New model to evaluate values, beliefs and assumptions in the recognition of prior learning

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Abstract

This research will present the model created for a study on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Ireland. This study aimed to identify the values, beliefs, and assumptions operating in RPL between the Assessor, Mentor and Candidate in higher education (HE).

A critical constructivist grounded theory; this paper is focused on the conceptual framework used for the research which adapted Van Kleef's (2007) model of RPL with Schein's (2004) model of organizational culture. Schwartz (2012) theory of values also helped with analysis of any values in the data.

Findings show that similar value systems operate in RPL, with honesty as the primary value, and fairness, openness, and equity also present. The remaining findings and conclusions show that RPL is a challenging field of practice and that resources and training are essential. The assumptions show RPL requires the standards to be upheld.

Keywords: *Values; beliefs; assumptions; recognition of prior learning.*

1. Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important concept in lifelong learning and it refers to an assessment process where value is given for all forms of prior learning; formal, non formal and informal (CEDEFOP, 2018; Werquin, 2010). RPL provides for access to education and for the award of credit. RPL is part of lifelong learning policy development, but there has been little emphasis on understanding the viewpoints of the actors within RPL or the philosophical basis of its practice (Hamer, 2016, Travers, 2017). This research took a critical constructivist grounded theory approach to examine the values, beliefs, and assumptions operating in RPL, aspects of which will influence interactions.

This paper will describe how Van Kleef's (2007) model of RPL was adapted to provide the theoretical framework required to examine the values, beliefs and assumptions present.

2. Methodology

Grounded theory was chosen as this research focused on the social processes in RPL and the values, beliefs, and assumptions that might be considered significant. This is a relatively understudied aspect of RPL and grounded theory provided the means to report the emerging themes in the data.

2.1. Data collection

This research followed Charmaz (2006) and employed a critical constructivist grounded theory methodology to examine what values, beliefs, and assumptions were present in RPL in a higher education setting.

Semi-structured interviews provided the initial data and the questions were focused on 'what' values, beliefs, and assumptions were important in RPL, and 'why,' this was so. The initial purposive sampling developed into theoretical sampling, and grounded theory techniques supported the analysis of the 82 interviews.

Three rounds of coding proceeded from initial open codes (573), to focused codes (5), and theoretical codes (3). The second round of coding provided the conceptual categories and the primary findings. The more abstract third round of coding provided framework for discussion.

2.2. Theoretical framework created a new model of RPL

The theoretical framework selected Van Kleef's (2007) model of RPL as the most suitable for this research, as her model combined aspects of adult learning theory and practice and suitably represented RPL (see Figure 1). Van Kleef (2007) also included values and beliefs in her model while other RPL models in the literature did not (Harris, 1999; Osman, 2004).
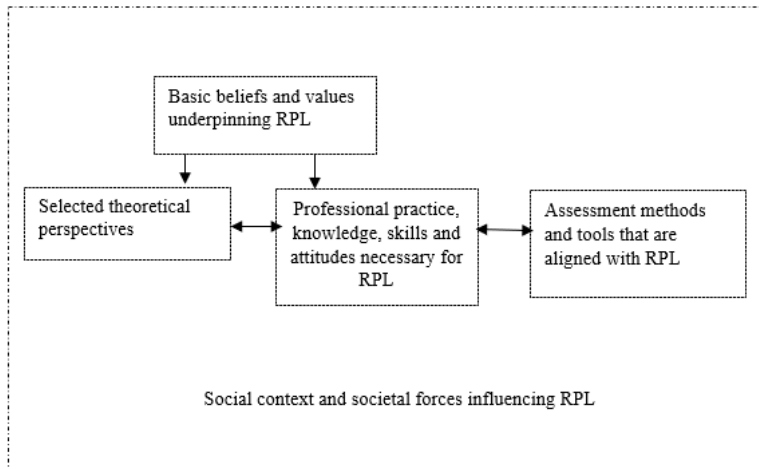
Figure 1. Van Kleef's model of RPL. Source:Van Kleef (2007).

