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## RPL as pedagogical pragmatism

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### **Abstract**

This case study is located within a joint venture between a University and a College of Further Education, with an explicit mission to bring into Higher Education under-represented groups, including mature learners and to promote part-time education. Our case study provides a review and evaluation of the successful development of an undergraduate programme in leadership and professional development for experienced learners, two-thirds of which is awarded through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The case study demonstrates how the research-informed RPL design has enabled the recognition of prior learning in a way that is both true to the students' experience and works within the parameters of quality assurance frameworks. The term used is pedagogical pragmatism i.e. a process that rests on particular combinations of both technical rationality (e.g adherence to a Learning Outcome focused output which is static and a "given") and professional artistry (differential judgements made about the

efficacy of approaches to RPL). The practices are contextual, however we would argue that sharing the conditions that underpin RPL as a specialised pedagogic practice is an important part of moving this agenda forward in the sector.

**Key words** Recognition of Prior Learning, part-time, mature learners, professional artistry, specialised practice

## Background and literature review

This case study demonstrates how the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPL) process can successfully support widening access and lead to positive outcomes with respect to student experience, retention and attainment for mature learners. We identify the innovative practices in our own context that reflect RPL as a specialised pedagogy (Ralphs, 2012). Some elements of the RPL process were externally determined. However Cooper et al, (2017) note also the degree of ‘‘artistry of practice’ involved in developing RPL processes:

...learners, facilitators and assessors combine in space and time to give shape and form to the enacted curriculum – artistry of practice – and this is evident in the selection, sequencing and pacing of the course, in the mediating strategies of the facilitators and mentors, and in the mix of social and pedagogic activities that constitute the course as a transitional learning community for a relatively short period of time. (Cooper and Ralphs, 2016:138, cited in Cooper et al 2017)

We have called our approach to RPL pedagogical pragmatism i.e. a process that rests on particular combinations of both technical rationality (e.g adherence to a Learning Outcome focused output which is static and a "given") and professional artistry (differential judgements made about the efficacy of approaches to RPL) based partially on the characteristics of the participants in any particular cohort. The case study is situated within the development of a part-time undergraduate course in Leadership and Professional Development (BA LEAP) that enables mature learners to gain credit for the equivalent of two years of full-time study through the RPL process.

Harris (2000) drawing on a UK case study wrote about the nature of RPL as one in which the onus was on the RPL student to take the initiative and to negotiate a process she described as a lone one and 'an introspective and cognitive exercise' (p34) culminating in the development of a portfolio.

One of the significant influences on the implementation of RPL in the UK and elsewhere has been the attention given to learning outcomes as a means of making definitions of knowledge more accessible and knowledge itself more assessable. In most institutions in the UK modules/units and courses/programmes are defined in terms of learning outcomes. For many practitioners of RPL learning outcomes are the standard means by which learning from experience will be measured as equivalent to formal university learning. Colley *et al* (2003) have criticised the enthusiasm with

which advocates of RPL have embraced learning outcomes arguing that such an approach renders invisible that learning which is not reflected in existing learning outcomes and that if that learning does exist then it needs to be re-shaped in some way to meet the academic requirements of the formal learning outcomes thus making RPL claims onerous and difficult. Peters (2006) also saw learning outcomes as problematic. She noted that learning outcomes embody a very specific language which she referred to as Halliday's (1994) 'little texts' ie they are shortened and highly condensed texts which become depersonalised and abstracted from context. This makes them difficult for RPL participants to make sense of. Allais (2012) notes how learning outcomes have come to dominate educational policy internationally resting on the assumption that they can be transparent and represent the essence of a learning programme whereas she argues that in practice they are open to dramatically different interpretations or derive their meaning from being embedded in a formal curriculum. However work in Scotland indicates that the generic learning outcomes from the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework level descriptors have been used successfully to provide an alternative way of measuring learning to that of mapping to the learning outcomes of formal courses (Whittaker and Brown, 2012). Travers (2012) has also noted the practice in the USA of assessing students on the basis of the concept of college level knowledge regardless of courses or stated learning outcomes.

The role of the assessor has been identified as pivotal to the learner's RPL experience. Pokorny (2012) undertook research with successful RPL learners which identified two distinct approaches – dialogic mediation and monologic teaching. The former was characterised by a shared process in which both the student and assessor worked together with the learning outcomes to identify learning that was equivalent but not the same as that within the taught curriculum. This contrasted with a monologic approach in which the tutor was much more concerned to mirror conventional academic practice in seeking equivalence. Those students in a dialogic relationship with their tutors appeared to feel empowered by the process and would recommend it to their peers. However those students for whom the relationship was more monologic in nature appear to have felt disempowered and would not recommend the process to others. Similarly, Hamer (2013) and Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) drew on the work of philosopher Axel Honneth (1995) to argue that the potential transformational and confidence building effects of RPL are developed through a process of inter-subjective mutual recognition between assessors and learners.

