Panel title: “The South African National Qualifications Framework, and mobility between education, training, development and work: four aspects”

Presentation sub-title: “Exploring the recognition of prior learning: assessment device and specialized pedagogic practice”

Linda Cooper, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Co-authors: Alan Ralphs, University of Western Cape; Kessie Moodley, Workers College; Karen Deller, Prior Learning Centre

Background to and Rationale for the Research

RPL was first introduced to the South African education and training system as a principle that was closely aligned to three key elements of the national policy discourse after 1994. Firstly, as part of the political discourse of transformation, to redress past injustices and ensure effective access to learning for those who were excluded by the policies and practices of apartheid; secondly, as part of a discourse of accreditation and lifelong learning, to render explicit and certifiable knowledge and skills that are acquired experientially at work or in contexts other than formal schooling or higher education; and thirdly, as part of the discourse of an integrated National Qualifications Framework (NQF), to enhance the flexibility and articulation capabilities of the system with reference to all forms of learning and the development of a national credit accumulation and transfer scheme.

The original thinking about RPL drew for its inspiration and design on the experiences of specialists and practitioners within South Africa and from around the world (NTB, 1994) mostly in higher education but with some applications in vocational education, trade testing, and workforce development. Its inclusion as a founding principle of the NQF raised many expectations that with the necessary standards and assessment expertise it would be widely applied and recognised thus helping to build an inclusive system of lifelong learning within and across the conventional boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal learning. However its implementation has proved a lot more costly and complex than was anticipated and its value in validating claims of equivalence across different knowledge domains has come under critical review.

This is reflected in a growing body of experience and research which suggests that although RPL has not fulfilled its promise as a fast-tracking assessment device, its value as a specialised set of practices for navigating access to new learning opportunities within and across different learning pathways seems worth further exploration. This research reflects continuity in the search for what Judy Harris (2000) referred as an “optimally inclusive” model of RPL in South Africa: from its first association with the espoused efficiencies of a standardised outcomes-based

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1 National Training Board. The Recognition of Prior Learning: Current Thinking and Status in South Africa. Document of Work Committee 9 National Training Board.
assessment through to the current proposition for its reformulation as a specialised pedagogy for engaging with the complexities of knowledge, curriculum and assessment across different learning pathways and contexts.

The concept of RPL as a specialised practice is not new in the literature. It has to do with the relatively unconventional processes that make it possible for participants to navigate between different learning and assessment practices and to evidence their prior learning in a new language or curriculum framework. The starting assumption of this project was that RPL is not only a device for measuring equivalence and allocating common currency (credits); it is itself a pedagogical practice with distinctive purposes and rules of description that regulate what knowledge is to be recognised and how is it to be represented in different contexts. In this sense it is always about the sociologies of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000) and related sources of epistemological authority (Michelson, 2006); about ways of learning and the reifications thereof produced in different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998); about the different dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2003) through which learners engage and negotiate their participation in different practices (Billet, 2004); about recognising the sociological separation between theoretical and everyday concepts, but also the pedagogic relation between them (Guile, 2006).

Much of the RPL research to date had been done on separate tracks, most of it in the higher education sector, much less in the trade and occupational sectors, and very little in trade unions and community-based organisations. This suggests a sector-based characterisation of RPL practices: assessment and certification in the occupational sectors, portfolio development and alternative access in the formal education sector, critical pedagogy and negotiated curricula in civil society.

This research project involves a collaborative exploration of RPL practices within and across these boundaries. Researchers at four different sites of practice are involved in the study. Between them they include a private FET College, two public universities and one college which specialises in educational programmes for trade unions and community organisations. All the researchers are also active participants in RPL-related practices at their institution. The study focuses on the complex mediations of knowledge, learning and assessment that are inherent in the design and implementation of RPL practices in these different contexts and the institutional conditions under which some of these practices have been able to go to scale and others not. It will also include a comparative exploration of the biographical data and learning narratives of three or four of the participants at each of the sites. This should provide a rich source of qualitative information for understanding learners and their socially located engagements in navigating their way in and across different activity systems and learning pathways.

