Towards A Comparative Study of RPL Practices

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24 February, 2011
Outline

- Overview: Key Questions for Policy & Practice
- RPL and the changing NQF in SA
- Evolving Forms and Specialisations
- Researching the Practice
- RPL as a Specialised Pedagogical Practice?
- New Research Focus and Lines of Enquiry
- UCT: CHED; LearnSys; Workers College; UWC: DLL
Key Questions for Policy and Practice

- How effective are RPL policies and practices for mediating complex knowledge recognition and certification in and across different contexts?
- What needs to change for RPL to become an optimally inclusive practice in the provision for education and training opportunities in formal education and in occupationally directed programmes?
- What cognitive, social and therapeutic effects do RPL practices have on the learning identities of those who participate in the practice? How can these be enhanced?
Knowledge, Learning & Qualifications

Q
(Ofticial)

Informal
K/ L

Formal
K/ L

Q
(Curriculum Vitae)
Building a Qualifications Framework in SA

Outcomes

Unit Standards

Workplace

K/L

Union / Community

College

School

Whole Qualifications

Curriculum Vitae

K/L

Q

NQF

Q
First Definition and Assumptions

- “Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.” (NSB, Regulations, 1998)
RPL Assessment Process
(SAQA Policy Guidelines 2002)

- **Identifying** what the candidate knows and can do
- **Matching** the candidate’s skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and assessment criteria
- **Assessing** the candidate against those standards
- **Crediting** the candidate for the skills, knowledge and experience
RPL: Forms and Specialisations

- Workplace
- Union/Community
- Other Sources
- School
- College
- University
- For Credit
- In-Curriculum
- For Access
- Curriculum Vitae
- NQF
- Q
- K/L
- L/K

RPL
Understanding the Practice

**QUESTIONS**

- What's the purpose?
- How to do it?
- Who benefits?
- What to recognise?
- Is it equivalent?
- How to use it in curriculum?
- Systems and Quality assurance?

**THEORIES**

- Human Capital Theory
- Liberal Humanism
- Critical Theory
- Feminist Epistemology
- Adult and Experiential Learning Theory
- Sociology of Knowledge
- Socio Cultural Activity Theory
What kind of system are we building?

- To what extent is the NQF an enabling framework for widening access, promoting equity and advancing development?

- Is RPL intrinsically a device for inclusive practices or is it also implicated in the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources for learning in a stratified social system?
Trade union knowledge and pedagogy (Cooper 2005)

- Opens the way for exploring RPL as a form of ‘border pedagogy’
- For mediating the dialogue with ‘other’ situated forms of knowledge and pedagogy
- And providing learners with the tools to navigate learning transitions in and across these different contexts.
Learning in Context
Socio-cultural activity theory

Mediation Tools

Subject

Object

Community

Rules

Divisions of Labour
Specialised Pedagogy: RPL Across Contexts
New Research: Objectives

- To understand and compare the complexity of RPL practices in different forms and contexts (workplace, union, college, university);
- To understand and compare the impact of these practices on the learning identities and trajectories of those involved;
- To contribute to policy debates and processes aimed at building an inclusive, articulated system of education and training in SA;
- To make appropriate contributions to the study and practice of RPL as a specialised construct of education and training development in South Africa.
Research Design

Comparative Study across four sites of practice

- First level case studies of existing practices
- Literature review and development of a conceptual framework for exploring RPL as a specialised practice
- Second level case studies using the conceptual framework to design, test and analyse the practice
- Biographical and narrative research with sample of learners at each site
Lines of Enquiry: exploring the patterns of inclusion and exclusion with reference to,

- **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?

- **Pedagogy**: The content, methods (teaching tools, rules, language, learning relations) and processes used in all aspects of RPL provision, from promotion to evaluation and assessment. How do these practices mediate adult learner participation or exclusion across the continuum of formal and informal learning?

- **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?