Whittaker et al (2006) used symbolic interactionism theory and social identity theory to explore the implications of facilitating RPL through a group learning process. Symbolic interactionism emphasises the role of the other in social identity development and social identity theory focuses on the process of becoming committed to membership of a group. Whittaker et al (2006)

argued that RPL has the potential to alter social identities in a transformative sense through the recognition participants can get from others as well as from assessors; and that recognising similarities and differences with others can strengthen learner identity. Transformation was seen as comprising four stages of learner redefinition, ‘a redefinition of what learning is or can be; a redefinition of what a learner is; a redefinition of the participant’s own experiences as learning experiences; and as a result a redefinition of the self as learner (p178).

## Case study

Taking a case study approach enables us to closely examine our specific context and to bring out some of the key reflections upon the RPL process that may be seen to have wider implications, whilst locating these with the details of this particular case. First we set out the institutional context, followed by a detailed exploration of the formal quality assurance framework – our ‘technical rationality’ and the way in which our ‘professional artistry’ or our judgements about the efficacy of approaches to RPL have informed our implementation of the process. We provide data from the completed student cohorts and conclude with some closing thoughts as to how a research-informed approach can frame thinking in relation to RPL practices.

The aim of the BA LEAP RPL process is to provide mature learners coming to university from the world of work with formal recognition of two-thirds of their degree from prior learning, equivalent to two years of full-time study and with a supported transition into the final level of undergraduate study. The course is located within a joint venture between a College of Further Education and a University. The programme is quality assured by the University.

The University's Flexible Credit Framework (FCF) provided the technical reference points for quality assurance and curriculum development. This framework enables learning to be benchmarked against SEEC (2016) level descriptors as an alternative to mapping prior learning to the learning outcomes of pre-defined curricula. SEEC is a credit consortium that developed a set of level descriptors with generic learning outcomes across the range of UK Higher Education Qualifications. This enabled the degree to be designed without taught modules prior to the final year of study. The FCF specified a two stage RPL portfolio-based process that included an initial interview, a guidance process with formative feedback and a final Panel Review. Portfolios are marked pass/fail by two assessors. The purpose of the Panel Review is to confirm the authenticity of the learning and the candidate's understanding of the wider subject context of their learning. The assessment tutors and an independent tutor from the University constitute the Panel which is chaired by an external member experienced in RPL. The assessed portfolio



and the panel feedback are reviewed by an external examiner who makes the final recommendation for the award of credits to the BA LEAP Programme Board.

We noted above that RPL students can experience the process as a lone, introspective and cognitive exercise (Harris, 2000) and the issues that can occur when using a learning outcomes approach. The challenge was to take the FCF technical specifications and enable a process that was both rigorous and welcoming to learners.

Whilst the SEEC (2016) level descriptors offer the potential for a more flexible approach to recognising prior learning than mapping to the learning outcomes of specific modules they remain abstract representations of learning. In order to operationalise such frameworks successfully a shared frame of reference is required between learners and assessors leading to a mutual understanding of what constitutes university level learning in the learner's context. This in turn requires a focus on mediating processes and exploring jointly the question of what is the appropriate evidence of learning that needs to be generated through this process? An additional consideration was to conceive of the RPL process not solely as one of confirming prior learning, but also of looking forward to the requirements of the final year of study. Mindful of the potential dis-empowering effect of RPL the process was underpinned by a set of implications for practice drawn from a review of

literature by Pokorny and Whittaker (2014) that explored the learner experience of RPL. Pre-eminent amongst these were;

- Using level descriptors...which reflect a broader set of competencies that can be understood and evidenced more easily across different contexts.
- Focusing on aspects of an individual's prior... learning which indicate their potential (in general as well as disciplinary terms) to successfully embark and progress on a programme of study...
- Providing appropriate resources for learners to connect their experience to the formal curriculum in meaningful ways.
- Analysing the role of writing within RPL assessment methods in ways that enable learners to describe their learning without necessarily requiring high levels of skill in academic discourse.
- Focusing on programme and RPL assessment design which enable successful progression within HE.
- Establishing shared understanding of the RPL process, including its purpose and outcomes.
- Providing a dialogic approach to assessment guidance in order to develop mutual understandings and meaning making...
- Respecting the learner's prior learning context and the learner's identity as an experienced, skilled and knowledgeable person.

