

The Long Reach of CAEL: Assessment of Prior Learning in the European Union

By Norman Evans, Trustee Learning from Experience Trust, formerly its Founding Director

*Norman Evans is Visiting Professor at Goldsmiths College, University of London and has had a close association with CAEL since 1979. He has recently co-edited a new publication, *Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities, for the European Universities Lifelong Learning Network (EULearn)*. The book gives an account of the different ways the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) is being used in European countries. In the following article, Evans summarizes some of the recent efforts to promote prior learning assessment in the EU and the role that this book will play in that work.*

Assessment of Prior Learning (APEL), PLA to you, is new to Europe. So like anyone else who attempts to promote the practice and theory of the assessment of prior experiential learning, the European Union (EU) has to find ways of answering the fundamental question: how to demonstrate its academic reliability and validity in ways which can refute the objections of all comers, however skeptical or hostile. A new book, *Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities*, is part of an attempt to answer that question under the auspices of the European University Lifelong Learning Network (EULLearn) which is funded by the European Commission.

Following the CAEL Model in the UK – The Early Years

In the beginning CAEL had three answers to that question. Do it, report it, disseminate it. Through the R and D period of the Co-operative for Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL first operated under this name from 1974 to 1976), and then the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL's name at the time of its incorporation in 1976), the results of "doing it" were put in the public domain for all to see. Dissemination came through seminars, conferences, and the skillful initiative of Morris Keeton in publishing twenty volumes of *New Directions in Experiential Learning* with Jossey Bass, a series he edited with CAEL's current President and CEO, Pamela Tate. CAEL's strength and reputation has grown from those sound deep roots.

In 1979, I first set out with Morris Keeton and John Strange to attempt to introduce APEL to the UK through our organization, the Learning from Experience Trust. We attempted as nearly as possible to copy CAEL. Learning from Experience Trust "did it" in as many different areas as possible; "reported it" in published reports; and, wherever possible, used a budget line for a free distribution of those reports. CAEL supported this effort by contributing to seminars and conferences and through the scholar exchange program for professional and institutional development.

The Challenge of "Doing It" in the EU

No such pattern is possible in the EU. To the best of my knowledge, serious interest in APEL began from a Keynote speech I gave in Estonia in 2002. But with its twenty-five different countries, their different cultures, different education systems, and different rules and regulations set by governments, the EU has no overriding structure, nor NGOs like CAEL or the Trust. EULLearn is an imaginative

device, in the absence of such organizations, for convening meetings of like-minded people under three themes: management of lifelong learning, networking for lifelong learning, and APEL in lifelong learning.

Approach to Promoting APEL in the EU

Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities is the work of that third group. EULLearN was a three year project. Within that short time it was vital and urgent to try to find ways of propelling APEL into mainstream thinking within the lifelong learning community. There was no possibility of following the example of CAEL or the Trust – doing it, reporting it, disseminating it. But following the example of CAEL and the Trust the idea took hold that the next best thing was to get a book in the public domain to promote prior learning assessment, despite the newness of the concept. Whatever its shortcomings, as a freebie the book is an attempt to send APEL messages as widely as possible throughout the EU.

The book has three main parts: a discussion of the wider context for experiential learning, practices in European universities, and meeting the challenges of Lifelong Learning. Ten contributions are included from eight different countries. Four of the contributions were from the UK where there are proven APEL stories to tell.

The Initial Challenges in Making This Book

One of the many challenges in producing the book was that there was no common pattern of activities to describe. Anglo Saxon institutional autonomy was at one end of the spectrum (“do it if you want to”). Mediterranean institutions experience a similar permissiveness from government, but there, tutors play the pivotal role in spotting opportunities for their students. Many of the Eastern European states have the experience of centralized government as under Soviet control. In Estonia, for example, APEL is not permitted by government at bachelor’s but is at master’s level. In Lithuania it is not permitted at all. France, meanwhile, is an example of a country whose centralized government fully supports APEL (or VAE in France). There, legislation and instructions to universities stipulate that VAE is a civic right for all who ask for it, and it is weighted heavily towards opportunities for employment. A university in Italy goes straight for the recognition of formal and informal learning towards the award of credits at the university. The Netherlands university incorporates it in programs for refugees. In Finland, APEL can help experienced trades workers become qualified teachers. And in the UK, as in the U.S., APEL/PLA for academic credit is standard practice but increasingly emphasis is placed on work-based learning.

As with any book, the central question was: who is the audience? The answer was a very diverse group. Governments, civil servants, and politicians were one obvious audience. Rectors and presidents of universities would also be addressed, to encourage them to take APEL seriously. The audience was also academics who needed information, encouragement, and support. Administrators and employers might also have an interest in the topic. The answer was to produce something readable for all of these audiences as well as for the European Commission in Brussels.

The Importance of Language and Terminology

It was indeed a challenge to make the book readable for such a variety of potential readers. The most basic editing required close attention to language (the book is in English), to ensure that the language used meant what it was supposed to mean and to untangle convoluted expressions.

Different terminology also presented problems. Various the terms “Recognition,” “Assessment,” and “Accreditation” appear throughout the text. Some in the EULLearN group believed that using different terms was bound to cause confusion. Being so accustomed to the use of PLA, RPL, APEL, APL and more in different parts of the world, I found the anxiety confusing in itself; a cultural difference. Moreover the simple case that *recognition* has to precede *assessment*—without which there can be no *accreditation*—found little favor. Any one of those three words could imply all three. Despite the desire of some for consistency in terminology, it proved to be unattainable. Procedurally, trying to have semantic consistency would mean rewriting many chapters with the risk of distorting meaning.

Intellectually, the problem was much more serious. It would mean attempting to override the cultural context in which the terms were used. In some countries, words are enshrined in government legislation. In others, usages are long established. And some, like the UK, made it up as they went along. The solution was to expand on those references by adding a chapter in the first section: “Words, Practices and Culture.”

The Result

In the particular field of the assessment of prior experiential learning, the book stands as an example of Anglo Saxon, Mediterranean, and Northern/Eastern Europeans trying to work together, and, perhaps, an example of the inevitable tensions that come with that kind of cross-cultural partnership. In addition, it shows how the early work of CAEL not only helped launch the Learning from Experience Trust in the UK but through it, is helping to lay the foundations for APEL (PLA) work in Europe. Like CAEL, the Trust contributes to seminars and conferences and through a scholar exchange program for EU participants to study APEL in UK universities.