

Some challenges in the assessment of prior learning
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assessment of prior
learning
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Introduction

This is not going to be a research paper. I'm choosing this occasion to raise some fundamental concerns I have about the moves towards the recognition of prior learning, the assessment of prior achievements or whatever we choose to call it.

I was tempted to call the paper From enthusiast to sceptic: the confessions of an advocate of RPL, but that is too strong, because I still believe in the principles. My concerns mainly centre on the failure to apply the principles and the failure to address the associated problems.

Some of you will have read a report I wrote about four years ago The school of hard knocks (Thomson, 1988). I invented a woman, Barbara X, who had impeccable qualifications for child care work, but no formal training whatsoever. I created a portfolio for Barbara detailing her skills and talents and asked three colleges teaching child care to consider giving her exemption from at least some of their courses. The response at that time was fairly negative. The worst comment being along the lines that she did not deserve any credit because 'It would take us a long time to get her to unlearn the things she had already learned as a mother before we could begin to teach her anything?'

With hindsight, perhaps I should have stopped there, but I didn't, so let me share my worries with you.

I need to begin with some local background which outlines the place of APL in the current moves towards a competency-based training system in Australia.

In Australia we have come to use the term Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL. But there are a range of terms used to describe what are essentially very

similar or closely
related processes, for example:
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
Recognition of Current Competency (RCC)
Assessment of Prior Learning (APL)
Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)
Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)
Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)
Assessment of Prior Achievement (APA)
and I'm sure many of you could add other acronyms to this list.

It is possible to identify five main reasons for somebody wanting an
assessment of their
prior achievements. These are:
career and educational guidance
entry into a course or program
advanced standing or credits in a course or program
novice or beginner status in an occupation
full or competent performer status in an occupation

Most of the research and development work in this area has concentrated on
the first
three reasons. However in this paper I do not intend to consider these
reasons, but
intend instead to concentrate on the last two because it is here that the
validity issue is in
sharpest focus.

An assessor might, for example, be forgiven for mistakenly allowing people
into a course
for which they proved to be unsuited. But the assessment of individuals
applying for full
status in a trade or profession is another matter. Assessing whether an
individual has
met the standards of competence required for, say, an electrician or a
medical practitioner,
is a much more demanding task, because failure to get it right in these
cases can have
grave consequences. The requirements of validity applied to the work of
assessors
therefore vary according to circumstances.

The Australian Standards Framework
The government's workplace reform agenda is linked closely to a newly
created
Australian Standards Framework (ASF) which defines eight levels of
competency, from a

basic vocational level through to that of senior professional or manager.
 More importantly, linkages are being established between the competency standards that apply to particular ASF levels and industrial award classifications. In other words, workers' pay levels are being related to the competency standards specified by the framework. This is shown in the following figure.

FIGURE 1: Classifications, standards and qualifications

Industrial
 classifications Australian
 Standards
 Framework Current qualifications
 (approximations) Industry
 `B'Gr 1
 Level 8
 Gr 2
 Level 7
 Industry
 `A'Gr 3
 Level 6Gr 4Gr 7Gr 5
 Level 5Gr 6Gr 5Gr 6
 Level 4Gr 7Gr 4Gr 8
 Level 3
 Gr 3Gr 9
 Level 2Gr 10Gr 2
 Level 1Gr 1

*Note the line between each grade
 of the industrial classifications
 represents a change in wages or salaries

*

Certificate

Adv cert

Dip/Assoc Dip

Degree

Higher degree

Some challenges in the assessment of prior learning It is important to appreciate that the changes being made involve industrial relations issues as much as (some would say more than) they do educational issues. This is because it is necessary to slot members of the existing workforce into industrial award classifications based on the competencies they possess.

Another element of Australian government policy involves a new look at the way qualifications can be awarded. Individuals operating at a particular level of the Australian Standards Framework will be able to receive certification of their competencies irrespective of how those competencies are obtained. This means an experienced person can be certified as competent without necessarily having to undergo formal study and training.

Nothing is likely to better concentrate people's minds on the learning they have obtained from experience than the possibility of that learning increasing their income. Therefore an explosion in the demand for the recognition of prior experience can be anticipated from all sectors of the workforce as the workplace reform processes become more widespread.

However, what we are currently seeing are terms and conditions of employment being used as bargaining chips to help determine movement from one level to another. This is probably the ultimate contaminant of any educational assessment process. All of us involved in the educational side of the process need to seriously consider

whether there is any point in continuing our efforts when industrial relations negotiations are introduced into the process.

