

THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN QUEBEC: CURRENT PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT. The curse of being the “new, new” thing was initially hung around the neck of the current incarnation of Quebec’s ‘recognition of prior learning’ program. However, this has changed as the program has evolved into a working service for Quebec residents. This article will examine the current public offering of the recognition of prior learning program in Quebec school boards and colleges, and will briefly discuss the historical context of the program in the province of Quebec.

LA RECONNAISSANCE DES ACQUIS AU QUÉBEC : PRATIQUES ACTUELLES

RÉSUMÉ. La malédiction d’être la « nouvelle, nouvelle » saveur a initialement plombé la mise en œuvre du programme québécois actuel de reconnaissance des acquis. Or, cette situation a changé avec l’évolution du programme en service à l’emploi offert aux Québécois. Dans cet article, l’auteur analyse l’offre actuelle des commissions scolaires et collèges québécois en termes de reconnaissances des acquis. De plus, elle aborde sommairement le contexte historique du programme au Québec.

There is a great eloquence to the expression “necessity is the mother of invention.” Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a concept born out of necessity, and can trace its roots to the original G.I. Bill in the post World War Two era of the United States of America. With thousands of servicemen expected to return home, the United States was faced with a crisis to integrate these veterans into a post-war workforce. Upon study of the situation, recommendations came in the form of the G.I. Bill which, among other innovations for the times, would recognize the experiential learning of soldiers and allow them access to formal education institutions based on a new system of recognizing

learning that had taken place outside of the classroom. Today, recognition of prior learning is still considered a necessity by its advocates as a mechanism to recognize the skills, knowledge and competencies of individuals who wish to pursue their formal education but without having to redo what they already know. As the former coordinator of the 'Recognition of Prior Learning' program for the English school boards of Quebec, I am one of these advocates. The motivation to write a snapshot of the current status of the recognition of prior learning in Quebec is to better inform a readership about a concept that is available and could be of great benefit to many (adult learners, educational consultants, education policy advisors).

RPL is known around the world by many acronyms and is adapted according to the priorities of the community it serves. In Canadian terminology, it is known as 'Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR),' and is understood as:

a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences. (Day, 2000, pp.7-8).

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), as it is referred to in the United States, is frequently defined according to an individual having attained "college-level" learning and often includes a mention of experiential learning garnered in military service.

Prior Learning Assessment is a term used to describe learning gained outside a traditional academic environment. Put another way, it's learning and knowledge your students acquire while living their lives: working, participating in employer training programs, serving in the military, studying independently, volunteering or doing community service, and studying open source courseware. (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2011)

In Quebec, the concept is not new of recognizing (for academic credit) learning that has taken place outside a classroom. According to a document published by the Quebec Ministry of Education, Sports and Leisure (MELS), "[i]n Québec, recognition of prior learning is steeped in history and tradition" (MELS, 2005, p. 3). The concept has been closely linked to the development of adult education and the establishment of a ministry of education. It may surprise some to learn that the Quebec public adult education system was established in the 1960s, making it a relatively new public institution. At the time, the main objective of adult education was to allow those adults who "missed out" the first time around to either complete their initial education or make up missing skills so as to be able to participate in the job market and in society (Greason, 1998). Fast-forward twenty years to 1982 and a watershed moment in adult education history in the province of Quebec: the establishment of the *Commission d'étude sur la formation des adultes* (informally known as the

Jean Commission Report, named after Mme. Michèle Jean, president of the Commission). The Commission was given a broad mandate to investigate both vocational and socio-cultural aspects of adult education and to frame a comprehensive adult education policy for Quebec (Greason, 1998). The Jean Commission Report provided many innovative recommendations to the Ministry of Education. Among the most progressive was the suggestion to implement “recognition of prior learning” in the adult education sector. The use of the terminology by the Jean Commission set in motion the beginning of a better understanding of the concept within the adult education system.

In 1985, the *Fonds pour l’implantation de la reconnaissance des acquis au collegial* (FIRAC) was established, which initiated the recognition of prior learning at the college level (MELS, 2005). In the early 1980s, a limited number of stakeholders in the field of adult education in Quebec were ready to implement practices related to the recognition of prior learning; however these efforts were short lived. The challenges of dispersion of population outside of urban areas, a need to train human resources, find continuous sources of funding and an overly bureaucratic approach were exacerbated by budgetary cuts. As a result, the program fell by the wayside.

PHASE II

In June 2002, the Ministry of Education of Quebec (MEQ) produced a *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and an accompanying *Action Plan*. The policy was significant in highlighting RPL in the Government’s orientation on lifelong learning. As well, it was an innovative move on behalf of a provincial government to formally recognize RPL as part of a government policy related to adult learning.

