process at NUIM?
- How many were successful?
- How many received access to programme only?
- How many received exemptions?
- How many credit exemptions did they receive?
- How many specified credits?
- How many general credits?
- What programmes did they enter?
- How many had already received an award from NUIM?
- What was the level and type of the award?
- Of those who had successful claims how many received: a) Diploma b) Degree c) Masters d) Doctorate?

Phase 1b - NUIM:

- What was the process and procedures?
- How was it experienced?
- How was its value – to the individual and to the institution?
- What did it cost?
- How is it perceived by the institution?
- What is understood as RPL in the institution?
- What is understood as RPL by the individual claimants?
- How is RPL promoted at NUIM?
- What is the future of RPL at NUIM?

Phase 2 - National Context:
- What is happening in the national arena?
- What is the nature of practice?
- Is learning from experience (informal learning), under- recognised in recognition of prior learning practice in Ireland?
- If so why?
- Does it differ from the NUIM context?
- What is the future of RPL in higher education in Ireland?

Phase 3 - International Data:

- What is happening in the international arena?
- What is the nature of practice?
- Is learning from experience (informal learning), under- recognised in recognition of prior learning practice internationally?
- Does it differ from the Irish context?
- What is the future of RPL in higher education internationally?

These and many more questions will be posed during the research process.

Analysis will be an ongoing process. It will be based on a 'search for the possible meanings for transformation and improvement of education practices...of others and ourselves' (Carlos Amorim & Ryan 2005:581). The analysis will chart the interconnectedness of the diverse and overlapping elements of RPL from the multiplicity of sites where it is fostered and constituted. I hope to capture a series of fragments, 'unintended praxis' and experiences that will not reveal a unified concept but instead will show a series of concept lines where RPL could grow and become something more than a technical measure of knowing.

The **theoretical conceptualisation** of RPL will be aided by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and others as appropriate including Axel Honneth.

8. Participants.
   a. Who will the participants be?

Phase 1 - NUIM Data:
   - Claimants from NUIM who have completed the RPL process successfully/unsuccessfully;
   - Senior administrators at NUIM engaged in processing RPL claims;
   - Heads of Departments involved in processing claims.

Phase 2 - National Context:
   - Representatives from: the NQAI, HEA, Department of Education and Skills;
   - Practitioners in the 3U;
   - Claimants in the 3U;
   - RPL champions if identified.

Phase 3 - International Context:
   - RPL leaders;
   - Claimants.

b. Approximately how many participants do you expect will be involved?

Phase 1a – NUIM Quantitative data:
   - Quantitative data will be collected for all claimants since RPL began at NUIM in 1997. This data will be taken directly from the ITS University data base and used for statistical purposes only.

Phase 1b– NUIM Qualitative data:
   - A random sample of 30-50 claimants will be selected from the ITS data base and invited to participate in the qualitative aspect of the research.
   - It is anticipated that 3 group meetings with 10-16 in each group will be facilitated. One to one interviews will follow with approximately 9 respondents.
   - 7 Senior administrators at NUIM engaged in processing RPL claims - Student Records Administrator, the Examinations Officer, Admissions Officer, Registrar and Faculty Deans;
   - 5 Heads of Departments involved in processing claims.

Phase 2 - Irish Context:
   - 1 Representatives from each of the following: NQAI,HEA, Department of Education and Skills;
   - 3 Practitioners in the 3U;

- Claimants in the 3U (I am unclear if this will be possible. Initial conversations with practitioners suggest an unwillingness to allow access to claimants but I will request a group meeting with 10 claimants in each partner institution);
- No more than 2 RPL champions if identified.

Phase 3 - International Data:
- Up to 2 RPL leaders in each institutions
- Claimants (this will depend on the institution and whether claimants will agree to be interviewed. It may be the case that I will use secondary data if group meetings are one to one interviews prove impossible however I will request group meeting with 10 claimant in each)

c. How will participants become involved in your project? If you have formal recruitment procedures, or criteria for inclusion/exclusion, please outline them here.

