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**Recognition of Prior Learning
(RPL/PLA/PLAR)**

Do you know your worth?

***How offering prior learning assessment
benefits the learner***

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(Dear CAEL-colleague – I will really appreciate any feedback on this paper, which formed the point of reference for the round table discussion – thank you! Marici)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL/PLA/PLAR) - Do you know your worth?

How offering prior learning assessment benefits the learner

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1. Introduction

The objective of this case study is to share the success of presenting a portfolio workshop for mature learners, and the experience of how I, sometimes unwittingly, laid sound foundations for lifelong learning, self-empowerment and commitment of mature learners. Although an experienced facilitator and being familiar with adult learning theories as well as with the RPL process, I realised that every learning intervention poses new challenges and adds more insight to a better understanding of mature learners returning to learning.

Non-traditional learners applying for access to higher education experience a variety of barriers, one being compiling a portfolio according to rigorous academic guidelines. As an RPL specialist tasked with facilitating portfolio workshops, the challenge was to ensure a meaningful learning experience for mature learners. These learners do not meet the admission requirements at a South African distance learning university, and get the opportunity to follow the RPL alternative admission programme.

I developed a workshop, using a developmental approach and participatory learning methodology, to help learners compile RPL assessment portfolios. Activities help learners to reflect on aspects within a learner-friendly, non-threatening environment.

2. Research approach

This case study is based on data gathered through participant observations during the workshop, written feedback from learners after the workshop and learners' prior learning papers. Merriam (1998:33) cites Sanders (1981) in stating that case studies help us to understand events.

Qualitative observation (Creswell, 2002) involves watching what people say and do, and relies heavily on the researcher (facilitator) as the research instrument. Since qualitative research aims to help participants engage actively to generate in-depth descriptions of their life experiences, the reflective essay (prior learning paper) is a valuable source of data. Reflective essays facilitate reflexivity - self-reflection being the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experiences in terms of the self and the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

3. First impressions

3.1 Activities

After the first workshop, it was evident that I should include sufficient activities to build self-awareness. During feedback sessions on activities, I soon learned that it is important to recognise the individual's contribution, and that adults enjoy positive feedback. As soon as candidates experience the feeling of acceptance, they enjoy sharing their own values and beliefs, and the moment the learner trusts the facilitator and the process, then he or she is open to participatory learning and can discover and experience the benefits of

the portfolio, the workshop and the RPL process on a personal level. It is also always a surprise to realise that adult learners cannot concentrate for long periods and that it is vital to prepare a variety of activities. Since January 2006, I have presented this workshop on a regular basis in different regions in South Africa and in African countries, each having its unique diverse regional target group. The challenge is to improve practices based on feedback from and interaction with learners.

My first impression of learners during a workshop is that initially candidates are hesitant to share, because informal learning is usually not valued, and they experience threshold fear during their first encounter with a university.

Round table discussion

A specific **ice breaker**, used as a humorous way of introduction, is useful. This ice-breaker will be demonstrated, illustrating an active learning experience for delegates.

3.2 The ice breaker

A specific **ice breaker**, used as a humorous way of introduction, is useful. The purpose of this informal activity is to:

- determine an immediate “informal” learner profile of the target group
- create strategies to encourage dialogue between a diverse group of delegates
- create a forum for discourse
- demonstrate that interaction and participation are crucial
- create a rapport with the group to ensure a successful three-day workshop
- focus on the object and activity and not on the person
- give the learners confidence when they realise they can do the “impossible” and that their first encounter with a university has been successful

The ice breaker demonstrates a few basic truths to us as RPL practitioners:

- “RPL is not a gift.”
- Every learner is an individual and will have an individual approach to the portfolio.
- RPL is a multipurpose tool.
- We need to see the world through the eyes of our learners.
- Negotiated criteria are important.
- The assessment process should be open and transparent.
- RPL moves learners to take action.
- It is not easy to make sense out of unstructured learning.
- RPL is not a matter of “one size fits all” (SAQA, 2002).
- Adult learners appreciate humour.
- Learner involvement in the RPL process is key.