In April 2005, the MELS hosted its first province-wide conference on the subject of the recognition of prior learning. This was followed by a second conference in April 2007 wherein the Ministry officially launched the title and logo of the program. In Quebec, RPL is known as *La reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences* (RAC). The logo is a blue box that encapsulates the acronym RAC with a ribbon motif streaming through the letters in blue (R), red (A) and green (C).

Prior to the launch of the logo, the *Direction de la production en langue anglaise* (DPLA), the official translation office of the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports, adapted the terminology to: “The Recognition of Prior Learning and Competencies” (RPLC). Since this was done before the launch of the official logo, the English acronym and the newly launched logo failed to conform. In September 2008, the English school boards of Quebec suggested and received approval to adapt the translation to the terminology currently in use. The terminology used by the English vocational sector therefore became: “The Recognition of Acquired Competencies” (RAC).

Standing on the shoulders of the 2002 *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training*, the Ministry pressed forward with the following two commitments:

- [To take] aggressive action toward the official recognition of adults' prior learning and competencies.
- [To offer] recognition of prior learning and competencies as a regular service in adult education and continuing education and training in Québec. (MEQ, 2002, p. 6)

With an allocated budget and a newly reinforced government policy, the school boards and colleges began to mobilize their resources.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The province of Quebec is divided into seventeen administrative regions that are used for everything from electoral planning to the promotion of tourism. In the case of RPL, a call for proposals by the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports was launched in July 2005 to develop regional consortia to implement RPL's services. Each region's consortium was to include: the local school board, college, and university; an Emploi-Québec representative (regional workforce development office) and any other pertinent community partner. Once a consortium was established, a coordinator could be engaged. MELS offered a two-day training session to these coordinators to cover the philosophy of the concept and the administration of the service.

There are three exceptions to the stated consortium stakeholder plan. The island of Montreal is unique due to the large concentration of people (especially Anglophones). Therefore, the MELS envisioned the first phase of the project to include multiple consortia on the island of Montreal, which would eventually merge in a harmonized approach to the delivery of the RPL service.

The first group was designated as the on-island school boards of Montreal. Under the coordination of the *Service d'évaluation et de reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences de L'Île de Montréal (SERACIM)* which is housed at the Commission Scolaire de Montréal's head office, both English and French-language on-island school boards are members of this consortium. This includes the English Montreal School Board, Lester B. Pearson School Board, *Commission scolaire de Montréal*, *Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-L'Île*, and *Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys*. The SERACIM consortium acts as a referral service for candidates on the island of Montreal who wish to pursue a diploma through the school board system.

Second, the consortium called *Compétences Montréal* was created, which is a referral service for the twelve colleges on the island of Montreal. This group included: *Cégep Marie-Victorin*, *Collège Ahuntsic*, *Collège de Rosemont*, *Collège de Maisonneuve*, *Cégep de Vieux Montréal*, *Cégep de Saint-Laurent*, *Collège de Bois-de-*

Boulogne, Collège Gérald-Godin, Cégep André-Laurendeau, Dawson College, Vanier College, and John Abbott College.

The third exception to the seventeen consortium model was the English community of Quebec. In January 2007, under the direction of the Provincial Organization of Continuing Education Directors – English (PROCEDE), the nine English-language school boards formed a consortium of their own. In 2010, the management of this consortium was transferred to the Anglophone regional table comprised of both school boards and colleges. This remained the only consortium with a provincial mandate. Two participants in this consortium overlapped with the SERACIM consortium, however, their role was different in that SERACIM acted as a referral service to the English school boards while the boards themselves offered the full service of the recognition of prior learning. The participating school boards were: Central Quebec School Board, Eastern Shores School Board, Eastern Townships School Board, English Montreal School Board, Lester B. Pearson School Board, New Frontiers School Board, Riverside School Board, Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, and the Western Quebec School Board. The participating colleges were: Champlain College, Dawson College, Heritage College and Vanier College.

In June 2009, MELS initiated a project to harmonize the service delivery of the recognition of prior learning from one consortium to another and from one region of the province to another. Each consortium's coordinator now sits at the *Table nationale de reconnaissances des acquis et des compétences (TANRAC)*. This "working table" was comprised of a number of subcommittees in areas that ranged from publicity to quality assurance. It was also the meeting place between consortium coordinators and MELS. Bi-annual meetings were held to discuss the progress of the working committees, new government initiatives, as well as the statistics of candidates entering or completing their diploma through use of the recognition of prior learning. Using a consensus process, professional development seminars were implemented for the coordinators – many of whom had no formal training in the area of RPL other than the initial training offered by the Ministry.

THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

In the last decade, there has been a sizeable growth in what can be called the field of RPL including new peer review articles, and greater attendance numbers at conferences hosted by national associations such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the United States, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) and the annual conference hosted by the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI). As well, in an effort to promote a sense of professionalism for practitioners, certification programs in prior learning assessment are being offered at institutions such as Red River College in Manitoba and on-line through a partnership between the Council

for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and DePaul University's Continuing and Professional Education Faculty.

RPL is not a complex theory. It *does* require a philosophical shift in the way a traditional pedagogical relationship operates. The student is more a colleague with a content expert than in a traditional student-teacher relationship. The adult learner may be returning to formal education out of personal interest, as a requirement to upgrade their skills, or to maintain their employment. Regardless of the past scholastic experience of the learner, a RPL candidate must have some sense that their experiential knowledge is of value. An adult who returns to formal education must also shed their presuppositions about the traditional student-teacher relationship. No longer is the teacher the all-knowing master of the subject. In RPL, a learner is expected to have some level of mastery of the topic in which they wish to have their knowledge validated. As well, both parties must be willing to acknowledge their respective contributions to what will be a collaborative effort to provide official recognition for experiential learning. According to Quinnan (1997),

adults bring a wide inventory of experience with them to learning. As a result, they do not automatically accord expertise to their teachers, but elect to appraise the knowledge an instructor disseminates against their own frame of reference to make a critical assessment of that person's fitness to facilitate learning. (p. 76)

In a RPL program, the student is no longer an empty vessel but is, instead, a learner with acquired competencies and experiential knowledge. This new relationship also challenges the presupposed relationship between school and society. No longer is the formal education system acting as gatekeeper to the world of work. A classic view of this relationship is described by Barakett and Cleghorn (2000), who state that "education is not merely a distant mechanism for sorting and selecting individuals for the work world; the institution operates as such because people have come to believe that this is a part of the school's task" (p. 70). In the world of RPL, the role of school as a selection mechanism for industry is challenged. Instead, it is more commonplace that an individual comes to the formal education institution *from* industry to have their existing knowledge validated in a system that offers a form of benchmarks and validation. The school system is being used by industry, not the other way around.

As can be expected, if the entire system is openly challenged, so are the roles and responsibilities associated with stakeholders in formal education. In a RPL program, the teacher, traditionally charged with bringing new ideas, concepts and knowledge to the student, is now considered a content specialist and assessor. The teacher's role is to act as an assessor to determine whether the candidate possesses the knowledge and the competency being evaluated - they will decide if credit is granted. In the case of RPL, the learner is evaluated and

assessed by the content specialist (usually a teacher) – there is no facilitation and there is no transfer of knowledge. It must be understood by both parties that learning can take place in areas that have traditionally been off limits to evaluation. What is perhaps most controversial is the idea of awarding academic credit for something as non-traditional as experiential learning.

A common argument for the acceptance of recognition of prior learning is to link the process of evaluation as being part of the learning process. Still, many authors in the RPL field write about the resistance from many educational institutions to accepting the concept and principles of RPL. The oft-cited argument from detractors is the educational institution's refusal to acknowledge that learning (and by extension a rigorous and valid evaluation) can take place outside of a traditional classroom (Thomas, 1998; Hamilton, 1997; Peruniak and Powell, 2006). Further, critics of RPL suggest awarding academic credit for experiential learning dilutes the integrity of a diploma bestowed upon a graduate – that in effect, a RPL program acts as a “credit give-away.” On the flipside of this argument are proponents who suggest that the concept is beneficial to formal educational institutions for a variety of reasons. On the conference circuit of educational institutions, one often hears from business development officers who have embraced the concept of the financial benefits of providing RPL as an extra service to adult learners. This allows the educational institution to capitalize on a market base of individuals who may not otherwise return to formal education. The argument goes something like this: recognize learners' experiential knowledge; charge a fee for the service, and then charge tuition for the missing credits required to complete a degree. Ideally, this would mean the candidate who is completing their degree using RPL will be an added bonus to the scheduled class roster and will only add to the revenue generated by mainstream students.

