

**The mature aged in transition: Innovative practice for re-
engagement**

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Abstract

There are mounting imperatives for the VET sector to be more responsive to the training needs of older learners and workers. There has been a steady growth in people over 45 years of age undertaking training through the VET system, as well as, labour market trends which show that the incidence of long term unemployment for people over 45 years of age is higher than for those who are younger and that re-employment for this group is more difficult. This coupled with the pressures of an aging population and workplace changes brought about by the new knowledge economy requires a re-thinking and reframing of VET sector practice, which will ensure greater engagement of this group. This paper is based on doctoral research, which involved a Learning Survey of job seekers (n=247) of whom 56 % were over 45 years of age and Adult Learning Australia (ALA) funded research into mature age jobseekers and their use or non use of recognition of prior learning (RPL). The ALA research complimented the doctoral research and the synergy between the two has contributed greatly to the development of a model for fostering re-engagement and lifelong learning. The model draws upon multiple disciplines including different adult learning theories and approaches, sociology, psychology and cognitive psychology and the New Literacies Studies. The model contains four integrated components and views the learner holistically. One of the main areas of focus within the model relates to issues of identity, transition and what has been referred to as the 'narrative turn' in pedagogy. A theoretical perspective on education and training, which relates to the use of biographicity or what Alheit (1992) refers to as biographical competency will be explored within the broader frame of 'self-reflexivity' in modernity.

Introduction

This paper has been submitted under the topic area of *Re-engaging later learners*. Later learners or the mature age are defined here as being those aged of 45 years and over. There seems to be a general consensus in the research, which sees this particular age grouping as statistically significant in terms of population and labour market trends, and rates of participation in education and training. The focus of this paper will be the mature aged (45 years of age and over) in transition, in particular the transitions from unpaid caring to employment and from unemployment to employment. Unemployment can encompass retrenchment, hidden unemployment and under employment. In a great many of these cases the transition necessitates and requires a re-engagement in formal learning. Yet for many mature aged the length of time since engaging in formal learning can be extensive. The research, which will be discussed in this paper has resulted in the development of a model for assisting those experiencing major life transitions in and around the areas of employment, education and training. For VET practitioners the research is important in that it provides a model for understanding, accommodating and assisting mature age learners re-engage with formal learning. Adults returning to formal learning face many threats, both negative and positive, to their identities. The model and approaches within it attend to and foster skills and resources, which assist later learners re-engage with formal learning. The following literature review has focused on recent reports relating to

mature age workers and learners and is followed by a discussion of one of the major theoretical frames used in the model.

Literature review

Ageing and the Australian workforce and economy is receiving more and more attention in government discussion and research. Three major documents will be drawn upon to illustrate the recent attention mature age job seekers, workers and learners are receiving in government discussion and policy documents.

Policy directions

In 2003 the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) produced a document as the starting point of a consultation process to promote discussion on adult learning. The paper listed seven key areas for consideration one of which was assisting mature age transitions (DEST, 2003, p. 3). The report makes the very pertinent point that;

‘Overall, adult Australians who grew up in the 1950’s and 1960’s have lower levels of [educational] attainment – 40% of people aged between 45 and 54 did not complete secondary school. In their youth, work was a more accessible and attractive alternative’ (DEST, 2003, p. 5)

This has meant that not only are these mature age workers and job seekers disadvantaged in today’s labour market but they are also less likely to have engaged in any formal post compulsory education and training.

As part of the strategies for the implementation of the new National Strategy for VET: 2004 – 2010 the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) produced a report noted that the proportion of mature age workers in Australia is much lower than in countries like New Zealand and the US and that individuals will need to extend their working lives, whether by their own choosing or due to necessity, for financial and health reasons.