4. The target group

What this group of learners have in common is that their educational paths have been disrupted usually because of inequalities of the past or personal problems. Those who have been out of the education system for a long time are likely to be unfamiliar with the academic language and educational processes. They experience a range of social and personal barriers that result in high levels of stress and much of this is related to prior negative experiences of formal education and assessment.

The reasons why learners enrol for this alternative admission programme are usually career progression, job security and a need for a formal qualification to apply for a promotion. These are supported by internal motivations, e.g. they want to fulfil a lifelong dream to have a degree, they have the sense that they are always discriminated against because they do not have a school-leaving certificate, or they want to be the first one in their family to obtain a degree.

A unique characteristic of these workshops is that the attendees are extremely diverse in terms of race, age, background and career, with only one thing in common, namely that they want to gain access to university. I have conservatively identified the following main groups:

- Black South Africans disadvantaged by the previous education system
- Women who fell pregnant young (usually at the age of 16) and who have had to raise the child on their own and now need to do prove that they can be successful
- Young men in their late twenties who were rebellious at school and dropped out, and who are usually successful in the work situation, and now need a formal qualification – often mention that “ *I owe it to my mother / my parents*”
- Women who have been the victims of abusive husbands and need to secure their own identity.

Student feedback

I want to become an attorney because I want to help women who do not know the law, and what their rights are (Carie)

- Learners (mostly white) who left school because there were job opportunities available, e.g. civil service
- Those who had to start working to support their parents and siblings.

Much has been written about the adult learner, but the following pointers (Smith, 2003) are used as the point of departure in the development of meaningful reflection and learning activities:

- Adults learn by doing and solving problems and they learn when they have a need to learn.
- Different adults learn in different ways.
- Adults like variety in learning activities.

- Adults want feedback on performance.
- They want to apply what they learn, hence the need to guide them to apply experience in their assignments.
- They are motivated to learn when they are faced with an immediate problem, e.g. to complete a comprehensive portfolio.
- Adults have a wealth of knowledge and information from their own experience, hence the importance of a prior learning paper.

This raises the question whether the characteristics and learner profile of RPL candidates are similar to the profile of adult learners as described in literature. Osman (2003:9) states that the framework of adult education “which places adult learner at the centre ... provides an ideal framework for understanding RPL in South Africa, and for developing RPL practices that are responsive to adults and their prior learning”.

😊 **Round table discussion**

Does the learner profile of RPL candidates match the general profile of adult learners as described in literature?

5. The portfolio workshop as a valuable learning event

I found the rationale for our workshops in Merriam’s study (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:275), where she states that “adult education is a form of social intervention and very often begins as an effort to solve a problem”. In this case the problem was to prepare the candidates for compiling the portfolio. To enable them to prepare and submit a portfolio, it is necessary to bridge the gap between their past and their new roles as adult learners returning to learning.

Learners need to experience the workshop as a transformative learning experience. Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a person’s frame of reference. Mezirow (1991) regards transformative learning as the most significant type of learning in adulthood. The theory of transformational learning is complex and encompassing. Central themes in Mezirow’s theory are:

- the role of the learner’s existing meaning structures in new learning
- critical reflection as it relates meaning to transformation
- discourse as the medium for activating critical reflection to promote and develop transformative learning.

Simpson & Coombes (2001, 1) states, that, “to be fully effective, adult learning must be transformative.” Crucial elements of transformational learning are emancipatory learning and consciousness raising, where the learner develops self-knowledge and self-awareness through critical reflection, and accept the importance of personal experience.

Based on transformational learning theory, observation and feedback from learners, the workshop **outcomes** are to:

- make learners aware of the wealth and value of knowledge from their own life experiences
- facilitate the personal discovery of skills, learning goals, learning styles, focus and self-knowledge
- ensure that learners grow in self-esteem, empowerment and motivation
- bridge the gap between being an employee and an adult learner in higher education, by transforming the prospective student or candidate with working experience into a motivated mature learner with confidence
- put them in frame of mind of not only being adults, but mature learners - to create a mind shift
- break down the barrier of fear of failure
- guide learners to extract learning from life experiences, and build their confidence by becoming aware of their own skills
- socialise learners into the learning process.

