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# Exploring RPL: assessment device and/or specialised pedagogical practice?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has attracted much interest from policy makers and scholars since its introduction into the discourse of an integrated National Qualifications Framework in South Africa in 1995. Its merits as a device for certifying experiential learning and for enhancing the inclusive nature of the new system are widely proclaimed but this has been challenged by practitioners and researchers who argue that it is a lot more complex and costly to implement than was originally expected. This is reflected in a growing body of research which suggests that whilst RPL has not fulfilled its promise as an assessment device for fast-tracking certification in an outcomes-based system, its value as a specialised pedagogy for mediating knowledge, learning and assessment practices across different contexts and pathways is certainly worth further exploration.

## Introduction

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was first introduced to the South African education and training system as a principle closely aligned to three key elements driving systems level reforms after 1994. Firstly, as part of the overarching discourse of transformation, to redress past injustices and ensure effective access to learning; secondly, as part of a discourse of accreditation and lifelong learning, to render explicit and certifiable knowledge and skills that are acquired experientially; and thirdly, as part of the discourse of an integrated National Qualifications Framework (NQF), to enhance the flexibility and articulation capabilities of the system with reference to all forms of learning and the development of a national credit accumulation and transfer scheme.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper were included in presentations for the Colloquium on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for the upgrading and upskilling of teachers in South Africa (SAQA, 2010) and the Researching Work and Learning Conference 6 in Roskilde, Denmark.

The early thinking about RPL drew for its inspiration and design on the experiences of specialists and practitioners in South Africa and from around the world – mostly in higher education (Evans, 2000) but with some applications in vocational education, trade testing, and competence-based training (NTB, 1994). Its inclusion as a founding principle of the NQF raised expectations that with the necessary standards and assessment expertise it would be widely applied thus helping to build an inclusive system of lifelong learning within and across the conventional boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This was especially the case in the formal economy where contradictions of the apartheid regulated labour market left the majority of workers without a qualification even though they were doing the jobs previously held by their more qualified ‘white’ counterparts (Kraak, 2004; Mariotte, 2009). However, its implementation has proved a lot more costly, contested and complex than was anticipated by policy makers and its value in validating claims of competence or equivalence against the outcomes specified in unit standards and registered qualifications has come under critical review. Scholars like Michelson (1997) and Harris (2000) have cautioned that RPL is not by definition a radical or transformative practice and cannot be easily separated from conservative conventions that are set up to monitor compliance with national standards and registered qualifications.

This paper reflects an important continuity in that search, for what Harris (2000) referred as an “optimally inclusive” model of RPL in South Africa: from its association with the espoused efficiencies of an outcomes-based assessment system through to the current proposition for its reformulation as a specialised pedagogical practice for engaging with the complexities of knowledge, curriculum and assessment across different learning pathways and contexts.

The paper begins with a brief background to the history and development of an RPL discourse in South Africa through various iterations of policy, practice and research over the last fifteen years. The evolving narrative indicates a diversified field with variations in the nature, purpose and form of the practice, most notably in the provision for alternative admissions to further and higher education, and in the provision for alternative routes to a qualification required for continued employment or professional practice. Three generic forms of RPL are described with reference to the purpose and specialisations of these practices, and what researchers have identified as some of the limitations of these practices for building an optimally inclusive system and practice of RPL in South Africa.

The paper concludes with a rationale for further comparative research on RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice, with special reference to its role in the evolving architecture and systems of the NQF in South Africa, an NQF which Parker and Walters (2008) refer to as “a work-in-progress and as contestable artifacts of modern society, which can contribute in a modest way to how a society manages the relations between education, training and work by finding common ground between distinct forms of learning” (p.71).