Statistical data are available on the University's ITS database. The Department of Adult and Community Education has a local database for the BA Local and Community Studies claimants. However, as I wish to include RPL across the university, I will use ITS. As I cannot access this database myself and as I do not have the technical skills necessary to draw down the data, I am reliant on the Registrar's Office for support. **The Registrar has indicated that his office will co-operate. I have requested their co-operation and the Registrar has offered his support (see email attached).** I will submit a full list of questions (Sample 7d). I will acknowledge this co-operation in my thesis.

Names and addresses of all RPL claimants are available on the University data base. I will request that a random sample of claimants (up to 50) will be invited to participate in the qualitative aspect of the research based on the **clusters outlined below**.

Selection criteria for participants will be:

1. Completed an RPL process, gaining credit exemptions for formal learning only.

2. Completed an RPL process using a combination of formal, non-formal and informal

3. Completed an RPL process using informal learning and became a registered student or graduated or resigned from programmes.

I will co-operate with the Registrar's Office as required. The procedures outlined below have been agreed with the Registrar, Student Records Officer and the Data Protection Officer:

> **1.Researcher to prepare letter of invitation for participants outlining the purpose of the research and inviting them to contact the researcher if they wish to contribute (letter attached);**
> **2. Researcher sends invitation letter to Student Records;**
> **3. Records Office send invitation to potential participants;**
> **4. Participants to contact researcher directly if they wish to take part in the research.**

I will carry any additional costs also.

RPL practitioners and senior administrators, NUIM Registrar and practitioners in the U3 partnership will be contacted to arrange interviews.

It must be noted that recognition of informal learning is not a common practice at NUIM. Recognition of formal learning leading to credit transfer is most commonly practiced. In the past 10 years I processed 5 claims that included informal learning and only 1 claim on the basis of informal learning alone.

d. What will be the nature of their participation? (e.g. one-time/short-term contact, longer term involvement, collaborative involvement, etc.)

It is likely that RPL practitioners, administrators and institutional leaders be interviewed on one occasion only with a request that further contact may be required if clarification is needed on any matter.

Claimants will be interviewed in groups first. Each group meeting will take place for two hours on one occasion only. Participants may opt for further involvement or not depending on their interest and availability. A selection of respondents from NUIM will be invited for individual interview. The number of respondents from universities outside NUIM is unclear, I will request 1 group meeting of up to 10 participants followed by one to one meetings with up to 4 participants in each university.

e. If participants will include the researcher's own students or employees, explain how the possibility of conflict of interest will be minimized.

The respondents will be selected from a group of graduates who completed a BA in Social Studies and BA Humanities and other programmes that offer RPL.

I was the academic course leader and manager of the programmes for over ten years. I processed most of the RPL claims. It is likely that all the respondents from these programmes will know me as I have processed all their claims and I may have taught some of them. However, they are now graduates therefore it is likely to be a significant lessening in conflict of interest at this point.

Their retrospective perspectives will be explored. There is potential for bias on my part and the normal issues of validity associated with qualitative data in particular the selection of 'exemplary' cases is noted. However given the nature of the research, it will be important to find exemplary cases for the purpose of comparative analysis.

Claimants who made successful claims that included informal learning will also know me as I am the person who guided them through the process. I will of course give them full information about the research and assure them that they are free not to participate.

A rationale for the inclusion of each case will be given, unusual or deviant cases will be explored fully.

f. Will the participants be remunerated, and if so, in what form?

Participants will not be remunerated however if necessary travel costs will be covered if participants travel long distances to participate. Refreshments will be provided if appropriate. Costs will be covered by the researcher.

b. **Persons Under 18.**

a. Will the research be carried out with persons under age 18?   [   ] Yes   [X] No

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b. If yes, will the sessions be supervised by a guardian or a person responsible for the individual(s)?

[　] Yes　[X] No

NOTE: If the sessions are to be unsupervised, you are required to undergo Garda vetting. Research cannot begin until Garda clearance has been completed. For NUIM researchers, this is facilitated by the NUIM Admissions Office (708-3822, admissions@nuim.ie).

c.　Vulnerable Persons.

a. Will the research be carried out with persons who might be considered vulnerable in any way?