These outcomes are not static, but dynamic. To achieve these outcomes, I ensure that the focus of the first day of the three-day workshop is on supporting activities. These activities prepare learners for the daunting task of compiling assignments at a required level to give them access to higher education.

5.1 The workshops: culture and approach

At first the learners are hesitant to participate actively in the workshops, as if not accustomed to dialogue within the academic framework. It is therefore necessary to establish a workshop climate conducive to interaction and dialogue. The workshops provide a structured situation conducive to learning – a community of discourse engaged in activity, reflection and conversation. They also become an informal and often rather social learning experience where learners can reflect on their problems and past experiences, share information about culture and traditions and increase their knowledge and skills base within a “non-threatening relaxed learning atmosphere” (Gravett & Henning, 1998:64).

The learner profile of the target group points to the need for a holistic and developmental approach (SAQA, 2002.) A holistic approach subscribes to the principles of values of human development and lifelong learning, it allocates a high priority to learner support systems, recognises the diversity of knowledge, is learner-centred and developmental, enhances the self-esteem and confidence of learners and provides motivation for returning to learning.

The result of using a holistic approach is confirmed by the following feedback from learners:

I feel that the RPL gave me a lot of confidence (Michelle)

I learnt that I gained more experience that I realised and that shaped me in the decision making and career path (Gary)

*The workshop brought out the **best** in me. I do not like speaking in front of people, and here I had to do as part of the team effort (Pearl)*

The context within which a workshop is presented is vital to break down the barrier of fear of higher education. This involves both the physical and the psychological climate. Experience has shown that learners appreciate the care taken by and the personal touch of the facilitator to ensure a friendly environment, e.g. venue decorations representing diversity, availability of tea and coffee.

Psychological climate refers to matters such as mutual respect, collaboration between members, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness, pleasure and humanness. The facilitator must ensure that the learners are open to the potential benefits of RPL by ensuring the success of the workshop, which serves as preparation for the RPL assessment process. The key is respect for the learner and humanness, which means that the facilitator has to make provision for human comfort, by creating a supportive social atmosphere required for learning.

I find the group work activities conducive to learning. Social interaction in the learning process is vital, especially since learners are in a new environment. Initially I thought that issues of sensitivity and confidentiality would be problematic, but it seems that learners are more confident to share information with strangers, probably because they have one important factor in common, namely their motivation to gain access to university.

The benefit of the group activities is emphasised in the following learner feedback:

Excellent and great fun. Learnt so much about our fellow students and their culture.

The group was interesting and motivating (Bongani)

The fact that all 3 of us come from different cultural backgrounds made it an experience to remember. (Rengani)

It has been fantastic (the workshop) and I will cherish this time for a long time to come (Ndoku)

I learned so much from other people's experiences, it also sharpened my skills of interaction in a team situation (Jeconiah)

*Speaking your mind and hearing others do the same
(Julius)
Smart group of people, good ideas and opinions Gary)*

*The worst was to leave the campus – because of the
fellowship of the students it was a sweet and profitable
experience (Michelle)*

6. Reflection as a tool for self-discovery and growth

Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Knowles's theory guide much of the RPL discourse (Osman, 2003.) Both base their point of departure on experience as a resource for learning with reflection being central. Reflection takes place within a safe and non-threatening learning environment. In the workshop reflection exercises learners become aware of the value of learning from past experience and personal achievement. It makes them aware that experience is a major resource of learning.

Central to the view of the main theorists on adult learning, e.g. Kolb (1984) is the concept that when adults learn, they relate what they learn from past, current and possible future experiences. This means that learning is cyclical and guides the reflection process. In order to encourage the reflection process, the facilitator needs to guide the learner through the process of critical reflection; the learner being engaged in the process. Since adults tend to be life-centred it is necessary to start with reflection on their personal life and then move gradually to work experience. Learners are required to reflect on a concrete experience: their childhood experiences, family life and cultural tradition. Then they move on to abstract conceptualisation and are able to understand themselves and put their abilities and possibilities into a new perspective (Kolb, 1984.) Through the various reflection activities, they discover that they are individuals with value and worth. How Maslow's theory lines up with this can be the topic for further discussion.