To locate values, beliefs, and assumptions within the RPL process, Scheins (2004) theory of organizational culture was employed. Schein's (2004) theory was suitable as the constructs within his model were relevant to the focus of this research (see Figure 2).
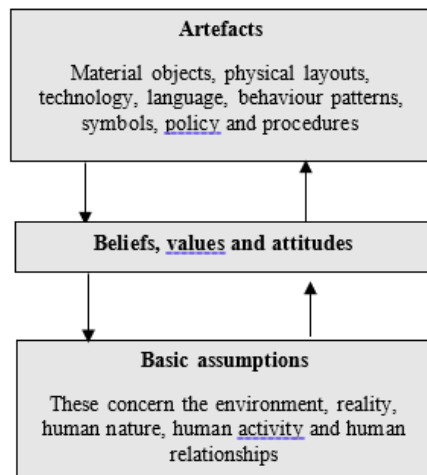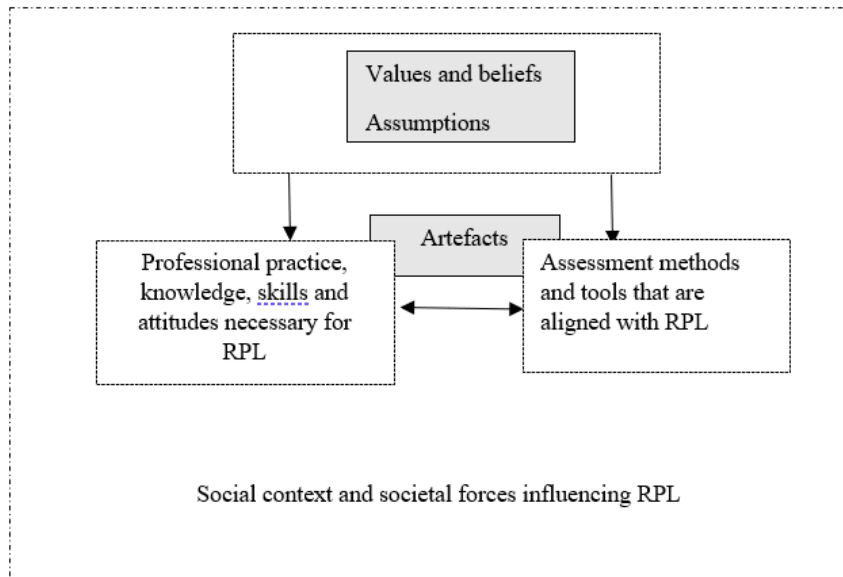

Figure 2. Schein's theory of organizational culture. Source: Schein (2004).

Integrating Van Kleef (2007) and Schein's (2004) models provided the means to locate the values, belief's and assumptions operating in RPL in a meaningful way. Figure 3 illustrates this adapted model.

Figure 3. Adapted model of RPL. Source: Schein (2004), Van Kleef (2007).

On the adapted RPL model (Figure 3) each of the elements therein interact to bring about the RPL assessment. And although they are represented here simply, it is a more reciprocical relationship as described by Schein (2004) that occurs in practice. Values, beliefs and assumptions drive the process now and artefacts are represented through the 'professional practice' and 'assessment methods' of the higher education setting.

In addition to this model (Figure 3), this research employed one more element, Schwartz's (2012) theory of values which supported the identification of any values arising in the data and the literature. Schwartz's (2012) model provided a consistent frame of reference and thereby supported the analysis.

3. Primary findings

Due to space limitations this paper only briefly reports the primary findings which were available in the second stage of coding. Here the focused codes were categorized into themes to yield five conceptual categories; the primary findings;

1. The values in RPL; honesty, fairness and openness are to the fore
2. Beliefs supporting lifelong learning and RPL
3. Assumptions; grouped into what RPL provides and upholding the standards
4. Challenges posed by RPL; it is a challenging field of practice
5. Supports for RPL; resources and training are essential

Figure 4 shows how these five conceptual categories were combined into three overarching abstract theoretical codes, providing the most abstract level of reference for the data.
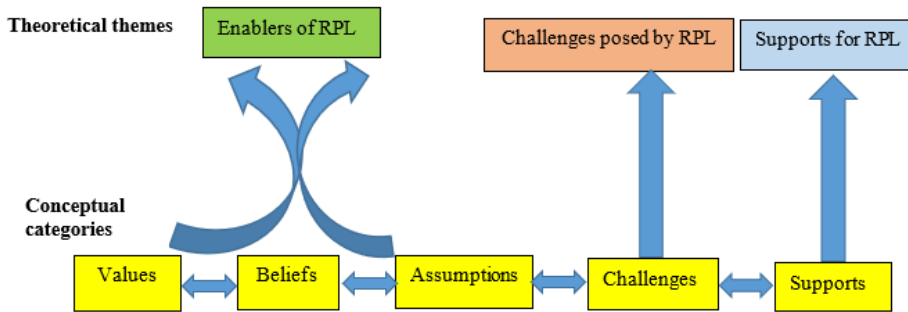

Figure 4. The emergence of the theoretical codes.

