

# **Increasing the confidence of advanced RPL assessors**

**Dr John Mitchell**, Managing Director, John Mitchell & Associates

**Judy Gronold**, Senior Strategy Officer, Strategy and Research, Product Services,  
Department of Education Training and the Arts (DETA), QLD

## **Abstract**

It is important that VET assessors have the confidence and capabilities to use their professional judgement in providing recognition of prior learning (RPL), to move beyond concerns with compliance and draw on their creativity. “Compliance to Creativity” was a work-based action learning project conducted from April-September 2008 for a group of 14 leading assessors in Queensland. It was designed to assist experienced assessors to build professional judgement as part of their own practice and that of their colleagues, particularly in relation to RPL. The overall finding from that program is that it is possible for leading VET assessors – through a structured capability building program – to significantly increase their confidence and enhance their capabilities with regard to the conduct of RPL, as well as help their colleagues to increase their confidence and capabilities with regard to RPL. The research also provided insights into RPL practice and skills, mentoring and professional judgment.

## **Introduction**

There is tension between compliance and creativity in VET (Schofield & McDonald 2004), particularly in the field of assessment and the sub-set of recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman & Roy 2006). Adding to this tension, RPL requires the use of fine judgment by the assessor (Jones 2006). It is important for VET assessors to have the confidence and capabilities to use their professional judgement in RPL assessment, if they are to move beyond concerns with compliance and draw upon their creativity (McKenna & Mitchell 2006).

The above views informed the design of a project entitled Compliance to Creativity (C2C), a work-based action learning project conducted from April-September 2008 for a group of leading assessors in Queensland. The Project Brief described the objective in the following way:

This project will involve the project co-ordinator working with experienced assessors. It will assist them to reflect on their experience and to identify strategies to support others to build confidence in using professional judgement in assessment decision making, particularly in relation to recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessment.

C2C was managed by Judy Gronold from Strategy and Research (Product Services) within the Department of Education Training and the Arts and facilitated by Dr John Mitchell from John Mitchell & Associates.

The project utilised an action learning approach with nominated experienced assessors and aimed to:

- evaluate current RPL assessment practice and identify opportunities for improvements to better meet the RPL needs of their diverse client base
- consider the organisational, pedagogical, technical and employability skills required for those implementing RPL in a range of RPL assessment contexts
- review current professional judgement processes and practices in making RPL decisions and identify improved processes and practices
- build mentoring skills in participants so they can better support the professional practice of their colleagues.

The major intended outcome of the project was the development of a pool of experienced assessors with the capacity to support their less experienced colleagues to develop confidence in professional judgement in assessment – particularly RPL assessment.

Sixteen assessors commenced the program. Two withdrew due to other commitments after two of the five workshops and the other fourteen completed the program.

One planned output of the project was the publication of a case study prepared by each participant. The participants in the C2C program were assisted in developing case studies which showcased their learning and achievements and which will be useful for the colleagues they subsequently mentor. The case studies are contained in a separate document *Confident RPL Assessors* (Mitchell ed. 2008).

## **Literature review**

A brief review of the literature shows that professional judgment in RPL requires the confident RPL practitioner to make a judgment call. That confidence can be eroded by the raft of other pressures impacting on the VET practitioner including the erroneous view that has circulated in the sector that “an unthinking semi-skilled operator could make an assessment of skills” (Jones, in Mitchell 2007). Daily pressures on all of us erode deep reflection (Clutterbuck 2004). One way to restore the habit of deep reflection for practitioners is to provide the time and space for them to feel safe about expressing their concerns and taking risks with new approaches (Amado & Ambrose 2001). Another related approach to building the confidence of VET practitioners is to use the technique of action learning with its emphasis on stepping back and reflecting on what is happening and why (Skippington 2002; ALA 2007).

Research by Dr Anne Jones shows that professional judgement is central to VET practice and to systemic quality. In an interview (Jones, in Mitchell 2007) she explained what first sparked her interest in professional judgement in VET.

Originally it caught my interest because in my conversations with teachers and managers in the early days of competency based training (CBT) – we’re going back a good ten years here – some people expressed amazement that they had to make judgements. There was a belief that CBT somehow completely and incontestably specified skills in words, so that an unthinking semi-skilled operator could make an assessment of skills. (p.68)

Jones also commented on the importance of the judgements made by VET practitioners.

