RPL Policy to Practice: Why the reticence of practitioners to engage?

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Abstract:

Despite more than a decade of policy initiatives and encouragement to embrace Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) there has been an apparent reluctance, born out in national statistics, to take up RPL. In 1992 the National Training Board issued the National competency standards wherein policy and guidelines identified RPL as an important element in Competency Based Training. Supporting this stance in 1993 the Federal and State Ministers of Education declared the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT), committing educational institutions, at all levels, to provide recognition for the existing skills and knowledge of students regardless of how, when or where they were acquired.

Fourteen years on the continuing reform agenda maintains the principles of RPL and a concern about its uptake. Recent responses to this concern include the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement to fund RTO's to establish or improve recognition services and processes, and the Australian Quality Training Framework 2007 that positions RPL as an essential element of quality training and assessment.

Through an interpretive research process 100 teachers and educational leaders shared dialogue expressing their views on the practice of RPL and impediments to its broader embedding in practice. The findings suggest that for many practitioners there are poor understandings across a range of issues and not limited to the prevalent view that tools and frameworks are the critical element, but also about competency units, the nature of evidence and its collection for assessment and a fear of making invalid professional judgements. This lack of individual confidence results in a reticence to provide recognition services. The data suggests that making clear the nature of evidence and its method of collection within the context of RPL may begin to redress the reticence of VET practitioners to engage in recognition practice.

Introduction:

The current reform agenda continues to reinforce the principles of RPL and the responsiveness of the training system to meet the needs of industry and economic growth. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has agreed to fund RTO's to establish or improve recognition processes so that workers do not have to repeat or undertake training for skills they have already acquired on the job. Further the Australian Quality Training Framework in its standards for Registered Training Organisations requires that an essential element of quality training and assessment as provided by the RTO is that assessment including RPL meet the requirements of endorsed training packages and accredited courses and are in consultation with industry.

Despite more than a decade of policy initiatives and encouragement to embrace RPL there has been an apparent reluctance, born out in statistics to take up RPL. Informal discussions with Professional Development Managers and colleagues suggested that practitioners lacked confidence in assessing in the RPL context, did not understand the process sufficiently and had few tools to guide them. As a result of the increased focus on Recognition and the imperative of increased uptake qualitative research was undertaken to find answers and cut through the rhetoric by using a participative approach to engage practitioners. This approach aimed to find answers and inform future capability development and knowledge management strategies.

A Colloquium was organised to provide both an opportunity to find out from a representative group their responses to the question of why is RPL not being taken up to meet policy expectations, and to provide an opportunity for practitioners to share ideas about increasing the provision of RPL. Attended by 100 TAFE NSW practitioners across a rich and diverse group, the Colloquium provided the opportunity for the generation of dialogue in attempting to illuminate what the key issues were from their perspective. Predominantly the Colloquium was seen as a constructive and productive method of bringing together a group of experienced practitioners to inform continuous improvement and capability development.

Colloquium design and methodology:

The RPL Colloquium was designed to value and acknowledge the expertise of participants and facilitate their engagement in generating empirical data through a grounded theory approach to better understand the barriers to the practice of RPL. A theme of RPL – "more possibilities - better results" was used to build a sense that the event would generate ideas with activities designed to engage practitioners to share insights from their experiences and understandings and provide an overarching environmental awareness and contextualisation of issues affecting RPL. In this way we hoped to find exemplary practice in process, pedagogy and product. Both formal and informal engagement was encouraged throughout the Colloquium.

Formal engagement was achieved through keynote addresses by educational leaders and short presentations strategically placed throughout the day's activities highlighting the elements of process, pedagogy and product. These short presentations were used strategically throughout the day as spark topics to generate critical thought and open up dialogue for consideration by participants in their deliberations and not pre-empting any particular element of RPL as more prominent or influential in the day's proceedings.

Informal engagement of delegates was through networking and relationship building opportunities at key points throughout the day. By engaging practitioners in this way it was felt that benefits would be gained in improving services to stakeholders whilst providing a positive impact on practitioner perspectives in response to the current imperatives relating to RPL and harnessing the strength in expertise from across NSW in working collaboratively to provide solutions.

