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Roslyn Cameron
*Southern Cross University*

Peter Miller
*Southern Cross University*

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# Recipes for recognition and lifelong learning: Community based approaches to fostering learning transitions

**Roslyn Cameron and Peter Miller**
*Southern Cross University*

## Abstract

This paper will examine three related concepts: *access, RPL & pathways*. The purpose of the paper is to expand and broadened perspectives in relation to these three concepts with the view to encouraging innovative practice in promoting lifelong learning and pathways. The concept of *access* will be discussed with reference to the spectrum of access models as outlined by Harrison (1993). Secondly, recent research into the up take and occurrence of *RPL* in Australia will be presented along with differing models of RPL from international literature. Lastly, the concept of *pathways* and *progression routes* will be explored. The discussion will conclude with the presentation of a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to promoting lifelong learning. The model was originally developed as a result of current doctoral and Adult Learning Australia (ALA) funded research focused specifically on jobseekers, however the model and its four integrated components has much wider applications. For example, it can be used with those groups with little or no post compulsory education and training, groups that are under-represented in tertiary education and those in transitional phases of their life course (re-enter, redundancy, career change). The model draws upon several bodies of knowledge, which includes theories of self and identity, social cognitive theory, models of adult learning, educational and cognitive psychology and new literacies studies. The paper offers insights into innovative ways to promote pathways and lifelong learning with ramifications and applications across all sectors and within a variety of learning communities.

## Introduction

I would like to take a few steps back from the title of the conference, *Making Connections: Transition to University* and ponder the vast numbers of people who currently do not even consider studying at University as one of their life possibilities. A major aim of this paper is to investigate what can be done in terms of making connections between those groups who are considered dis-engaged, under-represented, marginalised and alienated from formal learning. There exists a danger inherent in the emerging new knowledge economy of a greater polarization of those groups of people with access and those with limited access to educational services and information technology. Watson, et al, (2000) refer to the contextual shifts and growing imperatives for lifelong learning which have resulted from economic globalisation, rising income inequality and the growth of the knowledge economy. The authors make note of the deepening social divide and growing polarisation between the 'learning rich' and those in vulnerable positions (2000, p.40).

What strategies are needed to combat this polarisation?

How can we foster lifelong learning skills?

What can we done to create connections across learning communities?

How can we encourage positive learner identities, foster potential, explore possibilities and create learning pathways?

These are the types of questions, which I have assumed this conference hopes to explore with particular reference to strategies that support the transition to university study. This paper will examine three related concepts*: access*, *RPL* and *pathways*, in an attempt to broaden and expand our perceptions of what they can mean in practice across sectors and learning communities. The discussion will conclude by introducing a community-based, holistic and multidisciplinary approach to fostering and promoting lifelong learning.

## Access

The first of the three concepts to be discussed is *access* with particular reference to models of access provision as outlined by Harrison (1993). Harrison's discussion of the access debate focuses on the diversity of interpretation of the term itself. As a means of describing this diversity he brings attention to a spectrum between two extremes. At one end of this spectrum are access courses with the single aim of enabling students to gain entry to higher education. This is characterised by a process of assisting less confident and able students acquire skills, knowledge, and confidence to enable them to undertake a programme of study in higher education. Harrison refers to these as 'single exit' courses, which operate on assumptions about the students and their circumstances. The main assumption is in terms of skills and knowledge deficits. Hence the emphasis on study skills and shortfalls in required knowledge and skill bases. Harrison characterises this approach using Knowles' (1978) description of a 'transmission model' of teaching were the student is seen as an 'empty vessel' into which 'acceptable knowledge' is transmitted via a source of authority, the teacher.
The opposite end of the spectrum is characterised by 'multi-exit' courses, which is due to a lessening of assumptions about learner destinations. These courses aim to increase the students' knowledge about educational and training opportunities and possibilities and as a consequence are less prescriptive. The approach focuses on the learning needs of the student and as a result there is greater emphasis placed upon negotiated content and learner-centred processes. This approach also acknowledges that learning takes place in many different sites and contexts. For example, at work, community, family, leisure and through various forms of media and 'texts' (1993, p. 3-4). This table has been reproduced below as Table 1. Approaches to access.

