RPL AS SPECIALISED PEDAGOGY
CROSSING THE LINES

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memories of Professor Ben Parker, whose vision was key to the conceptualisation and funding of the research upon which this book is based; and Ms Gabiba Mokadam, Projects Officer in the Division for Lifelong Learning, whose dedication, humour and insights made such a vital contribution to the RPL project at the University of the Western Cape.
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Foreword

The research project documented in this book is the product of a research partnership between the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which started in December 2009. Importantly, this research project was commissioned at a time of significant changes to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa and a decision to allocate apex responsibility for the further development and implementation of the NQF to SAQA. This responsibility included RPL policy making and quality assurance advice and oversight to SAQA (NQF Act 67 of 2008) among a number of functions. SAQA revised its national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy to bring it in line with the NQF Act and as part of its strategic vision of focusing on career advice, articulation, recognition of prior learning and staff development (CARS). The contents of its revised RPL Policy can be attributed in no small measure to the insights derived from the research partnership. The revised policy, which was finally published in March 2013 (SAQA 2013), is markedly different from the 2002 version that it replaced. The latter was notable for its emphasis on the technical procedures and quality assurance standards for implementing RPL as a form of assessment and credit exchange; whereas the 2013 version provides for a more forthright engagement with RPL as a pedagogical process for mediating knowledge recognition and certification within and across the boundaries of the NQF, which consists of three integrated sub-frameworks:

The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access or inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, and extended preparation for assessment. (SAQA 2013: 5, Clause 30)

The policy goes on to define a number of priorities for the resourcing, quality assurance, effective delivery, and coordination of RPL by different stakeholders in the system. These are aimed inter alia at addressing defined barriers to implementation and pursuing ‘equitable access to RPL programmes and services’ (SAQA 2013: 8, Clause 46b) across the system. Together these clauses reflect a new policy environment, which better understands the complex knowledge boundaries and learning pathways of the NQF and its sub-frameworks, and at the same time, helps to create the enabling conditions under which the provision of RPL programmes and services can make learning and recognition more possible and more inclusive for more people in South Africa.
However, realising the possibilities and the promise of good policy making is simply impossible without the energy, insight and practical wisdom of the practitioners on the ground, and this is ultimately the contribution of the research that is reported in this book. The result is the product of five years of research and critical conversations between practitioners, researchers and policy makers in South Africa and with our associates in other countries across the globe.

The book is useful for policy makers and policy implementers with an interest in RPL in South Africa and around the world. I want to urge you to engage with this book and with the revised RPL policy as we are now moving from policy development to policy implementation. I want to say a special word of thanks to UWC, the authors of this special RPL publication and the SAQA Director of Research Dr Heidi Bolton for their splendid contribution to RPL in South Africa.

Joe Samuels
Chief Executive Officer
South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)
Acknowledgements and contributors

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- Doctor Sharman Wickham, whose knowledge and skills in the fields of educational research and project management proved invaluable in the design, write up and review of the case studies.
- Professor Elana Michelson and Doctor Judy Harris, our two international associates with a vast knowledge of the field, who served as critical discussants and readers at different stages in the project. Together, these partners, friends and associates helped to create a climate of intellectual rigour and support without which neither the research nor this book would have been possible.
- All of the researchers, assistants and participants at the four sites whose work, insights and commitment to the RPL project in South Africa are reflected in the pages of this book.
- Our editors, Jacqui Withers and Jenny Schnetler whose meticulous eye and linguistic wizardry are sewn into the pages of this book.
## Abbreviations and acronyms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALH</td>
<td>Autobiographical Learning History</td>
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<td>APEL</td>
<td>Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning</td>
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<td>CHAT</td>
<td>Cultural Historical Activity Theory</td>
</tr>
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<td>CEDEFOP</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
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<td>EISA</td>
<td>External Integrated Summative Assessment</td>
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<td>FL</td>
<td>Foundation Learning</td>
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<td>GLSD</td>
<td>Gender and Labour Studies Diploma</td>
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<td>LED</td>
<td>Labour Economics Diploma</td>
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<td>LSD</td>
<td>Labour Studies Diploma</td>
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<td>LLI</td>
<td>Lifelong Learning Institute</td>
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<td>NTB</td>
<td>National Training Board</td>
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<td>NQF</td>
<td>National Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>NVQ</td>
<td>National Vocational Qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>PDMP</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practices</td>
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<td>PDC</td>
<td>Portfolio Development Course</td>
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<td>PLA</td>
<td>Prior Learning Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSDD</td>
<td>Political and Social Development Diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>QCTO</td>
<td>Quality Council for Trades and Occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>RNFIL</td>
<td>Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning</td>
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<td>RPL</td>
<td>Recognition of Prior Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVA</td>
<td>Recognition, Validation and Accreditation</td>
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<td>SAQA</td>
<td>South African Qualifications Authority</td>
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<td>SETA</td>
<td>Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAPs</td>
<td>Tests for Access and Placement</td>
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<td>Unesco</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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Overview
Alan Ralphs

This book presents a collaborative study of practices associated with the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across a range of sites, and offers a theoretical framework for understanding RPL as a specialised pedagogy for navigating different knowledge, learning and assessment boundaries in different contexts. The book arises out of a four-year research project based in South Africa, supported by a grant from the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This chapter situates the research project contextually, in relation to the history of RPL policy and practice in South Africa and internationally. It seeks to answer the question: Why this particular research, in this particular place and at this particular time?

We commence with a brief overview of the RPL story as it has evolved over the last 50 years, from its early appearance in post-secondary institutions and workforce development projects in North America and the UK, to its current expression in the NQF and lifelong learning policies and practices of institutions and governments across the world. Our focus is on the changing nature, form and language of RPL principles, policies and practices, and how these have evolved in response to the economic and social challenges of globalisation and the network society. We also explore reasons for the persistent gap between the ambitious claims of RPL as an instrument of policy, and the uneven levels of implementation around the world and in South Africa.

RPL policy and practice on the global stage

Early developments

RPL often tends to be seen as a policy instrument, associated in particular with the development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and related educational reforms, but this has not always been the case. RPL exists in North America where there are no NQFs and it started in the United Kingdom before the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established. In both countries RPL was first proposed as part of a growing demand for greater access to post-secondary education in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by the agendas of social inclusion and employment for under-represented sectors of the adult population. From the outset, the argument in favour of the recognition of prior learning appeared obvious, namely that knowledge and skills acquisition does not only take place in formal education and that it should not be necessary to repeat such learning when seeking admission to a college or university level study programme. RPL on these terms was
RPL AS SPECIALISED PEDAGOGY

proposed as an assessment-led practice for establishing the validity of equivalence claims without risking the integrity of academic standards or the public confidence in the institutions offering such qualifications.

Of course, not all knowledge and skills acquired outside of formal education is comparable with that which is specified in the learning outcomes of registered qualifications. This poses the question as to how some forms of knowledge and skill could be recognised, particularly those originating from sources outside of the academy. Then, to take the question one step further, how could some forms of knowledge and skill be recognised while contesting other established knowledge constructs enshrined in the curriculum and/or outcomes of an existing qualification. How does the principle of RPL apply to these cases and what are the implications for RPL assessment practices that explicitly privilege existing standards and assessment criteria?

In both the USA and the UK, the initiative to establish credible policies for the assessment of prior experiential learning was built on carefully constructed research and development projects with reputable institutions, i.e. Education Testing Service (ETS) in the USA, and in the case of the UK, the Further Education Unit of the Department of Education and Science, and the Council for National Academic Awards (Evans 2000). The net result of these projects was a body of research and set of ten quality assurance standards (Whittaker 1989) that alleviated fears of a drop in standards and cleared the way for the award of academic credit based on the assessment of experiential learning acquired outside of the awarding institution. What this meant in practice, was the expansion of institutional policies governing the admission of atypical students with knowledge and skills claims rooted in their experiences as activists, workers, volunteers and parents, as well as from self-study and so on. It also meant an expansion of the practices for assessing these knowledge claims, from the more familiar standardised tests and rules for credit transfer to an inclusive range of challenge exams, performance observations, portfolio-assisted assessments and credit-rated training courses.

The approach taken in the USA and the UK was not to legislate and enforce new policies on post-secondary institutions, but rather to encourage them to explore and develop the practices within the framework of the ten quality standards (Lamdin 1992) that arose from the original ETS research. Not surprisingly, given their focus on assessment, these early forms of the practice came to be known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the US, and the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the UK. Agencies such as the Chicago-based Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) in the UK were established to provide specialised advice and support to institutions as they explored ways to open their assessment practices to these new ideas. These agencies also ventured into the field of workforce development, initiating a number of work-based learning projects through which employed workers or those facing retrenchment could access PLA benefits at participating colleges and universities in the programme.
The centrality of academic qualifications and standards became the benchmark against which the early PLA/APEL practices were designed and quality assured, although this was not uncomplicated. The use of standardised tests to assess generic literacy and numeracy or subject-specific knowledge was familiar territory for most academic staff in the USA, but engaging with claims for degree-level credit based on an assortment of artefacts drawn from different work and/or volunteer experiences, was clearly a more formidable challenge. It was also potentially a lot more difficult and time-consuming for candidates to prepare their claims, leading to the argument that it would be easier to simply take the course! For academic staff, it meant a process of reformulating their curriculum standards into more visible statements of 'learning outcomes' (Simosko 1988), and for adult students (and their mentors) it meant a process of assembling, translating and mapping their prior experiential learning against these learning outcomes, and then subjecting their claims for credit to a process of assessment. Assessment panels had to learn how to draw inferences and make judgements as to the equivalence (exact or approximate) or otherwise of the competence claims against the specificity of the assessment criteria. The complexity suggested here is not simply procedural (time and cost) but also refers to the assumptions about knowledge, learning and power that are invested in these practices – practices that endorse existing academic standards as the benchmark for establishing the credit value of experiential learning.

It was arguably out of this complexity that the earliest models of portfolio-assisted assessment emerged as central to most institutional and work-based forms of RPL, with much variety depending on the purpose, methodology and assessment criteria of the qualification (discipline) involved. Models of portfolio development varied on a continuum from those that were highly individualised (with extensive mentoring) and included claims based largely on credit transfers from college-level courses or credit-rated job training courses, to others that were course-based and served as a basis from which to prepare claims for academic credit against the stated learning outcomes (competences) of specific college or university level courses. Accounts of these early portfolio development processes speak equally to the difficulty and time-consuming nature of the work involved (production and assessment), as well as to the creativity of the course designs and the value of personal transformation and confidence building for the individuals concerned (Simosko 1988; Michelson & Mandell 2004).

**RPL under globalisation: an emerging paradox?**

The spread of PLA/APEL ideas and practices in and beyond the US and the UK moved fairly quickly during the 80s and 90s into Ireland, Scotland, Canada, Quebec and France, propelled in part by the advocacy and groundwork done by CAEL and LET, but more so according to Evans (2000), by the concerns of governments to ‘enhance the knowledge and skill of the workforce generally and to strengthen the position of firms, and hence national economies, in the fast-growing competitiveness
in the global economy’ (Evans 2000: 15). These concerns were to escalate as the contradictory features of globalisation became apparent as a mixed blessing for social and economic development across the world: on the one hand, profound changes in the modes of economic production and distribution associated with new information and communication technologies, and on the other, an escalation in the levels of inequality, exclusion and polarisation associated with logic of ‘global networks that integrate and disintegrate’ (Castells 2001: 11). These contradictory features, fuelled by the inordinate expansion of financial markets and transnational investment flows, also had a profound impact on the nature and functioning of the labour markets operating at the core of the knowledge economy, i.e. from labour markets characterised by relatively stable employment and predictable career paths to one requiring high levels of flexibility, specialisation and mobility and self-programmable labour (2001: 13):

Workers are gradually being defined less by a particular long-term job they hold than by the knowledge they have acquired by studying and working. This knowledge ‘portfolio’ allows them to move across firms and even across types of work as jobs are redefined. (Carnoy 2001: 25)

It is perhaps understandable that Evans (2000) and others writing at the end of the 20th century saw globalisation as a strong reason for the inclusion of APEL in educational reform policies, but that would be to miss the paradox to which Castells (2001) and Carnoy (2001) refer, i.e. the disaggregating effects of globalisation that would deepen the divide between the internationally mobile, highly skilled segment of the labour market and a much larger labour pool with few specific skills (generic labour) and very uneven access to technological resources and infrastructure. National states, universities and colleges came under increasing pressure in the 1990s to introduce educational reforms conducive to the requirements of the global market economy, while at the same time trying to respond to demands for greater middle and working class access to further and higher education (Delantey 2001).

