

## 'Re-purposing MOOCs for academic credit: a student and tutor perspective'

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### **Jon's story: Part One**

I became interested in MOOCs in about 2006 when I first stumbled across MIT's OpenCourseware. I thought it a useful resource and included a link on e-learning platforms I created for WBIS distance learners. No students ever used it.

A few years later in 2014 I noticed that things had moved on. I presented a paper at the Staff Conference that year whose sole purpose was to show other academics what had become available. There were few in the room but it was an eye opener for those present.

Since then I have kept tabs on new developments. I may be wrong but in the past 18 months I detect a waning of interest. The rather hysterical noises proclaiming the end of universities as we know them have quietened down somewhat. For the most part MOOCs have settled into becoming the marketing/branding devices they were always intended to be. Like many other web based services, there is a lot of anxiety about how you make money from them.

Most of the literature is about their production and broader significance. My own interest is in how they can be exploited- or to use the jargon term- 'repurposed'. Repurposing takes two forms. First is the use by tutors to replace or supplement other means of delivery such as lectures or online provision. My own interest is how they can be used as the basis for the Accreditation of Prior Learning- in other words how they can be converted into academic credit. It is this I now turn.

## **APL: General considerations**

APL is known by a number of different terms- usually Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or in the US and Canada Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). It has three purposes:

- As the basis for admission to a programme where a student lacks formal entry qualifications
- As part of an accredited programme of study (ie used for the awarding of credit)
- As the basis for the awarding of an named, accredited programme of study

The practice originated in the US from the 1930s, led by educationalists inspired by the works of John Dewey and later Carl Rogers. Both were interested in the way that individuals learn directly from experience rather than in formal educational settings. This was recognised as having value especially in vocational education where practitioners often have a lot of practical experience without obtaining formal qualifications. Initially APL was only used as the basis for admission to programmes, in the early days on the basis of an exam. This has largely been superseded by the use of portfolios, documenting the learning attainments of practitioners. From the outset APL was largely used by adults rather than younger people- a group whose knowledge, expertise and needs were hitherto ignored on conventional programmes. Prior to World War Two practice was on a very small scale in the US but was given a boost after 1945. Many demobilised GIs had received technical instruction in the armed forces but had not had the time to achieve formal qualifications. US universities therefore adapted their admissions practices so that they could enrol on Bachelor programmes.

Practice gradually spread, especially in the 1960s and 1970s where it was seen as a way of enabling previously excluded social groups into the formal higher education system. This happened in the US and also South Africa where it was used as a means to enter Africans onto degree programmes who lacked formal qualifications. In the early 1970s the Center for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) was established as a charitable trust to actively engage more academic tutors. One of the 1960s generation of British educational reformers, Norman Evans worked for CAEL and upon his return to the UK founded a British equivalent- the Learning from Experience Trust (LET). With the help of a grant from the former Manpower Services

Commission in 1986 what was then Chester College began awarding credit for the work placements its undergraduate students had been undertaking since 1986. Ten years later the WBIS programme was created for those in the workplace, rather than full time undergraduates. WBIS is essentially an experiential learning programme so that APL is an integral feature. WBIS does not just have a formal entry requirement so APL is used by many students as part of their programme of study, supplemented by current experiential learning and where appropriate more traditional subject based learning. The adoption of the European Qualification Framework with common understandings of credit, levels and so on has greatly assisted the process of adopting APL procedures.

### **APL practices**

Almost all UK universities have provision within their regulations to allow credit to be obtained from prior learning. There have been no recent studies in England but there is a wealth of evidence that here as in many other nations outside the US there is relatively little use of APL by tutors.

It is not possible to be definitive about why this is so but we can identify some major barriers:

- First is the issue of the student's experience being compatible with the learning outcomes for a programme or module and at the appropriate level. Very few programmes have the flexibility to adapt their learning outcomes to the experience or requirements of the student.
- While many academics are sympathetic to the idea of APL there is scepticism about aspects of practice. There is also difficulty integrating practical knowledge into a formal programme of learning where the emphasis is on more theoretically based knowledge.
- Few academic tutors are well versed in procedures and practices and may find them daunting. Similarly students are usually unaware that the regulations permit APL and so make few demands for change.