‘Whereas previously Australian workers were encouraged to consider early retirement in their mid-fifties, there is now an imperative for them to be encouraged to remain actively involved in the workforce for as long as possible. Workers who are involuntarily made redundant or who are underemployed need to be assisted to transition into new or greater levels of employment.’ (ANTA, 2003, p.2)

The report noted the diversity of the mature age workforce and that certain factors disadvantaged mature age workers in accessing training and employment. These factors being: unemployment or marginal employment, being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island origin, being from a non-English speaking background, living in a regional or remote location or being a person with a disability. This highlights the issues and complexity of what is referred to as multiple or compound disadvantage and what Golding & Volkoff (1998) refer to as the overlapping ‘cross-group factors’ which act to entrench disadvantage.

Drawing upon Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data the report also noted that on average mature age workers were less highly qualified, less likely to have participated in training in the last 12 months when compared to younger people and less likely to intend to study for a qualification in the near future. Of those mature age people who did have qualifications, only a few had obtained new qualifications in the last ten years (ANTA, 2003, p.3).

The report also acknowledges the fact that the mature age, do obtain new knowledge and skills in ways other than by formal learning and there is a need to recognise these other forms of learning. 'The VET sector needs to facilitate pathways that enable individuals to move easily between formal and informal training activities' (ANTA, 2003, p. 6). The paper concludes with five ideas which outline the range of areas in which action might be taken over the timeframe of the National Strategy for VET: 2004 – 2010. The third idea presented refers to making services more 'user-friendly and flexible' and contains suggestions very much in line with the purposes of the research being discussed. These include:

- Improve mechanisms for RPL and RCC to ensure they are user-friendly
 - Promote ACE as a useful pathway to informal and formal learning
 - Strengthen links between VET and informal training (eg. On-the-job training, ACE or community activities)
 - Provide and promote 'bite-sized' programs and introduced the idea of a 'skills passport'
- (ANTA, 2003)

In April 1999, the Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education drew attention to the large number of adults in Australia with little or no post compulsory education and training and to the widening 'knowledge gap' between adult Australians with higher levels of educational attainment who access and use learning resources compared to those adult Australians with lower levels of educational attainment whose use of learning resources is less effective. 'Over 50 per cent of the adult population do not hold post school qualifications. Thirty eight per cent of adults aged 45–54 and 49 per cent of adults aged 55–64 did not complete the highest level of schooling' (MCEETYA, 1999). The Ministerial Declaration concluded:

We need innovative and accessible learning solutions, relevant to individual life circumstances and environments that engage those with the greatest learning needs and give them the confidence, skills and desire to continue to learn. (MCEETYA, 1999)

It can be seen from these documents that there is a growing concern and acknowledgement within commonwealth and state governments of the need to encourage participation in vocational education and training and adult learning in general for the mature aged. Both the ANTA report and MCEETYA Declaration on ACE recommend the promotion of the ACE sector and its use of flexible, accessible and informal community based adult education as a valuable pathway to learning for disengaged learners over the age of 45 years.

Training needs of the mature aged

Older workers are less well-educated than the average worker which has implications for the kinds of training programs which are appropriate for them and also influences their willingness to participate.

‘For older workers, their lack of prior-and especially recent-educational experience is a significant issue. Firstly it limits their interest in, and willingness to engage in, training. Moreover, once engaged, they face a series of difficulties in acquiring the knowledge and skills that are the focus of the program. In case of vocational skills, it is especially important that they be capable of being practiced and applied within authentic contexts. This is especially difficult for unemployed older persons whose likelihood of employment is low.’ (Chappell, et al, 2003, p. 56).

A report by Keys and Young (2000) on older workers lists the major barriers to engaging in education and training for mature age workers and follows this with key suggestions for overcoming these. The barriers were identified as: difficulties with computers, problems with literacy and numeracy, resistance to learning new skills, low self-esteem and confidence (particularly following redundancy), and difficulty coping and adapting to change (particularly technological change) (Keys Young, 2000, p.2). The researchers listed approaches, which had been successful in overcoming these barriers as: ‘an empathetic response to difficulties facing mature age workers, showing how existing skills are transferable and still valid, collaborating with mature age workers so they see themselves as agents of change, adjusting delivery methods, and training in familiar surrounds (Keys Young, 2000, p.2).