The role of the skilled RPL facilitator is essential in this process. He or she is required to develop, facilitate, coach, guide and mentor suitable reflection and learning activities to guide mature learners to discover hidden learning and articulate relevant learning within an academic mode.

Student feedback:

*You motivated all of us because you allowed us to
say things that concerned ourselves, you listened
and respected all our opinions.*

*The feedback you gave was constructive and
objective, you never criticised. You recognised all
our efforts. (Jan)*

Positive feedback from the facilitator and confirmation from the group facilitate the realisation of self-confidence based on self-knowledge and valuable prior

experience. Adults derive self-identity from experience (Knowles, 1980) and in this situation where experience is valued, self-awareness improves.

Learners have had the following to say about reflection:

An eye opener to who I am (Ndoku)

For me it was like putting my mind back to track again (Natasha)

Reflection can be perceived as empowering learners and providing them with “a transformative learning experience resulting from a critical evaluation of their learning experience” (Pokorny in Anderson & Harris, J., 2006:266). Pokorny also explains that “assisted reflection requires personal qualities such as confidence, facility in language” – experience shows that reflection can be a confidence-building tool and a self-assessment tool to determine a possible learning gap, e.g. inadequate language skills. However, only when the prior learning, the raw data, has been subjected to guided reflection, articulation and any form of assessment, e.g. self-assessment, can it be worthy of recognition for a specific purpose, e.g. to compile a portfolio of evidence. It is necessary to structure unstructured learning.

I have observed that informal conversations assist learners to engage in critical reflection, which we discovered to be not an easy skill to master, but a highly complex, cognitive one. It seems that reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning.

At the end of the workshop, learners often mention that they have learned “a lot”. The question is whether this refers to personal self-discovery, learning how to compile a portfolio or the collaborative learning experience of sharing ideas and being respected as a person whose opinion counts.

7. Compiling the portfolio

7.1 Definition of the portfolio

The focus of this presentation is not to discuss the portfolio or the advantages of portfolio assessment. However, a few introductory notes are necessary. The portfolio is the end product that learners need to submit to gain access to university. It also prepares learners to write the academic literacy test which forms part of the assessment tool for alternative university entrance.

The portfolio can be defined as “a file or folder of information that has been accumulated about a learner’s past experiences and accomplishments. It can be a vehicle for organizing new experiences into a manageable form for assessment. A portfolio is not only a product, it is a process by which prior learning experiences can be translated into learning outcomes, documented and assessed for academic credit.” (Knapp)

The portfolio is more than an assessment tool; it is also a learning tool (Osman, 2003:113). This explains the use of the development model rather than the credit exemption model, since the development model of RPL is committed to in-depth reflection on past experience, and aims to help candidates derive learning from the reflection (Osman, 2003). The benefit of the portfolio is that it also provides an opportunity to include evidence outside these boundaries, e.g. reflection on community involvement, cultural background and valuable learning gained from experience. The right assistance of the RPL facilitator is required to utilise the portfolio as a tool for reflexive engagement, to guide candidates in “finding” their own knowledge, to demonstrate the link to future studies and to guide the discourse – thus promoting self-directed learning, which is essential for distance learning.

Feedback from learners on the portfolio:

After I have done this portfolio, I will be able to do any “damn” thing (Selma)

I have learned about my own strengths during the portfolio and that it is imperative to take time out and reflect on decisions that you have made and see how you would have handled the situations different in your present life, this will strengthen you” (Ian)

A concern is that portfolios can become “weighty documents” (Pokorny, 268 in Andersson, P et al. 2006). One of the supporting activities, therefore, is to guide learners to collect, analyse and decide when evidence is sufficient.

7.2 Prior learning paper

The developmental model allows for the “personal statement” (Osman, 2003: 60) in the portfolio. An example is a **reflective essay**, which is one of the portfolio assignments in the format of a **prior learning paper**. In planning and writing the paper, learners become aware that they are self-directed learners but that they have to give evidence, e.g. that they can manage time effectively, are intrinsically motivated, can take responsibility for learning and that they see a purpose in what they do.