## A brief history of RPL and the changing NQF in South Africa

The origins of RPL as a key principle and component of the education and training system in South Africa has its roots in the policy initiatives that prevailed in the early 1990s and gave it a prominent place in the early construction of the National Qualifications Framework.<sup>2</sup> This rise to prominence was, however, quite short lived as the narrative below will illustrate due, in part, to unrealistic expectations of what it could achieve as an assessment-led practice in an outcomes-based system, and in part to the dynamic and contested nature of the framework itself within the evolving system of education and training. NQF researchers Allais, Raffe and Young (2009), French (2009) and Lugg (2009) locate these developments at the complex intersection of local and global discourses contesting the identity and priorities of the fledgling democratic state: the national priorities of access, equity and redress on the one hand, and the high level skills development requirements of the global knowledge economy on the other. The former suggested a strong developmental state driving education and training provision, whereas the latter favoured the neoliberal corporatist state (Allais, 2003) using policy reforms and quality management systems to steer public and private provision in the direction of agreed human resource development goals. Lugg (2009) argues that whilst the initial commitment to the NQF was based on its espoused potential for moving the entire system from a state of fragmentation and exclusivity to an integrated and inclusive one, this was to prove more symbolic than real. Instead, it became increasingly reflective of

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<sup>2</sup> Different forms of RPL preceded the NQF in South Africa notably in the form of trade tests for artisans, and provisions for credit transfer and mature age exemptions in the higher education system (Ballim *et al.*, 2000).

the contradictory goals, practices and understandings of different private and public constituencies and interests.

Fractures built into the South African NQF point to the complex and contradictory challenges that states 'at the margins' face when simultaneously articulating globalised discursive practices and also seeking to establish equitable national education systems. (Lugg, 2009, p.55).

The question to be addressed by this paper is how these tensions played out in the evolution of RPL related policies and practices? RPL featured strongly in one of two leading initiatives that significantly influenced the education and training policies of the post-apartheid state in 1994. Both initiatives embraced the challenges of transforming a divided and unequal system of education and training albeit from different perspectives and starting points. The National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI) involved organised business, the trade unions and reformist elements in the apartheid state and focused on the skills development needs and priorities of the changing knowledge economy (HSRC, 1995). The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI)<sup>3</sup> was a project of the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC), a structure representing organised teachers, parents, students and workers, united in their opposition to the apartheid system of education and training (NECC, 1993). Both of these contributed substantially to the policy framework adopted by the African National Congress in 1994 (ANC, 1995) but, whereas the NTSI's strategy for an 'integrated system' was built around the proposal for a comprehensive NQF with explicit provision for RPL skills recognition and certification, the NEPI strategy was built around the construction of a 'single system' of education and training with a strong focus on public provision for high quality basic education and increasing levels of differentiation<sup>4</sup> and specialisation in post-compulsory education and training. There is little mention of RPL in the NEPI options which, in contrast to the NTSI choice for an outcomes-based strategy was largely inputs driven, cognisant of the limits of the state purse, and the uneven capacity of public

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<sup>3</sup> The NEPI was commissioned by the NECC at its National Congress in December 1990 and lasted 20 months and involved some 290 researchers and policy analysts working in groups that covered 12 key areas of education policy and provision including Education Planning, Systems, and Structure.

<sup>4</sup> Differentiation here refers to elements of curriculum, institution and funding (private and public) in the design, control and funding of provision. High levels of differentiation in the post compulsory sectors are distinguished from high levels of integration, state funding and control over basic and compulsory education and training.

institutions to deliver on the priorities of equity and development. (NECC, 1993).

The decision to go for a single comprehensive NQF including RPL found sufficient political consensus amongst policy makers around the White Paper of March 1995 although, as Lugg (2009) argues, this was not sustained beyond the promulgation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995. As the structures and functions of the NQF came into operation under the new SAQA, the net result was the creation of a third and contested discourse reflecting, what Parker and Harley (2007) refer to as, a prescriptive approach. Raffe (2009) in his analysis describes it as a *transformational* framework that

takes a proposed future system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in a transformed system, without explicit reference to existing provision. It typically uses learning outcomes for this purpose because they allow qualifications to be specified independently of existing standards, institutions and programmes (Raffe, 2009, p.25).