The merits of such a study lies not only in its study of RPL practices across different knowledge and learning domains, but also in its assumptions about the differentiated nature of knowledge and its recognition of the complex role RPL can play in enhancing articulation of different learning achievements in and across different domains.

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2 This is a useful term coined by Prof Elana Michelson in formulating the title and purpose of a symposium we gave at the 5th International Researching Work and Learning Conference in Cape Town, December 2007. It resonates with Billets notions of “negotiated participation” but also allows for positions in a more contested epistemological terrain.
Research Objectives

The first objective of this four-year research project is to bring researchers from different contexts and sites of practice into a cross-sectional study of their practices and in this way to begin to forge a common theoretical framework for understanding the specialised nature of the practice and its development in relation to the changing policy frameworks of the NQF and its constituent councils.

The second objective is to explore the nature of the practices that are located in and across these different boundaries with specific reference to (a) the epistemological assumptions they make about experiential learning and about qualifications; b) the specialised nature of the pedagogical practices which they engage; c) the organisational and institutional contexts (activity systems) in which they are implemented, and d) the conditions under which some of these practices operate on a large scale.

A third objective is to understand the nature and impact of RPL practices in different contexts through a comparative study of the biographical data, learning histories, and progress of those who participate in these processes in different sites of practice. This is the view from below, a view which has not been the subject of much systematic research to date but which would hopefully reflect the affordances and restrictions of different RPL practices on learners’ lives.

Research Questions

The search for an effective “optimally inclusive”\(^3\) model of RPL remains a priority in South Africa. The overall question for this research project is: Under what terms and conditions, in the South African context, could RPL serve as a more effective strategy for widening epistemological access and authority in the system of education in SA, and for taking these strategies to scale in different contexts? Under that overall question, the following research questions were proposed:

1. How effective are different RPL policies and practices for mediating the complexities of knowledge recognition and certification in and across different learning pathways and communities of practice?

2. In what ways do current RPL practices reproduce or transform the provision of new learning opportunities of those whose prior learning histories were severely disrupted due to social, political and economic factors beyond their control?

3. What needs to change for RPL to become a more optimally inclusive and effective practice in the workplace, in higher and further education provision, in mediating access and credit transfer across different contexts and learning pathways in a differentiated but interdependent NQF?

4. How does experiential learning feature in the representation of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice?

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\(^3\) Optimally inclusive as in the national policy objectives of access, equity and success
5. What social, cognitive and therapeutic effects do different RPL practices have on the learning identities of those who benefit from these practices in the workplace, union and in formal education?

**Research Methodology**

The initial phases of the research included a comprehensive literature review which, as indicated above, confirmed that limitations have emerged both in the design and implementation of RPL procedures and practices: whereas RPL was first promoted for its cost effectiveness and efficiency, practitioners and learners have had to deal with a whole range of language, learning and epistemological challenges that require a specialised pedagogical approach, including the provision of extensive advice and information, and not simply a battery of assessment tests to resolve.

The second phase of this research project involved a qualitative, cross-sectional, study of RPL practices across four different locations. A brief review of each of these research sites and some of the initial findings in each, is given below. Four lines of inquiry provided the basis for the analysis of data from the four case studies (with different emphases in each of the cases):

- **Knowledge**: The relationship between knowledge gained through experience and knowledge codified in qualifications. What knowledge is valued or excluded in the practice and how does it shape the nature of the practice? How strong are the boundaries between formal academic knowledge and experiential learning and how are they maintained in and through the practice?

- **Pedagogy**: The content, methods (teaching tools, rules, language, learning relations) and processes used in all aspects of RPL provision. How do these practices mediate adult learner participation or exclusion across the continuum of formal and informal learning? Do these practices favour some socio-economic categories of learners more than others?

- **Institutional Context**: The systems, rules and resources governing RPL provision in different institutional contexts. In what ways do institutional cultures, policies, rules, fees etc impact on the inclusive or exclusive nature of the practice? Do they favour some socio-economic categories of learners more than others?