> "The ends of the spectrum have been characterised in terms of a 'Provider model' and a 'User model'. These should not be seen as either / or alternatives, but as two ends of a continuum, with most access initiatives falling somewhere in between."
> (Harrison, 1993, p.5)

Harrison (1993) concludes by acknowledging the role of access courses, which teach study skills and provide knowledge top-ups as a means to enter established university courses, however he suggests there is a need to shift away from this 'Provider Model'. The alternative offered is a 'User Model', which draws upon community education approaches that have been successful for non-traditional learners. This approach is characterised by:

- Community based settings
- Relatively informal
- Developing a secure sense of 'learner identity'
- Learner centred
- Choice of subject matter relevant & useful to learner
- Teacher views learners as competent adults with experience which is valuable, relevant and valid

(1993, p. 16)

The new model for recognition and lifelong learning, which is being presented shares many of the characteristics outlined in the 'User Model' for access. Watson, et al, (2000) in their discussion concerned

with re-thinking equity strategies in post-compulsory education and training suggest local community partnerships as a strategy for equity provision. They advocate the necessity of a co-ordinated cross-sectoral approach to equity.

> "In a context of lifelong learning, the issues of cross-sectoral collaboration in pursuit of equity objectives is inevitably linked to the question of partnership between the education sectors and a wider spectrum of community partners, with much learning occurring in social contexts outside education institutions." (2000,p. 41).

**Table 1. Approaches to access**

| **'Provider Model'** | **'User Model'** |
|---|---|
| Curriculum is fixed and determined by professionals (educators) | Curriculum is negotiated between users and tutors |
| Users take it or leave it – choice is limited to the range of options on offer | Range of options is infinite (subject to resources) |
| Education is concerned with passing on a fixed body of knowledge by an active tutor to relatively passive students | Education is a joint learning experience where the values and knowledge of all participants are recognised. The tutor creates situations in which people learn rather than acting as a font of knowledge |
| There is a limited opportunity for negotiation within a group to meet the needs of individual learners | Learners can determine the content and method of the learning. Learners can even be involved in tutor appointments |
| Courses tend to be located in educational establishments (our territory) | Courses/groups are located in community settings including people's own homes, community centres, libraries, halls, etc. (their territory) |
| Learning goals are predetermined | Learning goals may change, or grow through experience |
| Access is solely concerned with the routes people take to reach a fixed position. (For example enrolment procedures, publicity, pre-entry Access courses) | Access is concerned with changing the nature of the provision to meet user's requirements (for example, content, place, teaching methods) |

**Source: Harrison (1993, p. 5)**

There exist parallels with this spectrum of access approaches and that of models of RPL, which are outlined in the next section of the paper. This is not surprising given that a major driver of RPL is its perceived ability to act as an access mechanism for those traditionally under represented in formal education and training. In fact Castle and Attwood (2001) make a distinction between RPL for *credit* and RPL for *access* and pose the question whether RPL in higher education should focus on access or credit. They conclude that the emphasis should be on RPL for *access*.

## RPL: Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) was introduced into Australia as part of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). A major tenet and driver of RPL relates to social justice and its promise to act as a mechanism for social inclusion. RPL was seen as a means to offer those groups who traditionally did not participate in post compulsory education and training an opportunity to have their work and life

experiences recognised. Initially, the rhetoric was full of promise however, over the ten or so years since its inception recent research paints a different picture (Cameron & Miller, 2004). The identified barriers to the up take of RPL, who applies for it, at what qualification level and in what sectors attests to the fact that the promise has not been realised (Wheelahan et al 2003, Bowman et al 2003). Two major reports on RPL, which were conducted in 2003 concluded that the up-take of RPL was low for members of equity groups. The major determinant of RPL activity was Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level – the higher the level the more RPL activity. This was followed by age as the second major determinant. (Bowman et al 2003, p 7). The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) research reported RPL activity across sectors, where possible and came to the conclusion that " those who are mid-career, established in the workforce, older, work full-time, and in associate professional, professional or managerial occupations benefit most from RPL" (Wheelahan et al 2003, p.20).

> "Despite policy intentions that it should do so, RPL has not, by and large, acted as a mechanism for social inclusion for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those who have benefited most are those with the most experience in post-compulsory education and training, and who do not come from socially disadvantaged groups" (Wheelahan et al 2003, p 4).

The AQFAB report refers to strategies for addressing issues surrounding the low up take of RPL. One such strategy is to identify different RPL models that will meet the diverse needs of students and potential students given no one model of RPL is suitable to all situations. The report also recommends supporting the implementation of RPL within the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector as a key avenue for those marginalised from formal education and training.

