Assessment in all its dimensions is a contested idea. Part of the contestation rests on the potential for assessment practices to exclude individuals, be it from work, from university and from schooling or, of course, from life opportunities. This contestation is sharpened when assessment of individuals on the basis of race is used to exclude individuals and indeed whole communities from equal opportunities to access work, university, school or any other context which has the potential to enhance a person’s livelihood. In South Africa, a country which is strongly racialised, and one in which race was used as a factor to exclude the majority from access to basic opportunities, assessment and rethinking assessment take on a profound role – a role that must ensure the equalisation of opportunities between people, rather than the continued differentiation of opportunities offered to people, based on race. This will require careful shifts in how we think about assessment and how we practise it. We need to develop a view about what a just and equal society means for all of us, individually and collectively, and we need to rigorously explore the implications this has for assessment. Whatever the position that we take on this matter, it is clear that the implications for assessment in all its dimensions ought to be not only significant, but also society-changing in the most positive of ways.

This chapter argues that a greater understanding of alternative and even complementary approaches to psychometric testing and assessment would make an important contribution to conceptualising and implementing assessment practices that are fair as well as transparent, and that have an equalising effect in a divided society such as ours. However, there is a need to identify and even to develop such alternative and complementary approaches to psychometric testing in such a manner that assessors can engage with them effectively. With this need in mind, this chapter will explore a practical form of assessment that could potentially complement and perhaps even enhance psychometric testing in the South African context. It will proffer the portfolio of learning as an effective way to assess the prior learning of adults in higher education. By focusing on the assessment of prior knowledge, irrespective of where such knowledge originates, the chapter offers insights into the transformative potential of the portfolio for individual learning and development.
Recognition of Prior Learning: the South African context

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach foregrounds ideas about open and fair processes of access and assessment. It is also a process through which an individual can make a claim to knowledge that she or he has which is up for assessment and evaluation. The aim of this assessment, undertaken by an assessor, is to validate such knowledge either for entry into an existing academic programme in a university or for obtaining a credit within such a programme. RPL can also be used to accredit an assessee’s learning in terms of what they know and can do in a particular domain or field of expertise. This form of accreditation or recognition does not depend on any prerequisites, such as a previous qualification. What it does is provide access to learning, and encourages adults to seek opportunities for further learning and education.

Ralphs (2012) reminds us that RPL was introduced in South Africa to address the transformation imperatives after 1994, by attempting to provide access to learning for those who had been excluded due to apartheid, and to encourage lifelong learning by creating opportunities for learning obtained from other sites, such as work and recreation, to be accredited. Finally, RPL was introduced as part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) so that the learning which was acquired informally could interface seamlessly with other forms of learning in the framework, ensuring that all people would find their place in the framework and not only those who had a formal qualification. This strong social justice agenda, coupled with a developmental agenda of providing new learning routes and pathways for those who had been excluded by apartheid, is what characterised the introduction of RPL in South Africa.

Overall, the uptake of RPL in South African higher education has been uneven. To date, national guidelines for the implementation of RPL are vague, and there is a dearth of research on existing RPL programmes and very little on the experiences of people who have participated in such programmes – that is, assessors and recipients. No comparative studies of RPL practices across academic and occupational settings are available, and most studies focus on RPL as an assessment device, examining the procedures rather than the methods of RPL interventions (Ralphs, 2007).

Ralphs (2007) points out that the uptake is in small projects in the fields of adult education, teacher education, nursing education, and management and leadership, based in higher education institutions. Where the uptake is bigger, it is usually in sectors that have to comply with newly established legal and professional standards, such as the financial and constructions sectors.

In addition to the practical challenges associated with RPL, the assessment of prior learning raises many questions in the realm of assessment. For example, what assessment methods can be used which allow for assessing the specificity of prior knowledge and, at the same time, for standardisation? Do we understand the complexity of assessing RPL in different contexts, and are the contexts comparable? The practice of assessment, psychometric or otherwise, raises questions of what knowledge can be assessed. Whose knowledge is valid? How
should it be validated and against what criteria? What are the costs to assessors as they come into direct conflict with normative values, beliefs and assumptions about assessment prevalent in higher education institutions?