Academic theorists who endorse the concept and philosophical orientation of RPL point to the issue of social justice and the marginalization of the adult learner in formal education institutions as principles to champion (Brookfield, 2005; Quinnan, 1997). Here the argument is simply that RPL is essential for an adult learner who is already faced with sizeable barriers to complete or continue their formal education: lack of time, lack of funds, family commitments, to name but a few. Although not referenced to an educational theorist or to the field of critical theory, the orientation of Quebec's RPL philosophy falls into this category. In a booklet provided as a basic introduction to the concept, MELS explains the rationale as follows:

An official process for recognizing prior learning and competencies is based on principles, which focus on individuals and their rights. These principles are:

- Individuals have a right to social recognition of their knowledge or competencies insofar as they are able to provide evidence that they possess them.

- Individuals should not have to redo in a formal educational setting any learning they may have already acquired in other contexts or other ways. What is important in the recognition of learning is what a person has learned, not where, when or how it was learned.
- Individuals should not be obliged to seek recognition again for competencies or prior learning that have been properly evaluated and certified by an official system.

These principles go hand in hand with three corollaries that appeal to the social responsibility of organizations involved in prior learning recognition. These corollaries are:

- All systems that recognize prior learning or competencies must be transparent.
- Evaluation activities that are carried out for the purpose of recognizing prior learning and competencies must be rigorous, reliable, and adapted to the extracurricular and generally experiential nature of learning acquired by the individual.
- The legislative and organizational frameworks in various official systems, including education, must create conditions that are conducive to taking into account the basic principles of prior learning recognition. (MELS, 2005, p. 5)

With such a strong statement to the effect that RPL is a right of all Quebec citizens, attention must now turn to effective delivery of the service and the issues related to what happens in the adult vocational centres and colleges throughout the province.

Considering MELS' statement that it is of no importance "where, when or how it [competency] was learned," it is important that assessors (*viz.*, teachers) keep pace with informal educational settings in out-of-school settings, and are capable of assessing the most current of acquired skills and competencies. This requires familiarity not only with the core subject of their instruction, but also with innovations that are taking place in industry, the trades or their sector. This issue is most prevalent in the field of adult vocational education in which many skills and competencies are acquired directly in the field. This has been one of the advantages of the Quebec curriculum – it is competency based. Whereas in most American RPL programs, there is a need to evaluate experiential knowledge in terms of its college-level equivalence, the situation is less subjective in Quebec. The candidate either does or does not possess the competency and is either capable or not capable of demonstrating the skill. This allows for more emphasis to be put on the principles of andragogy (the teaching of adults), in meeting with a candidate for the first time to determine if they are in fact eligible to pursue the route of a RPL process.

MODEL OF DELIVERY

In an effort to make the RPL process more accessible and understandable to the general public, many formal institutions that offer the service have mapped

out a model of delivery (for examples, see the University of Winnipeg, MELS, SIAST). The models share many common factors, including stakeholders and the general process through which a candidate can expect to travel. The devil is in the details, and herein lies a major issue for the prior learning assessment and recognition community in Canada: the lack of standardization in the process and structure of these programs. There is currently a subcommittee of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) entitled “CAPLA RFL Standards Working Group” which is a group of dedicated and informed volunteers working toward a proposal of standardization of practice across Canada. Currently the most prevalent variables include differences in: initial reception of candidates, fees charged, residency requirements, training of stakeholders, the appearance and recognition of “PLAR” on a transcript, its transferability from one academic institution to another and quality control in evaluations. The list seems all-encompassing – but what should be remembered, as per the definition of the concept, is that most recognition of prior learning programs are developed according to the priorities of the community it serves. Without stating such an intention formally, the Quebec model of delivery is designed very much in this manner.

The Quebec model shares many features with other RPL programs across Canada and the United States. However, there are some features unique to the Quebec model of delivery. The following is a highlight of the five most salient areas.

The first is the length of residency required for candidates to successfully pursue a diploma through RPL. Most community colleges in Ontario have an average residency requirement of 25%, meaning a candidate must register and pay tuition for a quarter of their diploma. This is not a requirement in Quebec. Under its RPL model, a candidate can attain (in its entirety) his or her diploma in a vocational program at a school board.

The second area is related to funding. Currently the Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) program in Quebec is not a self-financed endeavor. The service is offered free to all residents of Quebec. The Quebec government is still the primary source of funding for its RAC program in school boards and colleges. Within the budgetary rules that govern school boards and colleges, the Quebec government has committed predetermined allocation funding to the school boards and colleges upon completion of certain steps in the process of the recognition of acquired competencies. Once a candidate has met with a pedagogical consultant and has been deemed a good fit, he or she is asked to complete a self-evaluation form related to the program in which they are seeking academic credit. The candidate then meets with a teacher in the field who has been trained as a content specialist. An interview takes place in which the candidate and teacher discuss the self-evaluation form and the competencies of the program. The end result of this “validation interview,” as

it is called, is to have a plan in place for the candidate that lists: credits that can be awarded immediately, competencies that the candidate will demonstrate to the teacher to ensure their prior attainment, and finally a list of missing competencies known as ‘gap filling.’ Financial support is provided two places in the model of delivery: the first stipend is requested after the completion of the validation interview; the second request is made after the evaluation, in which the candidate has demonstrated completion of the competencies.

