RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF COMPETENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

World-wide there is a tendency today to optimise existing resources. The concept of recognising and accrediting what people already know and can do, is having a significant impact on many of the education and training programmes being developed today. This is irrespective whether that learning has been acquired through unstructured learning, performance development, off-the-job assessment or skills and knowledge that meet workplace needs but has been gained through various previous learning experiences. The concept Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is understood by most in the area of adult education as the method of assessing relevant competencies gained by adults through work and life experiences which can then be counted towards qualifications or for promotion in the workplace by using a systematic set of procedures. RPL is an integral part of competency-based assessment, not a separate process. It is a process which allows for evidence from past achievements to be included in the total of evidence collected during assessment. RPL is also a useful tool for motivating staff and for introducing competence assessment. A practical elaboration of RPL policy and practice in the current South African education and training sector is urgently needed. Administered carefully, and supported by explicitly anti-discriminatory policies and practices, RPL can indeed contribute to movements for greater casual mobility, thus optimising South Africa's under-used skills and expertise. In doing so, this country can embark upon a realistic and attainable strategy towards becoming a winning nation. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between RPL and competence-based assessment in a South African context.

1.   INTRODUCTION

World-wide there is a tendency today to optimise existing resources. Simosko and Cook (1996: 1) emphasise the need to maximise available infrastructure and personal qualities: "Educators, trainers, employers and government policy makers, regardless of nation, seem to saying much the same thing: that as nations we must put individuals first and provide opportunities whereby everyone can make maximum use of their potential. Educators, trainers and other human resource development specialists are concerned that too much valuable time and effort is lost teaching people what they already know and can do."

The concept of recognising and accrediting what people already know and can do, is having a significant impact on many of the education and training programmes being developed today. This is irrespective whether that learning has been acquired through unstructured learning, performance development, off-the-job assessment or skills and knowledge that meet workplace needs but has been gained through previous employment, hobbies, etc. (Rutherford, 1995: 2). This is called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The assessment system for the Education and Training sector (of which RPL is a sub-set) is the cornerstone of transformation activities and programmes (Department of Education and Training, 1997b: 117). In the past many adults and out-of-school youths attended non-formal training

programmes and had acquired a great deal of informal knowledge and experience. Such knowledge and experience were not recognised or certified and this often led to exclusion from certain jobs, promotion on the job, and from further education and training opportunities, for all of which some kind of certificate was a pre-requisite. It is important to certify these skills in order to provide access to the labour market for these people and also as part of a skill audit to plan the major training programmes required in South Africa during years to come.

Recognition of Prior Learning has the potential to be a powerful tool in the development of South Africa and in the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. It can empower individuals, provide a skill focus for employers and can assist in economic and social development. Harris and Saddington (1995: 7) mention that "...in terms of the current political, economic and social context in the country, RPL is seen to have the capacity to:

- contribute to redress and equity by opening up more inclusive ways for people to attain qualified status;
- enable more people to reach higher levels of qualification and expertise by beginning with an acknowledgement of existing skills and knowledge;
- contribute to enhancing international economic competitiveness by building on often invisible and unacknowledged workforce skills; and
- offer the fist step in attaining the goal of developing a multi-skilled and flexible workforce by acting as an auditing tool to quantify existing competence."

Education and training should be available to all, and the process of lifelong learning should be encouraged. People should be continually involved in acquiring new skills and should also gain reward for existing skills, experience and learning previously unrecognised. RPL in South Africa can thus be seen as a mechanism to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities. Guidelines need to be developed to form a basis to enable the issues of the practicability of RPL to be addressed in different circumstances. This is one of the key issues if RPL is to form a stable part of a national approach to assessment and recognition. We have to ask ourselves the question: Why do we not put as much energy into assessing and recognising the learning of learners when they come into our programs as we do into assessing learners when they exit?

A practical elaboration of RPL policy and practice in the education sector is needed. Administered carefully and supported by explicitly anti-discriminatory policies, RPL can indeed contribute to movements for greater casual mobility. Working Group 9 of the National Training Board (1994: 100) emphasises the importance of a practical RPL process in South Africa by the following remark. "...for the RPL process in South Africa to be credible and relevant, it must be transferred as soon as possible from a debate of ethos into a practical, workable and understandable process which is recognised as having real street value".

2. ELUCIDATION OF CONCEPTS
2.1 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
The concept Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is understood by most in the area of adult education to mean the measurement of learning gained through experiences other than formal post-secondary courses. In some contexts prior learning is taken to include all formal, non-formal and informal learning undertaken to date. This would include learning from accredited courses (i.e. university, technikon, professional courses, technical colleges courses, industry training, vocational courses, community college courses, etc.). learning from non-accredited courses (on-the-job

training, industry training, training with NGOs, training with private providers, etc.) and learning from experience. In other instances the term prior learning is used to refer only to accredited and non-accredited learning with the term Prior Experiential Learning reserved for demonstrated learning, not merely experience gained from the work place.