Given these constraints two studies have concluded that the use of APL in England is heavily concentrated in Work Based Learning departments, such as the Centre for Work Related Studies.

In contrast to earlier times when the pressure for APL came from tutors concerned with opening education up for excluded groups, in recent times pressure to introduce more APL has come from organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD and European Union, where it has acquired a new name- the

Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNIL). Policy makers are concerned that formal qualifications have not kept pace with the requirements for relevance in the what is referred to as the 'Knowledge society' - especially in relation to work- so that much of peoples' most important learning achievements are not formally credit bearing and therefore transferable.

'Informal learning' refers to what we would normally call experiential learning- the day to day, unplanned, incidental accumulation of learning based upon practical experience. 'Non-formal learning' is planned, structured and often formally delivered. It might even be assessed but it is outside the formal education system and so is not credit bearing. Examples include formal CPD events for professional bodies, programmes created by organisations for their employees and training delivered by specialist companies. 'Validation' refers to process of converting informal and non-formal learning into formal awards or credit.

While there is pressure from politicians for change there appears to be relatively little change in practice in countries like the UK where universities enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy. Guidance from the QAA has undoubtedly resulted in universities adapting their regulations but this appears to have little impact on practice.

### **APL practices at Chester**

University of Chester regulations allow students to obtain up to two thirds of their award using past learning. As far as I am aware APL is used in Health and education but I am going to restrict my remarks to practice in the Centre for Work Related Studies where it is used extensively on the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme. Unlike conventional programmes WBIS does not start from the premise of subject discipline but instead develops awards and curricula tailored to the learning requirements of those in the workplace.

On WBIS APL comes in two varieties- Certificated (APCL) and Experiential (APEL). APCL enables students with credit awarded within the past five years to import that credit into a WBIS pathway provided it is consistent with the level of learning and agreed learning outcomes for (where credit is non-specific) or module. Experiential learning, APEL can also be translated into academic credit. This can be either Informal learning- that which arises incidentally from everyday experience, especially in the workplace or Non-formal- structured learning, such as is often undertaken as part of CPD but not

accredited. From a student perspective, both have clear advantages over conventional modules. APCL enables students to transfer learning from one context to another for free as there are no fees for such credit. APEL allows students to obtain credit for learning from their professional experience and fees are half those for taught modules.

As we have already noted part of the resistance to the use of APL originates with practices rather than theory. APL as practised in CWRS overcomes many of these objections. The dominant model of APL assessment is known as ‘Credit exchange’. The student produces evidence and some sort of academic judgement is made as to the volume and level of learning. One of the difficulties is that it is very difficult to advise students on what is appropriate for a portfolio. The result is that students tend to think that more is better and so produce very large and unwieldy portfolios. My abiding memory of the process (in another university) is one of old carrier bags stuffed with lots of bits of paper which tutors are then expected to make sense of.

Having received the portfolio it is then extremely difficult to make judgements about volume and level to be awarded. What usually happens is that whatever students produce is deemed to be appropriate for whatever volume of credit and level of learning had been thought right in the first place. So if a programme at Level 7 has 20 credits as an option for APEL, lo and behold, what the student produces is thought to be appropriate.

Given the difficulties inherent in the process, the usual strategy to justify academic decisions is to create some sort of assessment committee, preferably involving senior academics. This does not make the judgements any easier or transparent but at least it confers authority. There may be a viva or critical dialogue to add some degree of criticality but in general safety is thought to reside in numbers. This may take up a lot of time but at least the outcome can be presented to an external examiner as rigorous. The external will almost certainly never have the time to wade through the carrier bags or watch the video of the critical dialogue, so this is important.

A viva may engender some reflective thinking but it is not informed by the knowledge we hold in academia. All that the student knows in the credit transfer model is what they knew already- there is no new learning from reading the relevant literature. Moreover the credit exchange model does not allow students to develop academically. This is a major weakness if the student aims to complete their studies by more conventional means.

Beyond these practical objections there are some more philosophical problems. Let us consider levelness. In a conventional module this is determined by level descriptors but if our only guide is a portfolio and description of learning this becomes problematic. It is usually assumed that position corresponds with learning level so that a team leader is likely to be awarded credit at Level 7. Does that mean the level of achievement is the same for all team leaders and that those below them cannot achieve learning at the same level?