Gap filling is the third area unique to the Quebec RPL model. Gap filling refers to competencies that a candidate is missing but must acquire and demonstrate in order to attain their diploma. In most programs across Canada, this area is usually dealt with by classroom instruction. In the case of most community colleges in Ontario, this can sometimes be dealt with within the residency requirement. However, the Quebec model takes an extreme andragogical approach and offers the candidate the option of self study, apprenticeship, mentorship, classroom instruction, on-line or distance education – any means by which to acquire the competency. This is of interest to those who may see a division between the philosophical tenets of RPL and the reality of its implementation. As previously stated in the principles governing the program, the Quebec model of delivery places little emphasis on when, where, or how a competency has been acquired.

The fourth area of uniqueness to the Quebec model of RPL relates to the philosophical orientation of the concept in terms of a non-traditional path through an educational institution. The mark or grade on a transcript for a RAC candidate will appear no differently than for any other student in the education system. This is quite significant when you consider that many academic institutions in Canada continue to mark a transcript as “PLAR” if the candidate has pursued their diploma through a prior learning assessment and recognition program. The fine print is intransferability. There is no guarantee that a diploma attained through a RPL program will be accepted by other academic institutions, especially those who do not offer the option themselves.

Finally, the fifth area is that the Quebec model does not make a distinction between credit transfer and the recognition of individual competencies as credit in the recognition of acquired competencies program. In most of Canada, credit transfer is not considered part of a recognition of prior learning program. Pan-Canadian quantitative statistics from RPL programs often do not include Quebec or have a special note to highlight this.

CONCLUSION

In the due process of academic review of this article, the Quebec Government implemented *Bill 100: An Act to implement certain provisions of the Budget Speech of 30 March 2010, reduce the debt and return to a balanced budget in 2013-2014*, (2010). This legislation seriously curtailed the activities related to RAC due to

the clause that put a halt to certain workplace activities. Specifically, the clause reads: “requiring certain bodies to take measures to reduce their advertising, training, travel and other administrative operating expenses” (p. 2). The regional offices of the MELS sent a directive to its departments that all travel must cease and budgets assigned to hold meetings would be frozen. The effect was that all efforts previously undertaken by the seventeen administrative regions to coordinate a delivery of services and plan for common expenses such as a public awareness campaign have, at this moment, come to a near standstill. Efforts were made to conduct regional meetings and use technology more effectively (for example, regional meetings by conference call) however the results have not been encouraging. The result is general awareness of RAC as an accepted mainstream activity of the education system is still in its infancy in the public domain.

In May 2011, the MELS and the *Ministère de Solidarité* embarked on a province-wide consultative process entitled *Document d'appui à la réflexion l'amélioration de l'amélioration de l'adéquation entre la formation et les besoins du marché du travail: une contribution au développement du Québec*. In preparation for the visits within all seventeen administrative regions, the Government produced a document to contextualize the current situation and provide open-ended questions that were meant to act as a springboard for discussion. The document also addressed the current status of certain programming, RAC included. According to the MELS and the *Ministère de Solidarité*, the service of RAC is currently “underutilized” (*Document d'appui à la réflexion l'amélioration de l'amélioration de l'adéquation entre la formation et les besoins du marché du travail: une contribution au développement du Québec*, p. 16). It has yet to be determined how the Government will negotiate its own directive of the service as a right for all Quebec citizens, with the appropriate resources to allow the school boards and colleges to fulfill the mandate. For those who have been in the RPL field since the 1980s, the consequences of the current economic cutbacks are all too familiar. The pattern in Quebec has stakeholders in the education sector invest themselves and the resources of their institution into the concept, only to be left hanging with the Government's reversal of economic incentives mid-way through the implementation of a five year plan of action. Similar situations have arisen across the country. It remains a struggle for the PLAR community to capture the attention of the federal Government of Canada to show financial support for RPL rather than programs that focus solely on retraining and workforce integration initiatives. Considering RPL is well established in multiple educational institutions in every province and territory, including a new program in Nunavut, it is worth knowing more about a concept that could complement retraining programs and facilitate pathways to formal education.

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