RPL in Australian Vocational Education and Training: what do we know (about it)?

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Abstract

This paper is the first stage of a proposed research study that will look back over 18 years of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. The study aims to address a gap in the current VET research literature: that is an accounting for RPL as practice and as a device implicated in the political relations of Australian VET. In setting the scene for the larger study, this paper locates RPL in Australian VET in an historical context, and briefly explores its characteristics as a device for managing training outcomes: asking how we have come to understand and negotiate RPL as practice, and how our commonsense understandings have been theorised by Australian VET researchers. I start with an account, based on primary sources, of the first excursion into recognition assessment in Victoria in 1989; tracing the newly named RPL as it moves from this locale into the national VET policy arena. The second part of the paper addresses the various ways that RPL in Australian VET translates the workplace and the community into the academy, and recodes work and life experience as school knowledge. In concluding I propose that throughout its brief history in Australian VET RPL has been more productive in the political arena than it has as educational practice; and that its robust vigour as policy in the face of administrative and pedagogical obstacles is primarily owed to its rhetorical power to smooth over policy perplexities in a national VET system at odds with itself. I also point to the need for a new research focus if we are to work out how to achieve an equally robust vigour in educational practice.

Introduction

RPL in the Australian VET system is both well-known and obscure. It is widely acknowledged, in government policy and reviews, as a 'cornerstone' of national policy on assessment, recognition and certification. RPL is enshrined in the principles underpinning the delivery of training and assessment in registered training organisations (RTOs), and supported by the rules and standards governing the use of nationally recognised qualifications. However, RPL also operates in a discursive space characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty and beset by unexamined assumptions. Its exact nature as an artefact of policy is by no means settled, with key agencies including the Department of Science Education and Training (DEST); the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB), state training authorities; the Australian VET Management Information Standard (AVETMIS); and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF); currently using different definitions of RPL[1]. There continues to be confusion over the difference between RPL and credit transfer (Hargreaves 2006), and over the meaning of Recognition of Current Competency (RCC): a term originally coined in New South Wales in 1991 to distinguish competency-based recognition initiatives from broader and cross-sectoral projects, which has come to refer to a procedure for the *maintenance* of current competency (Hargreaves 2006; 2007).

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[1] My thanks to Margaret Taylor of Learning Edges Australia who collated definitions of RPL and RCC used by key VET agencies and researchers as part of an RMIT project to streamline RPL practices.

Since its introduction in the late 1980s, multiple understandings of, and views about RPL have developed. On the one hand educators have advocated for RPL as an equitable mechanism for the recognition of individual student capabilities. Industry agencies have come to regard RPL as a cost and time-effective way for employers to audit skill levels and meet the training obligations built into award agreements. Peak bodies and governments have continued to support for RPL as a strategy to materialise VET system policies about flexibility and customer focus. On the other hand teachers and curriculum designers express concerns that less than rigorous RPL assessment practices have undermined the quality and credibility of VET qualifications. Teachers also complain that RPL is difficult to implement under government accountability regimes; that it increases workloads; and that they are 'not funded' to do RPL ('on top of their teaching'). And while an increasing number of researchers and stakeholders point out that, as a form of competency-based assessment, RPL should be integrated with learning processes (Bateman 2003), the most common recorded RPL practice remains 'upfront' prior to applicants joining the rest of the cohort for 'gap training'. Moreover, 'upfront' RPL has reached no more than a recorded four percent of national VET training delivery effort (Hargreaves 2006), and there is no evidence to suggest that 'integrated' RPL (undertaken within training programs to customise delivery to diverse student needs) is widely practiced. RPL remains in the curious position of being ubiquitous as policy and marginalised as educational practice.