Raffe's description of three NQF types<sup>5</sup> provides a useful basis for exploring the contours of NQF discourse in terms of the purposes, design features and processes of implementation. Design features are associated with the specification and classification of qualifications and level descriptors, and range from tight or loose, "depending on the stringency of the conditions which a qualification must meet to be included in the framework" (Raffe, 2009, p.25). According to Raffe, the key to understanding the dynamic and contested nature of the NQF resides not only in the political, but also in the social and technical dimensions of their introduction into an existing education and training system. The technical dimensions refer to the regulatory nature and scope of the new discourse (partial or comprehensive), whilst the social dimension refers to the complex and often contested logics associated with introducing a 'new language of learning' into an existing system with its existing set of institutional cultures and practices.

The emerging RPL policy discourse in the South African NQF reflects some of these dimensions and concerns. A report prepared for Working Group 9, a sub-committee of the NTSI (Harris, Saddington and McMillan, 1994), confirmed that international models of the practice had been developed and

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*Communications framework, Reforming framework, Transformational framework.*

tested in the US, UK and Canada but predominantly as an *institution-based* practice in Higher Education. It was only in the vocational sectors that it formed part of a national competency-based framework for occupational standards and qualifications. The report includes reference to the frequently cited benefits of RPL to learners, employers, and providers but argues that its introduction and implementation in the South African context would require a substantial investment in specialised materials, resources, systems and staff to meet the potential demand “which could easily outstrip the supply of services” (Harris, Saddington and McMillan, 1994, p.28). It also cautions that the introduction of RPL as part of a *national* system would require a range of other enabling policies and practices associated with curriculum innovation, flexible delivery and lifelong learning and that further research would be necessary to explore the implications of formalising the practice within and across the different sectors i.e. vocational and formal education. The consequent evolution of an RPL policy discourse in South Africa reflects these diverse orientations and histories: on the one hand, the commitment of SAQA to an outcomes-based approach to qualifications design and assessment, and on the other, a relatively autonomous development of policies and practices in formal education and in the workplace (Cosatu, 2000).

RPL policies and regulations and ‘how to’ guides for implementing and quality assuring the practice are all in evidence (SAQA, 2002; SAQA, 2003), as are different forms and models of the practice that reflect the political and social dimensions of its engagement with different institutional and occupational contexts. The first official RPL Policy Document (SAQA, 2002) proceeded from this much quoted definition provided in the NSB Regulations of 1998:

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 the purposes of that qualification of that which meets the requirements. (National Standards Bodies Regulations, No. 18787 of 28 March 1998).

The Executive Summary of the SAQA RPL Policy (2002) that proceeds from this definition provides explicit guidance on what this process entails:

- **Identifying** what the candidate knows and can do;
- **Matching** the candidate’s knowledge and experience to specific unit standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification;

- **Assessing** the candidate against those standards; and
- **Crediting** the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past. (SAQA, 2002, p.7, emphasis in the original).

Described in these terms, RPL appears as a deceptively technical procedure for *mapping* prior learning onto the specifications of a qualification and then making judgments as to its degree of compliance or not. Consistent with this approach, the policy provides a check-listed set of criteria for quality assuring seven related aspects of the practice i.e. institutional policy and environment, services and support to learners, training and registration of assessors, methods and processes of assessment, quality management systems, fees for RPL services, and curriculum development. These were specifically directed at the newly accredited Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) bodies, and many of them subsequently customised the document for their sector specific needs and purposes (SAQA, 2007).

This policy was followed in 2003 by an Implementation Guide (SAQA, 2003). Aimed at providers, it elaborated the procedural aspects of RPL as an assessment practice (its technical dimension), and its role in determining the equivalence (or otherwise) of prior learning and experience in relation to prescribed standards. However, the assumption was that all role players in the system would appropriate the language and logic of an outcomes-based approach to assessment and quality assurance, and use RPL processes in this fashion to resolve claims of competence acquired outside of the conventional routes. This has clearly not been the case as we discuss below.