The Workplace Education Research Consortium from the University of New England undertook a large and robust study into good practice in training mature age people who are disadvantaged in the labour market in 2003. The research identified five areas of good practice:

‘The investigation has confirmed that securing success for mature unemployed adult learners who are disadvantaged in the labour market requires five key features. These are: an initial education experience in a safe, non-threatening environment; negotiation with learners in content, format and timing of educational experiences; the use of social cohesion and a focus on learner interests to motivate learners; a learner focused (andragogy-based) approach to learning; and organisational innovation and flexibility.’ (Gelade, et al, 2003, p. x-xi).

Chappell, et al, (2003) compiled a table on good practice in training for older workers from the findings of seven studies and has been reproduced below as Table 1.

Table 1 Good practice in Training for Older Workers

	Education and Training issues	Workplace issues
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, non-threatening, less formal environment • Flexible in timing & delivery modes • Small class sizes • Older workers are involved in designing the training • Learner readiness issues are addressed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear linkage to valued rewards & incentives • Clear support from management • Avoidance of a competitive context
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly written instructions • Learning materials facilitate recall • Material is organised into small units • Work-related tasks • Prompt feedback on performance • Build new skills on existing knowledge • Practical knowledge is the focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-related tasks are identified
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predominantly utilise verbal rather than literacy skills • Vary amount of time allocated to tasks to accommodate individual needs • Vary amount of time allocated to tasks to accommodate individual needs • Allocate significant blocks of time • Use active, discovery-based learning methods • Provide opportunities to practice skills as they are developed • Limit learning group to older workers • Utilise participant experience • Use self-paced methods • Include group and collegial learning strategies • Gradual transfer of learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-the-job coaching is provided • Learning time is allowed & facilitated • Export support is provided • Opportunities to practice & apply knowledge are established

(Source Chappell, et al , 2003, p. 54.)

This research has major implications for many VET sector providers, especially those organisations and institutions which structure their activities in relation to promotion and marketing, social environments, student services and teaching practices around younger student populations. ‘As older clients become an increasing proportion of

those undertaking vocational and other training programs, providers need to rethink the way which they deal with older people and examine ways of making their operations more open and accessible to all age groups' (Smith, 1999, p.111).

Theoretical contribution of 'biographicity'

The model developed from the research, which is to be reported in this paper is framed by several approaches to adult learning. This paper will focus on one of these approaches, the concept of biographicity. This concept encompasses and compliments other approaches and pedagogic practices incorporated in the model. The model acknowledges the 'entanglement between perspectives for understanding adult learning' and adopts a multiple perspective approach as advocated by Fenwick (2004).

The post modern world is one where traditional expectations of life courses and phases have become confused and no longer organised around a working life biography. Life course patterns are no longer linear and clear cut. There are ever changing status passages and risk situations to accompany them. We are facing more complex patterns of transition in and out of the workforce throughout or working lives.

Alheit argues for an approach to biographical pedagogy, which insists on a different way of learning in relation to the transitions we are experiencing in late modern society. Alheit (2002) argues for a 'biographical learning' approach:

Interest centres here not on situative learning acts by isolated individuals, but on learning as the (trans-)formation of experience, knowledge and action structures in the context of people's life histories and lifeworlds (in other words, in 'lifewide' context noted above). Therefore, we speak of 'biographical learning', by which we mean not so much a sharply and empirically delineated entity – such as learning processes that are bound up with specific forms, locations or times – but rather a theoretical perspective on education and training that takes as its starting point the life history perspective of the actual learner.....

At the level of biographical experience, analytical distinctions such as those between formal, non-formal and informal learning are not necessarily sharp. On the contrary, one of the peculiar features of biography is that, through the accumulation and structuring of experience in one's life history, institutionally and socially specialised fields of experience become integrated, congealing to form a new and particular construct of meaning. This accomplishment on the part of living subjects can be circumscribed with the term 'biographicity' (Alheit, 1993; Alheit & Dausien, 2000b) (Alheit, 2002, p. 11)

Alheit (1994) argues for an approach to emancipatory adult education through biographical coaching. By this he means exerting a particular influence on the framework of social conditions of learning in order that an individual's hidden possibilities are 'brought to the surface and developed, and that "unlived" lives can be lived instead' (Alheit, 1994, p. 293). Alheit refers to unofficial communications which are non-evaluative and whose basic structure is narrative. Wildemeersch (1989) also sees the central dimension of learning as conversation and dialogue and that it is a crucial part of the transformational process applied in experiential learning.