[　] Yes　[X] No

b. If yes, please describe the nature of the vulnerability and discuss special provisions/safeguards to be made for working with these persons.

| |
| |

NOTE: Depending on the nature of the vulnerability, sessions may need to be supervised or the researcher may need to undergo Garda vetting as stated above under point 4. In such cases, the researcher must also be prepared to demonstrate how s/he is suitably qualified or trained to work with such persons.

d.　**Risks.**

a. Please describe any possible risks to research participants that your research and the techniques or procedures involved might cause, such as: physical stress or threats to their safety; psychological or emotional distress; risk of repercussions beyond the research context, etc.

Reflections on experience from learning often touch on early school life experiences and can draw individuals back, to a greater or lesser extent, to dark or troubled stories of childhood schooling experiences. This may occur either in the focus group or at interview however it is expected that it will not be of any greater significance than what commonly happens in many adult learning groups when stories of past education experiences are explored. It is my view that the risk of harm 'is no greater than that in ordinary life' (section 2.1) as experienced in adult learning groups.

University guidelines will be followed, respondents will be informed that they do not have to answer questions if they so wish and at the end of each group meeting/interview they will be advised that they may contact me should they feel distressed or suffer any emotional strain as a result of the engagement in the research process.

I am working for over seventeen years in adult education, I am confident I have a capacity to make good and measured judgements in relation to respondent distress should it occur. If necessary, I will consult with my supervisor Dr Anne B Ryan or seek advice from colleagues who are also practiced researchers and adult educators many with a background in counselling.

b. If you anticipate the possibility of risks, how will these potential risks be addressed?

Group meetings will be facilitated using adult education methodologies, boundaries will be discussed and agreed before commencement of sessions. However, it is possible that these boundaries may be

breeched in which case the individual or individuals will be invited to discuss the issues within the group and/or outside as appropriate.

At all stages of the research, respondents will be treated respectfully and with care, dignity, sensitivity. The BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research will be followed throughout the research process. The right of respondents to disengage from the research will be open to them at any stage in the research process

.

e. **Informed Consent.** Please answer the following questions about how you inform participants about your research and then obtain their consent:
   *NOTE: Please attach the **information sheet(s), consent form(s),** and/or **script(s) for oral explanation** to be used in this project. Please see the template at the end of this form showing standard information that must be included on all consent forms.*

a. Do research participants sign a written consent form and receive a copy for their records? If not, do they receive an information sheet that provides what they need to know before deciding to participate?

Yes, participants will be asked to sign a written consent form and they will be given a copy for their records before each research event e.g. group meetings, individual interviews. Respondents will receive fulsome information about the research before they participate. Any ethical considerations will be highlighted and discussed as appropriate.

Practitioners and institutional leaders will be asked to sign consent forms, a list of themes for discussion will be sent to them in advance of their interviews.

b. When, where, and by whom is consent obtained?

Consent of the Registrar will be required to access ITS data because he deemed to be responsible for the control of student data as per the Data Protection Procedures of the University (P 3/4). The data protection procedures will be complied with and in particular the restrictions on 'further processing personal data which incompatible with the original purpose and on not keeping data longer than necessary for the purpose'.

Claimants – letter of invitation sent to NUIM claimants accompanied with information sheet and consent form for participation in group meetings. A further consent form will be completed should they be selected and agree to participate in individual interviews.

Practitioners – letter of invitation accompanied with information sheet. If they agree to be interviewed consent form and list of themes for discussion will be sent prior to interview. Interview scheduled

Leaders in institutions - letter of invitation accompanied with information sheet. If they agree to be interviewed consent form and list of themes for discussion will be sent prior to interview. Interview scheduled.

c. If children or vulnerable persons are involved, please explain your procedure for obtaining their assent.

N/A

d. For projects in which participants will be involved over the long term, how will you ensure that participants have an ongoing opportunity to negotiate the terms of their consent?