They are fundamentally and absolutely important. The quality of education depends entirely on the quality of the judgements we make as professional educators – not just assessment judgements but all of our judgements. I am quite convinced that the exercise of judgement is the central act in any professional practice. The research that I have done has demonstrated that the achievement of systemic goals such as the national quality system in the end all come down to good quality decisions made by VET educators in the course of their practice. (p.68)

The exercise of professional judgement requires deep reflection by the VET practitioner, yet these practitioners like many other professionals are increasingly busy, time-poor and find it hard to allocate time for reflection. Clutterbuck (2004)

notes that “Although people are often working longer hours than a decade ago, they have less and less time to stop and think deeply” (p.20). Amado and Ambrose (2001) also find that, in the normal daily life of many organisations and communities, “people usually feel under pressure to get on with the job, to perform, to achieve objectives...Consequently, there is usually little room to manoeuvre ... to review their performance and their objectives” (p.26).

In this pressured environment, Clutterbuck (2004) finds that deep thinking most often occurs other than at work:

For most people ... deep thinking happens on the journey to and from work, in the bath or shower, taking exercise, doing the ironing, lying awake at night, or in other parts of their ‘free’ time. (p.20)

That deep, reflective thinking is essential to the effectiveness of our conscious brain:

Deep, reflective thinking is as essential to the effectiveness of our conscious brain as REM sleep is to our unconscious. In both cases we become dysfunctional if our minds do not carry out the essential task of analysing, structuring, organising and storing. When we allow ourselves to enter personal reflective space (PRS) we put the world around us largely on hold. (Even if we are doing a complex physical movement like jogging or driving the car, we allow our internal autopilot to take over.) (p.20)

According to Clutterbuck (2004), when we enter personal reflective space (PRS) “you ask yourself questions about the issue in an attempt to understand it and its impact on you”.

The more questions you ask from different perspectives, the more likely you are to achieve some level of insight which allows you to position the issue very differently and consider new ways of dealing with it. (p.21)

While reflection is valuable and central to making professional judgements, the first step to achieving it, argue Ambrose and Amado (2001), is to create what they call “transitional space.”

Transitional space is the space available, within the pressures of everyday life, for an individual or group to engage in transitional learning. It is an external condition for such learning to take place and is to be distinguished from potential space, which is an internal condition for innovative thinking to occur. The two concepts, however, are related. (p.26)

In the Compliance to Creativity project it was decided that an action learning technique would be used to create this transitional space, and to support the VET practitioners develop confidence in making judgements, particularly with RPL. Action learning involves the use of the cycle of experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning and is defined as follows by Skippington (2002):

Action learning is a systematic process through which individuals learn by doing. Through the process, people increase their self-awareness and develop new knowledge, attitudes and behaviours as well as skills for making changes and redefining their roles and responsibilities within new or changing workplace contexts. (p.25)

Action learning empowers the questioning process and enables people to develop themselves through working on a 'real life' problem, being encouraged to question what is happening, trying out suggested solutions, doing things differently, stepping back and reflecting on what is happening and why, and sharing the experience with those who are also learning by doing (ALA 2007).

## **Methods**

To monitor and report on the development of the participants' confidence in making judgements in RPL, the research methodology used was the pragmatic approach (Creswell 2003) as pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods and to different forms of data collection and analysis (p.12).

The methods used to record the growth in confidence of advanced VET assessors included surveys, feedback forms, structured interviews and the analysis of participants' formal writing for their case studies.

## **Findings and discussion**

The overall finding from the evaluation of the Compliance to Creativity project is that it is possible for leading VET assessors – through a structured capability building program – to significantly increase their confidence and enhance their capabilities with regard to the conduct of RPL. Participation in such a program also allows them

to assist their colleagues increase their confidence and capabilities with regard to the RPL assessment activity.

The benefits of the capability building program extend beyond the provision of RPL, because RPL is one form of assessment and assessment is inextricably linked with teaching and learning. One participant summarised these multiple benefits of the project and the links between RPL and other aspects of practice, as follows:

**For me professionally I began to see what I do in a much deeper kind of way and appreciate the complexity of what I do.** And I began to see also that in relation to my peers as well. In relation to RPL I think I began to experience a shift in the way I viewed the process and to get a bit of courage to be more creative and see that when I am thinking flexibly and I am thinking a bit creatively, that that's actually quite valuable, that I don't then need to contain that bit of myself in an ice box, but that I do have a skill set that enables me to make a professional judgement, often in diverse complex ways that aren't usually sometimes recognised by a template-driven regime. I think for me the biggest achievement was recognising the professionalism that I and other VET practitioners have. **(bold added)**

### *Findings regarding RPL practice – from the interviews and case studies*

The project aimed to evaluate current RPL assessment practice and identify opportunities for improvements, to better meet the RPL needs of the participants' diverse client base.