The organisation of biographically orientated learning (processes) must be communitarian, lifeworld-orientated, project related, and interest-related.

- *Communitarian* means that the context must be one of solidarity.
- *Lifeworld-orientated* implies that learning must be related directly to the learner's social world.
- *Project-related* means that it is implementable and must be directed at changing a specific element of practical reality.
- *Interest-related*, finally, means that it must have something to do with the learner's own ideas for shaping his or her world.

Learning processes then become voyages of discovery. (Alheit, 1994. p. 293)

The model to be presented in this paper incorporates these four elements of biographically orientated learning processes.

Alheit refers to "biographicity" as a competency, which he defines as:

The ability to attach modern stocks of knowledge to biographical resources of meaning and, with this knowledge, to associate oneself afresh (Alheit, 1992, p. 206)

Hake (1999) interprets this as drawing attention to the relationships between learning in times of transition and biographicity, where individuals engage in intentional learning as a means to coping with transitions and risks. This type of learning can become part of the learners strategic planning of the life course and can be conducted formally or informally or in mutual learning groups or as an exercise in self-directed learning. The model in this paper has recently been tested with a group of women aged 45 years and over who wished to re-enter the paid workforce. It took the form of a formal community based learning group and was funded by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training as a labour market program for the mature aged. The model could also be applied to less formal learning situations and incorporated into existing curricula across disciplines and subject areas within the VET sector.

There is a synergy between Alheits emancipatory approach to adult learning through biographicity and other adult learning approaches used in the model, in particular perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow describes Transformational Theory of adult learning as based upon an emancipatory paradigm which incorporates critical reflection and the discourse of human communication, and the transformative potential of our interpretive frames of reference (1996, p. 158).

'Transformation in meaning perspective is precipitated by life's dilemmas which cannot be resolved by simply acquiring more information, enhancing problem solving skills or adding to one's competencies. Resolution of these dilemmas and transforming our meaning perspectives require that we become critically aware of the fact that we are caught in our own history and are reliving it and of the cultural and psychological assumptions which structure the way we see ourselves and others. (Mezirow, 1978, p. 108-9)

The other approaches incorporated in the model include experiential learning methods (Saddington, 1998), community based learning (McGivney, 1991), critical reflection (Kolb, 1984), learner autonomy (Boud, 1989) and self-direction as a strategy for lifelong learning (Candy, 1991).

Research methodology

Both the doctoral and ALA funded research involved a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The former utilised a survey of approximately 250 job seekers involved in labour market programmes (LMP) and was followed by focus groups with representatives from the participating organisations. The latter utilised a telephone survey and case studies. This paper will focus on the findings from the doctoral survey (hereafter referred to as the Learning Survey) and the telephone survey from the ALA funded research (referred to as the Telephone Survey).

Learning Survey

The Learning Survey asked respondents questions from within nine areas:

1. Current situation-(learning activity)
2. Computer / internet access
3. Previous study
4. Awareness of RPL / RCC
5. Experience of RPL / RCC
6. Current knowledge and skills
7. Future intentions for learning
8. Motivations / influences on learning
9. Personal details

The survey was anonymous and was designed to minimise the writing required of the respondents. The survey was approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee, and was administered in three ways: the researcher would attend a training session of the LMP and administer the survey; the LMP trainer / leader would administer the survey; or practitioners of one on one services would administer the survey with individual participants / clients. The survey was designed as a developmental tool in itself and encouraged the survey respondents to start to reflect on the skills and knowledge they have acquired informally. The survey contains a combination of open and closed question formats. The forced-choice response formats used were likert-style rating scales, checklists and ranking formats.

Data sources

The survey was conducted from late 2003 through to early 2004.