This essay allows for both personal and academic development, e.g. “new” learning about essay structure and style. They also acquire the skill to collect information through reflection, analyse, organise and critically evaluate.

Although not the main purpose of the reflective essay, it also serves as a tool for personal emotional healing. Learners write the essay after reflection activities - my observation is that there is healing in reflection, but it is essential to guide the reflection to a step further where the learners see themselves beyond the RPL process and set clear and manageable future goals as successful learners. They get the opportunity to explain personal problems and how they have managed the situation. They often realise that

they do not need to be victims of their past situation, but should use this second opportunity of gaining access to higher education.

In the first draft of the reflection essay given as homework on the first day, learners include details on their personal experience. Although the underlying assumption is that the “RPL student is a story teller” (Osman, 2003:60), I have found that they are not aware of this ability and often fear the storytelling as a homework activity. I often get feedback such as “I worked the whole night” and “I could not stop writing”. When they come to the second day of the workshop with their story, I know that they have broken through personal and background barriers to be successful learners. A common remark is “I do not know whether this is right”; hence the need to assure learners there are no wrong or right answers when we talk about life experience, that experience is to their advantage and that the RPL process values their life experiences.

The prior learning paper benefits the learners, because they discover that they can also be storytellers! From the feedback it is evident that this exercise is the most rewarding aspect of the assessment process. This paper offers learners a unique opportunity to **think** about their past, gain a new understanding of **the self** and all they have accomplished in life, gain confidence for **future plans and objectives**, and realise the link between past, current and future plans.

Feedback from one specific learner:

The aspect of the portfolio I enjoyed the most is the essay on my life story as it gave me a change to reflect – definitely a learning reflection. (Ian)

During the self-assessment and peer assessment activities, in which they prepare the final draft of the paper, they are guided to extract the relevant learning, thus becoming aware of their **metacognitive** skills, namely the ability to organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively.

8. The role of the facilitator

Facilitators and especially academics at universities are recognised as figures of authority and knowledge, and unfortunately the perception is that they have power over learners. Therefore the initial ice breaker is critical to break down this barrier. The learners get the feeling that the workshop is going to be a pleasant experience.

The facilitator shapes and guides the process of people working together so they meet their goals and accomplish what they set out to do - the challenge is to facilitate the journey through a learning process, but not to be the seat of wisdom and knowledge. That means that a facilitator is not there to give opinions, but to draw opinions and ideas from the group members. The focus is often on HOW people participate in the process of learning or planning, and

not just on WHAT is achieved. A facilitator does not have all the answers and should not talk all the time. What the participants in the group have to say is the most important thing. Therefore a facilitator needs to focus on how the groups are structured, make sure that everyone can participate and ensure the group remained focused.

As a facilitator I subscribe to the following qualities:

- ***Commitment to lifelong and adult learning***

To be a diligent supporter of adult learning, the facilitator needs to be convinced that adult learning is a strategy aimed at opening up opportunities for individuals and ensuring personal development. Facilitators should respect the adult learner as a person, and be familiar with adult learning theories. They must also have faith in their own abilities and in the process.

- ***Experience in working with adults***

The experience of working with adults helps facilitators to understand how adults learn and the problems and barriers they face when returning to learning. With that experience, facilitators will be able to be very patient and empathetic when advising candidates. They have to be sensitive to the difficulty of combining education and training with the roles and responsibilities adults have at home and at work. They also need to be able to adapt their style according to the needs of the group.

- ***Belief in the knowledge, skills and experiential learning of potential candidates***

For most adults the journey back into formal learning brings back many different memories and feelings about their prior learning experiences; many may have lost their self-confidence through previous social, political and employment experiences. The facilitator needs to focus on the individual, build his or her confidence and self-esteem and provide practical ways to heal the past and to use learning to meet future objectives. People's development and constructive individual feedback should always be valued.

- ***Sensitivity to diversity (e.g. culture, gender, race)***

Adult workers who need educational advice have different personal and collective value systems, histories and issues. A facilitator has to be conscious of not projecting his or her own values onto the learners. Listening skills, having respect for who they are, where they come from, what they bring with them and where they aim to go are key.