RPL in the research literature

A significant amount of the research into RPL has been sponsored by government departments and agencies, as a result of which it tends to reflect these stakeholders' agendas. This is not to suggest that critique has been stifled in favour of good news stories. Quite the contrary: stakeholders including successive commonwealth departments of education; state training authorities; and industry training boards and councils; have all wanted to know about failures as well as successes. Funding has been allocated from time to time to university researchers – for example by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) – to identify barriers to the implementation of RPL and make recommendations for improvement. Two Senate inquiries into the Australian VET system (Senate 2000; 2003) have included critiques of RPL policy and practice. And in its time as national authority, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) strove to simplify and enhance RPL as a key component of national policy (ANTA 1994a; 1994b; Schofield & McDonald 2004).

RPL research has two distinguishing characteristics. First, the leading research community which has grown up around major sources of research funding is quite small. This community has also dealt with similar research themes: working from a research orientation which aims to inform quality RPL practice. These RPL research themes were identified in a 2003 research review as: 'defining RPL, reviewing the purposes and models of RPL assessment, as well as the perceived benefits, barriers and implications' (Bateman 2003b, p. 4). The theme of 'barriers' to the successful implementation of RPL has recurred with particular frequency since 1994 when an ANTA review of the implementation of training reforms identified assessment of work-skills as an 'unresolved problem' (Allan Consulting Group 1994, p. 33). Since then further reports have identified funding constraints; accountability practices; administrative costs; excessive paperwork; complex processes; confusing language; negative perceptions; limited awareness; the growing complexity of teacher roles; and institutional structures; as factors impeding the success of RPL (see for example:

Bowman et al 2003; Bateman and Knight 2003; Blom et al 2004; Bowman 2004; Cameron 2004; Schofield 2004; Smith 2004; Hargreaves 2006; Mitchell et al 2006a). On the other hand, these and other research reports have identified instances of successful implementation. Key enabling/success factors reiterated in a decade of research reports, and summarised in Bateman and Knight (2003), Bowman et al (2003), and Bateman (2006), include provision of support for applicants; streamlined administrative and assessment practices; inclusion of self-assessment; changes to enrolment and counselling procedures; and client-focused RPL processes.

The second characteristic of RPL research concerns its role in shaping VET system knowledge about RPL. Because our knowledge of RPL has grown up around the publications of this research community, and because successive reports reference and draw on their predecessors, certain research questions and methodologies dominate. These dominant research questions: the successes and failures of current policy and training practice, assume RPL itself to be a given part of the VET landscape. Research methods which predominantly involve identifying stakeholder needs; collecting statistical and case study data on current practice; mapping available resources; charting issues; summarising critical success factors and making recommendations for improvement, tend to reinforce the place of RPL as a fixture. Through this research a wealth of data on RPL sites and procedures has been amassed (for example, Bowman 2003; Bateman and Knight 2003; Simons et al 2003; Blom et al 2004; Smith 2004; Mitchell et al 2006b(a) and (b), from which two issues emerge. On one hand the conventions governing the reporting of this research produce broad and general data on RPL sites and procedures which makes it difficult for practitioners to discern actual, embodied practice (a point to which I return in the conclusion of this paper). On the other hand, conventions do not encourage engagement in theoretical analyses that might inform our understanding of, for example, how entrenched systemic ways of being tend to capture and remould new entities, such as RPL, to fit existing regimes.

The under-theorised nature of RPL, in Australia and other constituencies, is taken up in a recent edited collection: *Retheorising the recognition of prior learning* (Andersson and Harris 2006), which addresses RPL in the UK, US, Canada Sweden, South Africa and Australia. The editors of this collection propose that RPL needs to be re-theorised because practitioners have 'placed too much faith' in experiential learning philosophies and methodologies, as a result of which RPL practices have been naturalised as unproblematic (Harris 2006). However, as one contributor comments: there is 'nothing disinterested or innocent about the process through which knowledge is given value' (Michelson 2006, p. 154). Ultimately, even where assessment is based on *industry* competency standards, it is the academy which gets to determine what kind of industry knowledge counts and what legitimacy it will be accorded (Michelson 2006). To date there appear not to be any substantial empirical studies which analyse the way RPL practice is constructed in a competency-based assessment regime, or which analyse the epistemological and pedagogical relations of RPL in Australia. Apart from Wheelahan (in Andersson and Harris 2006) I have not been able to find substantive Australian research examining RPL policy and practice in relation to different conceptions and enactments of knowledge, although pedagogical questions raised in broader reviews of VET teaching and learning (eg Mitchell et al 2006a & b; Chappell 2006) offer a framework for such analyses. And while we might assume, on the basis of national data reporting low levels of RPL practice, that its impact on VET pedagogical practice is negligible, we do not have data to support or refute this view. Finally, there are no