Sample range:

- 247 people experiencing unemployment
- Majority engaged in some form of LMP / training
- South East Qld & Northern NSW

Due to the difficulties in accessing people experiencing unemployment a nonprobability sampling technique was used. Initially permission from the Queensland Department of Employment and Training (DET) was obtained to contact community based organizations which had labour market program and service funding. These organizations were contacted and asked if they would give permission for the researcher to conduct the survey with groups of unemployed who were undertaking labour market training and/ or were participants on Work For The Dole projects. During the initial stages of this process a form of snowball sampling occurred with representatives of these community based organizations referring the researcher onto other members within the network of community based providers of labour market programs.

Telephone Survey

The Telephone Survey asked respondents questions from within four areas:

1. Organisational details
2. Participant details
3. RPL /RCC policy and practice
4. Alternative approaches to RPL

This research involved a telephone survey of community based organisations, which conducted labour market programs (LMP) for mature age job seekers throughout the state of Queensland. The providers were identified on the Queensland Department of Employment & Training (DET) web site as being recipients of funding under programs within the *Breaking the Unemployment Cycle* initiative.

A representative from the organisation was contacted to seek agreement. Upon agreement a suitable representative from the organisation was identified and an interview time scheduled. The interview questions were, when possible, sent through to the interviewee beforehand to enable them to prepare any information before the actual interview process. On one occasion the organisation was very small and the contact person had a very busy training schedule so it was agreed that the representative would complete the survey questions themselves and email the responses back. Written consent was sort from the participating organisations in reference to the organisation being identified and named in the research report.

Data Sources

The state of Queensland is divided into six regional areas. Some of the regions are more populous than others and consequently the number and type of funded projects varied between the regions. The following lists the number of telephone interviews conducted in each of these six areas;

• North Queensland	1
• Central Queensland	2
• South-West Queensland	3
• Wide Bay / Sunshine Coast	4
• Brisbane North	4
• Brisbane South / Gold Coast	3
TOTAL	17

Seventeen providers were interviewed via telephone and one organisation completed the survey without the interview process. The providers all run some form of service &/or training for mature age job seekers. This is usually not the only activity of the organisation but one of many. The number of services and activities depends on the size & funding arrangements of the organisation. Not all providers were RTOs (Registered Training Organisations) although some non-RTO's were in partnerships with RTOs.

Key Findings and Discussion

Learning Survey

The demographics of the respondents were reflective of the general population with 44.4% of respondents being male and 55.2% female. Those who identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander were 2.1% and those with a significant and permanent disability were 15.6%. Approximately one third of the respondents were born outside of Australia with 17.7 % speaking another language other than English at home. Sixty two percent were over the age of 40 years. Table 2 below shows the distribution of age ranges for respondents.

Table 2 Age Ranges

AGE RANGE	Percentage
15-29 years	20%
30-44years	24%
45-60 years	56%

Findings – Mature age respondents

The discussion on the findings from the Learning Survey will now focus on the 56% of respondents who are aged 45 years and over (n=138). The highest level of educational attainment was the school certificate / Year 10 equivalent, followed by a TAFE certificate and then Higher School Certificate / Year 12 equivalent. Table 3 below details these figures further. Approximately 20% indicated that they had not done any training courses since they left school, while 80% had. Just under two thirds of the mature age respondents had a computer in their home while a third did not. 52% had access to the internet in their home while 48% did not. Three quarters of mature age respondents felt that having access to a computer was either very important or important.

When asked about the training they had done previously TAFE rated the highest followed by courses through paid employment and with RTOs. When asked if they intended to study in the next three years, definite “yes” responses were highest for work based learning followed by TAFE. The lowest was at University level.

Table 3 Highest level of educational attainment for mature age respondents

Education Level	Percentage
SC / Years 10	45.5%
HSC / Year 12	16.3%
Year 13	1.6%
TAFE certificate	20.3%
Diploma	8.9%
Bachelor	3.3%
Postgraduate	4.1%

When asked to rate themselves in terms of their literacy and numeracy skills for daily life the large majority rated these as either good, very good or excellent.

