

Recognition of Prior Learning – RECOGNITION OF PROGRESS

Reflections on Making Better Connections Forum, 4 December 2008

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Introduction

At the **Making Connections Project Showcase** held at the Australian Technology Park on 4 December 2008, an interesting and diverse range of projects embracing recognition of prior learning (RPL) was presented.

The assessment of prior learning brings to mind a concept put forward by an early influential theorist and writer on adult education. Kolb (1984) in his book on experiential learning reflects on assessment per se, but raises the very salient point of assessing learning as distinct from assessing performance.

Given the somewhat mechanistic approach adopted within the Australian VET system, practitioners need to be clear about exactly what it is they are assessing with an RPL process. The RPL process in the Australian VET context seems to be one which draws on prior learning to assess current performance with a view to potential future application. At least I think that's the theory!

Unfortunately, this article cannot undertake any in-depth analysis of each project in terms of Kolb's idea above. But it is a topic worthy of professional debate by practitioners as a development exercise.

Overview

The overarching theme of the Showcase was recognition of prior learning. All the projects – some 60 of them state wide – are funded by COAG.

The sub-themes for these projects included online projects, networking and communication, mentoring and skills express. The online projects have a focus on the virtual world – providing easy 24/7 access, flexibility, options and zeroing in on the techno-savvy candidates and practitioners.

The networking and communication projects tend to have a primary focus on outreach – getting word out about RPL to the main stakeholders: the practitioners, the candidates and industry. These are about mainstreaming RPL.

Mentoring projects are about professional development – sharing the knowledge, upskilling practitioners on RPL practice and implementation. They are also about increasing practitioner confidence as well as consumer uptake.

Skills express projects tend to focus on the process – streamlining pathways, simplifying procedures, increasing options and improving participation and outcomes.

The Project Brief

Most of the projects I observed (six in all) had one, some or all of the following primary objectives:

- improving the recognition of prior learning process;
- increasing practitioner capability and confidence;
- embedding and establishing the RPL product within a context.

The primary contexts thus far are:

- the workplace with the aim of employer endorsement;
- the education and training sector aimed at practitioners' expertise and involvement;
- personal development for the candidate who may be just 'surfing' around for a tool to use as self assessment.

All contexts are supported by some form of technology for ease of access and efficiency.

The brief given to the project leaders for the Showcase required them to demonstrate what significant outcome or characteristic their project had which set it apart from all others. There were a number of underlying questions also. These included themes like process improvement, professional development benefits and models for change and progress. It was also part of the presentation to highlight the 'standouts' of each project – innovative strategies, simplified but coherent processes and tangible, practical products.

But the real challenge was along the lines of, all else being equal, if the project team walked away, what legacy of the project would remain and be sustainable? A tough call really when all workplace environments are quite fluid and very dynamic. The usual 'suspects' must be considered: candidate access and capability, industry buy in, practitioner capacity and experience and the dollars.

The Projects Observed

The two projects which focused mostly on the process were the **RPL Skills Express for Hairdressing** and the **Arts and Media Artsmart Project**. Both demonstrated the insightful premise of seeking out unrecognised learning in a specific cohort of candidates. The processes endeavour to identify current and potential application

of this learning for each candidate and then creatively involve industry to provide employment and/or a process for back up training for the candidate. These two projects also clearly encompassed one of the underpinning tenets of RPL in the Australian context – equity and social justice.

The **Community Services Certificate IV in Employment Services and Mentoring – Significant Conversations** projects were principally about professional development – recognising the learning and ongoing professional development needs of practitioners, embedding RPL into the *psyche* of the practitioners teaching and learning thought processes so that RPL becomes second nature – simply part of the learning cycle. As with any successful project, communication and sharing insights are key factors within these projects and will contribute in a major way to their success.

Western Sydney Institute, Blue Mountains Campus managed **A Business Perspective on Recognition Project**. The Network of Community Activities based at Surry Hills managed an **Out of School Hours (OOSH) Project**. Both of these were about involving employers as stakeholders and promoters of RPL. The main focus was about strategies to embed and sustain RPL in the workplace. Simplicity, economies of scale and sustainability were uppermost in the goals of these projects. A highlight was the notion of utilising candidate and practitioner learning and data already available, especially that information located in the workplace. The processes tapped into familiar and compatible workplace systems to support the RPL process, thus endeavouring to achieve sustainability.

Current Status

With some 60 RPL projects in various stages of development and implementation, one could observe that there is a proliferation of creativity, exchanging and sharing knowledge, experimentation which adds to learning and professional development and which in turn helps to progress an initiative. This proliferation is not a problem of itself. The extent of innovation and promotion can only be of advantage to the RPL concept.

But an observer could ask the cautionary question about just how many wheels are being reinvented? With so many successful projects, it may be a good time to look at the common ground. What has been discovered about the generic, fundamental characteristics of an RPL process? What are the factors which make a process sustainable? How does the process evaluate learning as opposed to performance? How do these projects take RPL forward? And how do the stakeholders evaluate the plethora of processes?

As a beginning, these projects could provide data for the building blocks of an RPL matrix, one which could be used by stakeholders to test if the model is sound, valid and sustainable. The projects certainly challenge all stakeholders to look at and assess learning in different ways, demanding lateral thinking and innovation. Most

importantly, the projects deepen and broaden the understanding of learning and its application to current and future contexts.

So What's Next?

So much is being asked of RPL – solving the skills shortage, fast tracking training, addressing social and community justice issues, enabling financial economies, enhancing practitioner skills, upskilling and benefiting candidates to mention only a few. But none of these to date have been tested or analysed in any detail. However, these wonderfully enlightened projects are one of the ways to test these premises and the traditional boundaries which enclose education and training simply through practice.

However, it is important to identify the learning or should we say *progress*? Have the projects moved RPL to the next level? And if so, how can we recognise this progress, capture the best strategies, document the sustainability criteria and embed RPL as part of the teaching and learning process. The initiatives showcased at the Making Connections forum have many of the answers. As Young (2006, p 326) comments, RPL is 'a practice that needs *re-theorising*, but one which offers the possibility of *new theorising*'.

RPL offers a way of seeking new theories to assess learning and practitioners in particular are the ones who could discover them, simply through practice and a little courage as well.

References:

Kolbe, D A (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice Hall Inc

Young, M (2006) *Endword* in *Re-theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning*, Andersson P & Harris J, NIACE