Given the failure of current RPL models practiced in Australia to address the social justice issues promised, what approaches or models of RPL are more likely to act as mechanisms for social inclusion?

My own doctoral research led me to investigate in more detail the Australian and international literature in this area This in turn led to the discovery that there was very little written on models of RPL in the Australian literature, with the exception of Jones & Martin (1997). The most notable contributions originate from Britain and South Africa within the context of higher education.

## Models of RPL

Due to the limitations of this paper a more detailed synopsis of the literature is not possible. The key contributors have been Butterworth (1992); Butler (1993); Trowler (1996); Jones & Martin (1997) and Harris (1999). Table 2 below has been created to present key characteristics and features of the models described in the literature. Many of the contributors see the models as being on two poles of a continuum with many variations present between the two poles. At one end of the continuum is the Credential / Credit –exchange model while the Developmental / Empowerment Model is representative of the other end of the continuum. The model of RPL, which predominates in Australia, is the credentialing or credit-exchange model. An example of RPL practice within Australia, which draws from the developmental model, is the RPL module offered at the Canberra Institute of Technology. The RPL module focuses on group processes and applicant support and has similarities with *Making your Experience Count* (MEC) type courses offered in Britain. The AQFAB report draws attention to the development of skills from within both the models of RPL (developmental and credentialing), which could assist students learn to become lifelong learners. The skills identified are:

- Self-evaluation
- Self-assessment
- Career planning
- Learning to learn
- Learning to be assessed

(Wheelahan et al 2003, p. 29-30).

The dominant model of RPL currently being practiced in the Australian context is the credentialing model (Wheelahan, et al, 2003, p. 29). It is contested here that this model limits approaches to RPL due to RPL being perceived essentially as a form of assessment. This model has a valuable and viable role however it is limited by a 'narrowness' of application. The model suits circumstances, which are focused on a specific course, at a specific institution, at a specific point in time for an individual applicant. We need to broaden our vision of recognition possibilities to encompass features of the developmental model. Approaches and models that are not limited by a direct relationship to assessment or credit exchange but focused on the learner and the learning process. Approaches situated in the spaces and places, which the larger community identifies with and which are framed by the wider objectives of lifelong learning for all.

## Table 2 Models of RPL - Two poles of a continuum

| | **Credential Model** | **Developmental Model** |
|---|---|---|
| **Ideology** | Market orientated vocationalism | Person-orientated-<br>associated with a form of humanism |
| **Epistemology** | Behaviourist- knowledge & skill acquisition as objectively measurable, aggregative | Knowledge & understanding seen as constructed by individual. Integrated into their cognitive structures |
| **Discourse** | Human capital theory<br>Knowledge and competence- products | Humanist language of 'Learner centeredness' |
| **Features** | Based on **frameworks of Vocational Qualifications**- job-role notion of competence<br><br>**Discourse** of efficiency, accreditation, competence, access, transparency, equality of opportunity & mobility<br><br>Institution driven<br>**Sites** of formal education provision and accredited training<br><br>The claimant exchanges proof of past achievements for course credits<br>Onus is on the applicant to provide 'proof'<br><br>Claimant can receive credit | Development & empowerment of the individual-<br>confidence building, self improvement & self actualisation<br><br>**Reflective process**- act as a transformative social mechanism<br>Self-direction basis-enhancing self knowledge<br>Learning process in it own right- with intrinsic value<br><br>**Role of tutor**- assisting learners to make links between different learning contexts<br>Centrality of rigorous dialogue with a supportive 'outsider'-trained educator<br><br>Claimant can receive credit plus significant personal & professional development |
| **Focus** | **Outcome**<br>Commodity exchange<br>'Equivalence' | **Process**<br>Learner centred<br>Equity principles embedded |

**Source: Cameron (2004)**

## Pathways – progression and patterns

The last of the three concepts to be discussed is that of *pathways*. Veronica McGivney of the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in Britain has produced a large body of work concerned with widening access and participation of excluded adult learners. She is a strong advocate of community-based approaches to increasing adult participation in learning, however it is her research in the area of pathways and progression routes that will be explored in this paper. A major finding from McGivney's research is that the terms 'progression' and 'pathways' can mean a number of things. And that the term 'pathways' is commonly used as a proxy for educational progression, however this term can mean different things to different people (1999, p. 11).

