NZARE / AARE JOINT CONFERENCE 1992
SYMPOSIUM ON THE ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Spreading the Word: An On-Line Database of Resources for the
Assessment, Recognition and Accrediting of Prior Learning

Richard Benton & James Swindells
New Zealand Council for Educational Research

ABSTRACT

In 1990 the Maori research section of NZCER made the
recognition of prior learning a major focus of its research
and information activities. In the following three years it
has directly explored the implications of this process in
the areas of social service education and training and the
education of teachers and others involved in pre-school
Maori language centres, while assembling information on the
approaches to assessment, recognition and accrediting of
prior experiential learning internationally. With the help
of funding from the NZ Qualifications Authority, a database
of resources and information on the recognition of prior
learning likely to be relevant to the New Zealand situation
is being developed. The database includes an annotated
bibliography of written materials (from theoretical articles
to guidelines and handbooks used in various tertiary
institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere), and information on
projects and practices planned or implemented by New Zealand
providers. The information is available on-line through the
Te Wahapu electronic bulletin board, a facility set up in
1991 with sponsorship from IBM (NZ) Ltd to promote the
exchange of information relevant to Maori language and
education. This presentation will outline the structure and
content of the database, and will discuss the advantages of
this method of making information on RPL available to
educators, administrators and potential beneficiaries of the
process. (The written version of the presentation is by
Richard Benton; the oral presentation at the Conference will
be made by James Swindells.)

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Many academics, classroom teachers, students and parents alike
are not yet fully aware that developments in telecommunications
and computer technology over the last decade have placed
inestimably rich resources of information and ideas literally at
their fingertips and under their noses. Last year, while in the
United States, I became curious about the origin of fish and
chips: the first fish and chip shop in Los Angeles was about to
be opened, amid great hoopla and excitement. When I got back to
Hawaii, where I was based, I did an on-line search of the
University of California system's library holdings, and
discovered that there was in fact a book on this subject in the
University of California at San Diego's library. I didn't have
time to interloan it through the University of Hawaii library,
and lost the piece of paper I wrote the details on. About a year
later I was listening to a radio programme on Expo 1992, during
which it was revealed that fish and chips originated in Seville
(where they are still prepared and consumed con mucho gusto), and
were introduced from there into Britain by sailors. So one
Saturday morning, when I should have been writing this paper, I
dialled into the Wellington City Council's mainframe, to which I
have access as an external user, and selected the international
library catalogue service. I was connected within a few seconds
to the University of California's library database, typed in
"FIND TITLE FISH CHIPS", and within about 15 seconds had the
information I needed -- the history I had previously encountered,
"Frying Tonight: The Saga of Fish and Chips", by Gerald
Priestland, published in London by Gentry Books in 1972, and also
a recently published, and highly acclaimed social history, John

K. Walton's "Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, 1870-1940" (Leicester University Press, 1992).

There are over 6 million books in the catalogue I was searching, and had I wanted to, I could have searched also the contents of millions more issues of various periodicals for references to matters weightier (or lighter) than fish and chips -- and extended my search to the holdings of dozens of other libraries all round the world. All this without even having to leave the house to go across town to my office.

The library catalogue searches reveal, in the main, published information. But the same principles apply to any kind of information, and not just titles and locations. The actual data and documents can be stored in a computer, and be made available to anyone who needs them. Computer files can of course also be updated constantly, without the need to print an expensive second or third edition of the work in question, and this new information can be made available without any delay at all to those who need it. This aspect of computerised databases accessible through the ordinary telephone system is potentially of tremendous value to people working in a fast growing field, where new information is becoming available daily. Furthermore, because constant revision is possible, people can be given information which is useful, although incomplete, and then come back later for the rest of the story, rather than having to wait around until all the "i"s have been dotted and the "t"s crossed.

Widening Access to Information about the Recognition of Prior LearningPL

In New Zealand at the present time, the recognition, assessment, and accreditation of prior learning is one field of educational endeavour which is in this expansionary mode. It is becoming an increasingly important part of the new approach to tertiary education and training, and is seen as an important instrument of social justice, improving both access and the quality of participation in tertiary education for people who have until now bben shut out of the formal system, or whose learning achievements have been ignored. There is accordingly great interest on the part of educational administrators, faculty members, and potential students for information about the integration of prior learning into the tertiary curriculum. This interest is both practical and theoretical: people want to know more about both the how and the why of the accreditation of prior learning. They also want to know what is going on in New Zealand in the various pilot schemes which have been started in polytechnics, universities and other tertiary institutions.