At each stage of the engagement participants will be advised that it is their prerogative to withdraw from the research at any time should they wish to do so.

e. What will the participants be told about the study?

They will receive an information sheet at the beginning outlining the purpose of the research. They will be notified when the thesis is complete. If they request feedback a short executive summary will be provided, they will be notified when the thesis is available in the university library. If a publication ensues they will be notified.

f. What information, if any, will be withheld about the research procedure or the purposes of the investigation? Please explain your justification for withholding this information. If any deception will be involved, please be sure that the technique is explained above under methodology, and explain here why the deception is justified.

N/A

f. **Follow-up.** As appropriate, please explain what strategies you have in place to debrief or follow up with participants.

Follow up phone calls or emails (if telephone conversations prove difficult) will be carried out with all the claimants.

Confidentiality/Anonymity of Data.

a. How are confidentiality and/or anonymity assured?

Claimant participants:

Confidentiality will be assured as part of the agreement in the consent form. All claimants who participate in the research will be anonymised. They will not be identified in the research and their identities will be held in confidence.

Leaders and Practitioner participants:

It is sometimes difficult to anonymise key institutional leaders and some institutional practitioners due to their high profile public identity within the institution and outside it. Thus they may opt to have their identities included in the research. I will keep their identities anonymous unless they agree otherwise.

b. Will you record any personally identifiable information about research participants?

[ ] Yes   [X] No

c. If yes, please explain the following: how you will safeguard this information; if identifiers will be removed from the data, at what point will they be removed; if identifiers will not be removed, why they must be retained and who will retain the key to re-identify the data.

It is sometimes difficult to anonymise key institutional leaders and some institutional practitioners due to their high profile public identity within the institution and outside it. Thus they may opt to have

their identities included in the research. I will keep their identities anonymous unless they agree otherwise.

The identity of key leaders in institutions and practitioners will be used in the research with their agreement only otherwise they will anonymised.
Claimant identities will not be published in the research; their names will be coded with new identifiers before transcription. Leaders/practitioners who do not wish to be identified will be treated in the same way as claimants. Data protection policies and legislation will be complied with and academic freedom policy will be adhered to. The key to re-identify the data will be retained in a secure way by me.

d. Will you record any photographs, video or audio in which individuals could be identified?

[X] Yes   [   ] No

e. If yes, please explain who will have access to this material and how you will safeguard this material.

14(e) The audio data will be transcribed by a transcriber, participants will be notified about this at the outset and the person will be named. The audio tapes will be held by the researcher in a secure place and not used for any purpose other than research.
Tapes: Secured in locked file cabinet stored in locked office (on campus), these will be destroyed as soon as transcribed.
Electronic File (transcripts): Data will be password protected and stored on encrypted computer.
Transcripts (paper): Secured in locked file cabinet stored in locked office.
After the audio has been transcribed they will be destroyed.

f. After data analysis has taken place, will the data be destroyed or retained?

After data analysis has taken place the data will be destroyed.

g. If the data will be destroyed, please explain how, when, and by whom?

Audio data will be deleted when is has been transcribed. This will be completed by me. The transcribed data will be destroyed after data analysis has taken place.

h. If the data will be retained, please explain for how long, for what purpose, and where it will be stored; if there is a key code connecting subjects' data to their identity, when will the link be destroyed?

The data will not be retained after data analysis has taken place. I will ensure that it is in a secure place until the dissertation is complete.

NOTE: Include this information in the consent form, information sheet, or consent script.

g. **Ethics in subsequent outputs.** What are your plans for protecting the safety and integrity of research participants in publications, public presentations, or other outputs resulting from this research? How will subjects' permission for further use of their data be obtained?

In all publications, public presentations, or other outputs resulting from this research the participants will be anonymized by the removal of all personal data.

NOTE: If the data is not anonymised, additional consent would have to be obtained before the data could be deposited in an archive such as the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (http://www.iqda.ie/) or the Irish Social Science Data Archive (http://issda.ucd.ie/).

h. **Professional Codes of Ethics.** Please append a professional code of ethics governing research in your area to this protocol, and/or provide a link to the website where the code may be found.