These tensions, more accurately understood as a paradox, are manifest at all levels of educational policy and practice (government and institutional), including RPL policy and practice. They increasingly find expression in principles and guidelines aimed at: expanding the range, currency and comparability of national qualifications to reflect the knowledge, skills and competences required by global labour markets (Allais 2010; Allais et al. 2009; Harris 2000; Werquin 2010b; Young 2008), and promoting the principles of lifelong learning and an expansion of the modes of educational access and provision necessary for personal, professional and social development (Duvekot et al. 2014; Singh 2014).

The introduction of new occupational standards and qualifications in the 1980s was seen as a direct response to the massive restructuring and reskilling projects of British businesses, notably in the engineering, mining, clothing and chemical industries, in order to regain a competitive edge in the global economy (Winterton
This response was accompanied by a major overhaul of the vocational education and training system in the UK, which was felt by employers and government to be unresponsive to the changing requirements of industry and the knowledge economy (Young 2008). The focus on occupational standards was seen as significant for RPL purposes in that it formalised the recognition and assessment of knowledge and skills acquired independently of the formal education and training curriculum, and because it introduced what appeared to be a more inclusive and transparent approach to qualification design and assessment based on a functional analysis of work-based competence and specified learning outcomes. However, this focus was not unproblematic, and the proposition that learning outcomes and level descriptors could serve as the key articulating principles around which all vocational qualifications and standards were to be designed and assessed also met with considerable resistance. According to Young (2008), the difficulty lies not with the intrinsic logic of a Vocational Qualification Framework (VQF) as a basis for bringing order and comparability, but rather in the displacement of a sound institutional (curriculum) logic and/or the longstanding professional body involvement (‘communities of trust’) in the formulation and quality assurance of these new occupational standards and qualifications. Brockman et al. (2008) point to the consequences of this displacement in the design of low-level qualifications based on narrowly specified tasks (procedural knowledge) with few opportunities for articulation or progression to higher level qualifications, thus paradoxically widening rather than closing the gap between practical and academic qualifications.

**RPL in the European policy context**

The rapid expansion of RPL policies and practices across Europe and other Unesco-affiliated countries from the late 1990s is well documented in numerous peer learning and inventory studies (Duvekot et al. 2014; Harris et al. 2011; Werquin 2010a) that broadly distinguish between policies that have a strong association with the introduction of NQFs, and others that were built on pre-existing traditions of adult education and workforce development. Countries such as the Netherlands, France, Norway, Portugal, Canada and the USA exemplify the latter, while the UK, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (discussed below) are known to be among the first to formalise and test the implementation of RPL principles and practices within a national qualifications framework (Allais et al. 2009).

It is interesting to note how the discourse of prior learning has changed as it has become more explicitly encoded into these different national and transnational policy contexts. The shift from PLA and APEL to RPL marks a strong association with the first versions of NQFs and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) as in the case of the UK and Australia, whereas the term ‘Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning’ (VNFIL) is attributed to the French influence, with its particular history of adult vocational education and continuous learning. Brockman et al. (2008) suggest that in contrast to the British NVQs, the French approach is based on
a comprehensive rather than purely functional understanding of competence; one that includes the theoretical, technical, social and personal capabilities that underpin and inform a holistic occupational identity and not just the ability to perform a highly specialised or low-level task. The French opted to build a work-based learning component into the design of existing vocational qualifications, and to include alternative routes of access to the qualification via the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Brockman et al. (2008) cite Pouget and Osborne (2004) in making the point that competences in France are 'validated' rather than 'assessed':

The whole range of resources that the employee brings to a post is validated, over and above what is required and specified in a job description. Methods of validation include ways in which employees see themselves in their post and assess the ways in which they master particular work situations, as well as their potential for development. (Brockman et al. 2008: 232)

This approach and change of terminology is evident in recent policy reviews and guidelines of the transnational organisations in Europe (CEDEFOP 2009) and beyond Unesco (2012). These policies all situate VNFIL within an overarching policy discourse on lifelong learning albeit from different perspectives – the human capital discourse of the OECD (2010) and the humanist discourse of Unesco (2012). Werquin (2010a) in his report based on 26 different country practices sets out the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) perspective as follows:

Recognition of non-formal learning and informal learning outcomes does not, in itself, create human capital. But the recognition makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large. (Werquin 2010a: 7)

Singh (2014), on the other hand, situates the Unesco guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of the Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (Unesco 2012) within a context of deepening global inequalities and a liberal humanist discourse of lifelong learning:

The RVA of non-formal and informal learning is a key lever in making lifelong learning a reality. It renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives. Valuing and recognising these outcomes may significantly improve individuals self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning, and strengthen their labour market opportunities. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies. (Unesco 2012: 3)

RVA is described in these and other EU-related guidelines (CEDEFOP 2009) as
both a ‘summative assessment practice’ aimed at certification against the learning outcomes and standards of a registered qualification, and as a ‘formative’ process for knowledge and skills recognition inclusive of the provision of guidance and counselling on how to fill the gaps where required. This is arguably a reflection of the increasing pressure on governments in and across the EU to engage with labour market disparities and specifically with the growing pool of people at risk of losing their jobs or never finding employment, for example migrant workers, women, single parents, the elderly and the unemployed youth (Werquin 2010b). A number of countries have introduced subsidised RVA-related practices inclusive of extensive information, guidance and counselling services, to assist groups and individuals at risk in drafting a skills passport that can be used in seeking work and/or access opportunities to formal study (Straka 2004). Whittaker (2011), drawing on work of this nature with unemployed youth in Scotland, elaborates on the distinction as follows:

The key outcomes of formative recognition are therefore explicit, rather than implicit, and centre on confidence building, making the connections between prior learning and future goals and developing learner identity. The key outcomes of summative recognition continue to focus on entry to a formal programme or qualification and the award of credit. (Whittaker 2011: 179)

The evolution of RVA policies and guidelines in the first decade of the 21st century reflects a fast-growing commitment to RVA practices in and across national and international systems and institutions in Europe and the UN, but despite substantial funding, implementation remains uneven and generally low on the global stage (Harris et al. 2011; Werquin 2010a). The gaps between policy and practice are all too frequently attributed to the costly and time-consuming nature of the practices, the lack of legislation and other ‘barriers to implementation’ (Harris 2011: 11); and at another level they are attributed by researchers and scholars as an expression of the contested nature of education and training policy reforms grounded alternately in discourses of human capital theory, liberal humanism and critical theory. Mojab (2009) reminds us that despite its most inclusive intentions, the framing of policies and guidelines in the discourse of lifelong learning is no guarantee of greater equity and inclusion in a global market economy. In fact, she argues that the discourse of lifelong learning is a contested concept and has been deployed in the service of human capital theory to conceal the changing forms of exploitation, discrimination and marginalisation within the global market economy, and to perpetuate the myth ‘that the lack of skills causes unemployment; it supposes that constant retraining prepares workers to be ultimately adaptable and always ready to acquire new skills as the needs of capital dictate’ (Mojab 2009: 5). RVA in this sense does not easily resolve the dilemma of those who are excluded from these labour markets and whose knowledge and skills are increasingly positioned on the margins of the formal economy.
However, as Michelson (2015) in a similar vein reminds us, such is the nature of the paradox:

APEL is an important venue for revisiting the relationship between authorised and devalued forms of knowledge precisely because it formalises it. It is therefore a node for negotiating epistemological visibility and for negotiating new forms of recognition, based not on sameness and equivalence, but difference and inclusivity. (Michelson 2015: 105)

Our search in this book is for a complex understanding of how different policy discourses are related to the differential nature and form of RPL practices, and specifically, how the paradoxes to which we have referred above are manifest in the inner workings of RPL practices and programmes that are the subject of our research. This search looks to build on the critical insights raised by RPL scholars and researchers working within and across different contexts and practices (Andersson & Harris 2006; Cooper & Walters 2009; Harris et al. 2011; Michelson 1997, 2015; Michelson et al. 2004) where, as we discuss in Chapter 2 of this book, the assumptions about knowledge, skills and experiential learning within RPL practices are profoundly shaped by, but not determined by, the assumptions about knowledge, pedagogy and power outside and inside of these practices. This book is not based on an inventory survey of RPL policies and practices in South Africa, and readers looking for another purely descriptive account of RPL tests, tools and portfolios will not find them here. Our search is for a model of the internal structures of pedagogic discourse associated with RPL practices in different contexts, and how they differently mediate the struggle for socially just solutions to the paradox of globalisation, as opposed to simply being a carrier of external power relations associated with the political, social and economic forces and related policies of government, industry or social movements (Bernstein 2000).

**RPL within the South African policy context**

Compared to elsewhere in the world, RPL in South Africa9 has maintained a strong focus on equity and access. As noted in a SAQA policy document:

Recognition of Prior Learning in South Africa has, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, a very specific agenda. RPL is meant to support transformation of the education and training system of the country. This calls for an approach to the development of RPL policy and practices that explicitly addresses the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment. (SAQA 2002)

RPL was first introduced to the South African education and training system in the early 1990s; driven strongly by the labour movement, it was one of several elements driving systems level reforms. It formed part of an overarching discourse
of transformation, aimed at redressing past injustices and ensuring effective access to learning via an integrated NQF, which would enhance the flexibility and articulation capabilities of the system with reference to all forms of learning, and render explicit and certifiable knowledge and skills that are acquired experientially. The inclusion of RPL as a founding principle of the NQF raised expectations that with the necessary standards and assessment expertise it would be widely applied, thus helping to build an inclusive system of lifelong learning within and across the conventional boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This was of special significance within the formal economy where contradictions of the apartheid-regulated labour market had left the majority of workers without a qualification even though they were doing the jobs previously held by their more qualified ‘white’ counterparts (Kraak 2004; Mariotte 2009).

Policy makers were aware at the time that RPL was a relatively new construct in the global discourse of outcomes-based education and training, and that its implementation on a large scale would require significant investments of resources and expertise (Harris et al. 1994). A number of policy makers from government and civil society organisations had participated in two international study tours to look at RPL models in the UK, US and New Zealand, and funding was secured for a few strategically placed pilot projects in industry and in higher education. This included technical assistance from specialist organisations based in the UK, US, Canada and Ireland, and the first pilot projects and related research got underway in the fields of nursing, adult education, community development, teacher education, building and construction, and management and leadership development (Ballim et al. 2000). The first RPL regulation, gazetted in 1998, required all qualifications to be achieved in whole or in part through RPL, and by the year 2000, SAQA had commenced a process that would lead to its first national policy statement setting out the principles, procedures and criteria for the implementation and quality assurance of RPL as an assessment-led practice.

However, as in the case of other international practices reviewed above, the implementation of RPL has proved a lot more costly, contested and complex than was anticipated by policy makers, and its value in validating claims of competence or equivalence against the outcomes specified in unit standards and registered qualifications has come under critical review in South Africa. Breier and Burness (2003) found limited uptake of RPL in higher education institutions in the late 1990s, while Harris (2004) and Breier (2003) both write of the difficulties associated with recognising informal knowledge in formal, higher education contexts. Ballim et al. (2000) note the difficulties experienced with RPL in the workplace, where they talk of the ‘bruising experiences’ (2000: 188) of workers in some leading RPL pilot projects with metalworkers and mineworkers in the mid-1990s. This account is echoed in the Lugg et al. (1998) analysis of the disappointing results of another trade union RPL project during 1997. Cooper (1998) locates RPL within a shift in trade union education from a ‘transformative’ to a ‘human capital’ discourse, and argues that RPL has the potential to divide rather than unite workers.
In the early 2000s, there was the beginning of a serious rethink concerning the merits, principles and strategies of the NQF in South Africa, foregrounding the problems of outcomes-based education and attempts to impose a uniform model of qualification design on the whole system (DoE/DoL 2002: 58). These concerns were captured in later writings by scholars who argued that this was indicative of the failure to differentiate between the origins, types and purposes of knowledge production and distribution in different contexts (Muller 2009; Young 2009), and to appreciate the complex and often contested logics associated with introducing a ‘new language of learning’ into an existing system with its existing set of institutional cultures and practices (Raffe 2009). The report of a task team appointed by government to critically review the NQF identified RPL as one of the big disappointments of the NQF-led reform strategy (DoE/DoL 2002). This finding was perhaps a little premature as there had hardly been time to harvest the lessons from the first round of RPL pilot projects and related research activity (Ballim et al. 2000; Harris 2000), let alone set up credible national policies and funding mechanisms to support the large-scale delivery of RPL programmes and services in different sectors (SAQA 2002). In fact, the period following the publication of the Task Team Report saw the completion of a number of research reports (Blom et al. 2007; Volbrecht et al. 2006), PhD theses (Breier 2003; Harris 2004; Osman 2003; Deller 2007), journal articles and conference papers, which signalled a small but vibrant implementation of the policy at some universities and workplaces across the country.