Freely accessible electronic media offer an ideal way to make
this information available. They save the database organizer the
trouble and expense of printing newsletters, frequently printing
new editions of updated bibliographies, and so on, and they help
to ensure that the latest information is always on tap. It was
with this in mind that Te Wahanga Kaupapa Maori of NZCER, in
partnership with the Kohanga Reo Trust and the New Zealand
Qualifications Authority, began to construct an on-line
bibliography of materials on prior learning likely to be useful
(theoretically or practically) in the New Zealand context, and
also a database of information on projects designed to facilitate
the recognition of prior learning within nationally-recognized
tertiary qualifications.

The RPL databases can be consulted through the Te Wahapu
electronic bulletin board. This facility operates on hardware
donated in 1990 by IBM (NZ) Ltd, and is a forum for the exchange
of information concerning Maori language and Maori education.
There is no charge for access (although donations to help defray
the running costs are appreciated). The menus, however, are all
in Maori, although users have the option of French for background
prompts, and all help screens are either bilingual (English and
Maori) or trilingual (English, French and Maori). Anyone with a
computer, a modem, a phone line and the willingness to learn a
few computer terms in Maori (no more difficult than learning them
in English) can search the RPL databases to their heart's content.

The Structure of the RPL Bibliographic Database

The main database at present is the bibliographic one. This is a
collection of references to books, papers and documents likely to
be useful to people in New Zealand who are interested or involved
in the recognition, assessment or accreditation of prior
learning. At the end of November 1992, this database had 158
entries, ranging from philosophical and theoretical works to
manuals and guidelines for the implementation of RPL and APL
programmes in several countries.

Each entry is arranged in nine sections (these are separate
fields in the database program which generates the on-line
display, but at present each record is treated as a single field
for searches by modem). These are:

    Author;
    Year of publication or preparation;
    Title of document;
    Publication details (or location);
    Priority;

Key words;
Annotation (a brief summary of the contents);
Abstract (or extended commentary);
Date of last revision.

All entries contain the first four sections, and most have also
been assigned key words. The "priority" section contains a
recommendation for people who would like to range more or less
widely over the material available. At present, there are three
priorities identified: "essential reading", "important", and
"additional reading". About half the entries have been tagged in
this way; eventually, all will be, although a few more
subdivisions may be added. It is also planned to include a brief
annotation for each entry, to give people an idea of what the
item is about (especially when this is not obvious from the
title). The longer abstracts and commentaries, however, will be
confined to what constitute, in the compilers' judgements, the
most significant works. An example of a "complete" entry (like
all others, subject to revision at any time) is given in Figure
1.

> MASTERS, Geofferey N. and McCURRY, Doug.
> (1990).
> Competency-Based Assessment in the Professions
> (National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition Research Paper
No. 2). Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

/Important Reading
{AUSTRALIA {ASSESSMENT {PROFESSIONS {COMPETENCY

An examination of assessment in professional occupations,
that discusses what assessment techniques are available and
what they are based on. A clear link is established between
the competency standards of professions and the assessment
technique most appropriate for those competency standards.

 Masters and McCurry develop the agenda of their book
quickly: "to assist professions to develop ... suitable
methods of assessing individuals against national competency
standards; ... to provide advice on assessment methods
likely to be practical and useful (p1). They proceed
through a number of steps as they make their case.
Initially, there is a need to examine the concept
of`national competency standards'. It is argued that these
should be developed by professional experienced in a field,
with an explicit statement of anticipated work outcomes.
Standards are the "minimum acceptable level of candidate
performance" (p18). The development of assessment
techniques, it is concluded, will be linked to the

competency standards of each profession. Various assessments
models are outlined, and the authors recognize that no one
method, in isolation, is able to provide an accurate
reflection of ability. However, it is stated that: "a
greater emphasis on the assessment of workplace skills
rather than theoretical knowledge will imply a greater use
of more direct assessment models based on realistic
professional tasks" (p2). A panel assessment is
recommended, involving a group of professionals observing
and assessing candidates, and then meeting to develop a
common result. The need for stringent assessment standards
is emphasized, to ensure reliability. The same result should
emerge from similar assessments, by different professionals,
in different circumstances. According to the authors,
assessment should not be seen as an end result, but as part
of a process. Assessment should allow the demonstration of
existing competence, decide whether this level meets the
pre-determined, explicit standards, and provide diagnosis
for future professional development.