The third phase of the research project has yet to be carried out; it will comprise biographical and narrative research to be conducted with a select sample of participants at each location in order to explore their learning histories and experiences of RPL processes, and to follow the learning trajectory of these learners in relation to their changing identities at work, home, study and organisational base. The line of enquiry here will be:

- **Learner Agency**: Biographical profiles, socio-economic status, cultural dispositions, and strategy of learners as they engage RPL provision in its different forms. What ‘affordances’ and ‘limitations’ do learners bring, and how does this affect their participation in these practices?
Research Sites and Focus

The cross-sectional case studies were of existing, relatively well-established practices at different sites including two higher education institutions, one private provider of vocational/occupational qualifications, and one community college which offers training programmes for trade union and community activists.

RPL Pedagogy and Access to undergraduate study in higher education

The first site of research focused on RPL into undergraduate study in a large, comprehensive university. It built on a large body of research on alternative access routes into higher education for mature learners who do not meet the conventional entry level requirements for admission to undergraduate study. The focus in this study was on the comparative merits and specialised pedagogies involved in the design and implementation of two common forms of this provision, namely Standardised Admissions Tests and a Portfolio Development Course (PDC). The study acknowledged that current policy and the absence of state funding for RPL provision in the public universities favours the use of admissions testing over the more expensive and time consuming portfolio development course, but it set out to explore the assumptions and implications of this position with reference to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that these pedagogical practices afford to different constituencies of learners.

The report on the first phase of this study (Ralphs, 2011) provides a rich description of the origins and evolution of RPL policy and programmes at the university for the period 2001 – 2010, and a comparison of the admission, retention and success rates of students admitted to the university via the two different routes. Initial findings of a tracer study that compares the success rates of PDC and Admissions Test students respectively in their subsequent undergraduate studies show that PDC students perform better than their counterparts who gained access through Admissions Testing. This appears to confirm the advantages of the more explicitly developmental nature of the PDC over the espoused efficiencies of the assessment-led Admissions Tests. The report highlights a number of enabling and constraining features of the design and delivery of the PDC in what is characterised as a relatively successful “boundary crossing” pedagogic practice. The report also explores conditions that led some PDC participants to exit the programme prematurely and points to the complex interface between the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of the realities of life in which people live.

A Curriculum model for access to post-graduate study

This research site focused on developing an RPL model for access into post-graduate study, in particular, those programmes that have an applied, professional or vocational orientation. The study is based at a research-focused institution which historically has not been welcoming of RPL; those few programmes that have implemented RPL have tended to be postgraduate diplomas, reinforcing the argument that RPL is often more successful at post graduate levels where curricula are professionally or vocationally oriented and more flexibly delivered. The first phase of the research aimed to explore models of RPL currently in practice as well as document
academics’ views towards RPL with the longer term goal of putting in place a more generic RPL programme into postgraduate study at the institution.

The report on this first phase of the research (Cooper, 2011) details processes of RPL into three post-graduate diploma/masters programmes: in Adult Education, Management Studies, and Disability Studies. Initial findings were that the three programmes adopt different models of RPL, but that the key differences lie not in the RPL methods used but rather in the relationship between the RPL process and the mainstream curriculum. In both the Management Studies and Disability Studies programmes, which have a strong applied orientation and where staff enjoy relative autonomy in their decision-making from faculty authorities, the RPL process has a strong developmental character and is integrated (in different ways) with the mainstream programme. In the Adult Education programmes on the other hand, pressure from faculty authorities to foreground research capability has led to a more conventional RPL process which is far more assessment oriented. Coupled with findings from a survey of academics across six faculties, the findings suggest that while the disciplinary context or knowledge domain is an important factor in shaping the possibilities of and limitations to RPL into postgraduate study, the faculty/departmental organisational culture and individual dispositions/ideological orientations of academics also present key affordances and barriers.