In terms of early experiences of schooling 49% rated this as “OK” with 15% rating this as either negative or very negative and 36% rating it as either positive or very positive.

When asked about possible barriers to engaging in further study / training the highest ratings were costs and transport difficulties. 52 % of all respondents currently undertaking a training course (n=174) were mature age, the majority of this training was non accredited or at the level of a Statement of Attainment. These two categories combined to represent two thirds of the mature age responses to this question. This may reflect the nature of the training offered by the LMPs they were participating in. Table 4 below provides greater detail of AQF levels.

Table 4 Current training activity and AQF level for mature age respondents

AQF Level	Frequency
Non accredited	33
Statement of Attainment	33
Certificate I	17
Certificate II	2
Certificate III	11
Certificate IV	1
Diploma	0
Degree	2

When asked if they had experienced any major life changes which led them to undertake study / training 74 mature age respondents indicated that unemployment had led them to study followed by divorce/ relationship breakdown (60 responses), then career change (51 responses) and relocation (39 responses).

Just under two thirds of all respondents had not heard of the term RPL (63.3% of mature age respondents). Only 18 respondents had applied for RPL, 13 of these were mature aged.

Telephone survey

In the ALA funded research the four main types of assistance required by mature age job seekers was found overwhelming to be: personal development, peer support, self

esteem and self confidence, and job search related assistance followed by career guidance, basic computing and upgrading of skills. The types of assistance least required were skill recognition, seeking specific skill training and seeking a qualification.

The key issues which emerged from the research for mature age job seekers lie largely in areas related to self concept, self recognition, negative perceptions surrounding ageism and employability, contemporary work practices and job search activities. For many mature age job seekers these issues are compounded by little and /or lack of recent experience in formal education and training and extended periods of not being in the paid workforce.

The research also concluded that current RPL practice is not relevant to the current needs of mature age jobseekers and different approaches to RPL which are tailored to the particular needs of this group are required. The current practice of RPL in Australia demands high levels of self confidence and self esteem, a well developed ability to engage in self recognition activities and the recording of these through print based mediums, recent documentation which demonstrates competence along with a knowledge and familiarity of formal learning systems. These abilities and conditions are what is most lacking and in need of development in mature age job seekers. The research calls for a reframing of RPL in terms of levels of recognition: self recognition; informal recognition; formal recognition. And it is at the levels of self and informal recognition which mature age job seekers need assistance. This reframing of recognition can assist in explaining why so few mature age job seekers apply for formal RPL and why it is perceived by the organisations which run programs for mature age job seekers as not relevant to their current needs.

The research from both the Learning Survey and ALA funded Telephone Survey has led to the development and use of a model for fostering re-engagement and lifelong learning, which takes a multidisciplinary approach and views the learner holistically. One of the main areas of focus within the model relates to issues of identity and transition. The model was originally designed with a focus on an alternate approach to RPL but has much wider applications (Cameron & Miller, 2004b). It draws from several theoretical frames on which one was discussed in detail. That is Alheit's concept of "biographicity" and biographically related learning processes.

A transitional model of RPL

The model is framed by the wider objectives of lifelong learning and is relevant to VET practitioners as it provides a model for understanding, accommodating and assisting mature age learners re-engage with formal learning. Adults returning to formal learning face many threats, both negative and positive, to their identities. The model and approaches within it attend to and foster skills and resources, which assist later learners re-engage with formal learning.

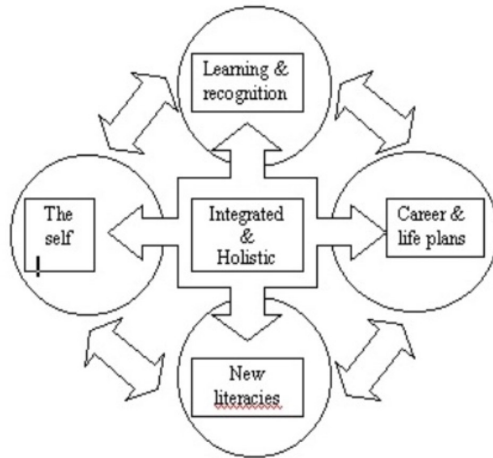
The transitional model of recognition has four integrated components and views the learner holistically. These four components are visually represented below in Figure 1. The model is framed by a number of adult learning theories and approaches. This paper has concentrated on the contribution of Alheit's emancipatory approach to adult

learning through biographicity to the model's development. This has been utilised in the Self and Career and life planning components of the model.