published studies of RPL which explore the social, economic and political conditions under which it developed in Australia, and the form it has taken as a consequence. Given the alacrity with which RPL was embraced in Australia, there is surely a case to answer. What was it, for instance, about government policy, economic imperatives and the nature of our vocational education and training systems that had RPL travelling from local projects to national policy in under three years? And what has been the impact of this policy move on the nature of Australian VET and on the experience of learning and assessment?

Puzzlement and disconcertment as methodological resources

My project has emerged in the context of such questions about the meaning of RPL in VET, and was borne into action on the back of the disconcertment I feel as a VET practitioner whenever TAFE teachers tell me that they are 'not funded to do RPL'; or that they cannot 'do RPL' because they don't have the proper RPL tools; or that they don't have an 'RPL qualification'. Where do these ideas come from, and why do they persist? Then there is the puzzlement that fuels laments about our failure, as practitioners, and that of the VET system at large, to truly embed RPL in VET (and specifically, TAFE) practice. 'It is the very bedrock of VET pedagogy' we exclaim! 'Why do we struggle so to make it work?' 'Why does the national aggregate RPL activity still hover around 4 per cent?' 'Why is there still such confusion and ambiguity about what we mean by RPL? And does it matter if we have multiple definitions and subscribe to different meanings? The literature on RPL simply amplifies our lamentations, confirming pockets of success and persistent barriers, without really explaining RPL's problematic progress. Rather, this literature begs the question of why and how these barriers persist in the face of the investments made to address them. And how many of the success stories (e.g. McKenna & Mitchell 2006) maintain their successes in the longer term, particularly if their champions move on?

As a participant in early RPL projects, I witnessed the enthusiasm with which this 'new' notion was greeted, and the ease with which prominent individuals and organisations embraced it. Even organisations which might have been regarded as cautious about non-formal learning were quick to come on board and adopt guidelines on the use of RPL (AVCC 1993). And the eagerness of the general public to know about and utilise RPL can scarcely be over-stated. RPL was quickly picked up in the press and embraced by advocacy groups. An ABC radio program: *Education Now* received more calls about RPL than about any other topic it covered during 1990. And when the ABC subsequently published a user guide to RPL titled *Yes I can do that* (Taylor 1992), despite poor marketing the guide sold out in weeks. Popular and political support was not, and is not the issue. And yet: and despite promotional spin to the contrary, RPL remains at the margins of VET practice.

It was this puzzlement and disconcertment which drove me back to the start: to find out how and why RPL could be both ubiquitous and marginalized. I came to envisage a research study that would explore the meaning of RPL as an artifact, and the history of its articulation as policy and practice in Australia. The present paper serves the purpose of a scoping exercise to lay out a skeleton history of RPL, and identify its consequential characteristics as policy and educational practice.