- **Learner Agency and Experience**: The biographical profiles, socio-economic status, cultural dispositions, and strategy of learners as they engage RPL provision in its different forms e.g. Portfolio Development and Admissions Tests. What ‘affordances’ and ‘limitations’ do learners bring to the RPL table as it were, and how does this affect their participation in these practices?
Specialised Pedagogy: A comparative study of RPL practices within the changing landscape of the NQF in South Africa
Research Question

Taking context and knowledge differentiation into account, what would constitute an optimally inclusive, RPL access programme into postgraduate studies that:

(a) Recognizes prior knowledge
(b) Identifies knowledge that can enrich existing curricula;
(c) Assesses academic readiness and
(d) Provides scaffolding into postgraduate research and writing practices?
Phase 1

Map existing practices of 3 case studies:

- **Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practices (Commerce Faculty)**
- **Masters in Adult Education (Humanities Faculty)**
- **MPhil in Disability Studies (Health Sciences Faculty)**
Research Questions

- What is the key purpose of RPL?
- To what extent does the disciplinary context lend itself to engagement with experiential knowledge?
- Where does RPL process ‘sit’ wrt. to mainstream programme?
- What pedagogic practices are involved in the RPL process?
- What forms of workplace knowledge do candidates bring?
- What kinds of knowledge are valued in the RPL process?
- What are the criteria of selection used?
- What is the profile of students who gain access via RPL?
Some common trends emerging

- In all these programmes, subject specialists do their own RPL - no ‘bolt on’ RPL in the sense of a specialized unit doing the RPL.

- All have strong orientation towards RPL as pedagogy rather than assessment – although the balance varies considerably, and sequencing of the two takes interesting forms.

- Tools of mediation: all 3 programmes, while placing priority on the ability to make arguments in writing, recognize the importance of orality as a culturally-embedded mediating tool in SA context.
Some issues/questions arising thus far:

- What do we mean by inclusion? What should we be ‘including’?
- Need to explore direction of movement between formal academic knowledge & experiential knowledge;
- Evaluative criteria: what is striking is the strong foregrounding of applicants’ disposition, habitus;
- Criteria amongst assessors may be explicit or implicit; but some reluctance to making criteria explicit to candidates;
- Some degree of disjuncture between assessment methods and actual assessment criteria ‘in use’.
LearnSys: Prior Learning Centre
Research Site

Specialised Pedagogy: A comparative study of RPL practices within the changing landscape of the NQF in South Africa
The ‘specialisation’

- **Provider** = private FET college
- **Context** = learners enrolled on a registered learnership, in the workplace already, who wanted to be fast-tracked through the qualification
- **Method** = PoE development course, discussions to help learners understand the academic outcomes + ‘self-study’ for the knowledge + projects/observation for the skills + reflexive components of applied competence
- **Scope / scale** = 2000 candidates in total / 3 years
- **Desired outcome** = full qualification
Preliminary Findings: Knowledge

- Based on knowledge demonstrated in the theory section of the RPL assessment (applications in the project / assignment / NoE section of the RPL assessment)
- Workplace knowledge appears to bear little resemblance to the knowledge codified in the qualification outcomes
- Knowledge as assessed in explicit form is often ‘unknown’ by the candidate but unconsciously applied
- New knowledge is often acquired during the RPL process (RPL as pedagogy)
- Knowledge not explicitly required by the qualification is ignored in the interest of getting the candidate to focus on what is required
- Because these are existing practitioners who are confirmed as good, competent employees, the mismatch between knowledge required to be found competent and what is really needed in the job leads to frustration with the unit standards + low face validity
Preliminary Findings: Pedagogy

- **Content**: the unit standards favour first language English speakers (and even then...) so much time (and cost) is spent unpacking and relating these to the “colloquial” and “unconscious performance” in workplace.

- **Delivery**: in English, in workplace boardroom, by RPL adviser, using rigid portfolio format linked to outcomes. Competence variations allowed within bounds of practicability (time/cost/SETA rules).

- **Assessment**: theory component is written or verbal; skill component is written + interview / observation / simulation.

- **Assessor**: workplace practitioner BUT must meet SETA rules of assessor registration - brings an academic codification to the process.