The research project

The brief for the research project on which this book is based thus came at a very particular time of transition in the post-apartheid education and training system, and the evolution of the South African NQF in particular. It began in 2009, one year after the promulgation of the NQF Act of 2008, which reset the NQF architecture and course of qualifications reform in South Africa, via a shift to a three-part interdependent sub-framework NQF – a move aimed at clarifying boundaries and articulation routes between different qualification and related learning pathways within the system. The Act also gave SAQA an explicit mandate to advance the development of RPL policy and practice in association with the three Quality Councils responsible for qualifications development and articulation across the system.

The research described in this book sought to explore the affordances and constraints of different RPL practices on the question of ‘optimal inclusion’; it aimed also to develop an understanding of the ‘inner workings’ of RPL as a pedagogic practice, and to develop a conceptual framework for theorising and comparing the specialised nature and modalities of the practice in different contexts. Our argument was that whereas the policy discourse espoused the inclusive nature and merits of RPL as an assessment-led practice, much of the work is in fact pedagogical in nature,
although the affordances and constraints of these practices remained largely invisible and under-theorised.

The research project was set up as a collaborative exploration of RPL practices within and across the boundaries of multiple communities of practice. Researchers at four different sites of practice were involved in the study. All the researchers were/are active participants in RPL-related practices at their institution.

Each of the case studies was guided by two main research questions:

- How effective are different RPL policies and practices for mediating the complexities of knowledge recognition and certification in and across different learning pathways and communities of practice?
- What needs to change for RPL to become a more optimally inclusive and effective practice in the workplace, in higher and further education provision, in mediating access and credit transfer across different contexts and learning pathways in a differentiated but interdependent NQF?

The study focused on the complex mediations of knowledge, learning and assessment that are inherent in the design and implementation of RPL practices in these different contexts, and the institutional conditions under which these practices operate. It also included a comparative exploration of the biographical data and learning narratives of a small but representative sample of between four and six participants at each of the sites, which provided a rich source of qualitative information for understanding learners and their socially located engagements in navigating their way in and across different and learning pathways.

The research strategy evolved over three main phases of activity.

**Phase 1**

Phase 1 commenced with a literature review (Ralphs 2012) and four detailed case studies of existing RPL practices at four different locations: two universities in the Western Cape, the Workers’ College in KwaZulu-Natal, and a private FET provider that has specialised in RPL for vocational and occupationally directed qualifications. Our aim in this phase was to understand and document the nature, affordances and constraints of the practices across these four sites, and to reference these in the search for what a more ‘optimally inclusive’ approach might require in different contexts. Details of the specific focus and methods used in each case study are provided in the chapters that follow, but given the diversity of RPL practices across the four sites, we agreed for the purposes of comparison, on four lines of inquiry, which served as a useful guide for the documentation analysis of the case study data, with different emphases in each case:

- **Knowledge**: The relationship between knowledge gained through experience and knowledge codified in qualifications. What knowledge is valued or excluded in the practice and how does it shape the nature of the practice? How strong are the
boundaries between formal academic knowledge and experiential learning, and how are they maintained in and through the practice?

- **Pedagogy**: The content, methods (teaching tools, rules, language, learning relations) and processes used in all aspects of RPL provision. How do these practices mediate adult learner participation or exclusion across the continuum of formal and informal learning?

- **Institutional context**: The systems, rules and resources governing RPL provision in different institutional contexts. In what ways do institutional cultures, policies, rules, fees, and so on, impact on the inclusive or exclusive nature of the practice?

- **Learner agency**: The biographical profiles, socio-economic status, cultural dispositions, and strategy of learners as they engage RPL provision in its different forms. With what capacities and limitations do learners negotiate the opportunities and barriers of the evolving national learning system in South Africa?

**Phase 2**

In Phase 2, the focus turned to a search for a conceptual framework that could explain the specialised nature, form and purpose of pedagogic activity in RPL-related practices. As an early step in this process, the four case studies provided a valuable basis for a comparative exercise in order, firstly, to compare and contrast the different forms of RPL pedagogy and understand what is common across the different practices; and secondly, to understand the affordances and constraints of RPL practices across our four sites, i.e. the conditions under which RPL optimally advances the inclusionary objectives of the education and training system in South Africa. It was out of this comparative work that we began to evolve a theoretical framework and conceptual language for describing these practices.

**Phase 3**

In Phase 3, the focus turned to learner agency as we sought to find out more about how the learners at different sites perceived the opportunities and constraints afforded by RPL in the context of their complex learning journeys, as well as across the different learning pathways and qualifications that make up the NQF and the national learning system as a whole. Questions that were probed in this phase of the research were the following:

- What do we know about the agency and identity of non-traditional learners as they negotiate their way across different learning systems and pathways; what are the hurdles they face and how do they deal with them?

- What can we learn about the nature and impact of RPL processes and practices on learner agency – as an enabler or as a constraint?

- What policy and practical improvements are suggested at the levels of the programme, the institution and the NQF to optimise the levels of learner agency, mobility and inclusion across different learning pathways in the system?
Guide to the case studies

The case studies documented in this project were all based on existing, relatively well-established practices at different sites. The brief descriptors that follow provide a guide to the focus and findings of each case study, which is documented in more detail in the next four chapters.

A curriculum model for access to postgraduate study

This research site focused on developing an RPL model for access into postgraduate study, in particular, into those programmes that have an applied, professional or vocational orientation. The study was based at a research-focused institution that historically has not been welcoming of RPL; those few programmes that have implemented RPL have tended to be postgraduate diplomas, reinforcing the argument that RPL is often more successful at postgraduate levels where curricula are professionally or vocationally oriented and more flexibly delivered. The first phase of the research aimed to explore models of RPL currently in practice as well as document academics’ views towards RPL with the longer term goal of putting in place a more generic RPL programme into postgraduate study at the institution.

The report on this first phase of the research (Cooper & Jones 2011) details processes of RPL into three postgraduate diploma/master’s programmes: in Adult Education, Management Studies and Disability Studies. Initial findings were that the three programmes adopt different models of RPL, but that the key differences lie not in the RPL methods used but rather in the relationship between the RPL process and the mainstream curriculum. In both the Management Studies and Disability Studies programmes, which have a strong applied orientation and where staff enjoy relative autonomy from faculty authorities in their decision-making, the RPL process has a strong developmental character and is integrated (in different ways) with the mainstream programme. In the Adult Education programmes on the other hand, pressure from faculty authorities to foreground research capability has led to a more conventional RPL process that is far more assessment oriented. Coupled with findings from a survey of academics across six faculties, the findings suggest that while the disciplinary context or knowledge domain is an important factor in shaping the possibilities of and limitations to RPL into postgraduate study, the faculty/departmental organisational culture and individual dispositions/ideological orientations of academics also present key affordances and barriers.

Navigating access to undergraduate study through RPL

This research site focused on RPL for access into undergraduate study in a large, traditional university. It built on a large body of research that examined alternative access routes into higher education for mature learners who do not meet the conventional entry level requirements for admission to undergraduate study. The
focus in this study was on the comparative merits and specialised pedagogies involved in the design and implementation of two common forms of this provision, namely Standardised Admissions Tests and a Portfolio Development Course (PDC). The study acknowledged that current policy and the absence of state funding for RPL provision in the public universities favours the use of admissions testing over the more expensive and time-consuming portfolio development course, but it set out to explore the assumptions and implications of this position with reference to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that these pedagogical practices afford to different constituencies of learners.

The report on the first phase of this study (Ralphs & Associates 2012) provides a rich description of the origins and evolution of RPL policy and programmes at the university for the period 2001–2010, and a comparison of the admission, retention and success rates of students admitted to the university via the two different routes. Initial findings of a tracer study that compared the success rates of PDC and Admissions Test students respectively in their subsequent undergraduate studies show that PDC students perform marginally better than their counterparts who gained access through the Admissions Test. This appears to confirm the advantages of the more explicitly developmental nature of the PDC over the espoused efficiencies of the assessment-led Admissions Tests. The report highlights a number of enabling and constraining features of the design and delivery of the PDC in what is characterised as relatively successful ‘boundary crossing’ pedagogic practice. The report also explores conditions that led some PDC participants to exit the programme prematurely and points to the complex interface between the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of people's lives.

An alternative/radical RPL pedagogy at the Workers’ College

This case study (Moodley et al. 2011) focused on a Workers’ College and specifically on its diploma programmes for activists from trade union and community organisations. The college has had a long-standing interest in RPL as a basis for enhancing the epistemological responsiveness of its programmes to the organisational requirements and priorities of its students and the civil society movements with which they work. The research project aimed to investigate ways of enhancing the integration of RPL-related processes and practices into the diploma programme from three perspectives. Firstly, the perspective of participants: to build their confidence and ability to draw on prior experiential learning as a valued resource for new learning and for dialogue with their peers and course facilitators. Secondly, from the perspective of the curriculum: to recognise the epistemological authority of ‘everyday’ knowledge sources and to engage with them as part of the diploma programme. Thirdly, from the perspective of the institution: to enhance the policy and capacity of the college to provide a quality RPL process to meet the requirements of a local university with whom the college has an articulation agreement for access to undergraduate study in the Social Sciences.
The findings of the first phase of the research richly illustrate the nature of RPL when it assumes the form and role of ‘radical pedagogy’ and where it creates a platform for the integration of formal, theoretical knowledge and experiential knowledge with the aim of not only creating future learning paths for participants who may not have enjoyed them otherwise, but also of creating a new knowledge base or 'knowledge archive' enriched by the experiences of activists in their collective struggles.

**RPL and occupational competence**

The development of an effective and inclusive model of RPL for occupationally directed qualifications was the focus of the research in this case study of a private provider of RPL (Deller 2012). The research project focused on the ‘Basic Business’ skills of employees from three different workplaces; it sought to test an RPL-friendly curriculum model that could be applied in the South African workplace under the evolving framework of ‘fit for purpose’ qualifications as envisaged by the new Quality Council for Trade and Occupations (QCTO). The project drew on previous doctoral research in the insurance sector, which highlighted the pedagogical specialisations involved in the design and implementation of workplace-based RPL assessment systems and practices, and aimed to further develop and evaluate RPL advising and assessment tools relevant to the new qualification standards and specifications of the QCTO.

One of the key issues, which was critically interrogated in the first phase of this research, was the potential consequences of fragmenting the RPL assessment process along the same lines as those defined in the revised format for occupational qualifications and curricula, i.e. the knowledge, practical, workplace and fundamental competences. The research found that this was pedagogically counterproductive and significantly undermined RPL candidates’ confidence in their capabilities, as well as their motivation to participate in the final assessment process. Significantly, the results also underscored the argument that RPL cannot be treated as a disaggregated assessment practice but requires a more integrated mediation of the different competences required for an occupationally directed qualification.

**Research collaboration, limitations and terminology**

The research project documented in this book was set up as a collaborative (not comparative) exploration of RPL practices within and across different institutional and epistemological settings. The merits of a collaborative study are that it does not start with the assumption of a standardised practice or common set of analytical resources for theorising the practice in different contexts, but provides instead the boundary space for a critical conversation and a shared enquiry across different practices and conceptual languages. These boundary crossing practices, it is argued, are characteristic of the kind of specialised pedagogies that are critical to the pursuit of optimal inclusion in the discourse and development of RPL in South Africa.
The case studies described in the chapters that follow – although selected in order to maximise variation across academic and occupational settings, are however not ‘representative’ of all RPL practices in South Africa, nor are they empirically generalizable to all other cases. Nevertheless, they do enable ‘analytic generalization’ (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 283) and in this sense have contributed significantly to the conceptual framework that has heuristic value in capturing the general inner workings of RPL as a specialised pedagogic practice, and in conceptualising the distinctiveness of this practice in relation to other forms of pedagogy.