This requires a variety of strategies to encourage dialogue between learners and a variety of methodologies and approaches suitable for mature learners from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The role of the facilitator is to plan and facilitate a suitable environment for active learning. The workshop

climate establishes a beneficial relationship where it empowers not only the attendees, but also the facilitator.

- **Conscious of the boundaries of the facilitator's role**

A facilitator must not try to solve everything. Adults returning to formal learning may need advice on issues not necessarily in the field of educational planning – the facilitator acts as the advisor, and must be able to refer learners, e.g. to the academic literacy centre and counsellors. During feedback on reflection activities, it is necessary to be supportive and to listen without allowing the session to become a counselling session.

- **Change agent**

The facilitator plays a critical role and his or her attitude towards people and learning will determine whether the learning outcomes are achieved. The facilitator is not just a subject matter expert - his or her role extends far beyond subject knowledge. The role of the facilitator is that of a change agent (Meyer et al., 2004:142) that creates suitable learning opportunities and allows individuals to move from one mindset or position to a higher level of understanding.

Students' feedback

When I walked into that classroom, realising that I was the oldest person there, I felt out of place and wanted to run away. That was until the start of the workshop - I felt at home! (Jan, 50 years, achieve 96 % for portfolio)

The role of the skilled and experienced RPL facilitator is key to ensure that learners benefit from the learning experience. The challenge is to relate activities and new learning to prior experience and the profile of mature learners.

The portfolio workshop must be planned within the context of outcomes-based learning that is learner-focused. Learners will benefit from the portfolio workshop if the facilitator is willing to use them as a resource, value their experiences, elicit expertise from the group and allow them to discover answers through the collaborative learning process, e.g. assignments.



Round table discussion

Please evaluate the workshop activities:

Are these activities sufficient to achieve the outcomes set for the workshop?
Do the activities have the potential to prepare non-traditional learners to compile a portfolio of evidence?
Compare the activities with similar activities that you may use in your programme.

9. Does RPL benefit our learners?

The benefits of RPL should be perceived at three levels:

9.1 National level

Recognition of prior learning in South Africa has a very specific agenda. It is meant to support the development and transformation of an equitable education and training system of the country (SAQA, 2002). In South Africa there is still a gap between policy and practice and the challenge is to take policy into practice and to realise that RPL should be a tool for transformation. It is unacceptable for the following situation to occur: a learner attending one of our workshops explained how she had been trying for years to get further without matric, and that “RPL is the best kept secret in this country”.

The reality is that South African higher education has not been producing enough graduates to meet the needs of society, and those who do graduate from tertiary education are hardly equipped for the labour market (Pityana, 2007:2).

As RPL practitioners, we are all too familiar with the fact that there are large numbers of adults in South Africa with a wealth of experience, but for a variety of political or personal reasons, could not finish their school careers. Since the skills shortage is holding back the growth of economy (Pityana, 2007), the possibility can be seen of marketing RPL as a tool for alternative admission into university and giving opportunities to motivated and self-driven adults to embark on university studies.

As the body responsible for the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the South African Qualifications Framework (SAQA) articulates some of the key objectives of the NQF in the national RPL policy (SAQA, 2002):

- Accelerate redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment
- Facilitate access to education

RPL practices promote the NQF principles of access, articulation and redress and this should be utilised to the advantage of learners.

9.2 Institutional level

I refer to the alternative admission programme as a means of giving previously disadvantaged learners access to higher education.

RPL has the potential to drive organisational change, and at our institution, an open and distance learning university, our well established RPL department with approved policies and procedures is to our benefit. A barrier is that higher education is still too rigid and not ready to utilise and appreciate this

wealth of knowledge, and to have mature learners who are motivated to succeed.