### *Progression*

McGivney typifies progression in four ways:

- Personal progression – greater confidence & self esteem, autonomy, broader understanding & improved literacy
- Social progression – greater community participation, better mixer, wider network
- Economic progression – employment and job acquisition
- Educational progression – engagement in more systematic & intentional learning

(1999, p. 7)

The last form of progression was the primary focus of a study on 'Informal learning in the community'. In the study McGivney has drawn from considerable research to conclude that:

> "…educational progression cannot be defined as a single direction or set of outcomes. Progression means different things to different people, depending on their characteristics, circumstances and starting points. What may be a small step for one may be a huge distance to travel for another. For a relatively well-educated, middle-class person, the achievement of a new qualification could be the main progression outcome; for a young ex-offender with literacy problems, a long-term unemployed person or an isolated young mother, progression may be an apparently smaller but even more important achievement: having the confidence to express an opinion in a group; gaining a perception of new opportunities and possibilities; the realisation that one has greater skills and capabilities than was previously though…….interviews with learners suggest that the increased confidence and recognition of potential gained during learning are the most highly prized benefits. (McGivney, 1994; McGivney and Thompson, 1995)" (1999, p10).

The model of recognition and lifelong learning, which is to be presented encompasses and acknowledges these different forms of progression and the subjectivity of their interpretation by individual learners. The model also accounts for the variety of patterns people experience in and around different types of learning.

### *Patterns*

McGivney quotes a New Zealand study that identified three dominant pathway patterns for adult learners as:

- Zig zag pattern- moving backwards and forwards between formal and non formal learning opportunities
- Linear pattern – moving from non formal learning to formal learning

- Cyclic pattern – moving between different non formal learning programmes

(Harre Hindmarsh & Davies, 1995 cited in McGivney, 1999 )

Current research being conducted by a partnership comprised of the Centre for Public Policy, Deakin University, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) & the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) points to the changes which have occurred in life course patterns.

> "The life-course once formed a reasonably consistent linear pattern, for men, of school, work and retirement, and for women, school, work, marriage, children and retirement. For both men and women, the life-course now includes numerous transitions around education, caring, full-time and part-time work, possibly divorce, retrenchment and unemployment, and retirement.
> Young people face a myriad of decisions in moving through secondary and post-compulsory education, and a much more complex period of transition to independence. They are likely to be financially reliant on parents for longer, and have to combine work and study over an extended period of time (Ayres-Wearne 2001)"
> (Considine, Howe, Hancock & Ziguras 2004, p.8)

What is needed is a broadening of our perceptions of what constitutes *pathways, progression, and patterns of learning, transitions* and *life course* patterns. This will better enable us to take into account the array of circumstances and levels of complexity that is associated with transitions for students and potential students. Widening our perspectives can improve our understanding and design of strategies to assist transitions into formal learning contexts as it encourages a more holistic approach to the learner. If we do broaden our perceptions in these ways then the credentialing model of RPL is not sufficient.

## New model of recognition and lifelong learning

This model has been developed through current doctoral and Adult Learning Australia (ALA) funded research. The model was originally designed for those experiencing specific forms of transition. Examples of these transitions include those groups who are wishing to re-enter the workforce after lengthy periods of childrearing and/or caring, mature age jobseekers, those experiencing redundancy and those in vulnerable economic positions. Nonetheless, due to the models multiple uses and wider applications it offers useful insights into practice across all sectors and for a wide variety of learner groups.

Key findings from the research points to a need to focus on learners' current needs and circumstances, the importance of relevancy, viewing learners from a holistic viewpoint, investigating past learning trajectories and current and possible 'learner identities'. Issues surrounding transition and self-concept were crucial in informing the approaches, which would best suit and serve the needs of the learners (Cameron 2004). The model draws upon a variety of disciplines and is considered a multidisciplinary approach to adult learning. The approach is holistic and consists of four integrated components. The model is targeted to those in transition and dis-engaged from formal learning and as a consequence focuses on community based educational practice. The approach is 'learner-centred', informal and flexible allowing for the content to be open to negotiation. A major aim of the model is to encourage autonomy and self-direction. This allows for the facilitator to be a *learning mentor* and to utilise a wide range of experiential learning methods. Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of the four integrated components of the new model. The model is framed by a number of adult learning theories and approaches, which include transformative learning (Mezirow 1991), reflection and experiential models of learning (Kolb 1984), approaches which focus on learner autonomy (Boud 1989), and self-direction as a strategy for lifelong learning (Candy 1991, Rossi 2002).