One of the challenges of a collaborative study across different contexts has to do with the terms we use to refer to the key role players in different practices: adult learners, non-traditional or atypical students, mature learners, candidates or participants. The term ‘candidate’ is possibly the most common but it is strongly associated with an assessment-focused RPL discourse, while the term ‘learner’ has a stronger association with a pedagogical discourse. Likewise, with the RPL practitioner, the term ‘assessor’ is particularly common within an assessment-led practice, while the terms ‘RPL facilitator’, ‘advisor’, ‘mentor’ and/or ‘counsellor’ are more commonly associated with the formative dimensions of RPL processes and practices. There simply is no ‘one size fits all’ and readers will need to bear these differences in mind as they go through the chapters.

Our attempt in this book, and most notably in the case study chapters, is to use the terminology appropriately, i.e. with careful reference to: a) the institutional types and rules (university, workplace, or college), and b) the orientation/approach of the practice concerned. So, for example, we mostly use ‘learners’ or ‘participants’ when referring to people on a portfolio development course for access to university, but we would use the term ‘candidates’ when referring to workers going through an assessment activity at work, or ‘students’ to describe those taking a course or doing an assessment at college or university. Likewise, we use the generic term ‘RPL practitioner’ where applicable, but switch to ‘advisor’, ‘administrator’, or ‘facilitator’ when referring to a particular role player in a particular practice. Therefore, readers will need to keep this guide in mind as they move through the chapters and, in particular, the case studies.

And finally, a note on the use of racial terminology in this book: Given the history of racism and ‘race’ classification in South Africa, it is with reluctance that we make use of racial terminology in this book. However, given the focus of the book on questions of equity of access to education, and given that inequities in present-day South Africa continue to be impacted upon and shaped by a legacy of discrimination and exploitation based on ‘race’ classifications, the chapters in this book occasionally make reference to groups of people in terms of how they might have been classified under apartheid. The term ‘black’ is used in a generic sense for all South Africans historically disenfranchised under apartheid. ‘African’ refers to black South Africans who speak indigenous languages such as isiXhosa, isiZulu or Sesotho. ‘Coloured’ refers to South Africans of diverse cultural origins, most of whom speak Afrikaans...
and/or English as a home language, and who were also disenfranchised under apartheid. ‘White’ refers to South Africans who were classified as ‘of European ancestry’ and enfranchised under apartheid.

**Structure of the book**

The following chapter, Chapter 2, traces the conceptual origins of the research questions. It reviews debates – largely emerging in the South African research literature, but including the international literature – around the epistemological foundations and pedagogic nature of RPL practices, and how these formed a backdrop to the conceptual framing of the research described in the book.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 provide detailed accounts of the case studies. The chapters detail the specific focus and methods used in each case study, and explore the nature of the practices across these four research sites, in relation to the search for what a more ‘optimally inclusive’ approach might require in each context.

Chapter 7 provides a conceptual pinnacle to the book. It sketches a theoretical framework that situates and defines RPL as a specialised pedagogy in relation to the fields of knowledge production and recontextualisation, thus providing a common conceptual language for describing the RPL practices across different sites and contexts. It also defines the generic and distinctive features of the ‘inner workings’ of RPL as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy, and illustrates how these inner workings play themselves out via the four case studies.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, begins by setting out three generic modalities of RPL, generated by our analysis of the case studies. It then goes on to summarise the findings of the research project and takes up the discussion on implications of the findings for policy, funding, implementation and further research.

The case study chapters to some extent stand independently, and readers may dip flexibly into these. However, familiarity with these four chapters will significantly aid the reading and ‘making sense of’ the theoretical models and typologies put forward in Chapters 7 and 8.

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**Notes**

1. The Cooperative Assessment of Prior Learning (CAEL) Project was a 3-year validation study costing $2.1 million in which 27 institutions took part.
2. The CNAA was responsible for the academic awards in the polytechnics sector up to 1992.
3. These terms and others (mature student) are used to describe students who do not meet the conventional entry level standards for admission to undergraduate or post graduate study.
4 These refer typically to the in-house company, government or union training courses that have been evaluated and rated by a recognised professional body and/or accreditation agency. For example, in the USA it would be an agency appointed by the American Council on Education.

5 These courses were clearly pedagogical in their approach but not described as such – they typically included an introduction to the principles of adult and experiential learning through which participants would be assisted in surfacing and rearticulating their knowledge and skills in the form of learning outcomes.

6 Winterton & Winterton (1997) also make the point that the radical overhaul of the system of vocational education and training in the UK involved two significant moves: ‘statutory industry training boards have (in all but two cases) been replaced by employer-led Industry Training Organisations’ and ‘a unified system of work-based qualifications is being developed following the establishment in 1986 of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications’ (1997: 156).

7 Qualifications are increasingly differentiated according to their designation as occupational standards or education standards, with variations according to the history and culture of different countries and related Qualification Frameworks. ‘Occupational standards are classifications and definitions of the main jobs that people do’ and ‘Educational standards are normally written as teaching specification and qualification specifications’ (CEDEFOP 2009: 32).

8 Also known as the Bilan des competences in France, the ProFil Pass in Germany and the Europass in Europe (http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/home).

9 The review of RPL policy developments covered in this section are elaborated in much more detail in the article written by Ralphs (2012).

10 This would lead eventually to a substantial revision in the architecture and conceptual underpinnings of the NQF, in Raffe’s analysis, ‘a looser, more differentiated, more bottom-up framework, with more input from educational institutions’ (2009: 30). The policy implications of these limitations for a technical definition of RPL are particularly significant given the prominence of prescribed outcomes and assessment criteria in judgments concerning the credit ‘value’ of prior experiential learning.

11 ‘Generic’ literacy and numeracy skills.
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Conceptual starting points

Linda Cooper

Harris, Breier and Wihak's (2011) review of research in the field of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) offers a critique of its theoretical basis. They say that internationally much of the RPL research is a-theoretical and uncritical; there is either an absence of theory or an unproblematised acceptance of experiential learning or situated learning ideas (in the case of research conducted by educationists) and human capital theory (in the case of research undertaken by the OECD and the European Commission). South African is an exception to this. (Harris et al. 2011: 7)

They argue that RPL research would benefit from a broader range of theoretical perspectives being brought to bear on practice – in particular, those perspectives that move beyond taken-for-granted adult and experiential learning theory (Harris et al. 2011: 10). What is needed is research into the institutional, curricular and pedagogic conditions under which RPL is most likely to succeed, and ‘be able to articulate the reasons why (and why not)’ (Harris et al. 2011: 11). Harris et al. conclude that theoretical and critical research is important if the field is to develop as an area of scholarly activity, and that there is a real need for research that deepens our knowledge base by building on earlier research in a systematic way.

The research project on which this book is based took these considerations into account when it was initiated. It had a clear focus on interrogating the institutional, curricular and pedagogic conditions under which RPL could achieve ‘optimal inclusion’ (Harris 2000), and its brief was explicitly theoretical: to develop a conceptual model for understanding the ‘inner workings’ of RPL as a pedagogic practice, and a framework for theorising and comparing the specialised nature and modalities of the practice in different contexts.

The research had two distinctive conceptual starting points. The first represented a departure from the hitherto dominant focus on RPL as primarily an assessment practice, and involved a self-conscious decision to explore the nature of RPL practice as a specialised form of pedagogy. The second represented an epistemological critique of the constructivist approaches to learning that have dominated RPL literature and that assert the socially situated nature of all forms of knowledge, as well as a move towards a more social realist epistemology that foregrounds the differentiation of knowledge. These two assumptions are closely related: if we accept the notion that knowledge is differentiated – and therefore that experiential forms of knowledge
cannot be easily equated with the codified forms of knowledge found, for example, in
the academy – then any process of RPL would require the RPL candidate to embark
on a process of navigating the boundaries between different knowledge discourses,
and hence the need for a specialist pedagogic role in mediating the complexities of
knowledge recognition across different learning pathways.

This chapter reviews two key debates that have been particularly salient not only in
South African research literature but internationally as well, and traces how these
formed a backdrop for the conceptual framing of the research described in the
book. The first focuses on the epistemological foundations of RPL, while the second
centres around the pedagogic nature of RPL practices. The review of the literature is
not comprehensive, but instead draws on the literature selectively in order to show
how it influenced the theoretical starting points of the research that underpinned
this book at its inception in 2009.

Theoretical debates: The differentiated nature of knowledge

According to Young (2006):

The relationship between knowledge and experience is as old as education
itself. It is both an epistemological issue (where does ‘true’ knowledge
come from?) and a pedagogic issue (how can learners be enabled to
acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experience?). RPL merely
dramatizes these issues … (Young 2006: 323)

Harris’ (2014) review of advances in theorising RPL identifies the key theoretical
lenses that have shaped research around RPL: adult and/or experiential learning
theory, critical theory, postmodernism and feminist theory, socio-cultural activity
theory, and social realist approaches.

Harris’ (2000, 2004) research was one of the earliest to place RPL's epistemological
assumptions under the spotlight. She argued that historically RPL research had either
tended to be atheoretical, or grounded in experiential learning theory with its roots
in humanist and cognitive psychology and related to this, constructivist theories of
learning. Up to the mid-1990s, Kolb's (1984) 'experiential learning cycle' had guided
much RPL theory and practice, along with principles inherent in Knowles' (1980)
andragogical account of adult learning theory. Reliance on these accounts meant
that RPL 'seems to have lagged behind contemporary developments in social and
educational theory' (Harris, 2006: 8). One reason for this is that RPL had acquired
the status of a 'social movement', which made it difficult to mount critiques of the
practice without being seen as critiquing the principles of social justice underpinning
that practice. Harris (2006) showed how discussions of knowledge were conspicuous
by their absence in the RPL literature, and argued that what was needed was a move
beyond constructivism and the incorporation of more social realist approaches to
theorising RPL.
Harris (2014: 46) draws on Phillips’ (1995) notion of ‘the many faces of constructivism’ to make the point that constructivism comprises a range of theoretical approaches, all of which foreground the historical and socially situated nature of knowledge production and the active nature of learning. These approaches tend – implicitly in the case of experiential learning theorists, or explicitly in the case of situated learning theories (Lave and Wenger 1991) – to flatten the distinctions between everyday knowledge and more specialised knowledge discourses.

Feminist theorists such as Michelson (1996, 1998, 1999, 2006) adopt a more critical, poststructuralist position, drawing attention to the relationship between RPL and unequal power relations between different knowledge cultures in society. Michelson directly challenges notions of knowledge difference that have their roots in Western epistemologies based on enlightenment distinctions between body and mind, and on positivist notions of objective and universal truth. She argues that whereas RPL provides for the recognition of non-academic and socially situated experiential learning, its inclusive potential often remains trapped within Cartesian epistemologies that privilege the universal objective knower and the abstraction of knowledge from its socially situated sites of production. She contrasts these with a feminist epistemology that recognises the authority of the everyday and the relational as categories through which women construct meaning in their lives:

Materialist feminism is the corrective here because of its greater ability to historicise, to read concepts such as ‘woman’ and ‘experience’ as historically and culturally produced categories situated within material conditions that vary at historical moments and in regional locations, to allow experience to be understood as both particularised and intersubjective, produced within historically specific social contexts that determine both content and form. (Michelson 1996: 638)

Social realist accounts, on the other hand, highlight distinctions between different forms of knowledge; while recognising that all knowledge is socially produced and acquired, such accounts view everyday knowledge concepts as context-bound and associated with particular communities of practice, while specialised or scientific knowledge comprises concepts that can travel across contexts and therefore have greater explanatory potential (Young 2008). Social realist approaches to knowledge have increasingly gained sway in South African research literature on RPL. Drawing on Bernstein’s (2000) concepts of vertical and horizontal knowledge structures, Harris (2004, 2006) argued that it is necessary to recognise and understand the nature of the boundaries between different forms of knowledge, if RPL is to succeed in enabling the ‘crossing’ or indeed changing of these knowledge boundaries. Breier (2003, 2006) investigated the recruitment and recognition of prior experience in the pedagogy of two university courses in Labour Law. She, too, drew on Bernstein’s (2000) work to make the argument that if RPL is to act inclusively, it is necessary to take account of the nature of the structure of the
discipline or academic field concerned, and the relationship between formal and informal knowledge within that discipline or field.