Different acronyms are used in other countries. In the United States of America where much of the early work originated, the process is usually called Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), in Australia the term most often used is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and in the United Kingdom the words include not only Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), but also accreditation of prior achievement (APA) and Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

There are many definitions for the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning.

According to the definition given by the Human Sciences Research Council (1995. 3) the Recognition of Prior Learning is the process of "...granting credit for a unit on the basis of an assessment of formal and non-formal learning/experience to establish whether the learner possesses the capabilities specified in the outcome statement. Similarly, a person could gain recognition for prior learning in respect of an entire qualification, provided that such a person is able to demonstrate the full competence associated with the qualification."

According to Harris and Saddington (1995: 1) RPL can also be seen as "...a way of recognising what individuals know and can do, before undertaking a task, job, or course of study. It may include testing, or various other techniques of assessment including compiling a profile or portfolio of learning and/or experience".

Simosko and Cook (1996: 4) emphasise that "...the accreditation of prior learning acknowledges that much of what people know and can do can be recognised in some formal way towards accredited qualifications. It is built on the premise that people can and do learn throughout their lives - formally and informally, systematically and unsystematically - and that this uncertified learning can be equated and measured against the same standards used to evaluate learners completing more traditional and formal learning programmes".

The South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA) definition for recognition of prior learning (Act no. 58 of 1995) states that "the Recognition of Prior Learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements."

The dimension of recognising, accrediting or assessing prior learning can be seen in the much broader definition of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996: 273), which defines Recognition of Prior Learning in the following way: "Granting credit for a unit on the basis of an assessment of formal and non-formal learning experience to establish whether the learner is able to meet specified requirements associated with a specific unit of learning or a qualification."

The National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) (1997:6) views RPL as "...a process to give recognition to people for the skills and knowledge that they already have, but which they have not been given credit for. In South Africa, its purpose is to enable redress, equity, access and redistribution".

Therefore, according to Hill (1995: 51) Prior Learning Assessment "...is based on the premise that adults acquire skills and knowledge through many means of formal or informal study. A PLA system evaluates this learning and relates it to programs and courses for the purpose of granting credit or exemptions".

2.2 Experiential learning

David Kolb developed the process that explains how people learn from a particular experience. Kolb (1984) sees reflection as the source of learning and development. He defines learning as the process "...whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it."

Kolb's basic contention is that perception is not enough, experience must be transformed into learning and knowledge.

According to McCormick (1994: 343) Prior Experiential Learning Assessment determines whether adult students have acquired knowledge on their own that equals knowledge ordinarily taught in college, and when appropriate, awards credit for that knowledge. Prior Experiential Learning is not about receiving credit for life experience or credit for living.

Working Group 9 of the National Training Board (1994: 28) defines Experiential Learning as "...learning that is gained through intentionally and systematically reflecting on experience. The learning may arise in formal or informal settings, or may be incidental."

Based on these definitions, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning can be regarded as the process of assessing and then credit rating learning which has its source in some experience prior to entry onto the course. This learning may have been gained as work, through voluntary activities, hobbies or other interests (Paul, 1996: 394).

Much energy has gone into getting the words right within each nation and context, but regardless of what it is called, there is no basic difference in the principles each process follows The basic concept remains the same: that through a systematic and valid assessment process an individual's skills and knowledge can be formally recognised and credited, regardless of how, when or why they were obtained.

According to the above-mentioned definitions it seems that prior learning assessment and recognition is a process of identifying, assessing and recognising what a person knows and can do. The process can take various forms and the outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to the goals of individuals, the labour market partners and society at large. Institutions and employers can make better use of their resources by not making people learn what they already know and can do.

RPL therefore is an approach that seems to embody a number of the key elements relevant to our current economic, organisational and labour market realities. RPL recognises the increased importance of continuous learning (lifelong learning) and upgrading. It values past learning and skills gained through life and work experience, as well as through formal education and training. It focuses upon each individual and builds confidence and self-esteem based upon systematic self-assessment of concrete performance and achievement. Finally, it provides a practical means to utilise past learning in order to pursue future objectives in a variety of contexts. From an organisational perspective. RPL provides a solid base for long-term human resource development

and improvements in morale, in quality service and viability For individual employers RPL will directly address the self-confidence factor that has been so badly undermined by recent economic and employment trends in South Africa

2.3   Competence-based assessment

Competence-based assessment is a way to monitor and assess the competencies a person has, no matter where or how these competencies were gained. Competence-based assessment could be defined as "...the assessment of evidence to determine a person's current abilities against a given set of standards or competencies" (Rutherford, 1995: 2).