### *The Self*

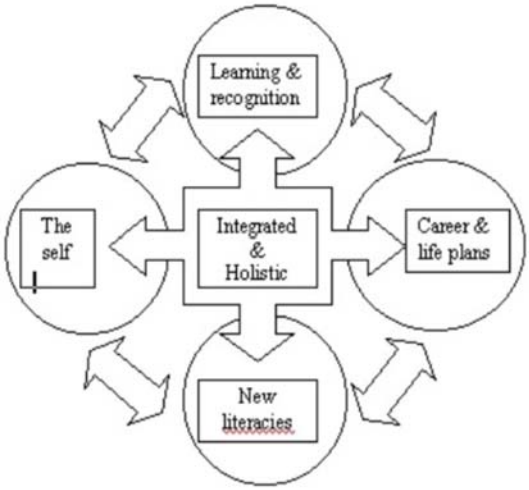
The Self component of the new model is crucial. The issues surrounding aspects of the self-concept must be dealt with in this orientation phase before any development or progress can be made in the other areas.

This component draws upon theoretical approaches, which include theories of self and identity and social cognitive theory (Branden 1994, Dweck 1999, Alexander 2001). Key concepts addressed include self-esteem, self-confidence and self-knowledge and development. Techniques used include an array of reflective narrative tools, which include biography, storytelling and a reflective journal. A variety of personal development planning strategies and techniques are also present within this component.

## *Learning and recognition*

The learning and recognition component looks at the different types of learning (non-formal, informal & formal). The language, systems and discourses of formal learning systems are addressed, as is a suite of 'Learn 2' skills. These 'Learn 2" skills include metacognitive skills such as 'learning to learn' and 'learning to be assessed' and also includes 'learning to be recognised' skills. Central to the latter is the concept of self-recognition, which is the first phase of a three phase developmental approach to recognition (Cameron, *forthcoming*). It is within this component that the learners will start to develop and maintain a Portfolio, which is viewed as continuous 'work in progress'.

**Figure 1 Four components of the transitional model of RPL**




## *Career and life planning*

The third component, career and life planning involves aspects of career guidance and development theories. Key concepts within this component are 'learner identities' (Whittaker and Mayes 2001), learning trajectories (Gorard, Reeves, Fevre and Furlong 1997), 'possible selves' (Cross and Markus 1991) and life course patterns (Merriam and Clark 1991). Exploration of these concepts results in comprehensive career and life plans which is a natural progression from the development of the portfolio.

## *New literacies*

This component explores macro-level changes using the distinction between the 'old' and 'new' economies, which is abased on research involving the 'new world of work' and literacy and numeracy practices (Falk 2002), the concept of the digital divide and contemporary research into conceptions of literacy for the new millennium (Lonsdale and McCurry 2004). Learners develop information literacy skills for the new knowledge economy.

This new model of recognition and lifelong learning draws from the literature, which advocates the ‘user model’ of access and the developmental model of RPL. It acknowledges & values the subjectivity of progression & progression routes, multiple pathway patterns and the complex nature of transitions. Not only does the model do this but it also addresses barriers intrinsic to the procedures associated with credentialing models RPL.

This paper calls for a broadening of perspectives on pathways to and through learning, the subjectivity of what constitutes progression, and the array of transitions and non-linear life course patterns. The paper also encourages a widening of approaches to access and RPL provision, in particular the development and utilisation of user models of access and developmental models of RPL. The new model of recognition and lifelong learning offers a conceptual framework for policy makers and practitioners across all sectors who are concerned with encouraging lifelong learning for those groups who are seen to be under-represented and alienated from formal learning. The model addresses the barriers identified in the research to the up take of RPL for these groups by taking a developmental approach to RPL and combining this with features of the ‘User Model’ of access. The model offers much wider applications than the dominant credentialing model of RPL and has the potential to be used in all sectors not only as a means towards RPL but as a means of encouraging access to formal learning and assisting in transitions into formal learning.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the related concepts of *access*, *RPL* and *pathways* in a manner, which seeks to broaden our perspectives of what these concepts can mean in terms of policy and practice. The result of this discussion has been to lay the foundation for the introduction of a new model for recognition and lifelong learning. The model offers insights into approaches and practice, which can assist in the creation of connections across a variety of learning communities. While the model has yet to be empirically tested it is grounded in the literature, and based on what we already know about learning, and re-engaging people in learning. The author foresees potential application to many groups of learners and potential learners, in a variety of settings. The model is framed within lifelong learning objectives and offers opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration and local partnerships between institutions of formal learning and community based organisations.

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