The research will be undertaken under the terms of the BERA Code -
http://www.bera.ac.uk/system/files/BERA%20Ethical%20Guidelines%202011.pdf

Please note that the researcher ensures that the study will comply with ethical requirements of each participating institution.

TEMPLATE FOR INFORMATION SHEET/CONSENT FORM

The form and content of information sheets and consent forms varies according to the nature of each project; however, the following standard information must be included on all forms used in projects affiliated with NUIM:

- Researcher(s) name, address and contact number (provide NUIM details only, no personal details or phone numbers should be supplied)
- Supervisor(s) name, address and contact number (if applicable)
- Details about how the data will be safeguarded, for what purposes it may be used, and for how long it will be kept.
- The following statement (verbatim):

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Appendix 2: Copy of email from Registrar (forwarded to Ethics Committee Office).

On 11/12/2012 15:58, Registrar wrote:

Re: Request by Josephine Finn to access NUIM data relating to recognition of prior learning claims as part of her PhD research

Dear Josephine,

I am writing to confirm that the University supports your research and will facilitate the provision of relevant data for your study. Please send your research questions directly to me at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

XXXXXX

Appendix 3: Consent Form

<div style="border: 2px solid #4a9bb5; padding: 10px;">

Information Sheet and Consent Form for
Group Meetings/Interviews with Participants

</div>

Background Information

Since 1997 NUI Maynooth has been offering a process for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The NQAI define recognition as a "process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged….The term 'prior learning' is learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal routes". These latter terms are described as follows: *Formal learning* takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards; *Non-formal learning* takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification; *Informal learning* takes place through life and work experience (sometimes referred to as experiential learning) (NQAI: 2006).

A great many people have made successful RPL claims and received credit exemptions or positions of advanced standing in courses at NUIM. Yet the process has changed little over the past seventeen years and no research has been carried out on participant experience or on the procedures and processes currently in operation.

What is this research about?

This research sets out to examine the RPL process and procedures, the student experience, and possibilities for the future development of the RPL at NUI Maynooth.

What will be your role as a participant?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group meeting at NUI Maynooth. The meeting will last for approximately two hours at which you will be asked to discuss your experience of the process for recognition of prior learning at NUI Maynooth, your thoughts about how it could be improved and possibilities for future development.

AND/OR

Interviews

If you agree to take part in the interview element of this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview at a time and place that suits you. The interview will last for approximately forty minutes and you will be asked a number of questions about the RPL experience.

Privacy and Confidentiality

With your permission, I will audiotape the interview to help us to record your views accurately. The transcript of the recording will only be available to me and the transcriber. Once the data is successfully transcribed the recordings will be destroyed. The transcriptions will be retained until the thesis is completed then these will also be destroyed. Your identity will be kept anonymous in all documentation.

What happens if I decide I don't want to take part?

Taking part in the study is completely voluntary and you do not have to be part of the study if you do not want to. If you have any questions, you can contact me at the number or e mail address provided below. If you wish to take part, please sign the consent form and keep a copy of this information so you can refer to it again. Please note that you may withdraw from the research process at any time without consequences.

What happens to the information I provide?

The information will be written up and will be used in my thesis. It may be published in the future. The information may also be presented at conferences or in other publications.

Contacting the Researcher

If you want to discuss any aspect of this study with the researcher, you can contact me at the following:

Josephine Finn, Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Republic of Ireland.

Email: Josephine.w.finn@nuim.ie

Telephone number: 017083601

Research Supervisor

*Dr Anne B. Ryan, Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth, **Co** Kilare, Republic of Ireland.*

Email: anne.b.ryan@nuim.ie

Telephone number: 017083308

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

DECLARATION

I have read this information sheet and consent form and have had time to consider whether to take part in this study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

I agree to take part in this research.

I understand that, as part of this research project, audiotapes of my interview will be made. I agree that the audiotapes may be studied by the researcher for use in the research project and for future academic publications.

