

## Recognition of Prior Learning as an integral component of competence-based assessment in South Africa

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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 currently being developed. This is irrespective of whether that learning has been acquired through unstructured learning, performance development, off-the-job assessment, or skills and knowledge that meet workplace needs but have 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 competences 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. 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.

### Introduction

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 currently being developed. This is irrespective of whether that learning has been acquired through unstructured learning, performance development, off-the-job assessment, or skills and knowledge that meet workplace needs but have been gained through previous employment, hobbies, etc. (Rutherford, 1995:2).

There is a worldwide tendency to optimise existing resources (Marsick & Watkins 1991:188). Simosko & 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 be saying much the same thing: that as nations we must put individuals first and provide opportunities where-by 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."

In many contexts the concept, procedures and tools for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) have become an integral part of flexible assessment or competence-based assessment systems. There is, therefore, no difference between the tools and procedures of competence-based assessment and those of RPL.

What are the benefits and who will benefit?

### Benefits for learners

RPL will avoid unnecessary duplication of learning, encourage self-assessment, assist learners to make judgements concerning their own knowledge and skills, reduce the time learners need to spend in training and help build learner confidence (McKay, Kotze, Vaccarino, Vaccarino & De Necker, 1998:163).

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, 1997:117). In the past many adults and out-of-school youths attended non-formal training programmes and acquired a great deal of knowledge and experience. Such knowledge and experience was not recognised or certificated 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. These skills need to be certified in order to provide access to the labour market for these persons. Certification is also an integral part of a skills audit for purposes of planning major training programmes required in the future.

### Recognition of Prior Learning as a tool in the development of South Africa

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 & 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 equity by opening up more 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 first 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. The following question needs to be asked: "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?" (Matthews, 1997:6).

A practical elaboration of RPL policy and practice in the education and training sector is needed. Administered carefully and supported to 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 fact that for the RPL process in South Africa to be credible and relevant, it must be transferred from a debate of ethos into a practical, workable and understandable process which is recognised as having real street value.

### Elucidation of important concepts

#### Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for the skills and knowledge (i.e. equal value to learning and skills) held as a result of formal training, work experience and/or life experience.

RPL is a process which attempts to put a value on all learning: what people know and can do, irrespective of how achieved, for example through study, community work, on-the-job training, or other life experiences and which has not been formally recognised through the transfer of credit mechanisms. It allows an individual to get some form of recognition for the skills and knowledge he or she has, as well as the evaluation of past learning against established academic standards through an open and transparent approach to assessment. RPL is not separate from assessment, rather it is a specialised sub-set of assessment.

The Human Sciences Research Council (1995:3) defines the Recognition of Prior Learning as 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."

The National Framework for Recognition of Training in Australia uses the following definition: "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" (McDonald, 1995:1).

According to Harris & 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 & 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 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 re-distribution".

The South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA, 1997:5) definition for recognition of prior learning (Republic of South Africa, 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".

According to the South African College for Open Learning (1999:2) the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is a most acceptable method of certification or exemption: "APL is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds, and attitudes to receive credit for achievements they have acquired outside the classroom. The basic premise of APL is that individuals can and do learn through their lives in a variety of settings and that often the ensuing skills, knowledge and abilities are equal and frequently superior to those obtained by students following traditional routes through formal education".

According to Hill (1995:51) Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) "... 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 pur-

pose of granting credit or exemptions".

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."

Much energy has gone into getting the words right within each nation and context, but regardless of what RPL is called and how it is defined, 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.

#### Experiential learning

Keeton (1982:623) argues that "... if a person has achieved the learning and the competence objectives required for successful completion of a given course or curriculum, the person deserves recognition and appropriate placement in further education programs regardless of where that learning was acquired".

David Kolb developed the process that explains how people learn from a particular experience. Kolb (1984:1) 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." It is often misleading to equate the amount of time spent in a position with the learning gained from undertaking the position. Experience should be taken to be an input while learning should be regarded as an outcome. Experience by itself, therefore, does not promote learning. It is through reflection upon that experience that learning occurs. This is why Kolb's work appears so often in relation to the accreditation of prior and experiential learning, as this is exactly what is requested from the potential candidates in order to demonstrate that they have learned from experience.

According to Working Group 9 of the National Training Board (1994:28) "Experiential Learning" (EL) can be defined 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."

McCormick (1994:343) states that Prior Experiential Learning Assessment (PELA) 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. This award is sometimes mistakenly called "credit for life-experience". In actual fact, students receive credit for demonstrated learning, not mere experience. Prior Experiential Learning is not about receiving "credit for life experience" or "credit for living"!

However, according to Weil & McGill (1989:5), experiential learning remains a diffuse, somewhat incoherent concept that encompasses many different viewpoints and theories and refers to a wide range of disciplines and practices such as therapy; formal, non-formal and informal education; social and cultural work; community organisation and organisational development.

From the above remarks the 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).

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.

### Competence-based assessment

Competence-based assessment is a way to monitor and assess the competences a person has, no matter where or how these competences were gained. 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".