In contrast to this largely formulaic approach, the SAQA policy (2002) also provides a set of principles for locating the practice in a more holistic discourse of human development and lifelong learning. This constitutes a second albeit less prominent dimension of the discourse (the social dimension) that acknowledges a diversity of contexts, constituencies, purposes and applications,<sup>6</sup> and poses the possibility of a maturing system in which RPL is defined not only in relation to its assessment function but also as “a meeting place for the different traditions of knowledge emanating from different sites of practice” (SAQA, 2002, p.15). This dimension is also reflected in some of the quality assurance criteria that focus on issues arising

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<sup>6</sup> RPL for credit and RPL for access.

from the cultural and historical legacy of apartheid which if not addressed would seriously undermine the purpose and quality of the practice e.g. issues of language, bias and trauma associated with an oppressive experience of prior formal education (SAQA, 2002). In short, the Policy is explicit in foregrounding its technical focus on RPL as a credible quality assured *assessment practice*, whilst at the same time acknowledging that the social dimension is crucial and that little is feasible without the additional resources of institutions, personnel and critical pedagogy.

It is perhaps ironic that two months after the approval of the RPL Policy (SAQA, 2002) a Report by the government commissioned Study Team<sup>7</sup> on the *Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework* was published (DoE/DoL, 2002), and with it the beginnings of a six yearlong process that would lead eventually to a substantial revision in the architecture and conceptual underpinnings of the NQF, in Raffe's analysis, "a looser, more differentiated, more bottom-up framework, with more input from educational institutions" (2009, p.30). Changes to the NQF architecture focused on streamlining the systems and structures for standards generation and quality assurance, whilst the conceptual critique focused on the limitations of qualifications' reform as the *primary* driver of systems level integration and transformation, and the problems of trying to impose a *uniform* outcomes-based model of qualification design on the whole system. The argument concerning the latter is that at best it fails to differentiate between different origins, types and purposes of qualifications in different contexts (Young, 2009; Muller, 2009), and at worst, leads to "over-specified and over-prescriptive outcomes and standards" that "often became both unintelligible and self-defeating because the intended outcomes were distorted in the process" (DoE/DoL, 2002, p.58). The policy implications of these limitations for a technical definition of RPL are particularly significant given the prominence of prescribed outcomes and assessment criteria in judgments concerning the credit 'value' of prior experiential learning.

The response of policy makers to the Study Team's report came in the form of the *Consultative Document* produced by an inter-ministerial team from the Departments of Labour and Education (DoE/DoL, 2003) which, as Young

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The Study Team report points to a number of reasons for the disappointment surrounding the provision for *large scale* RPL including "unrealistic assumptions about what RPL can achieve on its own" and "the absence of incentives for providers, employers, learners and ETQAs to attach value to RPL" (DoE/DoL, 2002, p.86).



(2003, p.6) argues “sets out to combine an outcomes-based approach with recognition of the importance of distinguishing between disciplinary and work-based learning”. To this end it proposed a re-organisation of the NQF so as to accommodate the further development and registration of qualifications within three different but interdependent learning pathways, with additional provision for articulation mechanisms or switching points to facilitate mobility across pathways. It retains the concept of a single integrated 3x3 framework with provision for a functioning credit accumulation and transfer scheme to facilitate access and progression across the different pathways, whilst recognising that qualification design and progression rules could differ within each of the three pathways. There is very little mention of RPL in this report but this did not prevent its strong showing in the new NQF Act of 2008 where it is explicitly indicated as part of the SAQA mandate for further research and development, along with a Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme.