For all these reasons and more at CWRS we do not use this method and instead use what is called the 'Development model' of APEL. Our APEL claims are bound together in a single folder. In the appendices are documents to support the claims being made. These are kept to a minimum and are only required for brief checking by the assessing tutor. At the front is a brief description of what the claim is for, cross referenced with the appendices. There then follows an analysis which uses authoritative literature to reflect upon what has been done so far and try to reveal fresh insights. That is theoretical and empirical literature is used to provide fresh insights into lived experience, obeying established academic conventions. The reflective review is assessed on a Pass/Fail basis only, not the portfolio. Standard academic level descriptors and assessment criteria are applied. Since the two are bound together the claim is manageable and can be easily viewed by a second marker and external examiner. There is no requirement to convene a committee or APL tutor specialist. The reflective analysis requires new learning and academic development.

If there is a divide between Credit exchange and Developmental assessment models there are two varieties of practice in respect of incorporating APL in the curriculum- 'Procrustean' and 'Trojan horse'. In the former model the curriculum is fixed so that any past learning of the student must be in conformity even if it is broadly consistent with the programme learning outcomes. One way of accommodating APL in a fixed curriculum is to have a module(s) for experiential learning which can be achieved either through past or present learning and indeed this is the approach of most who accept APL. By contrast the Trojan horse model (these are not my terms) has flexibility in the curriculum to include whatever APL the student can bring, provided it is consistent with the programme outcomes. Needless to say a negotiable programme like WBIS uses the Trojan horse model. The first module for most WBIS students ('Self Review and Negotiation of Learning') requires students to review their learning achievements as a prelude to making formal APL claims. A curriculum and award title is then negotiated between student and tutor to reflect the content of past and planned learning.

## **Using MOOCs for APEL claims**

During the past five years or so we have seen the creation of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs or rather the certificates which are generated as a result of the completion of an automated assessment, are an example of Non-formal learning. They provide highly structured and sequenced learning with quality online learning materials standard but they do not bear credit.

Most of the literature in respect of MOOCs has concentrated on such matters as their creation and whether they will supplant traditional degrees. Rather less attention has been paid to ‘repurposing’- adaptation by tutors for their own uses. The main use is as source material either to replace or supplement other forms of delivery such as lectures. The only study I have seen on repurposing found that few academics appear to have much use for them. It is not clear to me whether this is because there is limited awareness of what is available or other issues. The study was only small (JISC funded) but found that tutors did not find the materials compatible with prescribed curricula. In other words it was assumed that the materials should adapt to existing practice rather than practice adapt to the availability of freely available, high quality learning materials.

From my own observations I think there are also other practical issues. MOOCs are overwhelmingly developed and delivered by established universities, who for the main part have little incentive to simply give away their materials. Why they do it at all is something of a mystery. Many have been paid by philanthropists to do it or in the case of the Open University, encouraged by Government. For their own part it is partly it is to do with strengthening and spreading the brand and also a kind of loss leader. It is hoped students will be enticed onto full time programmes as a result of participation on the MOOC. Given their function it is not surprising that few MOOC units have very much real content. We estimate that units on Futurelearn, the Open University’s MOOC, are only about four credits. Like most MOOC programmes they are best regarded as ‘tasters’- a brief introduction to a subject with little depth. Nor are they truly ‘free’. Open Educational Resources (OER) learning materials are genuinely free in the sense that the originating body signs away its rights to intellectual property ownership by creating a Creative Commons license. In the case of most MOOCs ownership is retained by the university which created it.

There are some exceptions to the general pattern, most notably the Saylor Foundation. Saylor is not associated with a university but is a genuinely

philanthropic enterprise designed to enable anyone anywhere to obtain a university type learning experience completely free of charge. The materials are organised into units with learning outcomes at different levels. They are created and maintained by leading academics and comprise a series of readings, videos and other materials with automated assessment. Saylor and the authors of the materials do not retain copyright so they are genuinely free.

## **PRESENT SAYLOR**

Having seen what they have to offer and asking the opinions of colleagues in multiple disciplines (all reacted favourably) I was keen to see if any of my students were prepared to use Saylor to make APEL claims. I do not have many undergraduate students but one I thought would be a suitable candidate.