To guide the participants' analysis of their own practice, the facilitator presented research findings concerning the new VET practitioner and the emergence of the advanced VET practitioner. As VET shifts from being supply-driven to demand-driven, a new practitioner is emerging to satisfy the increasing expectations of industry clients and individual students (Mitchell et al. 2006). Traditionally, the VET practitioner was supply-driven believing that the best or only learning environment was the classroom – a site for learning far superior to the student's workplace.

In contrast, the new VET practitioner is demand-driven and only provides services that are wanted by enterprises and individuals. This progressive practitioner can customise programs to suit enterprises and personalise learning activities to suit the individual.

The new VET practitioner lets go of the old certainties, like pre-set curriculum and didactic instruction, and develops attributes, attitudes, ideas and techniques that meet the needs of clients. The new practitioner looks outwards at market needs and seeks to meet those needs. (Mitchell et al. 2006)

More recent research (Mitchell 2008) notes that some practitioners are modelling the use of even more advanced skills.

While the new VET practitioner is demand-driven, the advanced VET practitioner has extraordinary capabilities for building client relationships, ensuring customer responsiveness and supporting flexible delivery. This superior strand of the VET practitioner deserves public attention because its representatives are challenging previous concepts of the limits of capability of the VET practitioner.

The case studies in the C2C companion publication show that the participants possess many if not all of the characteristics of the advanced VET practitioner recognised by Mitchell (2008). For example, some findings from the participants' case studies identify that leading Queensland RPL assessors do the following:

- tap into their breadth of experience in industry
- access their deep knowledge of niche industry areas
- use their ability to offer services both as a consultant and as a training provider

- personalise training and assessment for each and every client
- demonstrate a personal commitment to extensive and ongoing professional development
- commit to continuous improvement of their provider organisation.

The interviews conducted with the fourteen participants show that the project broadened their appreciation of what is involved in RPL, including the differences in RPL from one industry context to the next. It also helped in the identification of some similarities in the RPL process across all industries:

I think it's [my knowledge] broadened, in that it hasn't been just within our own team of community services. It's with different people contributing from hospitality, mining, right through. There are some key things there that are the same, but there's also quite a lot of differences too, just by the nature of the industry. So it's given me a broader appreciation. But also, again it's probably normalised it for me in that there are some things just inherent in the RPL process that are common to all.

Some participants changed their attitudes about RPL. As an example:

I think I looked at RPL as just an easy thing to do when I first started this and now, doing this project has woken me up to quite a few things. With the RPL process, I've got to delve a hell of a lot deeper into the evidence or the type of evidence that people are giving me. It has made me start thinking about looking deeper into what people are giving me instead of just taking it on face value type of thing.

For participants, increased confidence with RPL, more than an increase in their knowledge about RPL, was the main change. This increased confidence enabled them to get in touch with their knowledge base.

I don't think my knowledge or my attitude towards the process of RPL particularly changed because I've been fairly heavily involved in RPL for a long time, so I think I know the process pretty well. What did change was again that making professional judgements and I guess the confidence that I now have in making those judgements...It's the professional judgement part that has changed rather than the knowledge of RPL as such.

Confidence came from the networking with other participants and doing exercises together.

My knowledge of RPL's fairly in-depth anyway. How did it change? I think that sense of having like-minded people [among the project participants] out there gave me more confidence in what I'm doing. So I would have to say that is probably the biggest thing that I got out of it.

### *Findings regarding RPL skills – from the interviews and case studies*

One aim of the Compliance to Creativity project was to consider the organisational, pedagogical, technical and employability skills required for those implementing RPL in a range of RPL assessment contexts.

The case studies in the C2C companion publication (Mitchell ed. 2008) highlight the diverse skills used by RPL assessors. For example:

- Leading RPL assessors draw on organisational skills such as how to make arrangements between the provider and sometimes complex and large external clients.
- Leading RPL assessors have a deep knowledge of appropriate pedagogy including how to allay candidates' nervousness about the RPL process, how to create an environment which enables the candidate to perform optimally and how to analyse any tabled evidence.
- Leading RPL assessors use appropriate technical skills such as accessing relevant legislation, developing efficient processes for record keeping and preparing customised documentation to suit corporate clients.
- Leading RPL assessors draw on employability skills particularly team work skills in liaising with other members of their section, faculty or department, problem solving skills in providing RPL for candidates who – initially at least – have difficulty providing evidence and a range of communication skills.