Findings and discussion

A potted history of the early explorers and their territory [2]

RPL took off across Australia all at once. In the early 1990s – the heyday of award restructuring and the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA), projects involving the exploration of skill recognition were thick on the ground. At this time the Employment and Skills Formation Council (ESFC) travelled Australia to collect models of recognition practice (ESFC 1990); the National Training Board (NTB) was integrating recognition principles into its national competency framework and competency standards (NTB 1991; 1992); the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee (VEETAC), was busy aligning TAFE qualifications with the newly released Australian Standards Framework (ASF), and investigating arrangements for the national recognition of training(VEETAC 1991a; 1991b; 1993). At the same time several national industry projects emerged (foremost of which was the tripartite Metals and Engineering project): sponsored by government, unions and employer associations to develop an articulated training structure which linked work-based and formal learning (Department of Labour 1987; MTIA/MTFU 1988; NSW TAFE 1990; Murphy 1991). The recognition of skills acquired through work and informal learning was suddenly regarded as a key to 'responsive' and 'flexible' training. In August 1992 the Commonwealth and state/ territory governments signed an agreement on a 'National Framework for the Recognition of Training' (NFROT) which introduced the notion of 'Nationally Recognised Training', and the now familiar green and red triangle logo (VEETAC 1992b). Significantly, NFROT included as one of its principles the stipulation that *provision must be made for the recognition of prior learning* (VEETAC 1992b, p.11).

The notion of recognition of prior learning was not an entirely new concept to TAFE. In the 1970s and 1980s students had been able to receive exemptions or credit for prior formal study, and in rare instances, for work-based and other informal learning: referred to as 'non-standard exemptions' (VEETAC 1993, page 35)[3]. What was new about RPL was the idea of codifying standard skill recognition procedures and incorporating these into state and national policy. Also new was a growing demand from unions, employer associations and major corporations for the introduction of procedures to enable the recognition of work skill. The first project responding to this interest in the formal recognition of skills acquired at work was in Victoria, involving the Ford Motor Company, Broadmeadows College of TAFE and the Gordon Institute, and named the *Ford/TAFE Articulation Project*. Others in South Australia, NSW and Western Australia quickly followed (ESFC 1990). The Victorian project is featured in this paper for three reasons. First, it is the project that led most directly to the adoption of RPL at a national level. Secondly, I have first hand knowledge of the project; and thirdly, it offers an example of an emerging 'tripartite' change strategy through which individuals with different interests formed alliances around matters with the potential to serve multiple agendas.

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[2] This section is based on personal archive materials (including project papers, memos, minutes, briefings and notes); as well as reports circulated between 1989 and 1993 when RPL was moving into the national policy arena

[3] Goode (1991) reports that credit/exemption procedures were regarded as 'slow and bureaucratic' and adversarial; relying almost solely on documentary evidence and student initiative; and poorly promoted by the system and its colleges.

The Ford/TAFE partnership started in late 1987 when the Victorian Government provided funds to establish training centres at Ford's Broadmeadows and Geelong plants. Each training centre was staffed with three trainer/facilitators and equipped with the then revolutionary advance in computer-based training (CBT): interactive videodisc terminals and software. These were in situ to enable the implementation of the Ford Training and Employee Relations Division decision to adopt CBT programs developed by Ford USA. This decision worried the Ford Broadmeadows Education and Personnel Research Manager, Dr Percy Worsnop. He doubted that workers would be sufficiently motivated to suffer the lock-step instructional and assessment sequences on which CBT was based. To create an incentive for these workers to participate in training, Broadmeadows College of TAFE was asked to map the Ford courses to accredited TAFE training with a view to offering workers credit towards a qualification if they completed the Ford program. After some initial exploratory work, Ford and the college director agreed to a full scale review of the relationship between their training programs, and to establish formal course articulation arrangements. They also decided to share their findings more widely, and in 1988 were successful in an application to the Victorian Education Foundation (VEF) for funding to:

> …develop a generally applicable model for use by companies and TAFE colleges in accrediting in-house industry programs and integrating of industry-based and TAFE vocational programs (VEF 1988b).