draft to 20/10/92 (js)

Figure 1: Sample RPL database entry

Searching for Information

Getting to the database requires the user to log on to Te Wahapu,
giving their name and password (new users have to answer a few
extra questions, and do not receive full access to the system
until their identities are verified), and selecting the "database
section" command at the main menu. This brings up a menu of
databases, two of which relate directly to the recognition of
prior learning. For each database there are two options -- an
"on-line" search, which brings up the results of the search in
attractively arranged, colour-coded segments, and an "offline"
search, which produces an ASCII text file (without page-breaks or
other special formatting features) for downloading to your own
computer, where you can peruse it at leisure.

The database is searched by selecting the appropriate command (for
on-line or offline reading), and then at the prompt entering a
sequence of letters or numerals corresponding to a word or part
of a word to be searched for (see Figure 2). The search program
currently used in the database operates on strings of characters
within each record. However, special characters are used which
make it possible to confine the search to either of two fields
(priority or key words). The priority ratings are preceded by a

readings, the sequence "/essential" could be entered at the
prompt.

        Recognition of Prior Learning Database
            Display for On-line Reading

                // Awhina (Help)

        Patopatohia te kupu e kimi ai koe: /essential

        Searching for '/essential' in 'd:\opus\test\dbase03.txt'

            Figure 2. Prompt for search of RPL database

This would produce at least 16 entries. Similarly, "/important"
would produce 30 or so entries tagged in that manner (including
the sample in Figure 1), and "/additional" over 40 others.
The "additional" category is likely to be the future growth area;
for the convenience of users other categories will probably be
added, for example "/background" (for entries which do not deal
directly with the recognition of prior learning, but which
contain important background material for people wishing to
understand this process, particularly in the New Zealand
context). Individual items are likely to go up and down the
scale as the needs of users of the database change.

As is noted at the prompt itself, typing in the string "//" will
summon a comprehensive help file, which contains instructions on
how to do a search (with examples), and information on how the entries
are structured, the "priority" tags, key words (and how to use them),
the way the database is amended and updated, what to do if you cannot
find some information that you need, and the difference between the
on-line reading and downloadable file options.

The other tagged field is that for key words. Each key word is
preceeded by a left brace ("{"), and an up-to-date list of key
words may be obtained by searching for the string "{key". The
key words are intended to help people locate significant
discussions of topics of concern within the field of prior
experiential learning, and materials relating to particular
occupations, courses of study, types of institution or national
education systems. There are over 40 of these already, with the
"top ten" being, in order, assessment, U.S.A., N.Z.,
accreditation, recognition, competency, U.K., Maori, Australia,
and empowerment.

The key word "{NZ" will bring up materials which relate
specifically to New Zealand, regardless of where they were
actually written. However, a wider search, using just the string
"NZ" (without the left brace), or the word "Zealand", would bring
in a number of papers published in New Zealand but not focussed
directly on the New Zealand scene -- for example, Sir Christopher
Ball's address on "Ladders and Links", presented in Wellington in
January 1992. A search for {Australia, with or without the key
word tag, would (in November 1992) have hauled in about a dozen
papers focussed on that country, including one written in New
Zealand.

Since the search program simply matches the sequence of letters
or numbers entered at the prompt, it is possible, by exercising a
little ingenuity, to locate almost any entry related to the topic
you are interested in, regardless of whether or not it has been
tagged with a key word or identified explicitly in some other
way. For example, if you were interested in anything written
about or published by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority,
what "NZQA" failed to reveal would be brought to light by
"Authority". This would include papers given at the 1992
conference mentioned above. One of these, by Gilbert Jessup,
might attract your attention. A search for "Jessup" (or even
"Gilbert") would reveal several more works by this author,
including an article mentioned in the abstract of another book,
but not included as a separate entry in the database.