The interviews conducted as part of the evaluation show that the participants in the C2C project are now capable of mentoring individuals and teams to build confident and competent RPL assessors – satisfying another identified aim of the project. For example, two interviewees commented:

I actually see a flow-on effect to the team of RPL assessors. I look at them benefiting from our participation in that workshop and that will translate into them feeling more confident about approaching RPL, undertaking that work, knowing themselves how to engage in RPL. I see it as multiplied.

I'm hoping that as a result of my involvement with this [project] and ongoing conversations with her [my manager] that we set up a network of RPL people within the institute across the different area disciplines, to moderate, to share stories and to begin to develop criteria in regards to best practice and professional judgement that will powerfully affect the institute, increase its RPL rate and decrease the level of angst or uncertainty around the process.

### *Findings regarding professional judgement – from the interviews and case studies*

The Compliance to Creativity project aimed to review current professional judgement processes and practices in making RPL decisions and identify improved processes and practices.

Anne Jones (2006, p.12) says that making a judgment call, not just in VET but in society generally, is considered a serious activity: “Making a ‘judgement call’ implies that one is being active, committed, accountable, powerful, and ethical, like a courtroom judge.”

As a frame for the project, the facilitator used the characteristics of assessors identified by Jones in her doctoral research. Jones (2006) found that VET assessors who make good judgements are characterised by their preparedness, their relationships and collegiality with their colleagues, their ability to work to the rules, their seriousness of purpose, their ability to handle predicaments and obligations and their pragmatism.

To stimulate discussion in the project, the facilitator also used literature on the topic of professional reflection and intuition, to examine judgement calls made by RPL assessors.

Related findings evidenced in the case studies include the following:

- Leading RPL assessors can increase their confidence in making RPL decisions by reflecting upon and analysing RPL-related events within a structured professional development program such as this Compliance to Creativity project.
- Leading RPL assessors sometimes draw on their professional intuition before making a judgement call.

The interviews for this evaluation show that the project deepened participants’ confidence to tap into their own ability.

I think that, in particular, [what changed] was my confidence in my own ability to make that judgement whereas previously I’d always have this nagging doubt. Am I doing this right? Is this sufficient or is this? And going to the workshops gave me that confidence that I do know the Training Package well, I do know the process well and so I think that that really cemented in me the confidence in my own ability.

For some participants the concept of professional judgement was a new one, which resonated profoundly.

That was definitely a light bulb moment for me. I've not thought of myself as using professional judgment up until that point. They were just things that I did without even thinking about it. And so now I feel far less pressured to gather a hundred bits of paper evidence from people. I've got to remind myself that I do these things as an advanced VET practitioner now, I'm using professional judgment on a regular basis. I've learnt about it and I'm also now confident to pass this learning on to my mentee. So that was quite a bit of a light bulb moment for me.

### ***Findings regarding mentoring skills – from the interviews and case studies***

The Compliance to Creativity project aimed to build mentoring skills in participants so they can better support the professional practice of their colleagues.

To guide project participants, the facilitator used frameworks for mentoring provided by Clutterbuck (2004). Clutterbuck makes the point that mentoring is not all 'one to one' counselling: that mentoring can involve a mix of the four helping strategies of coaching, guiding, networking and counselling; and that it is often appropriate to start with other than counselling-style support.

Related findings evidenced in the case studies publication include the following:

- Leading RPL assessors are capable of developing customised helping strategies to suit the needs of that mentee, from helping mentees to network with others, to coaching them in the use of specific techniques.
- Leading RPL assessors are capable of creating professionally and mutually rewarding relationships with mentees that allow the mentee to grow and learn while also enabling the mentor to benefit from the professional interchanges.
- Leading RPL assessors are capable of assisting colleagues who have lost their confidence with RPL to regain their confidence and sense of self-worth.
- Leading RPL assessors have much to offer their colleagues and mentoring is an effective way of passing on their knowledge and practices.

One project participant noted in a case study:

Having had the opportunity to participate in this [Compliance to Creativity project with the focus on mentoring] process and see the benefits, I would recommend that anybody who is new to RPL assessment be assigned a mentor that can help them to apply professional judgement with confidence and competence.