Name of Participant (in block letters) _____

Signature_____Date   /   /

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Appendix 4: Letter of invitation to participants

Invitation to participate in research study

January 2013

Dear,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study being conducted by Josephine Finn, a PhD researcher at the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth.

The research question under examination is: Why is learning from experience (informal learning) under recognised in recognition of prior learning (RPL) practice in Ireland? As part of her study Josephine wishes to meet individuals who participated in the RPL process at XXXX Our records show that you engaged in this process thus you have been selected to be invited to contribute to the research.

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to attend a focus group meeting at XXXX to discuss your RPL experience. The meeting will last approximately two hours. It is likely that some further one to one interviews may also take place. If you are invited to participate in this part of the study, interviews will be arranged at your convenience and they should take no more than an hour to complete.

Full details about the research topic and process will be provided before you commence participation. Taking part in the study is your decision.

If you wish to take part or if you have any questions please contact Josephine Finn at: *Telephone*: 01XXXXXX

Email: Josephine.w.finn@nuim.ie

Address: Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House, NUI Maynooth.

Yours sincerely,

XXXXXXX

Appendix 5: CS1 PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES FOR RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITED PRIOR LEARNING

Part-time degrees (1997-2015)

PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES FOR

RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITED PRIOR LEARNING

1. Applicants to the BA (Humanities) / BA (Social Studies) are requested to include on their application form information regarding third level courses they have successfully completed.

2. Applicants who are offered places are required to supply copies of certificates for the courses named on their application form.

3. Details of third level courses named on application forms awarded by institutions other than NUI Maynooth are obtained where necessary.

4. All claims for Recognition of Accredited Prior Learning are referred to the APL Sub-Committee for the degree where they are examined in detail and a proposal for appropriate exemptions (if any) is prepared.

5. This proposal is presented to the CMT which comprises of the Registrar, the Degree Director and Heads / representatives of appropriate Departments for final approval.

6. Following approval, applicants are informed of the credits and module exemptions awarded.

7. Decisions are transmitted to the Records Office to be recorded on the ITS.

8. APL credits thus approved are not negotiable by students.

9. The maximum number of APL credits awardable under current procedures is 60. This generally applies to particular undergraduate NUIM Diplomas, to degree holders in disciplines similar to the BA and to National Teachers / B.Ed.

10. The majority of credits awarded are **specific** credits, i.e. the credits earn specific module exemptions deemed equivalent in content to the prior certificated learning.

11. Up to 10 **unspecified or general** credits may currently be awarded.

12. Grades achieved in prior learning for which module exemptions have been awarded are not taken into account for the calculation of grades for the BA.

13. Credits awarded are ECTS credits.

CHALLENGES

1. The current procedures are unclear as to how to treat credits at Level 6 awarded by FETAC or equivalent awarding bodies, although cognate credits at Level 6 awarded by HETAC are recognised. Historically, before the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework, "further education" courses were not recognised for the award of RAPL exemptions on these degrees.

   While the division between HETAC and FETAC is likely to disappear in the near future, this issue may still arise where a divide is maintained in other countries.

2. The upper limit of 60 credits can be overly restrictive in certain circumstances, e.g. students potentially transferring to the degree from the NUIM Diploma in Addiction Studies (80 ECTS credits).

3. In a small number of cases, students with a substantial level of highly cognate accredited prior learning are, to a great extent, marking time while undertaking the *Introduction to the Programmes* module in Semester 1 to no particular benefit.

4. There is currently no mechanism for Accreditation of Prior **Experiential** Learning on these degree programmes.

PROPOSALS – FOR DISCUSSION

1. Cognate courses at Level 6 (or equivalent outside the state) are deemed acceptable for consideration for the award of credits.

2. The current upper limit of 60 to continue to be deemed the norm, with the *caveat* that the CMT will consider exceptional cases for the award of additional credit.

3. Students with substantial level of highly cognate accredited prior learning are considered for exemption from the *Introduction to the Programmes* module.