The shift to an interdependent NQF raises new questions and possibilities for RPL from a policy perspective, about its continued role in helping to build a more inclusive system of education and training. What are the implications for recognising different forms of knowledge and modalities of learning in a differentiated representation of academic, vocational and occupationally directed qualifications? What are the policy implications for defining and resourcing RPL, not just as a technical assessment device for measuring equivalence between different knowledge claims, but as a specialised practice for negotiating knowledge recognition and progression across different learning pathways, including specialisations of knowledge and skill that may not be officially registered? To answer these questions it is necessary to explore lessons emerging from a different set of perspectives – those emerging from the field of practice and research in the South African context.

## Exploring RPL in South Africa: forms and specialisations of the practice

The challenge of grounding RPL principles in the construction of a new post-1994 national learning system was taken up by a diverse range of practitioners and researchers, working in different contexts with different constituencies and specialising in different forms of the practice. Donor funding and technical assistance from specialist organisations based in the UK, Canada,

Ireland and the US provided the incentive for a number of small pilot projects at Higher Education institutions and in the workplace (Ballim, Omar and Ralphs, 2000). These were followed, after 2000, by a few large-scale projects designed to certify semi-skilled workers in the construction sector, and under-qualified professionals in the teaching and financial services sectors (SAQA, 2007; Volbrecht, Tisani, Hendriks and Ralphs, 2006).

These projects gave rise to forms and specialisations of the practice, each of them distinguished in relation to context, purposes, methods, scope and scale of delivery. I have used the term ‘specialisations’ here to denote the foci and methods associated with these forms of the practice, and to differentiate between them in terms of how they position assessment in relation to the other teaching and learning dimensions of the practice. These specialisations have been the focus of much of the RPL research that has emerged over the last ten years, research that has had to grapple with what the first cohorts of RPL practitioners and learners have experienced in formal education and workplace contexts. Together, they constitute an emerging ensemble of pedagogical strategies shaping the discourse of RPL although, as the following review will indicate, there is much still to be learnt about these practices and how they operate in different contexts and conditions. Three generic forms of the practice are briefly described and then analysed with reference to the purposes they serve and the pedagogical discourse they exemplify.

**RPL for credit** is the classical and pre-eminent form of the assessment device and is represented in the discourse of human capital theory as a form of ‘credit exchange’ (Harris, 2000; Osman, 2003) in which experiential learning can be certified in the credit bearing currency of national standards or qualifications. It is most frequently associated with the certification of craft and practical skills acquired through work-related practices or self-study, although it is also known as RPL for *advanced standing* when applied to formal qualifications in a higher education context. Outcomes-based assessment *leads* in this form of the practice and there would appear to be little room for pedagogy, in fact, the mantra and focus is on what has been learnt and *not* how it was obtained. This stance is supported by the distinction that is made between learning and experience, such that: ‘Credit should be

awarded for learning only, and not for experience<sup>8</sup> or, to rephrase in the discourse of outcomes-based education: on the distinction between explicit representations of knowledge and skills as described in statements of learning outcomes and equivalent representations embedded in ‘experience’, but technically not certifiable until they have been made explicit or inferred through an assessment process. This defines the central purpose and methods of the practice in relation to the process of extracting and evidencing the knowledge and skills acquired from experience, and the process of judging whether the evidence matches the specifications of the standard or qualification.

Notwithstanding this focus on assessment, the specialisations in this form of the practice are located in advising candidates, preparation of evidence, design of assessment instruments, assessment of the evidence, and the development of information and administration systems to process the results. Implementation is often individualised but may be on a large scale as in the case of standardised tests and examinations.