Pityana (2007) mentions the failure of higher education after apartheid to provide alternative frameworks of knowledge production. The benefit of RPL that needs to be explored is that it provides the awareness of alternative knowledge. Pityana (2007:6) argues that we must “rehabilitate the indigenous African knowledge systems”. In one of the workshop group discussions, learners get the opportunity to share indigenous knowledge, and for most this is the first platform where they have confidence to share this valuable knowledge. This raises a question on the long overdue debate on the nature and inclusion of indigenous knowledge. Taking cognisance of the wealth of learning that mature learners can bring to higher education will allow RPL practices to answer to its potential benefit to inform the curriculum.

The diversity of this target group and the wealth of experience that learners can bring into higher education is not yet acknowledged. Unfortunately most South African universities are still “suspicious and doubtful of RPL” (Osman, 2003:262).

The question is whether, South African higher institutions will open themselves up to benefit from RPL and not perceive it as a threat.

Student feedback:

*The RPL process has given me new hope in achieving my ambition. Furthering studies does not only open a gateway to improvement or reaching my objective, but personally it would complete me.
(Jackie)*

Round table discussion

Discuss the possibility of RPL as a tool for transformation.

9.3 Candidate level

The RPL process is not only an assessment of competence, but also preparation for lifelong learning assessment and inclusion in a learning society. The benefits are twofold: the adult benefits as a prospective learner, and also on a personal level.

What learners gain from workshops

- Dialogue generates further thinking. Learners are more **aware** of educational opportunities, as well as life and career goals.

- The learners discover the importance of **learning by doing** and thus promoting cognitive-constructivist assumptions where learning is treated as a "process of construction to which learners bring diverse prior knowledge structures and experiences and their own unique needs as learners" (Murphy, 1997:284). The workshops serve as a trigger event to prepare learners for the higher education paradigm.
- The workshop participants discover that "nothing has meaning or is learned in isolation from **prior experience**" (Merriam et al., 1999:171). Learners learn to make connections between past, present and future, by formulating goals considering the motivation of the past. Learners realise that negative and positive past experiences can be a driving force, and their mentor for future success.
- Learners develop the ability to use **self-assessment**, which results in critical reflection and an in-depth view of their prior learning skills and experiences.
- Learners became aware of their own **creative** abilities. The facilitators challenge them to generate ideas, e.g. an essay on cultural diversity and problem-solving.
- The workshops create opportunities for **action learning**. In action learning the overall goal is the development of questioning insight, e.g. the discussion of valid and suitable evidence. In the action learning process (Mashile, 2001:134) learners are led to take action in brainstorming their approach to assignments. They get the opportunity to develop cognitive and evaluative skills. The workshop serves as a tool to prepare students for the compiling of their portfolios of evidence.

10. My observations

The benefits of attending the portfolio workshop, i.e. the process, are often more rewarding than getting access to university, i.e. the product. Learners appreciate their personal knowledge resources, and replies to the question: "how do you feel about your own learning?" are usually "proud", "surprised", "did not know that I have done such a lot", "I underestimated myself", "I have achieve things, my past has meaning". Learners arrive as individuals and although groups are always extremely diverse, they leave as a group of friends.

Learner feedback on this issue is as follows:

Although we are different we have lot in common. I never realise that Afrikaners and African cultures have things in common. (Nomsa)

I thought I knew the African cultures, but I have learned a lot about my "brothers" – now I understand them! (Sphiwe)

Aarts et al. (1999) confirm my observation in the *Slice of the Iceberg* study that participation in the workshop activities reinforces the adult learners' confidence in their own abilities to learn and motivate other adult learners to pursue further education. The workshop activities provide an opportunity for learners to show a rich picture of their development. Learners are empowered to extract learning from experience. They become aware of the importance of keeping career portfolios that contain evidence of knowledge and competencies acquired outside formal learning, and will spread the news to colleagues and family members. They are committed to lifelong learning and building on prior learning whenever possible.

Involvement in the workshop is a powerful affirmation of the individual which results in self-confidence and a feeling of empowerment. This positive climate is tangible in the workshop, especially when I get the sense that learners do not want to leave at the end of the last day. As a facilitator, I perceive it a privilege to get insight into the "subjectively lived experiences of RPL candidates" and to be part of the process of adults finding "their voice" (Osman, 2003). The sense of achievement that learners feel when they realise that they have managed to articulate unstructured learning within an academic mode is wonderful to witness.