Constructivist and realist approaches to knowledge are not mutually exclusive; for example, post-Vygotskian or cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) perspectives assume a dialectical position that ‘points to both the distinction between everyday and scientific concepts and their interdependence’ (Young 2009: 52, emphasis added). While emphasising the socio-historical and cultural contexts of learning as well as the active role of the learner, at the same time these approaches recognise a distinction between everyday and scientific or educational knowledge, and retain a prominent role for the educator in mediating knowledge of the later kind. Cooper’s (2005, 2006) research has drawn on CHAT to explore how everyday and scientific concepts are brought into dynamic interaction in trade union education, and draws out implications from this for RPL.

However, there remains a tension between constructivist and realist approaches to knowledge, and this makes for a complex and contested boundary space within which RPL practices must operate. Osman illustrates this in her (2003) study of portfolio development practices at different universities, where she argued that academics experience a ‘knowledge paradox’

if they value experiential knowledge only, they marginalize the students in a university environment where academic knowledge is powerful. If on the other hand they render experiential knowledge invisible then they are contributing to the dominance of academic knowledge in the academy.

(Osman 2003: 159)

Harris also refers to this tension when she asserts that ‘the area of knowledge remains problematic’ and asks:

Are RPL practitioners to work on the basis of valid and necessary epistemological differences between forms of knowledge, or are any such differences to be seen as modernist binaries to be contested?

(Harris 2006: 26)

Harris’ answer to this is that RPL needs to acknowledge knowledge difference – to ‘know the borders in order to cross the lines’ – if it is to successfully work across and between different forms of knowledge that are not always easily connected or connectable (Harris 2014: 54).

The research underpinning this book accepted as a starting point the differentiation of knowledge – in other words, that where and how knowledge is acquired really does matter, and cannot be assumed as insignificant in the assessment and certification of this knowledge. At the same time, we kept in mind that the notion of knowledge binaries is a contested one, and that we need remain alert to the politics of knowledge and the unequal power relations that lead to the privileging of some sources of epistemological authority over others.
Theoretical debates: RPL curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

Alan Ralphs’ (2012) review of the RPL literature shows that a number of prevailing models of RPL practice have been proposed over time. There is a growing consensus among researchers of the need for a much closer look at the specialised nature, possibilities and limitations of RPL practices, given the complex differences in knowledge production and learning across academic, work- and community-based settings. It is also evident that there is a diversity of intellectual perspectives among researchers in defining these differences and the pedagogies involved.

The original distinction for describing RPL practices in the field of adult education was formulated by Butterworth and McKelvey (1997) in terms of the ‘credit exchange’ and ‘developmental’ models. The distinction is both philosophical and practical. The credit exchange model exemplifies an instrumentalist understanding of knowledge and a technical focus on methods of assessment aimed at giving credit for prior learning that matches the specifications of a unit standard or qualification. The developmental model operates within a liberal humanist paradigm that positions learners as self-actualising, reflective individuals who, via the powers of human reason and the processes of critical reflection, ‘gain wisdom and truth as developed over the centuries through the disciplines’ (Luckett 1999). Portfolio development and individualised mentoring are typical of the developmental model (although not exclusively so) and are often associated with RPL applications for access to further and higher education where the focus is on the potential to succeed rather than a strict labelling of current competence against fixed standards or learning outcomes as is the case with the credit exchange model.

Harris’ (1999, 2000) work built on these models as well as Weil and McGill’s (1989) ‘four villages of experiential learning’ to present four RPL models, each with its own distinctive purpose and methodologies:

- ‘Procrustean RPL’ is technicist and instrumentalist in orientation, matching prior learning to prescribed outcomes or standards.
- ‘Learning and development RPL’, influenced by liberal and humanist discourses, helps to orient and induct candidates into standard ways of expressing knowledge and skill.
- ‘Radical RPL’ is transformative in orientation, viewing RPL as a means to recognise and assign value to ‘subjugated’ knowledges and to challenge dominant forms of knowing.
- ‘Trojan horse RPL’ tries to bring prior, experiential learning into critical dialogue with formal ways of knowing, and thereby bring about greater equality between different forms of knowledge.

Both the Procrustean (credit exchange) model and the developmental model have come under critical scrutiny by researchers; the credit exchange model for its propensity to collude with market-driven commodifications of informal learning (Harris 2000), and the developmental model for privileging individualised and
rationalist ways of knowing over contextualised and collective practices (Michelson 1996, 2004, 2006). Hendriks (2001), in his case study of the portfolio development course at a South African university, argues for the use of narrative learning history and narrative analysis as a more inclusive method for recognising the often marginalised but socially useful forms of knowledge produced and acquired in working-class organisations and communities. In this representation, knowledge and skills are to be ‘judged on their own terms’ (Hendriks 2001: 105) with no attempt to use an intentional process of reflection and analysis to generate an extraction of the knowledge acquired. ‘On the contrary, it is the assessor who does the reflection and extraction and makes an inference about learning’ (Hendriks 2001: 105).

In addition to describing different models of RPL practices in the field, RPL researchers have also interrogated the internal logic of specific cases of RPL practice. Shalem and Steinberg (2006), in their case study of a portfolio development course for practicing teachers seeking access to a post-graduate qualification, describe how their students really struggled to recontextualise their work-based knowledge practices within the more discipline-based requirements of the portfolio programme, and this created real dilemmas for the academics involved. They conclude that RPL in higher education is complex and deeply ambiguous in nature: it is both retrospective in terms of recognising previously attained learning, as well as prospective in terms of assessing readiness to learn in a higher education environment, but the criteria for both (retrospective and prospective) remain largely invisible to the learners. Furthermore, these two perspectives are incompatible in terms of their underlying assumptions about knowledge; the former suggests that experiential and academic knowledge are similar and equivalent, while the latter assumes that knowledge is differentiated and hence the need to formally induct candidates into academic forms of knowledge. In a similar vein, Breier (2003, 2006) has written about the difficulties associated with recognising informal knowledge in formal, particularly higher education contexts. She used sociolinguistic theory to analyse and compare the discursive strategies that lecturers and learners used to engage ‘practical experience’ in two different university-based Labour Law courses. Her findings suggest that even where learners have extensive practical experience in the legal field, they are unlikely to succeed in higher education if they are not able to recognise the difference between context-independent and context-dependent modes of thought and knowledge, and the generalising (rather than particularising) preferences of the university-based curriculum and related assessments.

Deller (2007), in her case studies of RPL for under-qualified but experienced workers in the financial services sector, found that while the focus of these practices was primarily on assessment and credit exchange, the preparation of the portfolios of evidence involved a lot more training and new learning than is generally acknowledged. Describing this as a specialised form of workplace RPL, she identifies a number of elements that shape the nature and effectiveness of the pedagogy including the affordances of the workplace, the ‘personal mastery’ of the learners, the
role of advisors (brokers) and the contextualisation of assessment tools (boundary objects) associated with the practice.

Most of the practices reviewed above have as their starting point a given set of unit standards, qualifications and/or curricula, although they differ in the strategies they use to engage experiential learning in relation to these. Assessment is clearly an integral feature of all these forms of RPL practice but seldom exists in isolation from a range of other strategies associated with bringing different sources of knowledge and forms of learning into a shared discursive space where comparisons and judgments can be made. These strategies may be seen as specialisations of RPL practice but we want to suggest that they are better described as specialised pedagogical practices that take different forms and serve different purposes in different contexts.

This proposition is exemplified in work done by Cooper for her PhD thesis (Cooper 2005), a study that starts from outside the academy and inside the everyday operations of a large trade union. It explores the cultural historical contours of knowledge production and pedagogical practice in this context and then asks the question: What are the implications for RPL in the design and implementation of curricula for trade union educators in a higher education context if we take these different knowledge and learning cultures seriously?

Cooper’s (2005) ethnographic study explores the specialist nature of trade union pedagogy and its relation to formal university based pedagogies. Drawing on a post-Vygotskian conceptual framework, she found a range of linguistic, performative, narrative and written tools for mediating the production and distribution of knowledge and skills at all levels and sites of activity in the organisation. These tools are contextualised within the ‘local and particular’ activities of the union but ‘draw on different forms of knowledge ranging from local, practical forms to more analytical and conceptual forms, including elements of highly codified forms of knowledge such as economics and law’ (Cooper 2005: 234). From an RPL perspective, the study provides strong evidence for the proposition that where and how knowledge and skills are produced really does make a difference. Recognising prior learning is as much about recognising the epistemological and pedagogical contexts of experiential learning as it is about certifying the outcomes. RPL in this case is positioned between different but related pedagogical practices, languages and contexts – the ‘mixed pedagogical pallet’ (Bernstein 1996: 70, cited in Cooper 2005: 220) – of the trade union and the discipline-based pedagogies of the university programmes.

The obvious question arises: ‘What is it doing in this in-between space?’ Is this the space of the transformational model of RPL to which Harris (2000), Osman (2003) and others refer – the space within which different knowledge and learning practices are brought into critical dialogue around the content, methods and evaluation rules (Bernstein 2000) that decide what knowledge gets recognised and how evidence of such knowledge will be presented and assessed? Or is this a form of ‘border
pedagogy’ (Wenger 1998) for bringing different discourses of knowledge learning and assessment into dialogue (Rule 2006), while at the same time providing learners with the tools they require to navigate their way in and across these different and sometimes adversarial communities of practice?

The starting point for our research was that only detailed empirical work could begin to offer answers to this question.

**Conclusion**

The brief review of the RPL literature provided above shows how we arrived at our two starting assumptions: That there are different forms of knowledge, and experiential forms of knowledge do not easily nor automatically translate into more codified forms of knowledge; and that RPL practice therefore needs to be viewed as a specialised form of pedagogy positioned at the dynamic interface of learning trajectories across multiple communities of practice, usually academic and work-based, and that its specialist role is to mediate an exchange of pedagogic dialogue and meaning-making across these different discursive practices.

**Acknowledgements**

Judy Harris and Alan Ralphs contributed to the conceptualisation of this chapter.

**Notes**

1. This published article was a product of the literature review conducted at the beginning of the research project, and provides the basis for this section of the chapter.
2. We use this term expansively to include any forms of work, paid and unpaid.
References


Hendriks MN (2001) The Recognition of Prior Learning in higher education: The case of the University of the Western Cape. Master's thesis, University of the Western Cape, South Africa


This chapter focuses on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) into professionally oriented postgraduate study. The research on which it is based took place at one of the oldest universities in South Africa, which prides itself on being ‘world-class’ and research-oriented, where the institutional climate is epistemologically conservative. Historically, the scale of RPL access into this university has been very small, with most successful RPL applicants accepted into postgraduate, professionally oriented programmes. Previous research at the university (Harris 1999, 2000, 2004; Michelson 2004; Peters 2000) underscored the barriers that exist for those wishing to access university study via an RPL route at such an institution.

The focus on postgraduate access meant that the research focused on RPL into programmes that engage with ‘advanced’ bodies of knowledge in specialised fields, and that make assumptions about the foundational knowledge that entrants bring with them. Thus the focus on RPL into postgraduate study raised important questions about knowledge; in particular about knowledge specialisation and the relationship between experiential knowledge (for which RPL seeks to provide some formal recognition) and academic knowledge – and how this impacts on the goals of equity and redress through RPL.