At its best, the practice has been commended for its diagnostic and formative effects (HSRC, 1995), and for efficiencies of time and cost in securing recognition where it is due (Osman, 2003); and at its worst as instrumentalist and *procrustean* (Harris, 2000) in its preoccupation with methods to repackage and measure prior experiential learning, including everyday knowledge concepts (Young, 2009), against given academic or occupational standards. Concerning the latter, scholars have flagged its propensity to collude with a market-driven commodification of informal learning which disadvantages those whose specialised knowledge and skills are embedded in ‘other’ cultural and collective identities and practices (Michelson, 1997; Harris, 2000; Fenwick, 2006). Cognisant of these limitations, the South African version of outcomes-based education has attempted to steer standards writing and assessment clear of the behaviourism associated with narrow applications of competency-based education (Parker and Walters, 2008), although this too has been critiqued in some cases as trying to pedagogise procedural knowledge (Muller, 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> This is a classic and much quoted principle emerging from scholars associated with the pioneering work on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) by the US based Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Simosko and Associates (1988) in her discussion of the principle defines learning in this formulation as “the skills, knowledge, and competence that people acquire from their work experience, their volunteer activities, their avocations, their homemaking experiences, and their independent reading” ( p.7).

**RPL for Access** is most commonly associated with the provision by formal education providers of an alternative route of entry for those who do not meet the prerequisites for admission to a specific programme or course. Reflective, therapeutic and developmental practices take the lead whilst summative assessment takes a back seat and changes its focus. In contrast to the outcome-based focus of the credit exchange model, RPL for access places its focus on the intrinsic development of meta-cognitive and reflective capabilities required for success in further and higher education. Its orientation is said to be prospective, with a stronger focus on the *potential to succeed* than on the labeling of current competence against fixed standards. Portfolio Development Courses<sup>9</sup> provide participants with specialised activities and methods<sup>10</sup> to explore their own assemblages of knowledge and skills and to engage with the social and academic modes and languages of learning (Slonimsky and Shalem, 2006; Boughey, 2002) that are key to effective participation in higher education. These courses are usually provided on group basis and small scale, although the front-end advising and information services may well be public and offered on a large scale. On the back end, portfolio assessment, supported by interviews and standardised tests, are the most common methods used to make admission decisions on whether these candidates have met the entry criteria and are likely to succeed in their program of choice.

Notwithstanding the developmental and therapeutic benefits (Evans, 2000; Osman, 2003), this form of the practice has been criticised for privileging individualised and rationalist ways of knowing over collective and contextualised knowledge practices (Michelson, 1997 and 2006). Pedagogical strategies for getting around this problem are suggested by Hendriks (2001) in his case study of the portfolio development course which offers possibilities for access to undergraduate study at the University of the Western Cape. These include the use of narrative methods for documenting the marginal but contextually specialised knowledge produced in working class organisations and communities. Narrative analysis and the generic cross-field outcomes provide a broad framework for the assessment of these portfolios 'on their

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<sup>9</sup> These courses vary substantially in structure, content and methodology depending on the level and rules of entry for the targeted qualification e.g. for entry to undergraduate or post-graduate programmes in Higher Education.

<sup>10</sup> Kolb's Learning Cycle is one of the most common methods used on these courses although it has been subject to some critique by feminist scholars (Michelson, 2006; Fenwick, 2006).

own terms' (Hendriks, 2001) thus avoiding the temptation to use an intentional process of reflection and analysis to generate an extraction of the knowledge acquired. "On the contrary, it is the assessor who does the reflection and extraction and makes an inference about learning" (Hendriks, 2001, p.105).

Shalem and Steinberg (2006) in their case study, focus on the complex nature of the pedagogies at work in a portfolio development course for practicing teachers seeking access to a post-graduate qualification. Using the analytical frameworks of Bernstein (2000) and Wenger (1998), they argue that RPL pedagogy is situated 'invisibly' in a complex relationship "between different histories of learning, each forming its own respective discourse, vocational discourse (knowledge *from* experience) and scholastic discourse (knowledge *separated from* experience) . . . both of which use terms, concepts, and representational forms, that is 'reifications' (Wenger, 1998)" (Shalem and Steinberg, 2006, pp.108–109). Teachers on this course struggled to recontextualise their work-based knowledge practices within the more discipline-based discourse of the portfolio programme. This created real dilemmas for the academics who argue that relying on inferential judgments is problematic because the criteria for assessment (retrospective and prospective) remain largely invisible to the learners.