This definition emphasises the three major principles that differentiate competence-based assessment from any method previously used to assess and increase performance, i.e. the assessment of evidence, current abilities and standards or competencies.

According to Peddie (1992: 24) competence-based assessment is where "...a particular standard is set which candidates must reach if they are to be judged as 'competent' and therefore receive credit for the unit of learning. This is why competence-based assessment is also sometimes known as criterion-referenced assessment". RPL is an integral part of competency-based assessment, not a separate process (compare Simosko & Cook, 1996: 2). It is an assessment approach which allows for evidence from past achievements to be included in the total of evidence collected during assessment. In competence-based systems, the individual is increasingly viewed as a partner. Competence-based assessment is not simply a tool for testing a person's competence. It is a mechanism that helps the individual grow and achieve competence through feedback and positive support by the assessor and anyone else involved in the process. In Australia competence-based assessment is being promoted as ".. an approach to establishing occupationally-relevant standards of competence" (Masters & McCurry, 1990: 20).

Rutherford (1995: 10) further argues that competence-based assessment systems do not differentiate between competencies acquired as a result of any specific form of learning. According to him, competence-based assessment "...recognises that a person's learning could come about through formal training and education, self-development programs, work and life experiences, hobbies and interests, and informal learning".

Simosko & Cook (1996: 6) mention that competence-based assessment practices that embrace the basic concepts of RPL can be used for a number of purposes. These are:

- "...as a diagnostic tool to identify an individual's strengths or limitations at the beginning of an education and training programme;
- to monitor progress against known standards or expectations; or
- to grant credit towards a credential."

Assessment, whether used as an indicator of achievement, for access, for placement and promotion, or for diagnostic purposes, always purports to measure prior learning - that is, what the student has already learned. Therefore, it could be argued that since all learning has occurred previously, any educational measurement is prior learning assessment. The overall purpose of any assessment is to gather as much information as needed on which to base sound decisions.

According to Fletcher (1997: 16) the purpose of assessment in a competence-based assessment system is to "...collect sufficient evidence that individuals can perform or behave to the specified

standards in a specific role. If this assessment is also linked to an award system, a further purpose is formal recognition of successful performance".

The overall purpose of any assessment, be it competence-based or otherwise, is to gather and interpret information about an individual's achievement, as measured against agreed outcomes for a particular phase of learning. The evidence is needed so that an assessment of competence can be carried out against pre-determined standards.

According to Simosko and Cook (1996: 4) assessment reflects four basic activities:

- "Identifying what an individual knows and can do;
- equating those skills and knowledge with specific standards, course or qualification requirements;
- assessing the individual against those standards or requirements; and
- crediting the learner in the appropriate manner."

The systemic approach to each of the activities mentioned above will ensure a sound and equitable assessment programme that will recognise the different ways in which people learn and the various methods by which they can actually demonstrate what they know and can do.

3. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF COMPETENCE - BASED ASSESSMENT

According to Tait & Godfrey (1999: 247) the word "assessment" is derived from "...*ad sedere*, meaning to sit down beside, and consequently carries with it notions of its primary function being that of providing guidance and feedback to the learner."

The overall purpose of any assessment activity, be it competence-based or otherwise, is to gather as much information as needed on which to base sound decisions. Assessing must be recognised as being no more and no less than a process of sampling a student's work, making inferences from it, and subsequently estimating worth (Tait & Godfrey, 1999: 247).

The basic premises underlying RPL is that people, especially mature adults, learn many things outside the formal structures of education and training and that, irrespective of where, how and when learning was acquired, subject to assessment, this learning is worthy of recognition. According to the UTS Training and Development Services (1995: 5), RPL is "...a method of assessing relevant competencies gained by adults through work and life experiences which can then be counted towards qualifications or for promotion in the workplace by using a systematic set of procedures."

RPL is an "...integral part of competency-based assessment, not a separate process" (Fletcher, 1997: 34). It is one which allows for evidence from past achievements to be included in the total of evidence collected during assessment. RPL is also a useful tool for motivating staff and for introducing competence assessment.

The concept of RPL, regardless of the terminology used to describe it, is based on long-accepted theories and principles of experiential learning. Simosko & Cook (1996: 20) argue that the concept "...is intrinsic to the notions of competence-based assessment and flexible assessment. It recognises that what people know and can do is of value, regardless of how, why or when they learned it. Competence-based or flexible assessment systems actively encourage people to identify

what they know and can do and become more active. focused learners These systems are of significant benefit to both individuals and organisations."

Competence-based assessment adopts the same principles. Because it is all about the collection of evidence, the first step in the process is to determine why the evidence is needed Diverse evidence, once viewed as relevant only to RPL, "…is now considered a natural aspect of most competence-based assessment systems. As part of these systems, learners are expected to generate evidence in their ongoing effort to learn, develop and undergo assessment. The continuum of learning includes assessment and the continuum of assessment includes learning" (Simosko & Cook, 1996: vi).