To enable the gathering of data a process facilitation model of strategic conversation with predetermined questions was used. These facilitated conversations sought to collect data by listening to the rhetoric and capturing this for future analysis to identify key themes and messages. Whilst the right environment had to be provided conducive to engaging practitioners equally the right questions needed to provoke critical thought in the strategic conversations. Participants contributed by sharing their stories and ideas with the process facilitators, with these insights being gathered in response to predetermined questions. These questions were developed as a result of some limited feedback from teachers relating to a think piece entitled "RPL from Policy to Practice" (Cliff Trood and Janet Hewson, 2007) that was written for the purpose of stimulating critical thought and through dialogue with other stakeholders from across TAFE NSW. Questions attempted to maintain an outcomes focus and were posed to two separate groups of 15-20 participants and were:

- How can we reconcile the tension between quality assessment and the economic imperative - "quick and simple" and increased volume? (COAG, OECD, 2007)
- How can we facilitate new training/business opportunities by seeing RPL as a diagnostic tool as opposed to just a 'must do' policy?
- How can we reconcile the tensions between individualised/personalised assessment and the economies of scale in the classroom or large groups?
- How can we reconcile a teacher's role as an educator as opposed to that of an RPL assessor - how do you take the learning out of assessment?
- What are the responsibilities for the teacher's role in the RPL process as opposed to those of the student?
- How do we reconcile the tension between the implicit/intuitive/tacit nature of professional judgements and meet our audit requirements for explicit, valid and accountable data?

The strategic conversation methodology was used to facilitate participants through a four stage process to capture the voices in the group and enable scoping of the data for key messages which emerged:

Stage 1:   Where are we now? Naming the problem understanding clearly the present situation
Stage 2:   Where do we want to be? Finding a vision and purpose for the future
Stage 3:   How do we get there? What pathways will take us from Stage 1 to Stage 2?
Stage 4:   How do we make this happen? What actions will deliver the desired results?

These questions work the participant through a process that aims to create a strategic conversation where "the making of a new horizon - a shared understanding, aspiration, idea and judgement that has been reached through thoughtful collective conversation" (2nd Road, 2006).

Data collection:

Data for analysis was gathered from facilitators capturing "the individual voices" within the groups participating in conversations and through writers' perspectives in summarising key points noted during conversations and other activities throughout the day. These key points were then assimilated and sorted to provide a quantitative based graph that demonstrates degree of response across participants against elements identified.

A focus on progressing identified outcomes to sustain the momentum and inform future practice was reinforced through messages and activities throughout the day that focused on the importance of relationships and networks to use knowledge to inform their practice. A theoretical basis for this structure is articulated by Senge (1999) as "a learning oriented strategy which aims to produce self-sustaining change in a way that continually accelerates its own growth and development. In systems terms, it operates as a virtuous reinforcing cycle". Writers were also employed to capture stories and ideas from the Colloquium participants and group conversations which were made available on the website for a wider dissemination.

Findings and discussion:

Analysis of the data identified a range of factors affecting the take up of RPL, these were: recording of RPL/statistics, resourcing time/funding, methods/frameworks relating to pedagogy, processes, obstacles and language of RPL/terminology. Of these elements, methods and frameworks relating to pedagogy was of the most concern, followed by resourcing time and funding. With the language of RPL/terminology rating the least.
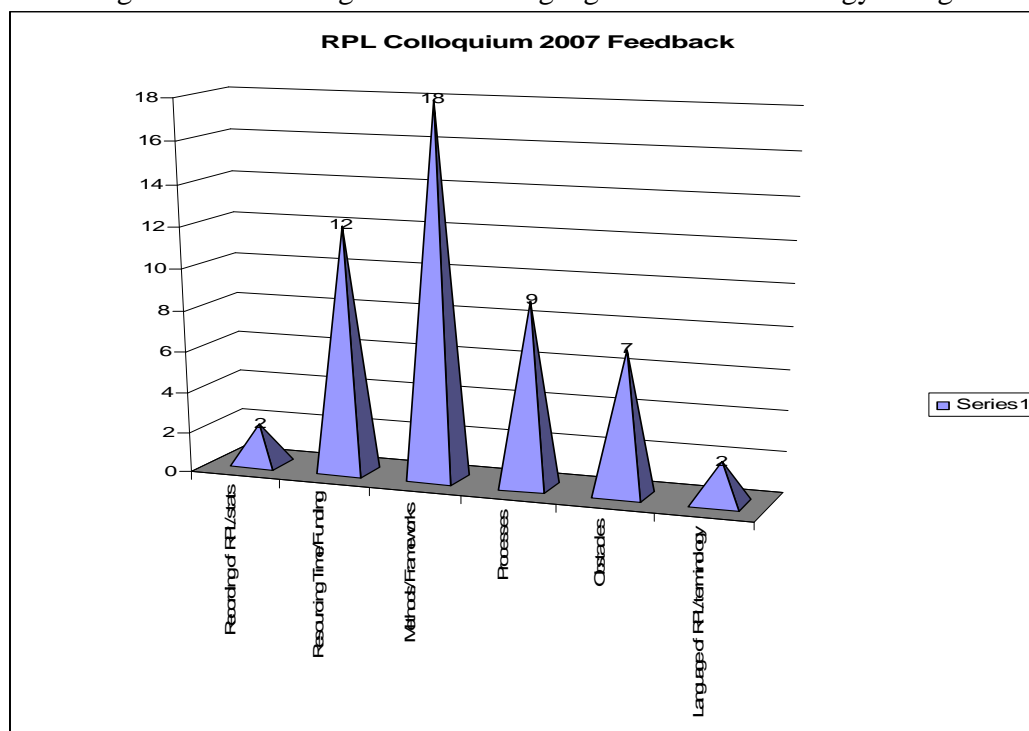

1**Figure 1Data from strategic conversation**

Recording of RPL	3% stats questioned RPL uptake - wrong reporting pass versus enrolment adjustment being recorded.
Resourcing Time & Funding	avoidance by teachers due to time spent dealing with application ASH - is it adequate compensation for sections? absorbed into related duties versus other assessment considered teaching Staff unfamiliar with Recognition process funding ratio: individual versus bulk billing fairness in allocation of ASH - those not undertaking RPL unfairly disadvantaged in minimising delivery hours online tools don't go far enough and still need effort in guidance/support funding assessors to go into the workplace common recognition themes need to have processes in place .i.e. common understanding establish recognition teams in Institutes flexibility of the learning plan and completion times i.e. in student's time not college schedule prioritising RPL against other demands
Methods/Frameworks	different methods for evidence collection understanding evidence - what is good evidence different approach to EBA resultant reluctance to undertake online tools don't go far enough too much emphasis on paperwork i.e. portfolios openness to a range of methods/tools knowledge of training package changing role of teacher teacher as facilitator facilitation of learner plan over rigorous assessments/processes availability of exemplars/case studies classroom centric - exposure to the workplace action learning projects identification of further learning acknowledging the learning in assessment what the learning can lead to i.e. further business RPL is assessed by experts in their vocational field
Processes	streamlining the process CLAMS - automate prior qualification mapping profiling RPL applicant consistency of process and simplified policies talk to those people who have been through the process quick and simples versus quality centralised support centre e.g. New England enrolment and commencement of classes RPL appointments - pre bookings

Obstacles	Evidence versus event – unfamiliar
	lack of confidence in the process
	lack of recent workplace experience
	improve industry involvement - TAFE practice insulated from workplace expectations
	fear of audits (What auditors want)
	shopping around for RPL - particularly on state borders - negativity in credibility of quals
	Are we making it more difficult than it is?
Language of RPL and terminology	seen as different to other forms of assessment
	portfolio - problematic due to different interpretations

Figure 2 data analysis from strategic conversation

Significantly, a number of approaches and ideas to improve RPL were highlighted in data feedback, as follows:

Figure 3 data on participant ideas

Capability Development
▪ Professional development to build capability
▪ Sharing of good practice
▪ Mentoring and projects in relation to RPL
▪ Recognition experts – or does everyone do it?
▪ Re-visit assessment practice – get the basics right
▪ Validation should be a part of the success of the process
▪ Auditing – providing more knowledge and awareness of requirements by teachers
▪ Understand what 'our' customer wants
▪ Trusting teacher judgements
▪ Compile mainstream course assessments for RPL purposes
▪ Recognition teams
▪ RPL for staff – do it yourself – increase uptake
▪ **Organisational design (processes)**
▪ Identify niche markets
▪ Working more closely with business consultants
▪ Establishing RPL centres
▪ Communication – non conflicting messages
▪ Student pays?
▪ Modify statistics collection

What the findings mean to TAFE practitioners:

In recent years there has been a multitude of projects, networks, tools and resources provided to support the VET practitioner in taking up RPL. The funding programs seemed to assume the barriers were tools, processes and structures and with the significant funding should have generated a major shift toward RPL provision. While

there are pockets of good consistent practice and examples of dedicated and committed RPL practitioners who are passionate in their belief in RPL and its subsequent benefits to not only the student but themselves. (ICVET website 2008) There still appear however to be some critical barriers that are impeding the progress and subsequent impact across the sector and a lack of an integrative and collaborative approach. This is evidenced through the plethora of projects being undertaken and resources developed in spite of duplication and reinventing of websites, templates and expertise. This observation was supported during a café conversation (TAFE NSW, Sydney Institute, 2007) where it was suggested that "there is a lot of activity in addressing many of the issues identified but perhaps not a consolidated cultural change approach". The Colloquium provided some qualitative data that suggests there is still a reluctance or lack of readiness for change in undertaking RPL and that these issues unless tackled will remain.

In interpreting the elements of concern raised by practitioners, the one which rated highest was methods and frameworks relating to pedagogy. In particular the concerns were towards the collection of evidence, expressed in terms of the need to identify different methods for evidence collection, the understanding of "what evidence is" and what constitutes "good evidence" and recognising that there is a different pedagogical approach required for evidence collection which may lead to a resultant reluctance to undertake. Perhaps these concerns imply that practitioners see Recognition as an assessment event which differs from assessment already undertaken, that there is a uniqueness and that evidence could be quite different to the assessor, depending on the different contexts which may vary for each student. This is in contrast to the standardised form of assessment routinely undertaken. The practitioner has therefore to adapt themselves to any given situation. Also expressed by participants was the need for openness to a range of methods and tools, with too much emphasis on paperwork i.e. portfolios and over rigorous assessments and processes which further exacerbate the practitioner's role. As was raised by participants at the Colloquium there is opportunity for practitioners to undertake their own RPL to inform their practice and embedding RPL as a part of the organisational culture. This would not only provide an on the job learning environment for practitioners but also positive reinforcement and reward.

These issues along with concerns about resourcing of time and funds have lead to avoidance by some teachers due to time spent on applications and prioritising RPL against other demands. There is also a perception of inadequate compensation or disadvantages through minimisation of delivery hours and individual delivery versus bulk billing are also seen as deterrents. Whilst resourcing and funding are related on the surface to organisational systems and processing, they impinge on the ability of the practitioner to provide a professional customer driven service in RPL which can lead to further reticence. These deterrents are impacted upon further where practitioners may not see the pedagogical value in the Recognition process and their reluctance can be linked to resistance to change as the practitioner's core values and beliefs and intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975) are not congruent with those of the current agenda. Through what Chan Kim, Mauborgne, (1997) describe as "fair process", the engagement of practitioners and explanation of the reasons for the uptake of Recognition and a clarity of expectation,

would enable a better understanding and commitment to change their practice and work through obstacles encountered in implementing change.

The changing role of the teacher was also cited by participants, with reference to the teacher as facilitator which is further impacted upon by a classroom centric approach and the need for exposure to the workplace. A knowledge of training packages and the need to be an "expert" in their vocational field further reinforced the need for currency of vocational practice and the linkages to industry, enterprise and the workplace setting. These issues further reflect a move away from the traditional assumptions of the educational paradigm to that of the current economic imperative. This juncture poses a more dynamic and complex environment in which the practitioner works.