These concerns are partly resolved by the third, **In-Curriculum** form of the practice, most commonly associated with professional programmes designed to cater for the continuing professional development and/or license-to-practice (statutory) requirements of employees in particular sectors of the labour market.<sup>11</sup> Specialisations of this form of the practice are located *within* the curriculum which is designed to include opportunities for the recognition *and* assessment of prior work-based learning as part of the course. Various options are available either as distinct credit bearing modules (Castle, 2003; Osman 2006; Michelson and Mandell *et al.*, 2004) or as an integral feature of the curriculum, what Harris refers to as the 'spine model' (Harris, 2000). In principle this provides for RPL related tasks to be built into the sequence and pacing of the curriculum which, in the manner of vocational and work-integrated professional programmes (Volbrecht, 2010; Deller, 2007), are designed to 'face both ways' (Barnett, 2006). It also offers a shorter time to

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of these in the South African context include the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) for under-qualified teachers, and a range of other qualifications specified by the Financial Services Board for advisors operating in the sector (Deller, 2007).

qualify, as opportunities to challenge for advanced standing are provided at different points in the programme, although this claim needs to be tempered by an appreciation for the purpose and structure of professional qualifications (Harris, 2006; Muller, 2009), and limitations on the value and transferability of knowledge and skills across different learning contexts. Moll and Welsh (2004) argue for a distinction between ‘domain specific’ prior learning and ‘domain general’ prior learning: both are worthy of recognition but the latter is particularly significant for the mobilisation of new learning in a changing programme or environment. Breier (2003, 2006) takes a similar view on the limitations of domain specific knowledge in an academic curriculum. Her findings suggest that even if learners have acquired extensive amounts of practical experience and wisdom, *phronesis* (Breier and Ralphs, 2010), they are unlikely to succeed if they are not able to recognise the generalising preferences of the curriculum and the evaluation rules for determining competence or otherwise.

Most of the practices reviewed above have as their starting point a *given* set of unit standards, qualifications and/or curriculae, although they differ in the strategies they use to engage experiential learning in relation to these givens. Assessment is clearly an integral feature of all three forms of the practice but seldom exists in isolation from a range of other strategies associated with bringing these different sources of knowledge and forms of learning into a shared discursive space where comparisons and judgments can be made. I have described these strategies as specialisations of the practice but I want to suggest that they are better described as specialised pedagogical practices taking different forms and serving different purposes in different contexts. This is a proposition which is exemplified in the doctoral study by Cooper (Cooper, 2005), a study which starts from *outside* the academy and *inside* the everyday operations of a large trade union. It explores the cultural historical contours of knowledge production and pedagogical practice in this context and then asks the question: what are the implications for RPL in the design and implementation of curricula for trade union educators in a higher education context, if we take these different knowledge and learning cultures seriously?

Cooper’s (2005) ethnographic study explores the specialist nature of trade union pedagogy and its relation to formal university-based pedagogies. What she found was a range of linguistic, performance, narrative and written tools for mediating the production and distribution of knowledge and skills at all levels and sites of activity in the organisation. These tools are contextualised

within the ‘local and particular’ activities of the union but “draw on different forms of knowledge ranging from local, practical forms to more analytical and conceptual forms, including elements of highly codified forms of knowledge such as economics and law” (Cooper, 2006, p.234). From an RPL perspective, the study provides strong evidence for the proposition that *where and how* knowledge and skills are obtained really does make a difference. Recognising prior learning is as much about recognising the epistemological and pedagogical elements of experiential learning<sup>12</sup> as it is about certifying the outcomes. RPL in this case is positioned between different but related epistemologies, languages and contexts – the ‘mixed pedagogical pallet’ (cited in Cooper, 2005) of the trade union and the encoded curricula of the academy.