The Self

The self component of the new model is crucial. The issues surrounding aspects of the self-concept must be dealt with in this orientation phase before any development or progress can be made in the other areas. This component draws upon theoretical approaches, which include theories of self and identity and social cognitive theory (Branden, 1994; Dweck, 1999; Alexander, 2001). Key concepts addressed include self-esteem, self-confidence and self-knowledge and development. Techniques used include an array of reflective narrative tools, which include biography, storytelling and a reflective journal. A variety of personal development planning strategies and techniques are also present within this component.

Figure 1 Four components of the transitional model of RPL



Source: (Cameron & Miller, 2004b)

Learning and recognition

The learning and recognition component looks at the different types and sites of learning (non-formal, informal & formal). The language, systems and discourses of formal learning systems are addressed, as is a suite of 'Learn 2' skills. These 'Learn 2' skills include metacognitive skills such as 'learning to learn' and 'learning to be assessed' as well as, 'learning to be recognised' skills. Central to the latter is the concept of self-recognition, which is the first phase of a three phase developmental approach to recognition (Cameron, 2004). It is within this component that the learners will begin to develop portfolios. Learners will be encouraged to explore innovative and non-paper based ways to present the knowledge and skills they have acquired through all three types and sites of learning.

Career and life planning

The third component, career and life planning involves aspects of career guidance and development theories. Key concepts within this component are 'learner identities' (Whittaker and Mayes, 2001), learning trajectories (Gorard, Reeves, Fevre and Furlong 1997), 'possible selves' (Cross and Markus, 1991) and life course patterns (Merriam and Clark, 1991). Exploration of these concepts results in comprehensive career and life plans which is complimentary to the development of the portfolio.

New literacies

The last component, new literacies is based on research involving the 'new world of work' (Falk, 2002), the concept of the 'digital divide' and contemporary research into conceptions of literacy for the new millennium (Lonsdale and McCurry, 2004). Learners are exposed to macro-level concepts associated with the 'old' and 'new' economies. This includes a 'sociocultural' approach to literacy which values less dominant literacies and views literacy practice as contextualised and multiple. Learners develop research and information literacy skills for the new knowledge economy. Depending on access to resources, available time and existing information literacy skills, the learners will develop e-portfolios.

Conclusions

The research described in this paper compliments existing research and literature on what types of training will best suit mature age learners, especially those experiencing periods of transition and the disadvantages associated with states of unemployment. Levels of formal educational attainment are relatively low for this group and the financial constraints imposed by unemployment compound barriers for re-engagement. For mature age job seekers their immediate training needs are related to issues of personal development, peer support, self esteem and self confidence, and job search related assistance followed by career guidance and basic computing. Approaches to re-engagement need to attend to these issues so that mature age learner needs are met and they are encouraged to be self directed and empowered to make informed decisions about their further learning needs and choices. Formal learning experiences need to be learner centred, flexible and relevant. This paper has argued that the Transitional model of RPL presented offers an innovative approach to assisting mature age learners re-engage with formal learning. This model incorporates several approaches to adult learning. The paper focused upon the contribution of biographical learning as a theoretical perspective, which encourages biographical competency. This approach attends to the issues identified in the research, which relates to the needs of mature age jobseekers. The issues around self concept, self recognition, negative perceptions surrounding ageism and employability, and identity during periods of transition. Reframing RPL in terms of levels of recognition also has benefits for mature age learners and workers. It may be argued further that biographical competency is an ability that should be addressed for all potential and current learners. It is a crucial capability for successful navigation in post modern times.

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