Work on this model commenced in March 1989 with the appointment of a consultant: Alan Brown, who had been a TAFE teacher and curriculum officer. As soon as the Ford and TAFE courses had been mapped, Brown argued that *course* articulation did not go far enough. From his discussions with Ford workers it had become clear that a good deal of their most relevant skill was gained through work practice rather than TAFE or Ford courses. In June 1989 Brown proposed that the project be broadened to include the development of procedures to formally recognise life and work skills: referring to the process as the *recognition of prior learning*. The funding agreement was amended, and the project went on to produce the first RPL model which set out principles and standard procedures for the recognition of work skills and knowledge, and strategies to promote these to potential candidates.

When the *Ford/TAFE Articulation Project* concluded with the publication of its 'Principle Report' (Broadmeadows College of TAFE 1990); work on RPL went in two directions. The first was an infrastructural turn which steered project findings towards the national training reform agenda. The incorporation of RPL into national policy started when the Victorian State Training Board (VSTB) endorsed the 'Broadmeadows Model' and supported a second successful bid for VEF funding. This new project set out to produce an RPL training program and manual; train 150 teachers and industry assessors; and develop an RPL funding model. By mid 1991, the VSTB had adopted policies which required TAFE colleges to implement RPL procedures, and had offered Broadmeadows College of TAFE an ongoing role as host of a state-funded 'Recognition and Assessment Centre'. The VSTB also named Sue Christophers, the Project Director who represented their interests in the Ford/TAFE project, as the Victorian nominee on VEETAC. Christophers subsequently became the Chair of the VEETAC Working Party on the Recognition of Training, and in that role was a principle architect of the NFROT *Principles for RPL* which drew directly on those in the Ford/TAFE project report. To the four principles adopted by the Ford/TAFE project: *Commitment*, *Access*, *Fairness*

and *Support*; NFROT simply added *Competence,* thus incorporating RPL into the emerging competency agenda:

> The recognition of prior learning will focus on the competencies a person has acquired as a result of both formal and informal training and experience – not how, when, or where the learning occurred' (VEETAC 1992b).

VEETAC went on to work with the NTB to incorporate RPL into its definition of competency-based assessment such that it would involve 'both recognition of prior learning and assessment mechanisms' (NTB 1992, p. 11). The national infrastructure was rounded out when RPL was incorporated into curriculum development and the issuing of qualifications. This was achieved by two policy moves. First provision for RPL was built into the template for national curriculum development, so that curriculum teams were obliged to 'describe methods, instruments, processes or policies which will be used to assess credit for prior learning' (VEETAC 1992a, p. 2-8). Secondly RPL was included as a pathway to national qualifications under the newly designed National Qualifications Framework[4] (Ministers of Vocational Education and Training 1993).

The second journey taken by RPL was somewhat evangelical: involving a series of events through which RPL was promoted and allies in government, industry and training providers recruited. This journey started when Alan Brown was awarded an Age/VEF Innovation Research Award to study overseas approaches to the recognition of prior learning. Apart from his report on UK practices, which was used to validate the 'Broadmeadows' model, the major outcome of Brown's study was a two-week national speaking tour[5] featuring Susan Simosko, a UK specialist in 'the assessment and accreditation of prior learning (APL) in employees' (Moeller 1991). This fully-booked tour was followed by a series of local and national workshops and conferences sponsored by state training authorities; NBEET, the Broadmeadows Recognition and Assessment Centre and the Victorian, NSW and Queensland education foundations (Humphrey 1991; Deakin University 1992; Rose 1993; Recognition and Assessment Centre 1994). By January 1994, when ANTA opened for business in its new Brisbane headquarters, RPL was firmly ensconced in national VET procedures and discourse.

Lessons from history

The foregoing is clearly a highly condensed and partial version of a complex history. It certainly does not do justice to the many organisations and individuals involved in the articulation of RPL as policy and educational practice (particularly those from states other than Victoria). However, it is a start: the purpose of which is to illuminate key aspects of RPL, reflect on their meaning; and to ask what might be learned.

