

THE EDUCATIONAL CASE FOR RPL

By the Institute of People Development

RPL – the next “big thing”?

Recognition of Prior Learning has been a central policy goal of the National Qualifications Framework since before the establishment of SAQA. However, while all accredited providers have RPL policies, there have to date been relatively few projects or organizations that have actually conducted RPL assessments. This will change in 2005 as all SETAs invest resources in achieving their RPL targets and many sectors race toward “qualifying” current practitioners to meet new regulatory requirements.

Research into RPL in South Africa and elsewhere has consistently raised a set of concerns about the practice of RPL. Yet, as Harris argues “many policy makers and practitioners continue to uncritically and triumphantly advocate the “obvious good” of RPL” (1997:1). In the race toward targets, there is a real risk of RPL projects failing to integrate these concerns. If this happens, RPL itself may be undermined as a policy goal, as employers and learners come to regard qualifications achieved through RPL as inferior in status.

In the past year, the Institute of People Development has developed and piloted an RPL model for Occupation-Directed ETD Practitioners. With an eye on the emerging quality assurance relationships between the Higher Education Quality Council and the SETA ETQAs, IPD set out specifically to identify the concerns around RPL and to explore options for addressing these. The central argument framing the model is that RPL needs to move beyond a simple matching of evidence to outcomes – currently a widespread view of how to “do” RPL.

The target audience

The first step in good assessment design is analyzing the target audience. Until about ten years ago, courses aimed at workplace trainers consisted of little more than two-day train-the-trainer courses. Most OD ETD practitioners accordingly developed their skills on the job. In addition, they did so often before there was an NQF or a skills development strategy. Yet the qualifications and standards for OD ETDs require that participants demonstrate the competence in the context of an outcomes-based workplace training system. This could be understood to mean that almost nobody is eligible for RPL.

In addition, an important concern raised by the higher education sector internationally is that RPL candidates often lack “graduateness” (Wheelahan 2002).

“Graduateness...can be taken to mean the “meta-thinking’ or learning skills (with an emphasis on reflective practice)... This underlines the importance of ‘communities of practice’ in which people learn and work. I define a community of practice here to

include not only the workplace, but all that contributes to constructing an identity for an occupation or profession” (ibid).

So the target audience for RPL in this case appeared to

- Have many years of practical experience doing almost everything in the field of workplace training
- Lack a theoretical understanding of what they are doing
- Be able to present much evidence of competence from systems that were not outcomes-based; and
- Lack meta-thinking skills required for reflective practice.

The RPL Model

To design a fit-for-purpose RPL assessment, IPD needed to avoid the simplistic matching of evidence to outcomes. The assessment process itself needed to be developmental, helping candidates to

- recontextualise existing competencies in new policy environments
- develop a sense of the community of practice in which they operate
- refresh or develop their foundational (theoretical) competence, required to be able to
- develop the reflexive (meta-thinking) competence required.

The model therefore provided retrospective logbooks in which candidates mapped the evidence they could provide against the outcomes of the qualification. This was then used as a basis for guided interrogation, reflection and actual study tasks and/or “challenge” assignments. The assessment design therefore integrated the different traditions of “self-oriented” and “outcomes-oriented” portfolios, and incorporated elements of all four sets of RPL practices described by Harris (1997:3).

What you test is what you get...or is it?

Almost all candidates during the pilot had very considerable experience – between 10 – 40 years in the field of workplace training. Almost all were able to present outstanding evidence of their practical competence. As a result, at least some candidates were initially irritated with a process they had expected would be a simple review of their portfolios. This was anticipated, given the instrumental reasons candidates generally have for assessment. During the final assessment interviews, however, candidates almost universally focused on exactly the issues raised by the target audience analysis and addressed in the assessment design.

- Even highly educated, sophisticated senior practitioners were initially unable to describe the theory underpinning their practice. As a result, their ability to formulate alternative ways of doing things was limited. One candidate reported that “when you are in the work environment, you are put at a desk and told to do certain things, without always understanding why. The why, the thinking behind it...gives [you] confidence to innovate. This process has done that for me...”.

- The same candidate compared herself to another colleague, also a candidate, who had a strong foundational competence: “[she] has like an internal fountain and she gains from this internal knowledge base, she goes there when she speaks”. She spoke about never having had “a point of origin” for her own work in the same way.
- The importance of developing a sense of the community of practice was highlighted by several candidates. One illustrated the point by speaking about the training of skills development facilitators. She said that “most SDFs go to training to fill in a form to get their money back. They leave understanding if they do it correctly they can change their organization and make a difference to their sector, and make a difference to economic growth. That’s so much more exciting for them...”.
- A surprisingly large number of candidates could present evidence against each individual outcome without being able to present any evidence that demonstrated the application of the competencies in continuous role performance. For example almost no needs analyses presented related to the learning programs designed. The integration of competences was therefore also highlighted by candidates. One argued that that “companies love to do course evaluations, but we don’ t use it to improve the courses. So the quality cycle is broken, instead of using the information to customize the programs to the needs...”.

Are RPL candidates more competent than graduates?

While the project aimed to address some of the concerns the higher education sector may have with RPL, it also raised concerns the industry sector has with higher education. As Weelahan argues “graduates from qualifications do not always have functioning knowledge (although they may have propositional knowledge)” (ibid). An issue the project grappled with was: if we require RPL candidates to exhibit “graduateness” should we not also be requiring graduate candidates to have functional experience? Far from representing an inferior path toward a qualification, the IPD model has illustrated that RPL candidates could potentially become the candidates of choice.

REFERENCES

Recognition of Prior Learning and the problem of “graduateness”. Wheelahan, L. 2002.

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