The obvious question arises as to ‘what is RPL doing in this in-between space’? Is this the space of the *transformational model* of RPL to which Osman (2003), Harris (2000) and others refer; the space within which different knowledge and learning practices are brought into critical dialogue around the content, methods and evaluation rules (Bernstein, 2000) that decide what knowledge gets recognised, and how evidence of such will be presented and assessed? Or is this a form of ‘border pedagogy’ (Wenger, 1998) for bringing different discourses of knowledge learning and assessment into dialogue (Rule, 2006), whilst at the same time providing learners with the tools they require to navigate their way in and across these different and sometimes adversarial communities of practice?

## Moving forward: new challenges for research and policy making

This paper has argued that RPL practices cannot be understood in isolation from developments in the larger political economy and the NQF system with its component structures for qualification design and quality assurance. The discourses of globalisation, neoliberalism and democratic transformation have all contributed to the complex and contested nature of the South African NQF

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<sup>12</sup> This comes very close to the position of Eraut (2004) that sharp distinctions between informal and formal learning, or learning as participation and learning as acquisition, are not helpful when researching complex practices outside of formal education. This is not to discount the prevalence of the informal in the workplace or the more codified practices of formal education provision.

and all have made different claims on the purpose and nature of RPL practices. The first part of this paper traces the emergence of an RPL policy discourse that is predominantly technical, prescriptive and closely associated with the discourse of an outcomes-based assessment system, but which also contains elements of a radical and humanist discourse more explicitly associated with the developmental purposes of RPL and a more socially and epistemologically inclusive education and training system. NQF systems are dynamic in character and the paper considers the impact of recent revisions to the NQF architecture for the changing discourse of RPL such that the provision for qualifications' design and quality assurance now resides in three distinct but interdependent councils and related learning pathways. The implications of these changes for RPL policy and practice have still to be elaborated but it is predictable that the focus will shift increasingly to the priorities of building a credible credit transfer and articulation system to facilitate vertical and sideways progression across these different pathways.

The second part of the paper engages more specifically with the post-1994 discourse of RPL as an assessment device and how this provides a very limited representation of the specialisations associated with different aspects of the practice in different contexts. Research by RPL scholars to date has done much to demarcate the conceptual nature of these specialisations in relation to the epistemological, pedagogical and institutional coordinates of the practice. The central proposition arising from this research is that RPL is seldom reducible to a technical formula for measuring equivalence and allocating common currency (credits); it is itself a distinctive pedagogical practice, an encoded practice with distinctive purposes and rules that provides the cognitive and therapeutic tools for navigating learning and assessment practices in and across the different contexts in the system. These include the tools for understanding the social and epistemological determinants of what knowledge and forms of learning are to be recognised, and how is it to be acquired and represented in different contexts.

The challenge in going forward is to continue this research in a collaborative fashion across the new three part structure of the NQF. Much of the RPL research to date has been conducted on separate tracks as it were, most of it in the higher education sector, much less in the trade and occupational sectors, and very little in trade unions and community-based organisations. The merits of a collaborative approach lies in the fact that it does not start with the assumption of a standardised currency for the comparison of knowledge and learning achievements across the three pathways. Conceptually this is



consistent with the move to a differentiated but interdependent system for the registration and articulation of qualifications and standards on the NQF.

Policies guiding the development of such a system are required to recognise the role that RPL specialists can play not only in the classification and articulation of experiential learning achievements in and across different domains, but also in the dedicated provision of RPL programmes and services at all institutions and levels in the system. Further research is required to contribute to the development and critique of such policies, not in a prescriptive fashion but rather as part of what Parker and Walters (2008, p.78) refer to as “a collaborative approach to NQF development that seeks a ‘means of portability’; ways of enabling boundary crossings, of improving quality and relevance and of better understanding different forms and sites of learning”. It is what Harris (2006) refers to as ‘knowing the borders and crossing the lines’ or what Wenger (1998) refers to as ‘boundary relations’. Sometimes it is about mediating convergence or connections between different forms of knowledge and learning; often, it is about engaging with the differences.

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