Fragments of words can be located as easily as complete terms, so
it is usually possible to make a successful search for an author
whose name one is a little unsure of. For example, papers by
Sally Davis could be located in a single search by someone who
did not know her first name, and was unsure as to whether her
surname was "Davis" or "Davies" simply by specifying "Davi" as
the string to search for. In a large database this technique
might result in a mountain of possible names to sift through, but
in this one the relevant papers will quickly be located, among
those by two or three "Davids".

A combination of all three techniques, key words, untagged words,
and word fragments can be used advantageously to narrow or expand
a search. The use of the key word "{assessment", for example,
will net a substantial number of references. About half a dozen
more will be found, however, by just asking for "assessment"
(untagged) or simply "assess". These would include contributions
to books with a major focus on assessment, or wide-ranging
reviews which touch on assessment (which has been noted in the
abstract for the item), but do not have this topic as their major
theme. The key word "{accreditation" will yield about the same
number of entries as its untagged counterpart, and about four

times as many as {credit as a key word (signifying the giving of
course credit in a global way, either because of an equivalence
established between different kinds of formal qualifications, or
for experiential learning which is assumed rather than explicitly
demonstrated). However, a search for any mention of the sequence
"credit" will bring in entries covering the full range of
possible uses of "credit", "accreditation", and related words,
about twice as many as with the two key words combined.

Numerals are valid characters, so searches for recent (or older)
materials are easy; in effect, the date field is directly
accessed through the use of numerals (although of course dates
embedded elsewhere in an entry will also be located during a
search). Over half the materials listed in the database in
November 1992 were written or published after 1988. However, a
search for earlier materials will reveal some of the seminal
books and papers underpinning subsequent developments in the
theory and practice of the recognition of experiential learning.
All the 1970s material, for example, can be summoned by typing in
"197", revealing such classics as the California State
Postsecondary Education Commission's 1976 publication Another
Time, Another Place, Morris Keeton's collection Experiential
Learning: Rationale, Characteristics and Assessment, published
the same year, and Paulo Freire's influential work Cultural
Action for Freedom in the 1972 English edition. The oldest work
included so far is Sir Peter Buck's The Coming of the Maori,
which contains important background material for New Zealand
researchers.

The Project Database

A second RPL database is also under development. This consists
of descriptions and reports of New Zealand projects aimed at
implementing the recognition of prior learning in the context of
university, polytechnic, college of education and other tertiary
qualifications. This database is searched in the same way as its
bibliographic counterpart. Each entry contains a project title,
some descriptors (e.g. "Action research", "Social Work") tagged
for easy retrieval, a brief description, more detailed notes on
the project or activity, notes on available documentation, a
brief comment on the significance of the project, and the name
and address of a contact person. The purpose of this database is
not only to make information about these local projects more
freely available to people with a general interest in the
recognition and accrediting of prior learning, but also to enable
researchers and practitioners to keep in touch with each other.
(A portion of one entry in this database is illustrated in Figure
4.)

Christchurch College of Education and Christchurch
Polytechnic RPL trial 1992

/Action research /comparative study

Lecturer Dale C. Sheehan of the Advanced Studies Department,
Christchurch College of Education, trialled an RPL model
derived from the Broadmeadows TAFE example in two tertiary
institutions among two groups of students: catering
students from the Polytechnic and Primary Teacher Trainees
from the College of Education.

...

Contact: Dale C. Sheehan, Lecturer, Department of Advanced
Studies, Christchurch College of Education, Dovedale Avenue,
Christchurch