**A Vocational Model of RPL**

The development of an effective and inclusive model of RPL for occupationally directed qualifications is the focus of the research at the site of a private provider of RPL. The research project here focused on the ‘Basic Business’ skills of employees from three different workplaces; it sought to test an RPL-friendly curriculum model that could be applied in the South African workplace under the evolving framework of “fit for purpose” qualifications as envisaged by the new Quality Council for Trade and Occupations (QCTO). The project drew on previous doctoral research in the insurance sector which highlighted the pedagogical specialisations involved in the design and implementation of workplace-based RPL assessment systems (logic model) and practices and aimed to further develop and evaluate RPL advising and assessment tools relevant to the new qualification standards and specifications of the QCTO.

One of the key issues that was critically interrogated in the first phase of the research in this site was the potential consequences fragmenting the RPL assessment process along the lines of the different components of a qualification – ie. ‘knowledge’; ‘practical’; “workplace” and ‘fundamental’ capabilities. The research found that this was pedagogically counterproductive and significantly undermined RPL candidates’ confidence in what their capabilities are, as well as their motivation to participate in the RPL process. Significantly, the results also underscored the argument that RPL cannot be treated as simply an assessment practice but involves complex mediation between different representations of knowledge and learning (see Deller, 2011).

**Integration of RPL into a Diploma Programme at a Workers’ College.**

This case study focuses on a Workers College and specifically on its Diploma programmes for activists from trade union and community organisations. The College has had a long-standing

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4 ‘Generic’ literacy and numeracy skills
interest in RPL as a basis for enhancing the epistemological responsiveness of their programmes to the organizational requirements and priorities of their students and the civil society movements with which they work. The research project aimed to investigate ways of enhancing the integration of RPL-related processes and practices into the diploma programme from three perspectives. Firstly, the perspective of participants: to build their confidence and ability to draw on prior experiential learning as a valued resource for new learning and for dialogue with their peers and course facilitators. Secondly, from the perspective of the curriculum: to recognise the epistemological authority of ‘everyday’ knowledge sources and to engage with them as part of the diploma programme. Thirdly, from the perspective of the institution: to enhance the policy and capacity of the College to provide a quality RPL process to meet the requirements a local university with whom the College has an articulation agreement for access to undergraduate study in the Social Sciences.

The findings of the first phase of the research (see Moodley, 2011) richly illustrate the nature of RPL when it assumes the form and role of ‘radical pedagogy’ and when it creates a platform for the integration of formal, theoretical knowledge and experiential knowledge with the aim of not only creating future learning paths for participants who may not have enjoyed them otherwise, but also of creating a new knowledge base or ‘knowledge archive’ enriched by the experiences of activists in their collective struggles.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study has begun to develop and test a framework for theorising RPL as a specialised pedagogy and subsequently to work with this framework in comparing the practices at each site. Some of the key lines of comparison that are emerging including the differing:

- purposes /conceptualisations of “success
- constituencies
- forms of knowledge valued/assessment criteria
- learner and practitioner identities constructed
- institutional conditions and contexts
- resource enablers
- forms and degrees of inclusivity, mobility and progression.

The comparative study also seeks to develop a language with which to describe different forms of RPL pedagogy and different curriculum types.

Some common themes emerging across the sites are:

- In all these cases the design and implementation of RPL involves a specialised curriculum and learning programme through which participants are equipped with the necessary procedural and conceptual tools to engage with the learning and assessment requirements of the RPL process. The pedagogical nature of these programmes is such that learners are provided with the social, cognitive, and linguistic tools needed to articulate their existing knowledge and skills for the purposes of accessing learning opportunities or acquiring a formal qualification. This is distinguished fundamentally from RPL as an assessment-led practice where learners are classically rpl’d for
compliance to pre-existing standards, as interpreted by the assessors in whom power and authority is vested.

- RPL as an isolated assessment-led practice is seldom effective in advancing the aims and objectives of the NQF. On the contrary, RPL as an integral practice combines the processes of advising, mentoring, coaching, and teaching in preparing learners to engage successfully with different forms of learning and assessment in different contexts.

- RPL as a specialised curriculum and pedagogy is seldom reducible to a one size fits all, and takes on different forms in different contexts and settings; it is necessary to take into account the specialised organisational and institutional context, and the disciplinary or knowledge context as well as the purposes of the programme to which the RPL candidate is seeking access.

References