While this chapter may not fully answer all of these questions, it makes visible critical issues about RPL and its assessment dimensions – issues overlooked and sometimes ignored in debates about testing and assessment. It makes clear that in the final analysis all forms of assessment, whether these are psychometric or alternative forms, are underpinned by a particular theory of knowledge and learning, and of the value of such knowledge and learning. How we get our assessees to talk about this learning, and how we choose to assess or recognise this learning, is a complex and far from neutral process. Michelson, Mandell et al. (2004, p.23) remind us that ‘such decisions reflect the stated or unstated ideological frameworks that mould our understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts within which we and our students live’.

Portfolios as a complementary tool to assessment

Portfolios of learning are usually opportunities for assessees to express the knowledge, understandings and skills that they have gained from experiential activities, be it in the workplace, recreationally or through the activities of life and living. Through a process of reflecting on this learning, an assessee is able to compile a portfolio of learning, which is then assessed or evaluated for its fit with relevant learning outcomes in an institution, a degree programme or a course. The degree of fit will determine whether the assessee can claim a credit for such learning and avoid having to redo or repeat what is already known from experience. This process of reflecting on one’s learning and then representing it in a way that matches the learning outcomes of a programme or course sometimes enables the assessee to develop a deeper understanding of his or her own knowledge. Unlike psychometric testing, which can be completed in a short period of time and interpreted relatively easily, reflecting on one’s learning in a portfolio of activities is time-intensive, in that the assessee/RPL applicant is expected to receive feedback on their representation of the knowledge. This process of formative feedback is ongoing while the portfolio of experience is being developed. Coupled with this formative feedback is the need for an assessee-friendly environment in which such feedback and assessment occur. Such feedback and assessment also require sustained guidance, mentoring and support from the assessor.

This emphasis on reflection draws on the work of Kolb (1984), who posited an experiential learning cycle as the basis of adult learning. He suggested that adult learners engage in a process that takes them from a concrete experience to reflection, to drawing inferences and making generalisations on the basis of experience, and then testing these inferences by engaging in a new experience. Challis (1993, p.40) points out that ‘it is important to remember here that past experiences are being recalled in order to identify not the events themselves, but the learning that can be identified as having arisen from that experience’.
Similarly, Whitaker (1989, p.11) states unequivocally that ‘experience is good for many things, but ... credit should be awarded ... only for learning and not for experience’ (emphasis in original).

Assessment techniques used in the portfolio method include interviews, reflective writing tasks, portfolios of learning and portfolio development courses, with portfolios of learning and portfolio development courses playing a significant role. Typically, such portfolios require assessees to reflect on prior experience by analysing learning moments and events that were significant to them. This usually culminates in a reflective essay in which assessees move beyond description of experience to analysis of learning that has emerged from such experience (Castle & Attwood, 2001). Assessees then assemble evidence that supports such claims of learning from experience, which includes certificates of formal learning and project work done by the assessee as well as testimonials from the workplace. An alternative to the reflective essay would be a task that requires assessees to reflect on their prior learning and represent this learning in a way that would be comparable to competencies set for the courses in which access or credit is being sought. The emphasis, in the portfolio approach to assessment results, is on an enhanced sense of individual well-being, respect for experience and individual empowerment through education. In South Africa, this form of assessment is in sharp contrast to the types of assessments that were used under apartheid, which were designed and implemented to undermine learners’ sense of self-worth.