4. A mechanism for accrediting Prior Experiential Learning be introduced when resources allow.

Appendix 6   CS1   INSTITUTIONAL RPL POLICY

Non Standard Entry/ Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning Request

Principles: While there are normally defined academic entry requirements for university programmes, it is appropriate that the University has mechanisms to allow entry to applicants who do not meet the normal requirements, but who have equivalent learning achievements which adequately prepare them for the programme. Each application requires individual review, taking into consideration a number of factors, including;

(i)   **Flexibility to admit applicants from a range of backgrounds,**

(ii)   **Ensuring the highest standards within programmes,**

(iii)   **Avoiding admitting students to programmes for which they are poorly prepared.**

There are two processes in use:

1. **Non-standard applicants: this process is used where the case is being made that the applicant's academic qualifications should be considered as the primary basis for admission. This may be supplemented by relevant professional experience.**

2. **Recognition of prior experiential learning**: this is used where the applicant's professional experience is being used as the primary basis for admission.

This request form should be used in tandem with an application on the Postgraduate Applications Centre, www.pac.ie. It should be submitted well in advance of the commencement and registration of the programme. For most programmes, registration is in August and September each year.

Non-standard applicants
The applicant should document academic courses successfully completed prior to making this application. Where there is also relevant professional experience, the Department will normally review a written personal statement and interview the applicant.

Recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL)
An initial application is made to the Department concerned, and normally involves a written statement and an interview. Following this, a recommendation is made to the Registrar, who may approve progression to the portfolio stage.

As a second stage, the applicant is required to produce a portfolio demonstrating the relevant experience and capacity. This portfolio is reviewed, and used as the basis for a decision on admission.

Appendix 7: CS 2 RPL policy in part-time degrees

Recognition of Prior Formal, Non-formal and Informal Learning

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is built into the programme structure. Credit for prior formal learning can be transferred for the purposes of contributing to the completion of a maximum of 50% of the non-mandatory learning outcomes of the Level 7 degree. To be recognised, such formal prior learning must:

- Meet one of the (non-mandatory) programme learning outcomes (competences)

- Be accredited at a minimum of NFQ Level 6

- Carry a minimum of 5 ECTs, and

- Be awarded by an established educational provider or professional body.

Appendix 8: Timeline of policy development in Europe and Ireland with scale of practice in Higher Education in Ireland

Year	Europe	Ireland	Policy in Irish HEI
1918			
1973		First recorded in Irish policy documents: NCEA and Green Paper on Adult Education	
1989	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) First recorded mention of RPL in European policy documents		
1999	Bologna Declaration	Qualifications Act	
2000	Lisbon Agenda	While Paper on Adult Education Learning for Life	
2000	Memorandum for Lifelong Learning		
2001	Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning		
2002 2002 2004 2006 2008 2010	Copenhagen process: Copenhagen Declaration, Maastricht Communiqué, Helsinki Communiqué, Bordeaux Communiqué, Bruges Communiqué		
2004	Common European Principles for Validation of non-formal and informal learning (EC); The role of national qualification systems in promoting LL (OECD) Education and Training 2010 (EC).		
2005		Principles and Operational Guidelines (National Quality Assurance Ireland)	
2006	Council Resolution on RPL within the European youth field		11 HEIs
2008	European Qualifications Framework for LL		
2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016.	Cedefop inventories		
2006, 2007, 2008.	OECD RNFIL research	OECD Country Back Report and Country note for RNFIL	
2010	OECD synthesis reports published (2010a/2010b) Europe 2020 strategy (EC)		16 HEIs
2011	European agenda for adult learning	Expert Group on Future Skills Needs Report; RPL in University Sector (Irish University Association)	
		Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act	

2012	European Council Recommendation on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning		
2013		QQI Green Paper on RPL	
2014		RPL Practitioner Network Ireland	
2015	European Higher Education Area Cedefop European Guidelines		35 HEIs
2016	Cedefop synthesis report on RPL Cedefop Funding Guidelines Cedefop Validation and open educational resources.		

(Goggin et al, 2015; Cedefop, 2017; Murtagh,2014; Noonan, 2010; Geoghegan 2006.

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