- **Success**: favours candidate with knowledge of academic principles + able to speak English, adequate analytical reasoning + access to support + resources (NoE) + employed, structured + logical + introverted personality.
Preliminary findings: Institutional Context

- Bound by SETA rules e.g. PoE design, assessors, time to certify etc. They design and award the qualification
- SETA funding favours the employed, PDI candidate
- SETA rules limit funding for non-scarce skills
- SETA rules ‘penalise’ providers + employers who don’t achieve high competency rates (lack of future funding, loss of final payment if competency rate of 80% not achieved)
- Providers and employers ‘compete’ for limited funding
- All impacts quality of delivery, time spent with candidate, pedagogical experience, validity of the process
Preliminary Findings:
Learner Agency and Experience

- Those who succeed are not often the top performing employee.
- Success (qualification award) appears to be dictated by:
  - Personality and distinct learning styles (PoE)
  - Prior academic exposure (to understand specific requirements of the outcomes + provide sufficient evidence)
  - Time to devote to the process (top performers are and so less time for PoE)
  - Employment status (access to NoE, support from manager, internet access, time off)
  - Personal motivation and positive attitude (want to do it as opposed to forced to do it)
  - Need to succeed (professional status, loss of employment)
  - Support at home so they can spend time on the PoE
  - Access to funding (few pay for themselves) BUT then employer drives the process + adds stress
Lessons for RPL in the new QCTO environment

- Individual funding for RPL (not via employer)
- Rework outcomes to be more like the ‘world of work’ (less emphasis on knowledge and more on performance at this level)
- Dedicated RPL providers
- Less time-bound (SETA funding requirements)
- Reduce emphasis on PoE
- Introduce an “RPL for equivalence” concept – allowing assessment against general workplace competencies and skills not linked to specific outcomes – so candidate can get an unspecified NQF 4 qualification
Workers’ College, KZN
RPL in the Diploma Programme

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RPL Approach

- The knowledge and learning conventions of the academy are brought into dialogue with life experiences, skills, and knowledge acquired by workers and community activists through non-formal education.
- Thus, participants' involvement in different and various struggles have led to the learning process not only being regulated by the discourse of the academy, but also by the participants' knowledge, experiences and skills which are recognised and valued.
- RPL integrated into the curriculum of four diploma programmes – each offered over one year – accredited by UKZN for access into BA Soc Sci.
Research Methods

Current Research Project: - Provides a summary of the emerging patterns from interviews, observations and documents across the diploma programme offered 2010

Data collected from participants, facilitators and staff:

- the integration of RPL into material development, facilitation methods of the diploma modules,
- participants, facilitators and WC staff perception of RPL and its application, and
- the emerging policy process at the Workers’ College, as an adult friendly institution.
Knowledge discourse

- **Activism Module**: an introductory module done in all four (4) diplomas, to get participants to reflect on their own activism and how such activism connects with the other forms of activism and activism theory.

- **Gender and Labour Studies Diploma (GLSD)**: this Diploma draws extensively on participants' prior knowledge; it begins by drawing on the stories of gender struggles that participants may have experienced both in the community and the workplace.

- **Labour Economics Diploma (LED)**: the Labour Economics Diploma is much more theoretical than the other three diplomas; how do you get participants to understand economic concepts, critique economic policy and at the same time relate this to everyday life and experiences - this is the challenge.

- **Labour Studies Diploma (LSD)**: this Diploma presents an excellent opportunity for participants to share their understanding and practice of trade unionism and link it with other approaches, both theoretical and practical.

- **Political Social and Development Studies (PSDD)**: again, a Diploma that is linked to everyday practice and which offers an opportunity to broaden understandings, both at an activism and a theoretical level.

- **Projects**: This is the final module, again done in all four (4) diplomas; its intention is to form the link between experience and learning and the practical application in the workplace, organisation or community.
The Pedagogical Discourse

- **Content**: The process of integrating RPL into module materials was particularly difficult – how do you link theory with participants’ experiences?

  - **Projects**: integral part of all the Diplomas, the projects form the link between the ‘learning in the classroom’ to that of the practical experience designed for students to apply that which they have acquired through their engagement with academic & practical knowledge.

- **Methods**: Two types of facilitation prevail: facilitators as ‘specialist’ and that facilitators of “participants-led learning”

- **Evaluation**: Assessment usually takes the form of verbal and written assignments, examinations, and class performance.

- **Class Assessments**: determined by class participation – level of participation – of course this is subjective to a large extent.

- **Assignments**: RPL forms an element of some assignments, such as, stories of their own experiences – presentations such as that relating to their project findings.

- **Examinations**: A percentage of the examination attempts to cover the assessment of participants’ prior / experiential knowledge.
The Institutional Context

- **Policy and rules**: The Workers’ College does not have a policy on RPL but both its constitution and a few working documents drawn from practice and developed over the years on RPL, contribute to its orientation and approach to RPL.

