Specialised Pedagogy: A comparative study of RPL practices within the changing landscape of the NQF in South Africa.

Project Overview

1. Background and Rationale

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 driving systems level reforms 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, 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 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 is certainly worth further exploration. This research proposal reflects an important continuity in that 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 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.

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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 proposition of this project is that RPL is not only a device for measuring equivalence and allocating common currency (credits); it is itself a distinctive pedagogical practice, an encoded 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); 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, 2003 & 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 has been done on separate tracks as it were, 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 tends to suggest a sector-based characterisation of the 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 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.

Such a cross-sectional study allows us 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. The study focus 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 for the revision of NQF policy and frameworks lies not only in its study of RPL practices across different knowledge and learning domains, but also in the fact that it does not start with the assumption of a standardised currency for the comparison of knowledge.

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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.
and learning achievements recognised by these practices. Conceptually this is consistent with the move to a differentiated but interdependent system for the registration and articulation of qualifications and standards on the NQF. Policies guiding the development of such a system recognise the complex role RPL can play in enhancing the classification and articulation of different learning achievements in and across different domains.

This research promises to contribute to the development and critique of such policies, not in a prescriptive fashion but rather as part of what Parker and Walters (2007) refer to as “a collaborative approach to NQF development that seeks a ‘means of portability’; ways of enabling boundary crossings, of improving quality and relevance and of better understanding different forms and sites of learning” (ibid.).

2. Research Objectives

The first objective therefore 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 to explore the nature of the practices that are located in and across these different boundaries with specific reference to the epistemological assumptions they make about experiential learning and about qualifications, b) the specialised nature of the pedagogical practices which they engage and 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. A cross-sectional study of these ‘learning portfolios’ should provide valuable insights into how learners negotiate their participation in these practices and on the complex learning pathways of the NQF in South Africa. Empirical case studies and biographical research data will provide a basis for engagement and critique of this framework at local and systems levels.

3. Research Questions

The search for an effective “optimally inclusive” 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

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3 Optimally inclusive as in the national policy objectives of access, equity and success
questions are proposed but are quite tentative at this stage and will need to be developed in more detail with the SAQA research directorate and the other research associates that elect to join the project.

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?

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?

6. What value could RPL practices add to a national policy and programme for building alternative routes of access to FET Colleges for undereducated and underemployed youth in SA?

4. Research Methodology

The proposed methodology for this research project is for a qualitative, cross-sectional, study of RPL practices at four or five different locations. See Appendix A for a motivation and details of the sites have indicated a willingness to participate in the project subject to further discussion and agreements around this detailed proposal and plans.

The initial phases of the research will include a comprehensive literature review as indicated above, including studies that have already been done at or by scholars from the selected research sites. It will also include a review of the changing policy landscape as envisaged by the Joint Policy Statement (MOE&MOL, 2007) and subsequent developments emanating from the three quality councils (CHE, 2008). The purpose of this review will be to provide material for the development of the conceptual framework which will be tested and refined in relation to the detailed case studies and biographical research that will be done at each of the selected sites.

The processes of data collection and review at each site would include three core activities:

A first level case study which will involve a peer enhanced collection and review of documents pertaining to the practices (e.g. designs, programmes, course and assessment materials, artefacts, results reports, financial statements etc) and any relevant research reports available at each site.
A case study descriptor will be produced on the basis of this review and this will serve as a primary input for the development of the conceptual framework mentioned above.

A **second level action research** engagement with the curriculum and pedagogical practices at each site, drawing on the conceptual framework and aiming at a more optimally inclusive modelling of the practices at each site. This engagement will include strategic interventions in the design and implementation of one or more aspects of the practices e.g. the advising and information processes, course materials, portfolios, assessment instruments, administrative systems etc). The impact of these interventions will be monitored through tracer studies of learner progress, interviews with staff and a sample of learners; observations of a sample of the practices etc.

**Biographical and narrative research** will be conducted with a select sample of three or four participants at each location. A narrative study of written portfolios, journal entries and interview data will be undertaken to explore the learning history and RPL experiences of these people over a period of not more than 18 months before and after the RPL interventions at that location. In this way we would get to follow the learning trajectory of these learners in relation to their changing identities at work, home, study and organisational base.

The design of this project provides for a five phase implementation plan over four to five years.

**5. Research Sites and Focus**

A brief summary of the research activity at each site in this comparative study is provided below.

**5.1 RPL Pedagogy and Access to undergraduate study in higher education**

This project builds on a fairly 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 is on the comparative merits and specialised pedagogies involved in the design and implementation of two common forms of this provision, namely the standardised admissions tests and the portfolio development course. The study which is based at UWC, acknowledges 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 sets 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 study also provides for a comparison of the admission, retention and success rates of students admitted to the university via these different routes, with particular attention to their socio-economic and occupational backgrounds and fields of study. Recommendations arising from this study will have a bearing on the funding and provision of RPL services and programmes at public institutions in South Africa.
5.2 A Curriculum model for access to post-graduate study

This project will focus on developing an RPL model for access to post-graduate study, in particular, those programmes that have an applied, professional or vocational orientation. The study which is based at UCT builds on the notion that RPL is often more successful at post graduate levels where curricula are professionally or vocationally oriented and more flexibly delivered. RPL access to three post-graduate diploma/masters programmes are brought into the focus of this study, i.e. in Adult Education, Management Studies, and Disability Studies. The aim of the project is to explore and develop an access programme that “faces two ways”: while looking towards recognising and valuing the specialised workplace knowledge that candidates bring, it will also look towards their future course of study to see how their prior knowledge might enrich the curriculum and what scaffolding might be required to ensure their future success in postgraduate study.

The study which is based at UCT includes a series of case studies to document, theorise and map the different RPL practices in these programmes, as well as the perceptions of academics and institutional administrators of these practices. This will be followed by a phase of action research, involving the development and piloting of a specialised RPL course to mediate access into post-graduate study at the University.

5.3 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 this site. The project, which focuses on the ‘Basic Business’ skills of employees in different sectors is testing an RPL friendly ‘curriculum’ model that can 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 draws 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. Methodologically it will draw on these findings to further develop and evaluate RPL advising and assessment tools relevant to the new qualification standards and specifications of the QCTO.

5.4 Integration of RPL into the Diploma Programmes of the Worker's College.

This case study is located at the Workers College in KZN and specifically in their Diploma programmes for 'activists' from trade union and community organisations. The College has had a long standing interest in RPL as a basis for enhancing the epistemological responsiveness of their programmes to the occupational requirements and priorities of their students and the civil society movements in which they work. The focus of this project is on 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, the perspective of the curriculum: to recognise the epistemological authority of other 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 enhanced programme and services to meet the
requirements of participants, their organizations, and the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal with
whom the College has an articulation agreement for access to undergraduate study in the Social
Sciences.

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