Reduced time in the education system is considered as one of the generic benefits of RPL. However, with this target group RPL is not the "easy" and shorter option, but a demanding process. The increased self-confidence and motivation seem to compensate for this longer route.

Metacognitive abilities are needed to ensure academic success. Mature learners already have these abilities, but are not aware of them. The challenge is to facilitate awareness of these skills - adult learners can become aware of their metacognitive abilities, which means that they can think about thinking (Kilfoil, 2007, 2). The collaborative learning environment guides this process, e.g. through group discussions on suitable, valid, sufficient and authentic evidence for learning experiences. To ensure success, learners need to be aware of their own knowledge, strengths and weaknesses as mature learners. When they become aware of these aspects, they are empowered to ensure more successful learning, because they can reflect on and explore a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.

Learners learn the skills of self-assessment, self-evaluation and of being a reflective practitioner. They learn to reflect on what they have learned from experience, why and how it was relevant and to articulate that in learning situations. They also realise that in taking responsibility for further studies, they are no longer victims of their past situations, but can become more than what they have achieved to date.

Through the process of discussion and critical reflection, participants are able to re-evaluate their experiences. Whittaker et al. (2006 :315) refer to the "changed people" who experience RPL in this way. My own observation during workshops is that the uncertain adult sitting in a classroom with

strangers is a changed person by the third day, when they feel part of this community of practice and have taken the first steps towards entering university.

Feedback from a learner about this:

I feel it helps as a bridging gap, preparing us for the learning process (Belinda)

11. The way forward

There is a need to conduct an in-depth qualitative study to identify the learner profile and characteristics of RPL candidates. One of the research approaches will be to encode prior learning papers and learner's feedback to determine emerging themes. This will inform:

- an RPL departmental action research project on the success rate of RPL learners at our institution. One of our assessors followed up on the success rate of learners whose portfolios he had assessed, and his undocumented finding was that they were always among the top achievers in the subjects that he lectures. This needs to be documented.
- the facilitator's proposed doctoral study on RPL as a tool for transformation, where the learner profile will be a variable that impact on the RPL process.

Round table discussion

Experience and/or research on the success rate of RPL candidates.

How do we measure success rate of RPL candidates?

12. Conclusion

Mezirow's theory (1991) presents us with a set of prescriptions for good practice on the part of adult educators who are committed to facilitating self-directed adult learning. Transformational learning occurs when candidates develop new assumptions or views of the world or their reality. Through the process of critical reflection they gain a deeper awareness of their skills and competencies.

In reflecting upon the impact of the programme, I should critically ask how much of this case study report is the conscious construction of my own view of my communication with the candidates and observation of the workshop. A facilitator's personal conceptual life-frame can influence needs analysis and planning. This means, therefore, that RPL interventions need to be based on a sound knowledge of the learner profile and its impact on RPL practices.

As part of the reflection, my literature study showed that learner support to ensure the achievement of workshop activities should be given within a constructivist framework, where the facilitator should guard against lecturing and acting as the academic expert.

In determining the content of the workshops, these pointers should be a guideline:

- Cognitive science
- Constructivism
- Customisation
- Creativity
- Communication
-

Cognition relates learning to prior knowledge and permits a multi-perspective review of activities and assignments. **Constructivism** offers the candidates the choice of realising their full potential by solving problems by themselves. They are equipped with skills, knowledge and attitudes derived from the workshop experience, life skills and prior learning. The workshop activities are **customised** according to the needs of the target group, based on **communication**. This learning experience allows opportunities for both the facilitator and adult learner to explore creativity.

Only after learners realise the value of knowledge from personal experiences, and have discovered learning goals and self-knowledge, grown in self-esteem, empowerment and motivation are they ready to compile portfolios to help them gain access to university and start the lifelong learning journey. After every workshop I realise the human being's need to be acknowledged and to be treated with respect.

 **Questions for round table discussion**

What role do RPL facilitators play in guiding learners to structure prior learning and creating an atmosphere conducive to reflection?

The impact of the **learner profile** as a variable on our RPL practices.

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