Most participants implemented the framework for mentoring examined at the project workshops.

Putting a structure and a framework to the mentoring process is probably most important thing. It's something that I guess we were all just doing bits and pieces of randomly. Having the methods and resources is like increasing your tools in your toolbox.

### ***Summary findings from the survey of participants***

A survey of participants was conducted, to identify factors affecting the achievement of the program's objective. Key findings included the following points. Two sets of factors influenced the achievement of objectives more than other factors. One set of factors relate to participants' networking, workshop participation, own goals and prior knowledge – and this suggests that the participants took responsibility for their own learning and professional engagement and interactions. The second set of factors related to resources and structures put in place by the facilitator – and this suggests appropriate decisions by the facilitator.

The survey shows that participants took responsibility for their own learning and professional engagement, and these were positive forces assisting the achievement of the program's purpose. The participants' written comments about anticipated and unanticipated outcomes show that the project exceeded their expectations. Common themes in their comments were their discovery of their existing skills and knowledge and their quick acquisition of new skills and knowledge, leading to a significant growth in confidence.

The survey results also suggest that, for QLD DETA to continue to improve the quality of assessment, this commitment by its leading assessors to professional learning deserves to be acknowledged and supported.

### ***Summary findings from the evaluation of the workshops***

The findings from the evaluations of the workshops provide some summary evaluative points. Over the five workshops, the participants generally increased their sense of self-worth as VET practitioners and become comfortable viewing themselves as advanced VET practitioners. The participants developed increased confidence in their skills and knowledge as assessors and particularly in their professional judgement with RPL. The participants generally changed from being concerned about what they didn't know to wanting to share what they did know, to the point that they uniformly embraced a model for mentoring.

Over the five workshops, the participants generally moved from wanting theories – such as those about professional judgement – explained to enjoying developing their own theories, for example about professional intuition. The participants moved from seeking guidance on RPL to seeing that they could tap in better to their existing knowledge, through reflection, and to the knowledge of the participants, through networking.

The participants found high value in learning from each other, particularly from stories and incidents from grounded experience. They were enthusiastic about ongoing networking with the other participants and saw this as an important benefit from the project.

The participants valued highly the space and time and sanctions created by the workshops with their peers, as occasions where they could share, listen and learn. They learnt from a variety of activities, ranging from professional conversations, role plays and reading to examining models and theories. They found value in reflection on their practice and looking at ways to undertake that reflection. Finally, the participants generally looked forward to continuing to learn about RPL and other aspects of their practice.

## **Conclusions**

The Compliance to Creativity project was ambitious, in requiring participants to be part of a work-based learning program where they examined RPL in the light of advanced practice, professional judgment and mentoring. Participants were also asked to undertake case study research. Their case studies (Mitchell, ed. 2008) show that leading and advanced practitioners can further develop their capability by undertaking research and the associated deep reflection required when they are the author of, and key player in, that case study.

In the project, the participants interrogated the concept of advanced practice and examined the characteristics and attributes of advanced practitioners. Over the course

of the project they moved from a humble position - that they were not worthy to be called advanced practitioners - to a position at the end of the project where they not only identified their own strengths as advanced practitioners (particularly in their case studies) but committed to using these strengths to assist their colleagues. The participants moved from shyness to a calm confidence in their capabilities.

A participant reflected on the multiple benefits of the C2C project in making more VET practitioners confident about their practice:

RPL assessment requires the application of advanced assessment skills, as well as excellent knowledge of the industry and confidence to apply the skills and knowledge required to the assessment process. I had developed these skills through experience in training and assessment, but the inexperience of my team members meant that while they had the skills and knowledge required in terms of industry requirements and training package content in specific areas, they hadn't yet had the chance to develop the confidence to apply these attributes, or the depth of knowledge about the processes involved in assessment and recording of RPL outcomes to complete the task. The opportunity provided to this team in terms of developing individual and team capacity was invaluable, with identifiable benefits to the teachers involved, the student, the Institute, and myself as the mentor.

This quotation is representative of the findings of the whole group and indicates the increased level of confidence that advanced practitioners can develop when appropriate space and time is created to allow them to flourish.

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**Contact details for the authors**

John Mitchell ph. 02 9660 0255 [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au)

Judy Gronold ph. 07 4120 2571 [Judy.Gronold@detq.qld.gov.au](mailto:Judy.Gronold@detq.qld.gov.au)