The first observation to be made is that the incorporation of RPL into the national VET system happened too quickly for anyone to truly know what they were dealing with. RPL was national policy long before it could have become widely understood as an educational process, and before the implications of its incorporation into (an inarticulate) VET pedagogy were clear. Exploration of alternative practice models was effectively foreclosed at the end of 1993, and the VET system has since invested in refining RPL policies, evaluating current practice, and defining the accounting for RPL in national data collections.

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[4] The NQF become the AQF in 1995.

[5] Sponsored jointly by the VEF and its NSW counterpart: the Education and Training Foundation (ETF)

Secondly, when RPL was introduced in the late 1980s, the training and industry reform agenda was crowded and messy. Much was at stake, and the industry and training change project was beset by structural rigidities on all sides. In this climate RPL was appropriated as a political tool to help resolve issues in the configuration of a national training system before it had been able to establish itself as an education and training practice. And because the emerging industry focussed training system had not yet embarked on the sort of reforms in pedagogy and curriculum that would relate the notion of RPL to personalised and performative learning, RPL ended up squeezed into the academy somewhere between enrolment and the delivery of cohort and lesson-based training and assessment. As a result RPL has not really been able to fundamentally challenge 'our traditional phenomenology of knowledge and education' (Fraser 1995).

On the other hand, the rise and rise of RPL is an excellent example of innovation and entrepreneurship, and a case study of the optimum conditions to achieve innovative outcomes. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter observes: breakthrough innovations tend to occur 'in resource-rich environments, when working capital, expert staff, and hungry customers are all abundant' (Kanter 1983, p. 21). The period between 1988 and 1993 in Australia met these conditions. Apart from the money flowing into training reform from Commonwealth government agencies, there were three trust funds: in Victoria, NSW and Queensland administered by government owned, but independent foundations. The charter of these foundations was to fund innovative initiatives which 'enhanced the links between education and industry' (VEF 1988a), and their combined annual capital base was in the vicinity of $25 million: a richness of resources at that time. Kanter's other conditions were also met. First, there were customers in government, unions, employer associations and the general public who were hungry for recognition services. Secondly, the exploration of RPL brought together educators and assessment experts from TAFE, universities and enterprises across Australia (and in the UK) in an unusually open environment – people were encouraged, and frequently paid, to talk to each other across institutional boundaries. Further, dissent and innovation were encouraged, and RPL intellectual property was regarded as being in the public domain. After 1994, conditions changed as ANTA became the focus of action in building a national VET system. Funding was now tied into performance agreements with the states, and directed elsewhere – principally towards solving the problem of 'responsiveness' and 'flexibility' in national VET curriculum. As the states remained responsible for workforce development, there was a considerable disjuncture in this part of the reform agenda. Notwithstanding national staff development projects, exploration of RPL *practice* was subsumed in projects wrestling with strategies to document and regulate curriculum across eight state/territory jurisdictions.

The fourth observation drawn from its history concerns the socio-political environment in which RPL operates, and the way multiple constructions of RPL relate to multiple constituencies. Wheelahan has identified RPL as working 'at the centre of the intersection of pedagogy and policy' which 'brings practitioners of each into the same arena' (Wheelahan 2006, p. 241). But the intersection encompasses more than just an educational constituency. The practices that became known as RPL emerged at the intersection of very different constituencies. RPL emerged where industry, educational and government agencies came together in new hybrid spaces that spanned the cultural specificities of 'industry' (awards, job descriptions, awards, job manuals, operating procedures, production schedules and deadlines); 'education' (curriculum, syllabus,

text-book, lessons, assignments and exams) and 'governance' (policy, regulation, inspection, audit). Whereas RPL is configured by educators as an educational practice and articulated as teacher/learner discourse, system, administrators configure it as an administrative practice which is articulated as regulations and standards. Employers and unions in their turn configure RPL as an industrial relations tool to be drawn into award negotiations and pay claims. RPL has come to be many different things. Indeed its efficacy as policy has been largely a product of its capacity to work between different constituencies to perform what actor-network theory has named 'translation': *the process or the work of making two things that are not the same, equivalent (Law 1999, p. 8).* RPL translates individual job skills and knowledge into national competency standards that can be expressed as qualifications. It is not just another educational tool that fits comfortably into the academy, like curriculum. It is a tool that brings previously incommensurate entities/practices into alignment. Moreover, under competency-based arrangements, this process is designed to step around/over curriculum, offering an alternative pathway to a qualification or skill set.