These factors whilst on the surface appear to imply a reticence by practitioners can possibly be seen as "reasonable and predictable reasons" why sufficient practitioners have failed to embrace the changes to practice needed to meet the needs of the RPL imperative. Kanter, Stein and Jick (1995) suggest reasons such as loss of control, too much uncertainty, costs of confusion, more work and concerns about competence, are valid reasons why practitioners have been reticent. Given that RPL is also just one of the changes that are currently impacting on practitioners. There appear to be strong similarities between the take up of innovation and the major shifts required which perhaps suggest the need to further support and engage practitioners. As Kanter, Stein and Jick (1995) suggest the agendas of the economic imperatives may not eventuate "because assumptions, perspectives and even agendas may not always converge"

Or should Recognition be seen as a diversification and as such differentiated from the mainstream. The ideas suggested by participants for the identification of niche markets, formation of RPL centres and increased collaboration with business consultants in relation to RPL would seem to indicate that RPL may be better served by RPL experts or those practitioners motivated by the benefits to both themselves and students. Lorsch (1997) describes a "3 way fit" whereby "individuals must have interests, skills and needs that are consistent with the work required". This perhaps goes some way to explain the "passionate" RPL practitioner and those pockets of excellence, where RPL is seen as a natural extension of their practice and the meeting of an educational imperative for growth and direction in students.

To add further complexity to this situation and the reticence by practitioners there appear to be mixed messages surrounding RPL such as those of "quick and simple", and the emphasis on "tools not techniques". Practitioners as recipients of change have perhaps been "too distant from the source of change - visionary light like any other diminishes in proportion to the square distance (Fitzgerald, 1988). These messages seem to imply the complete opposite to the traditional educational stance whereby pedagogy informs practice not tools, and education is not seen as quick or simple, with relationships being built with students over a period of time, trust established and with the benefit of formative assessment and ongoing interaction to inform decision making.

These mixed messages as part of the change process may have hindered the uptake of RPL and have detracted from the benefits of RPL. Benefits were acknowledged however, in the data there were positive indicators such as the reference to the learning that occurs during assessment and that this learning can lead to empowerment of the student and the identification of further learning. This not only supports the personal economic imperative of the student and the benefits of improved employment and remuneration to them, but also meets the economic imperatives of the current VET environment. The traditional assumptions that everyone comes to the learning environment without prior knowledge and positioning everyone at a certain level, places the practitioner at the juncture between the social and economic imperatives. This suggests that a life based learning (Staron, et al, 2006) methodology can inform our practice and enable a better understanding of RPL and frame our thinking as educators in allowing background, history and ability to better meet the needs of students and customers.

Conclusion:

In evaluating the Colloquium there was evidence that those practitioners present wanted to respond to the RPL imperatives both social and economic and that their attendance had clarified some of their understanding of process and examples of practice, and importantly that it provided opportunity to provoke thought and ideas. This type of activity also perhaps provided "fair process" (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 1997) and a level of engagement required when dramatic change is embarked upon. Questions raised indicate an openness by practitioners towards RPL but that there is a need for continued sharing of expertise and knowledge to build the confidence of practitioners in reaching judgements.

The ideas to improve the uptake of RPL suggested by participants, as illustrated in Fig. 3, suggest the need for more development with the majority of ideas suggesting the need for expanded capability. Participants at the Colloquium given an environment where their voices were heard and with stimulation of thought were able to demonstrate their ability to contribute towards issues affecting their work as well as providing new ideas for working differently. Peck (1998) describes this psychological empowerment to change by enabling practitioners to consider their own roles and responsibilities in light of the broader organisational goals. Not withstanding, that all staff would be able to attend Colloquiums, there are however compelling reasons for a clear implementation strategy incorporating capability development through participative approaches for cultural change and that the provision of systems and processes are only elements in an open systems approach to change. (Galbraith, 1995).

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