Figure 5 locates the primary findings within the adapted model of RPL. A more detailed reporting of the primary findings was not possible within the space constraints of this paper.
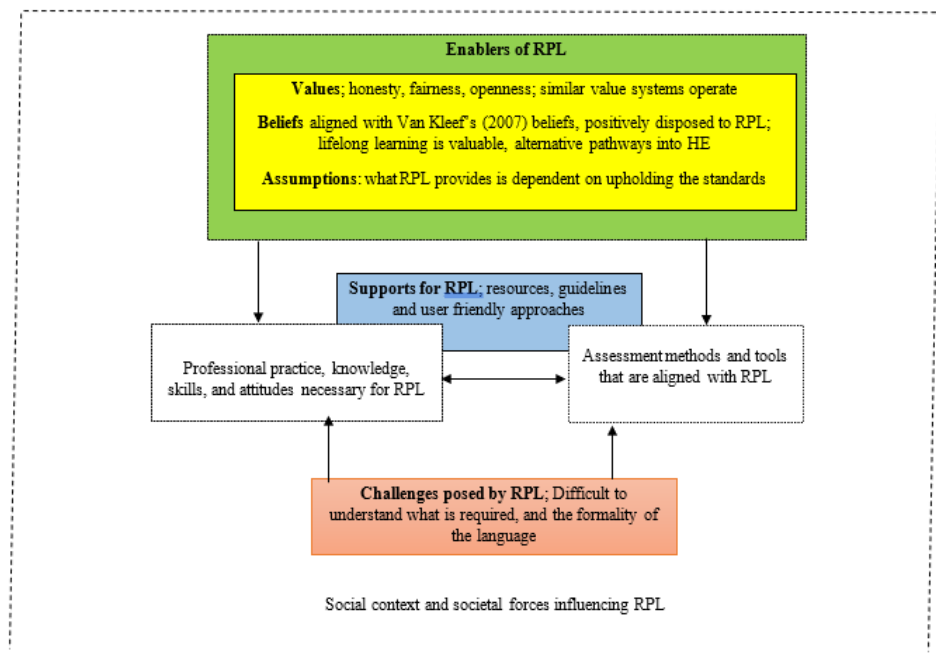

Figure 5. Primary findings in the adapted model.

This paper is focused on Van Kleef's (2007) adapted model which was employed to successfully locate values, beliefs, and assumptions within RPL. The discussion will consider this model.

4. Discussion

The primary findings provided empirical evidence of the values, beliefs, and assumptions present according to the Assessor, Mentor and Candidates in HE in Ireland. While space did not allow for a detailed presentation of these findings, Figure 5 provided a top-level summary. This discussion will focus on the adapted RPL model that provided the conceptual framework for this research.

This research furthered Van Kleef's (2007) model of RPL by incorporating Schein (2004). Van Kleef's (2007) original model combined aspects of adult learning theory and RPL practice. She drew from the humanist and critical traditions (Dewey (1938), Friere (1972), Knowles (1970), Mezirow (1978), Kolb (1981), Jarvis (1987), and Schön (1983). Van Kleef incorporated the knowledge and skills of the RPL practitioner, the assessment, and the social context itself in her model. Significantly, she positioned 'basic beliefs and values underpinning RPL' (p. 13) as key driving forces. She then positioned the remaining elements as interacting with each other.

However, there were limitations with Van Kleef's (2007) model, the first of which is that she did not position 'assessment methods' as directly influencing 'basic beliefs and values underpinning RPL' (p. 13). It might have been appropriate to do so. The second limitation is that she did not explicitly name the values underpinning RPL, although she did identify her beliefs about RPL in the paper. In this Van kleef (2007) stated her belief is that learning does occur outside of HE, and that this learning can be assessed without compromising the standards. A final limitation is that Van Kleef (2007) did not include the influence of the Mentor or the Candidate in her model specifically, two important additional actors in RPL. Notwithstanding these limitations, this researcher considered Van Kleef's (2007) model a very good starring point for this study.

In addition to Van Kleef (2007), this researcher considered Schein's (2004) model of organizational culture useful. It was possible to bring Schein's (2004) insight about the levels of organizational culture into Van Kleef's (2007) model, thereby locating values, beliefs and assumptions therein.

The grounded theory methodology provided the means to analyse the 82 interviews and Figure 4 illustrates where this analysis culminated. The values, beliefs and assumptions in the data are seen as driving the RPL process. Although space is limited here, this research finds that honesty was the primary value required in RPL according to the participants. There were beliefs in the data in support of RPL and lifelong learning similar to Van Kleef's (2007). The assumptions show that what RPL can provide in terms of access and credits is dependant on the maintenance of the standards of HE. The challenging nature of RPL provision and the requirements for supports were also foregrounded in the data.

5. Conclusion

Further developing Van Kleef's (2007) model provided the means to locate values, beliefs, and assumptions effectively in an RPL process. The grounded theory methodology identified these values, beliefs, and assumptions in an Irish HE context. The findings have implications for future policy development including the requirement to re-frame the policy discourse to reflect the challenging nature of RPL provision.

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