Once the reason for collecting the evidence has been determined, the *way* in which this information will be gathered is decided (assessment methods). The data is obtained and finally it is assessed (using assessment instruments) to see how and if it matches the competency level that is required (Rutherford, 1995: 3 – 4). During the RPL process exactly the same procedures are followed

In competence-based assessment and during RPL the individual, not the assessor, has responsibility for proving competence. This means that he or she must collect and present any or all evidence required in a format acceptable to the assessor. The portfolio is usually used for the collection of materials assembled by students to demonstrate achievement (Freeman & Lewis, 1998: 271)
No longer is assessment seen as something that is "done" to an individual. Rather, in competence-based systems, the individual is increasingly viewed as a key partner in the assessment process (Simosko & Cook, 1996: vi).

The individual is guided in the learning and assessment process by occupational standards or learning outcomes.

5.   CONCLUSION
Competence-based assessment cannot be understood as "psychometric measurement" which is carried out scientifically (Luckett, 1999: 77). It should not be assumed that assessment instruments will measure competence accurately, objectively and reliably, or that testing will be context-free. Instead, a concern for the generalisability and reliability of the results will have to be replaced with a concern for validity.

During the implementation of any RPL model it will be vital to develop activities in which learners are encouraged to be active and where the focus is on meaning making and where prior learning is not removed from its social context.

The main issue when implementing a RPL model will be to try and develop RPL practices that are in keeping with contemporary learning theory and with the views of mind implicit in the various sectors of education and training. The need for a dialectical relationship between RPL processes and context is important. The former could inform the latter in order to work against a situation where different forms of learning and views of mind are valued in one context and devalued in another.

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RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

"WHY DO WE NOT PUT AS MUCH ENERGY INTO ASSESSING AND RECOGNISING THE LEARNING OF LEARNERS WHEN THEY COME INTO OUR PROGRAMS AS WE DO INTO ASSESSING LEARNERS WHEN THEY EXIT?"

CONCEPTUALISATION

"RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING REFERS TO THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE HELD AS A RESULT OF FORMAL TRAINING, WORK EXPERIENCE AND/OR LIFE EXPERIENCE."

3

ACRONYMS

- RPL
- APL
- PLA
- APA
- APEL
- CPL
- CCC
- RCC

4

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

"LEARNING IN WHICH THE LEARNER IS IN DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE REALITIES BEING STUDIED OR PRACTISED TO ACHIEVE A LEVEL OF COMPETENCE IN A PARTICULAR SKILL OR KNOWLEDGE DOMAIN.....SUCH LEARNING MAY BEGIN AS 'UNINTENTIONAL LEARNING'"

5

THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RPL

WHY IS RPL IMPORTANT?

(A) Efficient use of resources

(B) Development of a lifelong learning culture

(C) Greater social justice

(D) Co-ordinated and consistent labour force development

(E) Reform of education and training systems

(F) Effective management of change

WHO COULD BENEFIT FROM RPL?

- INDIVIDUALS

- EMPLOYERS

- EDUCATIONAL/TRAINING INSTITUTIONS AND PROFESSIONALS

- THE NATION

DISADVANTAGES OF RPL

- ## *RPL CANDIDATES*
  * Candidates are deprived of the benefits of education which go beyond what is normally assessed

- ## *EMPLOYERS*
  * Possible frustration if workers are unable to fulfill their increased expectations

- ## *EDUCATIONAL/TRAINING INSTITUTIONS AND PROFESSIONALS*
  * Potential effect of RPL on course structure
  * Absence of more experienced students

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WHAT SHOULD A GOOD RPL SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

- *ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT*
- *TRANSPARENT*
- *RELIABLE*
- *VALID ASSESSMENT TOOLS*
- *TRAINED ASSESSORS*
- *FAIR AND EQUITABLE*
- *EFFICIENT & EFFECTIVE*
- *APPEAL PROCEDURES*
- *COST-EFFECTIVE*

9

DIFFERENT ASSESSSMENT METHODS

- **THE CHALLENGE PROCESS**

- **STANDARDISED EXAMINATIONS**

- **PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT**

- **PROGRAMME AND COURSE EVALUATION OR CREDIT TRANSFER**

10

EVIDENCE

EVIDENCE IS SOMETHING PRODUCED BY THE LEARNER TO SHOW THAT HE/SHE HAS SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE IN A CERTAIN AREA: I.E. THE PROOF THAT A LEARNER IS COMPETENT IN A FIELD OF LEARNING

11

TYPES OF EVIDENCE

- ■ DIRECT OBSERVATION OF PERFORMANCE

- ■ PRODUCTS / DOCUMENTATION / EVIDENCE GENERATED BY THE CANDIDATE

- ■ SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

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