- Attending to the quality of the assessment relationship, including the impact of this relationship on the outcomes of the process.
- Focusing on artefacts, products and practices from outside the academic context as both sources of academic credit and as resources for meaning-making in RPL assessment.

(Pokorny and Whittaker, 2014: 275-278).

The starting point was to develop a detailed RPL Handbook which included tasks and exemplars and served to provide a focus for conversations and shared understandings between the RPL curriculum developers and tutors delivering the programme and with the learners, as well as forming a key document for the quality assurance process. This handbook took the SEEC level descriptors (2016) at Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) level 4 and 5 (full-time year 1 and 2) and mapped them to meaningful workplace artefacts and activities to be evidenced in the portfolio.

Stage 1 of the RPL process set out in the handbook had four requirements;

- A 1000-word Professional Profile
- Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- Employer reference and job description
- Interview assessment record and feedback

These formed the basis of the claim for level 4 credit. Applicants typically were expected to have at least two year's work experience in a management

or leadership role. Documents were included in the portfolio and importantly were discussed with the RPL Course Leader in a Stage 1 interview after which the Course Leader recorded the RPL credit potential of the candidate's experience. The process of writing a professional profile evidencing what has been learned from experience is not straightforward and it often took several contacts and conversations to achieve this.

Supporting perseverance at this early stage is a key function of the process. If the Course Leader concluded that the candidate has the potential to make a successful RPL claim s/he is invited to enrol onto Stage 2 of the process which spans a 16-week period with 4, one-day workshops, 2 individual tutorials plus a Panel Review

Stage 2 requirements were mapped to the level 5 SEEC descriptors and include;

- Three Areas of Learning narratives mapped to BA LEAP Programme Learning Outcomes
- Evidence linked to the three Areas of Learning.
- A Leadership Challenge Statement mapped to LEAP programme learning outcomes.

BA LEAP Programme Learning Outcomes (PLO) describe what learners will be able to do on completion of the degree. The three Areas of Learning (AoL) and the Leadership Challenge Statement were designed to enable

learners to demonstrate how their learning from experience underpinned a selection of the programme level Learning Outcomes ie that they were progressing towards these PLOs. The RPL curriculum designers mediated the process of mapping prior learning to SEEC levels and PLOs by designing specific tasks that would facilitate this. For example, Area of Learning 1 (Table 1) requires learners to provide a narrative, supported by evidence in relation to their experience of managing change. These tasks are mapped to SEEC level 5 descriptors by the course team.

**Table 1: Area of Learning Activity**

***AoL 1: Managing change to increase your organisation's effectiveness and efficiency at getting things done.***

This may involve change in relation to the development of both processes/systems and new products/services. Your narrative may relate to a specific project, your own team or a wider organisational development. Think about what you have done to help change the way your team or organisation become more effective and efficient in meeting its strategic goals. This could be a specific project, activity or initiative that you led or had key role in implementing. Identify why the changes were needed and how you planned the process. Consider the ways in which you engaged people. What barriers did you have to overcome? How did existing organisational processes and culture impact on the way the changes were implemented? What was the outcome and what might you have done differently?

This underpinned three level 6 programme learning outcomes

**PLO A2: *Knowledge and Understanding of:*** The relationship between organisational culture and the achievement of leadership objectives

**PLO A3: *Knowledge and Understanding of:*** The influence of structure, process and people on organisational change

**PLO B3:** *Able to:* Think creatively about issues and develop innovative solutions that support implementation strategies

The Leadership Challenge statement forms the final overarching document learners produce for their portfolio. It provides an analysis of both where learners feel they are now in their leadership and professional development and their future direction of travel, drawing on both their own experience and on leadership frameworks, models and concepts introduced through the workshop sessions that form part of the RPL facilitation. It provides a bridge into more formal academic research and writing.

The final portfolio contains all of the stage 1 and stage 2 requirements with a formative feedback point prior to the final submission. This is rapidly followed by a Panel Review which provides a further opportunity for learners to demonstrate the depth and breadth of their prior learning in dialogue with the Panel.