Rutherford (1995:2) defines competence-based assessment as the "... assessment of evidence to determine a person's current abilities against a given set of standards or competencies". 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 competences.

### Philosophical foundations of the recognition of prior learning

The philosophical roots of RPL are found in the educational philosophy of John Dewey, the social psychology of Kurt Lewin and the cognitive developmental theory of Piaget (Simosko & Cook, 1996:10). In these theories, learning is seen as a lifelong developmental process which is personal and holistic: new learning is integrated into the experience and cognitive sets of the learner to form new and creative outcomes. Learning is manifested in complex and integrated performances which reflect an application of knowledge, understanding, skills and values (Shaughnessy, 1996:7-8).

The central premise of RPL is that theoretical, high level and quality learning can be gained through experience (Keeton, 1982:21-25) and informal means (Marsick & Watkins, 1991:12-18).

Based on these philosophical underpinnings, Harris & Saddington (1995:3) make the statement that RPL is based on "commonly accepted adult learning principles, for example, the notion of a lifelong learning continuum; learning occurring through a wide variety of styles, methods and contexts; learning as individual and unique; and that new learning can be integrated into the experience of the learner to form new creative outcomes".

Recognition of Prior Learning places prominent emphasis on learning achievement. It recognises and celebrates experiential learning, opportunities for learning through activities which take place in the real world, in authentic contexts in a wide range of environments (Masters & McCurry, 1990:4).

Thus, whilst a particular experience might generate the learning impetus, it is only after engaging in a process of observation and reflection, creating ideas and generalisations, and applying ideas to new situations that recognisable levels of learning and understanding emerge. Experiences lead to learning and learning leads to understanding. From understanding comes the ability to generalise and from that comes insight.

A learning outcomes approach entails much more than merely converting old objectives into a new format. It reflects a philosophical shift which, if authentically embraced, will require change in aspect of educational delivery. However, if the essential root values associated with RPL are not operationalised into basic programme and curriculum change, RPL will not be anything more than a marginalised student service, providing a few course credits for a limited number of advanced students (Harris & Saddington, 1995:3).

### Recognition of Prior Learning in a contemporary South African context

According to Gawe (1999:23) many institutions of higher learning all over the world have been assessing prior learning for over thirty years (e.g. United States, Canada, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom and Australia). However, in most countries RPL has traditionally been a relatively marginal practice in education and training conducted at a distance from the main business of the institution.

The radical potential of RPL has been given greater immediacy through its introduction in South Africa. Nkomo (1991:309) argues that the post-apartheid dispensation will require profound social, political and economic transformation, but "perhaps more daunting" will be the task of challenging the epistemology of apartheid, that is, its embedding in formal and informal knowledge structures that were then used as justificatory strategies. In challenging traditional divisions of knowledge and, with them, divisions of labour and of power, RPL is potentially an important tool in deconstructing that epistemology. Due to the fact that RPL insists, firstly, that socially useful knowledge is gained through active engagement with the world and, secondly, that work is the primary means of engagement, it recognises workers as creators of knowledge and thus encourages, according to Nkomo (1991:309), "a re-conceptualization of knowledge-power relation".

In South Africa various RPL initiatives have been undertaken in the vocational sector as well as the education and training sector with different degrees of success. The majority of the initiatives were conducted on an informal basis due to the fact that the necessary legislation and structures have only recently been established.

According to the Skills Development Levies Act (RSA Act No. 9 of 1999:6), "every employer must pay a skills development levy from 1 April 2000 at a rate of 0.5% of the leviable amount and, from 1 April 2001, at a rate of 1% of the leviable amount". Employers will be responsible for upgrading staff skills and qualifications.

This places a demand on companies to demonstrate the success of their training programmes in order to qualify for subsidies from the Department of Labour. The assessment and recognition of prior learning will be central to the cost-effectiveness of this scheme because the tangible evidence of learner achievement and accumulation of credits will be utilised to qualify companies to obtain subsidies to augment internal training programmes in the field of continuous education and training.

Prior experiential learning is deeply connected to a context, therefore any treatment of it will benefit from drawing on that view of mind as far as the conditions in each sector allow. RPL is only just beginning to be theorised in this way and the South African context presents opportunities to develop and extend this work. Such approaches may be "a key to helping to ensure that RPL lives up to the equity claims made in its name and do not become alternative means of exclusion" (Harris, 2000:35). This can all too easily occur if there is no two-way relationship between the mainstream context and the recognition of prior learning, and if the process becomes an un-problematised, one-way problem, whereby learners simply have to translate their prior learning into formal learning.

### Conclusion

Prior learning assessment and recognition can take various forms and 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 and do what they already know and can do.

RPL 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.

When practical RPL policies and procedures are established in a

South African context it should be kept in mind that labour and other progressive sectors of South African society must be vigilant concerning what standards are applied and what methods are used to assess against those standards. The ability of RPL to serve the interests of workers cannot simply be assumed, but must be concretised within particular practices that both create a supportive environment for workers and assure that workers are heard in the establishment of RPL policy.

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