Michelson (1997; 1998) cautions that the reflective, autobiographical modes are not appropriate for all assessees. Similarly, Usher (1989) reminds us that the emphasis on articulating learning with outcomes and competencies is reminiscent of behaviourist approaches to assessment. In South Africa, Volbrecht (2009) also cautions that the effectiveness of the portfolio process depends on reflection, and this requires the assessee to use information from informal learning settings clearly and accurately. This is not always possible, as sometimes experience has to be extracted from the distant past and information about such learning is not readily available. Cretchley and Castle (2001, p.489) also point out that this assessment process through portfolios can be ‘unwieldy’ and require ‘high-level language skills’. Again, this is potentially exclusionary if the portfolio process is conducted in a language that is different to the one that the assessor speaks. In some ways this language difference or the need for high-level language skills could alienate the assessee from his or her experience (Osman, 2004; Trowler, 1996). This echoes the repeated difficulties mentioned elsewhere in this volume regarding language proficiency and assessment. In spite of this critique, the portfolio approach is attractive because it provides an opportunity for adult learners to make what they have learnt from experience visible and measurable. This approach to assessment also gives assessees an enhanced understanding of themselves as knowledge makers and knowledge seekers. The potential for achieving self-empowerment and self-knowledge is worthwhile in itself. Volbrecht (2009) rightly asserts that RPL should be about learning and about assessment. In some ways this holds true for all forms of assessment – there is a need for a learning dimension to assessment, or what
Boud (2000, p.151) calls ‘sustainable assessment’. Boud argues that assessment practices in higher education ‘tend not to equip students well for the processes of effective learning in a learning society … sustainable assessment encompasses the abilities required to undertake those activities that necessarily accompany learning throughout life in formal and informal settings’ (p.151).

Is an RPL assessment through the portfolio valid?

Andersson (2006, p.40) offers an interesting position on the question of the validity of RPL assessments – be they formative assessments (like the portfolio discussed in this chapter) or summative assessments (like multiple-choice questions): ‘To make claims of validity you have to know what you intend to assess.’ Depending on what is being assessed, Andersson, drawing on the work of Kvale (1996), offers four types of validity: predictive, pragmatic, content and communicative validity. He argues that if the function of RPL through the portfolio is the development of the individual and his or her learning, then pragmatic validity is high because it is related to the formative function of RPL. By way of contrast, the predictive validity of RPL assessment through the portfolio may be low, as it will be difficult to tell how the assessee will do in the programme or course to which she or he has gained access after having completed the portfolio. Despite evidence of statistical validity in psychometric tests, this is generally based on the assumption that all individuals tested come from the same backgrounds, an assumption that cannot be made in South Africa.

Final thoughts

This chapter has foregrounded a number of questions relating to RPL and ways of thinking about acquired knowledge and its assessment. Portfolios as a complementary tool for assessment, particularly in occupational and aptitude testing, are an innovation that will require a variety of shifts. They require an institutional culture that is responsive to subjective orientations to assessment, an orientation not commonly found in South African universities. Using portfolios to assess students calls for assessors who understand psychometric testing and alternative forms of testing such as portfolios, who can cross the boundary between these approaches and then assist in a viable collaboration between different forms of assessment. Portfolios of assessment cannot replace psychometric assessment, as they are focusing on slightly different objectives, but they may complement psychometric assessment and assessment for learning. Messick (1989) reminds us that assessments construct societies, and have consequences for societies. The task before us is to deconstruct and undo the negative effects of and attitudes towards assessment in our society, and to be vigilant about the effects of assessment on society, since, ‘all acts of assessment involve more than is apparent and we must judge them accordingly’ (Boud, 2000, p.166). RPL gives assessees an opportunity to exercise a measure of control over assessment, and is transparent and fair. It
does not discriminate between assessees (as psychometric tests do), and instead discriminates between different levels of learning from experience. While no single approach to portfolios as a means of assessment can be deemed most appropriate, they should be seen as an alternative form of assessing adult students’ prior knowledge – an idea and practice of assessment that is open to change and possibilities. They also hold promise for affirming adult students entering higher education, as they learn about themselves and feel confident as learners and as human beings. In South Africa, where educational assessment under apartheid was synonymous with undermining adults’ sense of themselves as human beings and as learners, individual and collective assessment through portfolios could be one of the thrusts for equity in education. More importantly, entrenched educational inequalities in South Africa compel teachers in higher education to explore alternatives to the logic and practice of assessment, as is evidenced by the chapters in this volume. The challenge is to engage in such an exploration with integrity, and to work responsibly with claims about assessment being objective and fair.

References