This process and associated guidance form the RPL curriculum designers' interpretation of the technical requirements of the process. The transformational process for the participants hinges on the workshop facilitation and the group discussions. A strong sense of collegiality is developed over the programme in a highly interactive and in a safe environment where learners are able to explore ideas about leadership and share thoughts about the tasks they have to complete. In the workshops the challenge is to problematise the often taken-for-granted relationship

between experience and learning. The students are already sophisticated learners but may not have taken much time to consider what they have learned in order to perform at the levels at which they work. The RPL tutor and Leadership Development tutor worked together to provide an engaging and interactive RPL process with educational activities designed to keep the end point in sight – achievement of the BA LEAP. The delivery of leadership theories compliment the RPL process in such a way as to develop the learners’ reflection of themselves as leaders. They are provided with a new lens through which to explore their experiential knowledge and understanding. The social and pedagogic activities start with where they are at that moment and move to consider particular aspects of learners’ experience (related to Areas of Learning) drawing out the knowledge and understanding gained. Learners then move to the final task of integrating their learning through the Leadership Challenge Statement selecting personally meaningful leadership theory in order to provide a spring board to level 6 study on BA LEAP. The resulting process is sophisticated, engaging, fun and also pragmatic, working within the framework of quality assurance requirements.

## Outcomes and discussion

To date 42 students have completed the BA LEAP RPL process, a further two withdrew due to changes in employment. 100% of those who completed the RPL process were successful in gaining the total credits required to progress to the final stage of the degree. Of the enrolled students 67% were aged between 31 and 50, and 31% were 51 or over. 48% were female. These students came from a range of workplace environments, public, private and charitable/voluntary sectors. They may inhabit formal managerial positions or have found themselves in positions where leadership is a process of negotiating complex relationships with little or no formal authority. Some worked in small family businesses others managed large corporate budgets, specialist teams and work across international boundaries. A minority were small business owners. All shared a desire to formalise their experience into the degree level qualification which is missing from their career profile at present. Most left school after matriculation and have not pursued formal education for many years or decades. Graduation achievements are impressive, with 74% achieving an upper second or first class degree (a UK benchmark for good degree outcomes). Evaluation feedback from the students is consistently positive and highlights the key roles played by the tutors and the peer group in navigating the demands of the process and maintaining motivation when the process felt overwhelming. The mix of peers added to the credibility of the course. Students talked about the transformative effect, their increasing confidence at work, shifting perception of themselves as a learner and a



leader and of looking forward to the next stage of their academic career.

One student commented, *'The whole process has been a huge confidence booster which has enabled me personally to aim even higher'*.

We began the design of our RPL process taking account of the conceptual frameworks set out in the literature review and used the implications of the review of learners' experience of RPL (Pokorny and Whittaker, 2013) to shape the process. The technical rationality in our case – our “given” was the FCF with its level descriptor framework and prescribed process. Around this we made our judgements about what might work – our “professional artistry.” Traditional HE often positions learners as novices and learning as a process of absorbing curricular knowledge with the teacher as expert and assessment as a process of checking that the learner has ‘acquired’ knowledge. The agency we had within the process enabled us to provide guidance which was framed by the FCF and, through the tasks we set and activities we provided, allowed us to deal with images of “otherness” in learners' minds, of what being a student means (me/not like me) and, more importantly images of what knowledge is - and where it comes from. We started the process of learners moving from “other-directed” conceptions of knowledge and meaning/understanding towards a limited degree of “self-authorship” defined by Baxter-Magolder, (2008, p269) as “the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations” - which impacts on learner identity and promotes the

transformational effects reported by the participants. We do this explicitly whereas in “traditional” HE we may embrace that aspect of pedagogy in curriculum design but rarely make it explicit. The transformation effects of RPL has been shown to have a positive impact on learner identity, self-esteem and confidence and to produce learning benefits which continue into formal study (Travers, 2011). By developing research-informed processes and practices our approach can be seen to support Whittaker et al’s (2006) use of symbolic interactionism and social identity theory to theorise the benefits of a model of RPL that is cohort-based and the findings of Pokorny (2013), Hamer (2013) Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) who point to the importance of the inter-subjective mutual recognition between assessors and learners on the perceived validity of the RPL process. The learner achievements and outcomes reported here support the view that we have found meaningful ways for learners to translate their experience into formal credit and enabled them to successfully embark and progress onto a taught programme of study. Using a cohort approach to RPL is relatively economical, however in the UK students have no access to student loans or funding support for RPL and the student and/or institution has to bear the cost. The level of fee an institution charges for RPL will be indicative of its approach to widening access. If RPL is to expand within UK HE systemic barriers such as funding need to be addressed, nevertheless we would argue that sharing the conditions that underpin RPL as a specialised pedagogic practice is an important part of moving this agenda forward in the sector.

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