### **Tim's story**

I first came across the WBIS programme in 2010, having previously left formal education after my GCSEs in 1998.

I work as a business manager, for a small civil and structural engineering consultancy in Colwyn Bay, north Wales. After starting in this role, my employers were keen for me to continue to develop my skills. My research subsequently led me to the Centre for Work Related Studies at University of Chester.

Prior to enrolling on WBIS, I had long held an ambition to further my studies, but lacked the academic prerequisites and financial resources to study full-time. Like many in my situation, my career had begun to stall in my late twenties. This meant that discovering an accredited degree programme, which offered total flexibility on course content, and method of study, was something of a revelation.

I chose to study Business and Project Management, and agreed a course of modules from across a range of study methods. These included work-based, conventionally taught, and, as Jon has already discussed, APEL.

When it came time to agree my Level 5 programme of study, Jon explained his research into MOOCs, and enquired if I would be interested in applying this form of study to a piece of reflective experiential learning. The flexibility to



choose my own course materials was very appealing, and I agreed to select three MOOC courses and submit them for approval.

At this point, the sheer number of MOOCs available began to dawn on me. I quickly distilled my list of options to a few major providers, based on my discussions with Jon.

I settled on three courses provided by the Saylor Foundation: Advertising and Promotion, Principles of Microeconomics, and Risk Management.

I ultimately chose Saylor because of the nature of their course materials. The condensed written notes they provide seemed to lend themselves more favourably to applying the knowledge directly in a work-based context. Other providers space the learning out, often in a linear or interactive fashion.

The philanthropic motivations of Saylor themselves was also a factor in my choice. As Jon has already covered, many MOOCs are now thinly veiled sales opportunities for paid course providers or established universities.

I used the knowledge gained from each of the Saylor modules to prepare APEL claims, based on my application of the learning to my workplace. These were submitted together with the module completion certificates provided by Saylor, as evidence.

Ultimately, I was surprised at the similarity of the process to previous APEL claims I had made. Whilst the course materials and my notes taken while studying them served as key texts, I still needed to research and read beyond them to demonstrate the learning that had taken place.

From a student's perspective, APEL already offers almost unlimited flexibility. Integrating a MOOC into the process felt like a pragmatic recognition and extension of this. It was certainly a process I would recommend, and happily undertake again.

### **Jon's story: Part two**

I was very pleased indeed with the way Tim used Saylor. We ought to note that had we been using the credit exchange model we could have used Saylor in the way we did. The developmental approach allows students to draw upon non-formal learning experiences to create new learning in the way Tim has described. But this is not the end of the story; there have been two further developments.

First at CWRS we thought there might be people out there who have completed a MOOC automated assessment who are looking for accreditation so our website includes an invitation for individuals to speak with us about it.

During the past year there has only been one person who has contacted us about this and it is not exactly the sort of person we had in mind. This person works for a company who have created what is known as the 'Athlete's Learning Gateway' for the International Olympic Committee. The MOOC has online learning materials aimed at elite athletes, coaches and support workers but it is not accredited. The IOC would like to see it accredited and we are currently in discussions with them about this.

The second consequence is it has spurred me on to find out if anyone else has been doing this sort of thing. As mentioned the use of APL is heavily concentrated in WBL departments so during the summer I sent out a questionnaire to every university in England and Wales where I believe WBL is present. WBL is not a subject area recognised by HESA so it has always been difficult to know who is doing it, let alone who is responsible in each institution. In all I think there are about 40, probably half of whom are engaged in a substantial way.

The results I am presenting are interim. They do not include all respondents as there has not been time to do anything further at this stage.

## **PRESENT RESULTS**

### **Further steps**

The story is not yet complete. The survey has to be written up for publication and I am not sure if Tim wants to do some further research in the area. There is no sign of any other university doing what we have done. The OU considered it during the last year but have opted to only assess their own Futurelearn materials.

The study has highlighted the need for further research in the field of APL. It is over 10 years since there was a survey in England. The Learning from Experience Trust is moribund in Birkbeck and there is no active centre for the dissemination of practice as there is in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.