Muller (2012) shows that since the scientific revolutions of the 17th–19th centuries, there has been an ever-widening cleavage between ‘everyday’ knowledge and specialised knowledge. Drawing on Durkheim, he argues that unlike earlier (religious) versions of ‘sacred’ knowledge, new developments in the scientific field are driven by impersonal, often abstract concerns rather than moral and ethical concerns. This results in

\[ \text{a latent and complex tension between specialisation on the one hand and social cohesion and integration on the other, a tension that the ethico-spiritual link had hitherto, with greater or lesser success, managed to keep in check. In a rapidly specialising world, with no intrinsic ethical check, we confront the question of how social integration is to be managed. (Muller 2012: 4)} \]

In South Africa, RPL has been driven by strong political and moral concerns (in addition to economic, human capital concerns) as it is seen as a means of
achieving greater equity and redress for those historically excluded from education opportunities. The wider research project of which this study is a part is also framed primarily by a concern with how to increase social inclusion. How then is it possible to reconcile the increasing need for postgraduate programmes to produce highly specialised professionals and researchers, on the one hand, with social justice concerns to broaden inclusion at these advanced levels of study, on the other?

This leads to the first question posed in our study: Is it possible for RPL to grant access to a postgraduate programme for someone who does not have the usual requirements of an undergraduate degree in that discipline or field? Furthermore, specialisation exists not only between ‘everyday’ and academic knowledge; different academic fields are also differently specialised. Thus we needed to understand the implications for RPL of the distinctions between (for example) pure and applied knowledge, between discipline-specific and cross-domain or interdisciplinary knowledge, and between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences. This led us to the question: Are some fields of study – on account of their knowledge structure or disciplinary context – easier to access via RPL than others?

In order to answer these questions, the study embarked on three research projects. One comprised a survey of academic leaders of postgraduate programmes from across the institution and across faculties and disciplines. This research project was designed to maximise differences in knowledge structure and disciplinary context, and it aimed at tapping academic attitudes towards the viability of RPL access into their programmes. Here, we found that the principles that structure knowledge in different disciplinary domains are important in considering the feasibility of RPL access, but so too are factors such as faculty/departmental cultures as well as pedagogic agency on the part of academics who engage in curriculum design and delivery.

A second research project comprised in-depth studies of three professionally oriented postgraduate diploma programmes that allow access via RPL on a regular basis and/or significant scale. The three programmes – located in Management Studies, Disability Studies and Adult Education – are all ‘4th generation’ professions (Muller 2008) that have a emergent disciplinary base and weak professional identities (Bernstein 2000). These programmes were selected because they seemed to offer different models of RPL worthy of further examination. The programmes were compared in terms of their curriculum and assessment practices, the forms of knowledge that they recognise (or exclude), and the affordances and constraints represented by the institutional contexts in which they are embedded. Findings from the analysis of these three cases echoed those of the academic leaders survey already mentioned; that is, they suggest that despite limitations dictated by disciplinary context or organisational culture, there exists considerable room for ‘pedagogic agency’, that is, for programme leaders and individual academics to engage in thoughtful and creative RPL practices.
Having identified the importance of pedagogic agency, we also wished to explore the role of learner agency, that is, to analyse the impact that learning histories and socio-economic background might have on candidates’ success in completing the RPL process, and to identify the prior knowledge and strategies that candidates draw on to negotiate their way across institutional and knowledge boundaries. This analysis was achieved through a third, biographical part to the study, which involved in-depth interviews with a selection of students who had gained access via RPL into each of the three programmes.

This chapter first elaborates on the conceptual framework that informed this study. Thereafter, it presents data from interviews with academics across the institution and uses these to analyse their attitudes towards RPL. The section that follows critically explores the three models of RPL practice investigated in-depth, and in the last section, we consider the role of pedagogic (i.e. academic) and learner agency in terms of the affordances and constraints of RPL as a means of widening access into postgraduate study.

**Conceptual framework**

Given our focus on knowledge specialisation, the research needed to draw on conceptual approaches that foreground knowledge differentiation. Harris (2004) has argued that the theoretical literature on RPL has tended to neglect the issue of knowledge, but the broader research project of which this study is a part acknowledges its importance (see Chapter 2, this book). It is important to note that knowledge differentiation is as much a reality within experiential learning as within academic discourse. Moll and Welch (2004) have pointed to the distinction between ‘domain specific’ and ‘domain general’ experiential learning, with the latter being more significant in mobilising new learning in an academic context, while Cooper (2005, 2006) has shown how experiential learning is always embedded in particular cultural contexts that shape the form in which such knowledge finds expression, and that very often this knowledge comprises a hybrid mixture of different knowledge discourses.

Our analysis draws first and foremost on the work of the sociologist of education Basil Bernstein. For Bernstein (2000), broader social power relations are reproduced in the very structure or form of knowledge itself. Bernstein contrasts the context-specific ‘horizontal discourse’ of everyday life and work, with the codified ‘vertical discourse’ of formal education institutions. In making sense of the survey data, we drew on Bernstein’s further distinction between two types of vertical discourse. The natural sciences exemplify a ‘hierarchical knowledge structure’ where the development and structure of knowledge is cumulative towards ‘more and more general propositions which integrate knowledge at lower levels and across an expanding range of apparently different phenomena’ (Bernstein, 2000: 161). In contrast, the social and human sciences exemplify ‘horizontal knowledge structures’.
Here the development of knowledge is characterised by the addition of ‘specialised languages’ that offer ‘the possibility of a fresh perspective, a new set of questions, a new set of theories, and an apparently new problematic’ but that have less capacity for cumulative and vertical progression (Bernstein 2000: 162).

Drawing on Bernstein, Muller (2008) notes a distinct ‘connecting logic’, albeit not mechanical or direct, between knowledge structure and curriculum structure. One way that knowledge structure shapes a curriculum and embeds power relations within this curriculum may be understood through Bernstein’s concept of classification. Classification refers to the strength of the boundaries between different forms of knowledge in a curriculum, that is, the degree to which the curriculum is insulated from, or allows for the importation of knowledge from other disciplines or knowledge domains. While the pure or hard sciences tend to be more ‘strongly’ classified – that is, relatively impermeable to everyday knowledge – there are much ‘weaker’ or more porous boundaries (i.e. weaker classification) in the social sciences, which tend to draw on the knowledge resources of the everyday. Inside pedagogic practice, power is embedded not only in the principles of classification but also through framing. The latter refers to the relationship between educator and learner, and the degree of control that the educator has over the selection, sequencing and pacing of content, as well as over the evaluative criteria of the programme.

The concepts of boundaries and boundary strength or weakness are drawn on in Harris’ (2000: 111) typology of the different positions of RPL in relation to mainstream curriculum:

- In her ‘open module’ approach to RPL, selected modules of an RPL curriculum are customised to accommodate knowledge specialisms.
- In the ‘bolt-on’ approach, a ‘stand-alone’ RPL module precedes the mainstream curriculum.
- In the ‘spine module’ approach, academic writing and research skills are developed alongside the mainstream curriculum, providing space for students to consolidate the coherence of prior and new learning.

As noted in Chapter 2 of this book, Harris (2000) also outlined a further dimension to this typology focusing on the different purposes of RPL:

- A ‘credit exchange’ curriculum model.
- A ‘development’ model of curriculum.
- A ‘transformation’ model of RPL.

In our in-depth analysis of the three postgraduate programmes, we also drew on Bernsteinian accounts of the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge in a curriculum, as well as the question of the proximity or distance of knowledge from the point of application. In professional and vocational higher education, previously separate disciplinary categories (‘singulars’ in Bernstein’s language) are combined according to a relational principle usually drawn from the requirements of practice or the world of work. The traditional professions of medicine, architecture, accounting and engineering are all examples of interdisciplinary knowledge ‘regions’
(Bernstein 2000). In contrast to these traditional professions with their strong identities and their foundations in stable, incremental bodies of knowledge are newer additions – journalism, management, business studies, communication studies, sports science and tourism – which, as noted earlier, Muller (2008) describes as ‘4th generation’ professions with weaker professional identities, less clear foundational disciplines and greater proximity to the point of application.

All these conceptual resources proved of value not only in analysing the survey data, but more particularly in exploring the different RPL curriculum models that gave access to postgraduate study at this institution. However, as noted above, we found that curriculum is not wholly determined by knowledge structure. In our analysis, we drew on the notion that as knowledge is moved (‘recontextualised’ in Bernstein’s terms) from its field of production (the field of research) into the field of reproduction (curriculum and pedagogy), a space – or a ‘discursive gap’ – opens up. Here it is possible for pedagogic agency, the curriculum developer’s ideas around the purpose of education, as well as his or her notions of an ideal learner and assumptions of how learning best takes place, to come into play.

Our final set of conceptual resources is related to our concern with determining the nature and role of learner agency in RPL. Biesta et al. (2011) define agency as ‘the situated ability to give direction to one’s life’, while in this study we describe it more specifically in terms of the biographical profiles, cultural dispositions and strategies of candidates as they engage RPL provision, as well as the strengths and limitations alike that candidates bring with them, and the impact of these on their RPL participation.

In our study, RPL activities constitute boundary-crossing practices where candidates demonstrate their ability to navigate between different activity systems and qualifications. We needed to know more about how students perceive the nature of these boundaries and how they negotiate, navigate and engage in crossing them – that is, the individual and the collective strengths and limitations pertaining to their agency. We wanted to explore how learner agency is shaped by students’ histories and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as how it is activated or restricted in and through RPL pedagogic practices.

In exploring students’ histories and their socio-economic backgrounds, we drew on Bourdieu’s (1990) notions of position (a person’s specific social, economic and cultural locus in social space) and of various forms of capital – in particular cultural capital (language, and cultural and educational background) and social capital (social networks and contacts), as well as his notion of habitus and dispositions (propensities towards particular values and behaviours). We also borrowed from Field et al. (2012) the notion of psychological capital – ‘the qualities that may be forged as an individual encounters and deals with life crises’ (Field et al. 2012: 82). Finally, we adopted Helen Porkorny’s (2012) notion that the pedagogic approach used in RPL has a significant impact on candidates’ experience of the process, and we drew on the Vygotskian
notion of ‘tools of mediation’ (Daniels 2001) and Bakhtin's (1994) concepts of ‘monologic’ and ‘dialogic’ forms of mediation as a means of making sense of how RPL candidates experience different pedagogic approaches.

**Discipline-based attitudes towards RPL for access into postgraduate study**

This research originated in a concern with why the uptake of RPL within higher education more generally (see Chapter 1, this book) and within this institution specifically, has been so restricted. We were interested in whether this restriction was for knowledge/epistemological reasons, or because of contextual factors such as a lack of political will on the part of academics or the rejection of forms of knowledge that academics cannot immediately recognise. Therefore, we embarked on a survey among academics from across the institution guided by the following overarching question: To what extent does the nature of the disciplinary or knowledge domain into which RPL candidates seek access determine the feasibility of RPL?

Sixteen interviewees were selected in such a way as to maximise disciplinary and institutional diversity. These included

- academic leaders of postgraduate studies in five faculties (Science, Commerce, Law, Humanities and Health Sciences);
- leaders of eight professional postgraduate programmes (Transport Studies; City and Regional Planning; Creative Writing; Film and Media; Nursing; Disability Studies; Education; and Technology in Education);
- the leader of one research-focused, postgraduate programme (History);
- two people in institutional leadership/management positions.

The interviews were semi-structured, and probed current criteria and processes regarding access to postgraduate study; views on the feasibility (or otherwise) of RPL at postgraduate level in different disciplines, knowledge domains and programmes; perspectives on the role of experiential knowledge in higher education programmes; and the nature of faculty decision-making regarding admissions via RPL. Findings were analysed by exploring the extent to which the patterning of responses could be explained by the nature of the knowledge field or discipline, the organisational (departmental/faculty) culture, and/or the academic's epistemological orientation and personal pedagogic disposition.

Before analysing the interview data, we had drawn up a set of ‘hypotheses’ of how we anticipated academics might view the feasibility of RPL if arguments about the importance of the knowledge structure of their disciplines were valid. We predicted that academics in the pure sciences (Bernstein's singulars), including professional programmes drawing on those sciences, would be most resistant to RPL. We predicted that the cumulative nature of the content (based on hierarchical knowledge structures) would mean that clearly specified conceptual foundations acquired through undergraduate formal study would need to be in place for a student
to engage at postgraduate level. Conversely, we anticipated that academics involved in programmes in the arts and social sciences based on horizontal knowledge structures where disciplines tend to be more weakly bounded (i.e. more weakly classified), especially professional programmes that draw from those disciplines and that are closer to practice, would be more amenable to RPL.