From the old to the new: the move from performance objectives to competency standards
Until recently, most courses in Australia were being described in terms of objectives. These were statements describing what students would be able to do after completing a course, in other words, performance objectives.

Once the successful students entered the workforce there was an understanding that on-the-job training and experience added to the learning that had been acquired. That is to say the performance objectives of the courses and the on-the-job industry and occupational competencies only partly matched each other. Most occupations had particular competency requirements that were not covered by the content of a course; and the courses, because they were giving preparation for an industry sector, were by nature more general.

This relationship between performance objectives and occupational competencies is outlined in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: Comparison between performance objectives and occupational competencies for a hypothetical occupation (old system)

Performance objectives of course required to practise occupation X

Industry and occupational competencies required for occupation X

Course objectives not used in occupation X
Course performance objectives which match occupational competencies
Industry and occupational

competencies
not delivered
by course

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Employers, in taking the graduates from the course, recognised that their
new employees
would require a period of on-the-job experience before obtaining the
necessary industrial
and occupational competencies the course failed to deliver. However, the
move to
describing industries and occupations in terms of the competency standards
expected in
employment aims to substantially change this picture. Indeed, if the
competency
standards have been described adequately the ideal picture is shown by
Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: Comparison between course competency standards and industry
and
occupational competencies for a hypothetical occupation
(new system)

Competency standards delivered by
course required to practise
occupation X

Industry and occupational
competencies required for
occupation X

100% overlap

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Added here is an assumption that the course involves both on- and off-the-
job training, so
in principle, the new graduates should have all the competencies required
by the
employer. This figure can be further modified if we take into account
competencies
obtained informally through life and work experience. And rather than

talking about
competencies required by industry, let us also assume that a substantial
amount of
training is firmly sited in industry as the government intends.

Some challenges in the assessment of prior learning
between course competency standards and industry and
occupational competencies and competencies obtained
informally for a
hypothetical occupation (proposed for Australia)

Competency standards required to
practise occupation X delivered by
course off-the-job

Industry and occupational
competencies of occupation X
delivered on-the-job

100% overlap

Competencies obtained informally
through work and life experiences
that are relevant to occupation X

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However, this two-dimensional picture given by Figure 4 hides a complexity
that brings
us to the issue of validity.

The facts are that people practise occupation X with varying degrees of
proficiency, that
requirements vary within industries, and that the set of competencies
obtained informally
are likely to vary substantially from individual to individual.

FIGURE 5: Relationship between competence requirements and levels of occupational proficiency

Even this figure is simplified because different levels of proficiency require different mixes of competencies. For example, in the case of the novice not all the

competencies required
will necessarily come from the lowest levels of the `stacks', nor are the
stacks necessarily
of equal size.

Figure 6 is perhaps more representative of the direction in which we are
headed.

FIGURE 6: Relationship between competence requirements and levels of
occupational
proficiency

THE APA PROCESS

An individual with qualifications and/or related work
experience seeks recognition

Relevant qualification which meets individual's needs
is selected

Identify competency standards which go with the
selected qualification

Match individual's qualifications and/or relevant
experience gained with competency standard
statements

Verify and record competencies

Grant full recognition
or
provisional recognition subject to a period of
supervised workplace assessment
or

reject

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The process
Given that these are the relationships that exist, we can now consider the
process by
which the assessment of prior achievement occurs.

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In considering the process, the first point to make about validity when we
contemplate
allowing somebody with informal training the right to practise in an
occupation, is that
relevance is all important. A few months at a horse stud sweeping out the
stables does
not automatically confer skills relevant to a career as a veterinary nurse.
It would be
important to know a lot more about what the sweeper learnt from the
experience before
considering it as a contribution towards a qualification. In the absence
of evidence of
relevant learning, such an experience, at best, might be viewed positively
by people
selecting applicants for entry into the veterinary nursing course on the
grounds that it
suggested the applicant had an interest in animals.

This experience would be unlikely to be considered when the 'right to
practise as a
veterinary nurse' was the desired outcome for an applicant.

Having decided what is relevant, the next step is to verify that an
applicant possesses the
required competencies.

Verification

Probably the most difficult and contentious step in the process is that of
deciding how
many competencies need to be assessed and confirmed in cases where an
applicant is
seeking full occupational status. This is especially true when the person
seeking that
status has had little or no formal training and is requesting recognition
almost entirely on

the basis of experience. That is from stack No 3 in Figure 5.

At present we lack empirical evidence to help us reach a decision on what constitutes sufficient evidence and when the first arbitrary decisions are made by accrediting bodies they are likely to err on the conservative side. In other words the first people put through the process are likely to be over-assessed rather than under-assessed. It is also likely that the decision will vary between occupations and industries and with the 'level' of the qualification being sought. And occupations where the health and safety of the public and practitioners are important are also likely to be over-assessed.