js/tk 7/92

Figure 4. Portion of entry in RPL project database

Advantages, Enhancements and Caveats

The most obvious advantage of having a database on-line is its
potential for being up to date. This of course is not
automatically assured, as someone has to do the updating.
Nevertheless, the on-line database will generally be much more up
to date than any paper-based one. Costs of distributing
information are also significantly reduced, as the receiver of
the information is the one who will provide the paper for the
"hard copy" version of the material. Transfer of data by modem
is comparatively fast. At 2400 baud, now a standard transfer
rate, the equivalent of about 6 typed pages can be transmitted in
a minute -- much faster than by fax -- or about 20 pages in
compressed form. Te Wahapu will eventually be using a 14400 baud
modem, which will enable a transfer rate equivalent to around a
hundred pages of text a minute. At these higher speeds, even
long distance calls may cost less than surface postage,
especially for users who program "offline readers" to log on to
the system and collect mail and files automatically.

```
Wa~hi 12: Nga Pa~tai Rangahau
Na:    Hoani Mete
Ma:    Te Kaiwhakahaere          Kupu #9, Nov-04-92 11:08:20
Kaupapa: RPL


MSGID: 3:771/210.0 2af73ea4
Kia ora
   I noticed a reference to a book about the recognition of
prior learning, "From Hegemony to Symphony", in the RPL
database.  Could you tell me how much it costs and where I
could get a copy, please.


%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%%


Na:    Te Kaiwhakahaere
Ma:    Hoani Mete               Kupu #10, Nov-04-92 15:16:44
Kaupapa: RPL


MSGID: 3:771/210.0 2af7409c
REPLY: 3:771/210.0 2af73ea4
Kia ora Hoani.
   The book can be ordered from NZCETSS (the Council for
Education and Training in the Social Services), Department
of Social Welfare, Private Bag 21, Wellington.  They're
sometimes a bit slow off the mark, so follow it up by phone
if you think they're taking too long to reply!  As far as we
know, the price is $15 per copy.
```

Figure 5: Exchange of follow-up messages

Access to a system like Te Wahapu is also much more easily
achieved by many students and most parents and classroom teachers
than mainframe-based systems like the one mentioned at the
beginning of this paper. Furthermore, practically any computer
can be used to communicate with the system (mainframes are
generally more exacting in their requirements), although an IBM-
compatible system with a VGA colour monitor (or better) will
reveal the system's capacities more fully than most
alternatives. Smaller systems like Te Wahapu are also generally
more personal and user-friendly. Although their range of
operation is much more limited in some ways, it is also
international in scope (see Benton 1992). Furthermore, if the
information you seek is not in the database, you can "ask the
librarian", and expect a reasonably prompt, and usually helpful
response. This is rarely an option on larger systems. Users

of the RPL database, for example, are encouraged to follow-up items of interest to them by leaving messages to the system operator, or to fellow users, in the "research messages" section of the bulletin board -- an example of such an exchange is given in Figure 5. It is also possible to scan both the message and file areas of the bulletin board for further information about the recognition of prior learning (or any other topic), and, again, leave a query if the search did not give satisfactory results.

There will always be room for improvement in this or any other system. We are well aware of the current limitations of our search program, for example. There are much more sophisticated programs available (including the one which searches the message areas on Te Wahapu itself). However, we have not yet found any text-oriented database program which is simple, inexpensive (we have no money for software!), user-friendly, can operate with Maori-only prompts and commands, can easily be adapted to a variety of source-files (we run half a dozen other databases through Te Wahapu besides the RPL ones) and can be accessed remotely as a read-only facility through a computer bulletin board without compromising the security of the system. A colleague in India is giving his graduate students the job of writing such a program for us, which will enable the RPL and other databases to be searched in such a way that terms can be combined to expand or limit the scope of a search (e.g., allowing a search for all combinations of "polytech" or "university" with "credit" and "Australia" in a single pass). If we can also get it to highlight the selected terms in context while retaining our elaborate colour coding, and allow searches on specific fields as well, we will have a better search program than most mainframe systems.

In this quest for perfection, however, we have to avoid the temptation of being too clever for our own good. The more sophisticated and complex our programs become, the harder it will be for potential users less sophisticated in the ways of computers to gain the confidence to use productively the facilities we wish to provide for them. "User-friendliness" and "simplicity" must remain paramount criteria. So must open access and minimal cost. Crawford's Law of Telecommunications should never be forgotten:

> If it costs anything at all -- if there are ANY online fees or long distance charges involved -- 90% of potential users won't even consider buying a modem, 6% will use it only sparingly, and the remaining 4% will be charging it to someone else. (Crawford 1990, p.2)

Thanks to IBM and the generosity of many corporate and individual donors who have underwritten the running expenses, Te Wahapu can operate as an open access, no cost computer-based communications system for anyone interested in Maori language and Maori education. When the New Zealand Qualifications Authority decided to fund the development of the on-line database on the recognition of prior learning, it stipulated that there must be free public access to the information. This is a very encouraging development at a time when the "user pays" philosophy has so often resulted in the restriction rather than the expansion of a citizen's opportunities to know.

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