I would argue that it is this translating role of RPL in a competency-based system that has become a major cause of consternation to TAFE teachers and other educators who regard school-based learning processes as integral to the acquisition of skill and knowledge. RPL challenges these assumptions by moving beyond the classroom, the cohort and the testing of learning outcomes. In enabling assessment of individual skill and knowledge against an *industry* competency standard, RPL in the Australian VET system quite profoundly disturbs the centuries-old settlement which privileges school-based knowledge processes. If RPL is to 'work', both teachers and learners need to understand that different forms of knowledge (that of work practice and school learning) and ways of doing knowledge (as work performance and academic study) are involved, and to feel comfortable working in such different domains.

Conclusions

RPL has achieved undeniable success in two arenas. First, RPL has succeeded as a resident of the hybrid space in which policy-makers work out how economic and social relations will go on. It is here that RPL works to smooth over the perplexities of a complex system, and to rhetorically join up the parts which may not otherwise quite cohere. In the discursive arena of policy-making, promises which resonate with a sufficient number of constituents have the power to keep things going. For example, when the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reached an agreement that by January 1 2007: 'all workers entering publicly funded training will be able to have their existing skills recognised quickly and simply so that wherever possible their training time is reduced (COAG 2006); ministers could be assured that mechanisms existed to materialise this agreement. State public servants knew what to do, and Ministers were able to attend their next national meeting assured that action plans were in place. The Victorian state training authority for instance can point to its Skills Stores program[6]; and Queensland to its Skills First Initiative[7]. At the same time the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry can announce a policy for 'mandatory Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC), at the commencement of training, designed to meet the needs of existing workers' (ACCI 2006), knowing that

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in calling for improvements in RPL it is assured a hearing from government. Everyone is on the same page and the policy community goes on. And this is how policy rhetoric contains a value proposition for those who would have RPL work well. RPL is on the agenda: it has champions with resources, and with the right arguments, we can get a share. Secondly RPL has achieved success as a subject of scrutiny: by government, industry associations and researchers. The substantial collection of research material provides ample data on *what* RPL is, *where* it happens and *how much* of it happens. Now we need to take up a new research challenge: to find out and communicate about *how* RPL works. To illustrate the research gap, here is an extract from a case study report:

> … learners go to the organisation's intranet to find learning materials and to discover what to expect from the process. They can then download an assessment matrix which comprises both tasks and assessment instruments, perform self-assessment and source a workplace assessor who has the skills to assess in the particular competency of interest to the learner. Once the recognition has been conducted, the assessor's decision is recorded electronically in the learner's training file and on hard copy (Blom et al 2004).

What is missing here is a picture of RPL as embodied practice that works (and perhaps struggles) within the constraints of an enterprise and an RTO and their respective (and not necessarily complementary) demands. To make this point is not to criticise the particular research report. Rather it is to call for an additional form of research which includes ethnographic studies located in the micro-worlds of particular RPL enactments. Teachers who are uncertain about how to get into RPL are not encouraged by general descriptions of organisation procedures. They want to know what really goes on – and what is acceptable practice. They ask questions about the minutiae of practice. About what happens from the moment an applicant for RPL makes contact with an RTO. What do they ask for; what are their expectations; what does the administrative officer say and do? How do I, the assessor, get the process going? What gets said during the process of interview/conversation/ discussion between applicants and assessors? How do I know what is enough evidence?

If we want research on RPL to truly inform practice, what better way to do this than to sponsor the *practitioners* to engage in research on their practice, and that of their peers, in their own workplaces?

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