Nevertheless, when deciding how much evidence is sufficient, it is possible to use the traditional assessment procedures of some occupations to provide a rule of thumb. For example, the traditional end-of-year written examinations probably sample less than 20% of a course's objectives, so a figure of 25% might be a reasonable sample size of competencies to be assessed. Irrespective of the sample size chosen, it will probably be necessary to grant only provisional recognition to anybody seeking novice or full status in an occupation or profession. This has the added advantage of allowing the assessor to take a second look at the applicant. Again, the way provisional recognition might work is likely to vary across occupations and professions; each will need to develop a policy on the matter.

Provisional and restricted recognition

The granting of provisional recognition subject to a period of supervised workplace assessment might be an essential safety valve, at least in the early days of implementing such a significant change. This period would depend upon the occupation and the number of competencies to be covered; therefore assessments could take place over a number of months. Such a lengthy period of assessment has two main advantages.

Firstly, the longer the period of supervision, the greater the number of competencies that will be demonstrated as part of normal work and the greater the number of repetitions of a particular competence that can be observed. This will improve both the validity and reliability of the final assessment that is made.

Secondly, the applicant is advantaged by gaining additional work experience in the occupation of his or her choice. Apart from being of substantial personal value to an applicant (who might otherwise be out of work) there also exists the added advantage of offering opportunities to practise skills that are the subject of the assessments.

The implication of provisional recognition is that it is followed by full recognition after the supervised period of work. However, this is not the only possibility; recognition could be restricted rather than full. Restricted recognition already exists in some occupational areas. For example, in Australia it is possible for a plumber to get a restricted electrical licence to work on the electrical appliances and components encountered as a part of plumbing work.

A system such as this could be applied to applicants who are seeking an assessment of their prior achievement for the purpose of working in an area of specialisation only. Restricted recognition has appeal if only because it offers a solution to the problem posed by specialist professionals from overseas who have been refused the right to practise in a new country.

Restricted recognition could be based on the assessment of a specified subset of competency standards in a particular occupation. While a new set of problems in relation to occupational status and salaries is presented, it does mean the skills possessed by someone with a restricted set of competencies can be both recognised and used.

I need to draw attention to the speculative nature of these suggestions about provisional

and restricted recognition. Not the least, they assume it will be possible to find places in the workforce for persons seeking recognition. And the question of what time limits, if any, should be put on the process has not been considered. The suggestions do however, underline the need for policy at a number of levels in systems which intend to implement these procedures.

Reciprocity and the life-span of qualifications

It is also important to briefly consider the validity of reciprocal arrangements which I understand are about to become very important in this part of the world as well as in my own country.

The great beauty of reciprocal recognition agreements is the low cost associated with implementing the procedures. However, in a system based on national competency standards, reciprocity between countries implies a uniformity of educational and assessment standards that may not withstand close scrutiny. Added to this is the fact

that new competencies are constantly replacing old ones, especially in the technical areas, a factor which suggests the need for a time limit to be imposed on a set of competencies and any qualification based on those standards.

Conclusions

There is an underlying paradox to our approach to recognising a person's experience.

This paradox is the reluctance on the part of many who profess support for the principles to actually get some experience in what is involved. There is a great need to test empirically some of the ideas that I have presented. Until we do, most of the perceived benefits of a valid system for assessing prior achievements or current competencies that were acquired informally will be at best, speculations.

My main points are these:

1A system for recognising prior achievements must be based on the relevance

of
competencies possessed to the occupational requirements. (A lack of
relevance
might be acceptable when considering an application for entry into a
course; it
cannot be accepted when we are dealing with the 'right to practise'.)
2If this is true, it follows that a system which ties wages to competencies
is likely to
be driven by industrial relations considerations and will therefore be in
danger of
failing. Experience shows that in any battle between industrial relations
and
educational principles it is unlikely that education will win. Therefore
if the
industrial relations people insist on specifying what is relevant,
educators should
withdraw gracefully and leave the field to them.
3Should we decide to hang in there, I believe that it is possible to find
empirical
solutions to the problems of verification, sampling, provisional and
restricted
recognition and life span of qualifications that have been identified. All
that we
require is the will to find those solutions.

References

Thomson, P. (1988) The school of hard knocks. Adelaide: TAFE National
Centre for
Research and Development.

EXPERTPROFICIENTNOVICE

Competencies
delivered
by course

Competencies
delivered
by industry

Competencies
obtained
informally

STACK 1STACK 2STACK 3