We found as many, if not more, divergences from our original hypotheses as convergences with them. Both are interesting. Convergences offer more nuanced detail about where and why RPL is easy or difficult to implement, while divergences provide evidence that knowledge and knowledge structures do not impact in a deterministic way on the feasibility of RPL in relation to a particular programme.

Our findings confirmed that knowledge differentiation – on the one hand, between ‘working’/professional knowledge and academic knowledge and, on the other hand, within different knowledge domains – does, according to academics, impact on the feasibility of RPL into postgraduate study. For example, in the ‘hard’ sciences, a foundation of undergraduate study is seen as necessary; RPL is conditional on the candidate having a minimum of a diploma, plus work experience that has involved some component of research and research writing. As one interviewee said, ‘Things are more clear-cut in science – we know what we are looking for.’ It was acknowledged that any real potential for the expansion of RPL in the sciences lay in interdisciplinary and professional areas that are closer to practice, such as oceanography, zoology, biological sciences and environmental management. An undergraduate degree was also considered necessary for access into postgraduate study in engineering or commerce. A leading academic in commerce stated that ‘foundations are so critical in this field; in some disciplines the foundations are not that critical as long as you can think … but in these disciplines it would be like putting up the roof without the foundations.’ Likewise, the academic interviewed in history, a human science that is nevertheless ‘strongly classified’ by virtue of its specialised methodological practices, argued that ‘it is very difficult for people with no formal undergraduate training in history to come onto a postgraduate course.’

It should be noted, however, that the convenor of the history programme saw experiential knowledge as important and valuable, and was extremely well disposed to RPL for personal, equity and institutional capacity reasons: ‘People, especially in this context, have such rich life experience that they come in with. So, we are really cutting off our noses [to spite our faces] if we are ignoring that; ‘the whole process of broadening access to education is exceptionally important in the context of our country, where people lacked access’, and ‘we are in an area where we actually want to encourage this kind of thing because we don’t have floods of undergraduate students who are going on to do research’.

An interesting departure from the science-related programmes’ insistence on the need for discipline-specific knowledge foundations was two interdisciplinary master’s programmes, in Transport Studies and in City and Regional Planning, in
the engineering faculty. Here, clearly specified conceptual knowledge need not be in place and programme leaders rely on 'proxies' in the form of general cognitive abilities, academic literacies, and learner dispositions to gauge suitability for access. According to the programme convenor of the Transport Studies programme:

I’m looking for an ability to think – to engage with policy debates at an intellectually high level – someone who, when presented with a problem, can frame that problem – evidence-based reasoning versus critical reflection on accuracy of data. The prior qualification is not always a good indicator of how well a person responds.

(Transport Studies convener)

Likewise, exceptions in the Commerce faculty were 4th generation professional programmes, especially those closer to practice or with a strong contextual curriculum logic; for example, a leading academic regarded postgraduate programmes in management or in information systems as being ‘tailor-made for RPL’. In the Health Sciences, contextual factors such as the regulatory role of professional bodies, as well as a high demand for places and scarcity of posts in some health fields, place obstacles in the way of RPL; however, contextual factors can also act to enhance access. One example of this is where the nursing professional body has increased its qualifications requirements in a field where most practitioners historically have had only an initial diploma. Due to these policy changes, the Postgraduate Diploma/Master’s in Nursing programme at this institution routinely accepts ‘between 80% and 90%’ of applicants who do not have a first degree. According to a leading academic in this programme, ‘for us, it has just been so much part of what we do that we don’t really think about it as RPL’.

In the Humanities (Arts and Social Sciences) faculty, we anticipated that the postgraduate programme in Film and Media Studies would be open to RPL on account of it not having a particular disciplinary tap root, and this was confirmed by the interviewee. Here a curriculum derived from a very weakly bounded knowledge region creates the space for industry-related, experiential knowledge and dispositions such as ‘passion’ and ‘maturity’; and ideas, insights and ‘having something interesting to say’, are regarded as important access criteria. Experiential knowledge is highly valued because it is the film and media industry rather than the university that is the site of cutting-edge knowledge production (programme convenor).

In contrast to this logic, however, was the Master’s in Education. We had hypothesised that this programme would be open to the idea of RPL because the education profession draws on horizontal knowledge structures such as psychology and sociology, and is oriented towards practice. One of the programme leaders described how he viewed experiential knowledge as very important both prior to and within the programme: ‘their [RPL students’] experience is valuable to the class, and drawing on this increases their comfort; I welcome their comments, invite them
to talk about their experience so that it becomes useful. However, our research found that negative or even hostile attitudes towards RPL in the department had presented serious obstacles to candidates. As a result of these attitudes, the programme leader above who expressed his valuing of experiential knowledge had concluded that RPL ‘[is] a waste of time – if I’ve got an option, it is the last thing I want to do!’ We tried to make sense of this in the light of the particular history and culture of this department. This is an education department that has been more research-focused than practice-oriented and where, in recent years, leading academics have tried to strengthen the conceptual logic and the knowledge base of their postgraduate programmes. RPL is thus viewed as weakening the discipline’s already weak boundaries, as undermining academic rigour, and as increasing the vulnerability of the programme in the university context.

Our general conclusions from the survey were that the particular disciplinary context of knowledge domain into which an RPL candidate is seeking access will impact on the extent to which experientially gained knowledge can ‘count’ in terms of access. In other words, our findings confirmed arguments that knowledge structure does affect the feasibility of RPL, but with a number of important qualifications.

Firstly, knowledge and knowledge differentiation are not as important determinants of the feasibility of postgraduate-level RPL as we had anticipated they might be. Just as important is the question of pedagogic agency. Individual academics who are committed to opening up pathways of learning for those historically excluded from higher education can play a role in designing diverse pedagogic interventions that are appropriate to purpose and innovative in form. The converse is also true: Academics and managers opposed to RPL on epistemological or pedagogical grounds may act as powerful gatekeepers in relation to access by those whose knowledge bases are primarily experiential and/or work-based.

Secondly, the research showed that knowledge is as much about cultural and institutional practices as it is about conceptual hierarchies. These cultural practices translate into distinct organisational environments in which RPL has to take place, and play a significant role in offering affordances to or constraints on the implementation of RPL.

**RPL models of pedagogy**

The next section of the chapter shows how three of these factors – the disciplinary context, the organisational cultures within which academics have to make decisions about RPL, and academics’ ability to exercise pedagogic agency – have played a significant role in enabling or placing limits on RPL practices in the three models of RPL into postgraduate study that we investigated in depth.

The part of the research reported on here involved detailed case studies of RPL entry to three programmes sited in different faculties and different domains of
professional development, which appeared to adopt different approaches to RPL. Data gathering involved oral presentations giving an overview of the RPL practices, in-depth interviews with lecturers, and examination of documentary sources. The analysis aimed to

- establish the nature of the mainstream curriculum into which RPL candidates sought access – including its proximity to the field of practice, the nature of the boundary between formal knowledge and everyday knowledge, and the degree to which experiential knowledge is recruited;
- ascertain where the RPL process is located in respect of the mainstream programme, and describe the processes involved in each of the models of RPL practice, including their evaluative criteria;
- explore the affordances and constraints offered for the implementation of RPL.

**The mainstream curricula**

The research mapped existing models of practice of RPL into postgraduate study across three case studies: a Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practices (PDMP) located in the Commerce faculty; a Postgraduate Diploma/MPhil in Disability Studies in the Health Sciences faculty; and a Postgraduate Diploma/Master’s in Adult Education in the Humanities faculty. All three programmes have had an RPL access route in place for a number of years. They are all 4th generation professional development programmes, so therefore it was expected that with their more fluid knowledge bases and strong emphasis on contextual relevance, these programmes might provide specific affordances for RPL.

The three programmes have fairly distinct purposes. The PDMP has a strong applied orientation and a concern to develop critically reflective management practices; it aims to **enhance professional practice** through the development of ‘personal mastery’ and ‘systems thinking’. The Disability Studies MPhil on the other hand primarily has a **conscientising** and **social transformation** purpose. As noted elsewhere (Cooper 2011), the sub-field of Disability Studies has attempted to effect a paradigm shift within the wider field of rehabilitation sciences by challenging the biomedical model of disability (that views disability as a ‘disease’ or ‘abnormality’), which historically has been dominant in the field, by foregrounding the socially constructed nature of disability. The programme foregrounds critical social theory, links disability to issues of race, gender and class, and draws on feminist, postmodernist and psychodynamic perspectives. This programme is close to the point of application, not so much in the sense of improving professional practice, but in terms of transforming the field of knowledge production (i.e. foregrounding the socially constructed rather than biomedical dimensions of disability) and reshaping policies in the field of practice.

The third case study – the Master’s in Adult Education – has a far stronger **academic and research** orientation, with the specific intention (in line with the Department of Higher Education and Training’s priorities mentioned earlier in this chapter)
of deepening the knowledge and research base of a field that has historically been largely practice-driven. The coursework curriculum has a strong research orientation: its starting point is theory, and although it ‘works back’ to experience, the role of this experience is to interrogate the theory and to question how practice might pose researchable questions, rather than mainly to enhance practice.

The point was made earlier that knowledge is as much about cultural and institutional practices as it is about conceptual hierarchies. These three programmes reside within very different faculty cultures. The PDMP is located in the Business School, which has very close ties with the field of practice, and which enjoys relative autonomy from the Commerce faculty as a whole. The Disability Studies programme – located in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences in the Health Sciences faculty – also has strong links with the field of practice and enjoys some degree of flexibility in relation to the faculty’s admissions processes. The Adult Education programme, however, is subjected to highly regulating faculty and departmental oversight and gatekeeping practices; each RPL application is subjected to the scrutiny of departmental and faculty authorities, and they have frequently rejected lecturers’ recommendations for RPL access to particular candidates on the grounds that the criteria used do not closely enough match the equivalent outcomes of honours-level study.

Their different purposes mean that these programmes recruit experiential learning in different ways. The PDMP draws strongly on professional knowledge as part of the Business School’s action learning approach to developing management skills. The programme’s applied purpose and methodology, its commitment to being relevant to specific contexts, and the interflow it encourages between academic knowledge and workplace knowledge, allow for experiential knowledge to play a significant role in the programme.

The Disability Studies curriculum places high value on theory and the ability to do applied research, but experiential knowledge is seen as providing a critical foundation for social critique and transformation of social practice:

＞We look for someone rich in experience, someone who is intellectual, who is able to think, talk, debate, reflect at a point that is beyond the everyday … it’s one of the privileges we have – of being constantly in contact with people who bring their experience to an academic environment … without that our whole programme would be bland … without reality to make it alive. (Disability Studies convenor)

Experiential knowledge is consciously and continually recruited in order to challenge taught theory and established understanding of disability, and ensure relevance particularly to the African context.

By contrast, the curriculum of the Adult Education programme draws far less on the experiential learning of students, and experiential knowledge is mainly drawn upon to illustrate understanding of theory and to help to pose researchable questions.
Three models of RPL practice

The three case studies were selected in part because each appeared to fit into one of the three RPL models proposed by Harris (2000) outlined above. They also display different degrees of orientation towards 'RPL as assessment' on the one hand, and 'RPL as pedagogy' on the other.

In the PDMP and Disability Studies programmes, the RPL models seemed to constitute good examples of an 'open module' or 'spine module' approach respectively. In both cases, the learning/developmental aspect of the RPL process – aimed at developing academic literacies while providing the space for candidates to consolidate the coherence of prior and new learning – is strongly integrated into the mainstream curriculum. In contrast, the RPL process of the Adult Education programme takes place before access to the mainstream programme; it is more strongly bounded relative to the mainstream programme and operates as a 'bolt-on' process. It also focuses more strongly on RPL as an assessment rather than as a learning or developmental process, in order to meet the departmental and faculty requirements.

The PDMP has very 'soft' boundaries between the RPL portfolio development process and the mainstream curriculum, and in terms of sequencing, the RPL process is an integral part of the PDMP programme. The RPL portfolio process runs alongside the mainstream programme and its development aspects are fully integrated with the mainstream programme. Experiential knowledge and academic knowledge are seen as mutually supportive: the experiential knowledge identified in the portfolio development process is seen as enriching learning on the programme, while aspects of learning on the mainstream curriculum (e.g. systems thinking) enhance the depth of reflection in the RPL process: 'The abilities to reflect and analyse are learnt on the [PDMP] programme itself, so the RPL process and the academic programme are developmentally articulated,' (PDMP convenor). Students receive assistance from staff as they work on their portfolios and staff monitor students’ progress and identify ‘at-risk’ students, who then get given additional attention and support.