- **Systems**: The Workers’ College has established a relationship with the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI), Canada, over the years. Through such link, the Workers’ College came across a set of institutional tools termed ALFI – Adult Friendly Institutions – a set of tools that get organisations/institutions to measure and determine in eight (8) identified areas whether they are adult friendly. The Workers’ College has adapted these tools and is using them to ensure that it is an adult friendly organisation.

Thank you.
RPL for Access to Higher Education
University of the Western Cape

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Alternative Access Routes
Commerce, Arts, Law, Social Work, Education

**Standardised Admissions Tests:**
- NBT and Tests for Academic Potential

**Portfolio Development Course:**
- 9 weeks, 5 contact, 4 mentoring + assessment

**Combinations of both**
Researching the Practice
Patterns of inclusion and exclusion?

- **Cohort Tracer Study: PDC & TAP 2006/ 7/ 8**
  - Access, Success, Completion Rates

- **Portfolio Development Course Study 2010**
  - Recruitment and Admissions
  - Course Design and Methods: Observation and Video
  - Course artefacts and portfolio analysis
  - Mentoring and Assessment: Observations
  - Interviews: Academics and Non-completers

- **Standardised Tests:**
  - Correlations and Comparisons
**RPL Tracer Study**

**2006-2007-2008 Cohorts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of Access, Success, Completion</th>
<th>TAP (%)</th>
<th>PDC (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of participants who actually registered</td>
<td>22 (14)</td>
<td>137 (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Semester Modular Pass Rates</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Full Set of 120 Credits by Dec 2009</td>
<td>10 (45)</td>
<td>84 (61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2006 [n=63]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2007 [n=56]</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2008 [n=40]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Qualification by end 2010</td>
<td>5 (23)</td>
<td>50 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still in the System @ Dec 2010</td>
<td>11 (50)</td>
<td>51 (37)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Still in the System in 2011:
Degree Final Year and Post-Graduate Study

• 2006 Cohort
  ▪ 2 x Final Yr Degree; 2x Hons; 1 Masters;

• 2007 Cohort:
  ▪ 3 x Final Yr Degree; 1; 8 x Hons; 1x Masters

• 2008 Cohort:
  ▪ 6 x Final Yr Degree; 3x Hons
Portfolio Development Course 2010
Recruitment and Admissions

- 1050 Applications + Information Sessions

- 250 attend TAP/ NBT special info sessions
  - 62 register to write the tests
  - 14 pass + 8: **22 accepted**

- 140 selected to do PDC (126 register)
  - 99 complete contact sessions
  - 50 portfolios submitted: **44 accepted**
Preliminary findings:
Content, Structure, Methods and Relations

- **RPL as Curriculum as a voyage of discovery**: Learning as participation and communicative action.

- **Integrated curriculum, andragogical methods**, learner friendly, with clear framing of content, sequencing. “Tibetan gong and local humour”

- **Effective movement between particular ‘examples’ and general concepts; surface and deep level learning**: “marinading”

- **Explicit use of examples, tests, simulations, feedback and mentoring to prepare for assessment processes**: “Am I doing what you want?”

- **Limitations**: Language; Time; River of Life: feeling “swept away”
Preliminary findings
PDC Pedagogy - Bridge or boundary device

- Attempts to face both ways – world of work and experience – strength and critique
- Strong ontological reflective space, sense of ‘becoming’
- Strong on PDC as a ‘community of learning’
- More explicit induction and practice in text-based discourse i.e. academic literacy, reflection, required
- Expand the range of journal writing and reflective activities
- More field specific orientation and shadowing if possible
Preliminary findings:
Why did they not complete the course?

- Telephonic interview with 25 out of 38 non-completers plus focus group with 5 people
- 17 women, 8 men, most in 25-35 age range
- 7 unemployed and 18 others in semi-skilled jobs e.g. clerical, domestic work, caring
- 11 of 25 completed the contact sessions
Reasons for not staying the course

- Health, divorce, death in family, pregnancy, unemployment
- Writing learning history “turns into moments of confrontation and precipitates a crisis”
- Realisation that “study was not meant for me” or “too much and too little time”
- Struggle to balance work and home life with study commitments – working night shifts
- Sense of personal failure at not completing the PDC, but given the chance, “I would try again”