The Disability Studies curriculum has very porous boundaries. Firstly, its interdisciplinary orientation means that it crosses the traditional disciplinary boundaries between, for example, sociology, political studies and rehabilitation sciences. Secondly, programme leaders involve prominent national and local disability rights organisations in the development of the curriculum, thus crossing the traditional boundary between the academy and the everyday world. There is an initial RPL process where applicants submit a written motivation, CV and letters of reference from their organisation, and undergo academic testing exercises. However, a more developmental dimension to RPL is contained in the subsequent ‘critical research literacies’ module, which all students complete in the first year of the programme. This module can be viewed as an RPL 'spine module'; it requires students to do a small research project to familiarise them with the language and
concepts of research. It prepares students to think independently and critically, to interrogate literature and reflect on their own experience, to know how to collect data, and to build their arguments based on these data. Other forms of academic support include the university's Writing Centre, one-on-one writing support and a life-skills coach.

In the Adult Education programme, an RPL portfolio development process takes place prior to the start of the mainstream programme. Although candidates are encouraged to present a wide range of evidence of their experiential learning, the programme's stronger academic orientation (i.e. compared to the other two programmes in the study) means that the RPL process is directed mainly towards documenting experiential knowledge for the purposes of alignment with the conceptual abilities, academic literacies and research skills usually required for entry into a master's degree. Whereas in-course support for Adult Education is substantial at the diploma and advanced certificate levels, RPL candidates are expected to be able to cope with the academic demands of the master's level. Little scaffolding is provided once the RPL candidate is accepted into the coursework phase. However, extra seminars are provided in the second, dissertation research phase of the programme to assist (all) students with their research.

Thus both the PDMP and Disability Studies RPL processes have a strong pedagogical orientation rather than an assessment focus, and this lends them a more inclusive quality. What are the sorts of ‘learning transitions’ that students are expected to make in the course of these developmental processes? Programme leaders noted the importance of the ability to deal with emotional barriers to learning, as well as to show an appreciation of the difference between advocacy and analysis, and to make the transition from being an activist and/or professional to becoming a critical enquirer who is able to rely on evidence rather than rhetoric in the making of arguments. For the Disability Studies programme, RPL students must also develop the ability to reflect critically on their own theoretical and political assumptions as well as those of others.

**Evaluative criteria**

What forms of knowledge or capabilities are most valued and how might this impact on patterns of inclusion or exclusion that result from the RPL process? For all three programmes, a degree of field knowledge and practitioner experience is expected to be in place. Overall, the data suggest that Disability Studies values contextual knowledge of the field, in the form of familiarity with government policies and issues related to social inequality and discrimination; the PDMP places greatest value on professional management experience and skills, while the Adult Education programmes foreground conceptual abilities (particularly sociological concepts).

Not surprisingly, the RPL process into the Adult Education programmes also prioritises candidates’ academic literacies; this includes the ability to engage critically
and in writing with academic texts (in English), and to organise critical reflections on learning in a logical and chronological way rather than writing ‘long, rambling biographies’ (Adult Education lecturer). The PDMP RPL process, on the other hand, places little weighting on language and grammar because – according to the programme convenor – communication is only ‘one small competence’ in the rubric this programme uses. As the programme draws mature students from across the African continent, ‘they can hand in [their work] in Portuguese … as long as it comes in later in English’. For Disability Studies and the PDMP, many of the critical thinking and academic writing skills required are seen as being developed in the course of participation in the mainstream programme itself.

It is noteworthy that both the PDMP and Disability Studies programmes place crucial emphasis on dispositional factors as indicators of RPL candidates’ ability to succeed (thus echoing the views of a number of survey respondents). Dispositions that are valued include motivation, confidence, the ability to be reflexive (to reflect on and categorise their learning), emotional maturity and ‘life skills’. These dispositional criteria are prospective rather than retrospective in orientation; in other words, RPL practitioners in the two programmes are more interested in identifying RPL candidates’ potential to develop and learn in this regard than in focusing narrowly on skills and capabilities already in place. These criteria clearly ‘look both ways’ (Barnett 2006) in the sense that they face towards candidates’ professional/work and life experience, as well as towards the demands of academic study. Foregrounding dispositional criteria signals these programmes’ orientation towards more inclusive RPL practices.

A further point of interest is that neither the Disability Studies nor Adult Education programme convenors make all their assessment criteria explicit to RPL candidates. They explained that they wanted to leave open the possibility of candidates demonstrating unexpected qualities rather than ‘straitjacketing’ responses:

Set criteria … do not always accommodate all the competencies that candidates bring – often they present with unexpected abilities. Intuition based on our knowledge and experience of which students will succeed plays a vital role in selection – you ‘just know’. (Adult Education lecturer)

In the case of the PDMP too, the criteria deployed – in particular the dispositions described above – go well beyond the criteria specified in the South African higher education qualifications framework that candidates have to address in their portfolios. How do we account for the fact that many of the criteria used by RPL assessors on these programmes remain ‘invisible’ to candidates, and does this limit the inclusivity of the respective RPL processes? It is possible that the emphasis on dispositions, which are often hard to define, means that their identification remains an intuitive process. It is unlikely, however, that this emphasis on dispositions (whether explicit or tacit) limits the inclusivity of the RPL process, given that the possession of such dispositions is not dependent on prior formal
education, and many dispositions are likely to be activated and developed through work and life experience.

**Pedagogic agency**

In keeping with the findings from the survey research, it is clear that academics are able to assert considerable pedagogic agency – within the limits of the discipline and the departmental/faculty culture. The data presented above show that individual lecturers and programme convenors who are committed to opening up paths of learning for those historically excluded from higher education can play an enormously creative role in designing diverse models of RPL pedagogy that are appropriate to purpose and innovative in form.

This is perhaps most evident in the case of the Disability Studies programme. Here a grouping of lecturers have coalesced around a particular project, which is aimed firstly at disrupting what Bernstein (2000) has called the dominant ‘rules of distribution’ in the field of knowledge production by asserting that valuable knowledge is to be derived not only from research within the academy, but also through critical reflection on activists’ everyday experience of disability. Secondly, in the field of curriculum, they have also sought to disrupt the biomedical paradigm that dominates most research and teaching within the broader field of health sciences. Thirdly, they have made important innovations in curriculum, providing academic support (unusual at postgraduate level), and deploying tools of mediation that draw on students’ experiential knowledge and include unconventional forms of assessment (e.g. writing an advocacy or policy position paper; oral presentations).

The PDMP is at home in a Business School culture, which regularly deploys creative teaching methods. However, the programme’s weaving together of portfolio development into the systems thinking logic of the curriculum is innovative. Even in the case of RPL into the Adult Education Master’s programme – despite the historically negative, sometimes hostile nature of the faculty/departmental culture towards RPL – lecturing staff have been able to design a portfolio development process that not only yields ‘matches’ of academic literacies that will satisfy faculty authorities, but also allows a range of alternative expressions of students’ experiential knowledge.

**Summing up**

This section has outlined three models of RPL practice, each with different relationships to the mainstream curriculum, thus illustrating the rich variety of approaches that may be successfully adopted when designing RPL access into postgraduate programmes. It has also illustrated some of the factors that enable or put obstacles in the way of RPL into postgraduate studies.
These factors include the following:

- **The purpose of the mainstream curriculum:** A curriculum that ‘faces both ways’ – i.e. it looks both towards the demands of academic discourse and to the world of professional practice – enhances opportunities for implementation of RPL. A mainstream curriculum that leans towards a transformative social purpose, such as in the case of Disability Studies, also strengthens the affordances of the curriculum in terms of RPL.

- **The departmental and faculty environment:** Authority structures of faculty admissions processes that are flexible, allowing programme leaders a degree of relative autonomy and ‘room to manoeuvre’ enhance the implementation of RPL.

- **The nature of the knowledge base of the mainstream curriculum:** Factors that enhance the implementation of RPL are a knowledge base that is fluid or not very strongly codified, a curriculum that sits in proximity to the field of practice and thus foregrounds contextual relevance, and porous boundaries between formal knowledge and knowledge from the ‘everyday’ world, thus allowing for extensive recruitment of experiential knowledge. RPL as a boundary-crossing practice is also best located within programmes that have porous boundaries more generally, such as interdisciplinary programmes and those like Disability Studies that draw non-academic partners into the curriculum design process.

- **RPL practice that becomes more inclusive to the extent that the RPL process is oriented more strongly towards ‘pedagogy’ rather than ‘assessment’, provides significant scaffolding to enable RPL candidates both to recognise and realise the academic literacies required of postgraduate studies. The different models of RPL practice presented above illustrate the creative ways in which such academic support might be designed.**

- **Flexibility in terms of evaluative criteria, and in particular, the weighting of not only prior knowledge and skills but also dispositional factors and the potential to succeed allow for a more inclusive RPL approach.**

The in-depth study of RPL access into three postgraduate programmes also demonstrated that even within a relatively conservative epistemological and institutional environment, significant potential remains for individual academics to exercise their agency to design creative and innovative forms of RPL pedagogy.

In the last section of this chapter, we explore the other dimension of agency – learner agency – which we believe needs to be understood and taken into account, if the inclusivity of RPL practice is to be maximised.

**Learner perspectives**

As mentioned earlier, this phase of the research comprised a biographical study of a selection of students admitted via RPL, aimed at exploring their experiences prior to, during and subsequent to the RPL process, and the nature of the agency that they exercised in navigating their way across institutional systems and learning pathways. It rested on a series of in-depth interviews with a small group of students. In
choosing to focus on a small number, we prioritised depth rather than representivity. This choice was influenced by life history methodological approaches (see, for example, Field et al. 2012), which advocate the use of in-depth qualitative research as a means for exploring agency and identity through the life course, and the meanings people attach to their lives.

We selected two students from each of the three postgraduate programmes. Key selection criteria were that

- they should have been accepted into postgraduate study via an RPL route;
- they should have successfully completed the RPL programme (so that we could gain a sense of how they had experienced their programme of study subsequent to the RPL process);
- in an attempt to bring the question of ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’ more sharply into focus, we tried to select one student who had done well on the mainstream programme and one who had done less well or had encountered some difficulties. In order to identify the two students from each programme, we approached the programme leaders and asked them for suggestions, taking the above criteria into account.

Interviews covered students’ formal, non-formal and informal learning histories (including strengths and limitations, and strategies adopted to succeed), as well as their expectations and experiences of the RPL process. These interviews also examined subsequent learning experiences on the postgraduate programme to which students had gained access (how these compared with the RPL experience, the extent to which they felt that their prior experience was valued and the strategies they adopted) and, lastly, their sense of confidence and belonging within the institution concerned.

RPL students’ experiences of the postgraduate programmes

What can we learn about the experiences of those admitted via RPL of the programmes described above? In analysing students’ experiences, we found a close correlation between positive experiences of the process, and the inclusive elements identified in the RPL curricula in the previous section.

The two RPL candidates who gained alternative access to the PDMP experienced the RPL process and the programme of study very differently; some of this might relate to the differences in their life histories and in the cultural capital that they brought with them. One of the students, who came from a relatively privileged, middle class, English-speaking background, and who had completed her schooling with a university-level pass, experienced far less of a gap between her cultural capital and that demanded by the course, as compared to the other learner, who came from a more working class, Afrikaans-/isiXhosa-speaking family background, and who had dropped out of high school because of an early pregnancy and her mother’s illness. However, both described the empowering effects of the PDMP
programme’s pedagogy that spoke strongly to their prior experience and enabled them to acquire a new and confident learner identity. This is reflected in the words of one of the students who felt that the lecturer took a ‘huge gamble’ in accepting her onto the programme, and that ‘she [the lecturer] believed in me even more than I did myself’.

Similarly, the narratives of the two RPL students who completed the Postgraduate Diploma/Master’s in Disability Studies experienced the pedagogic practice of the programme as enabling, with one emphasising her lecturers’ availability and willingness to offer unending support, and the other emphasising the democratic ethos that underpinned student–lecturer relations, and the value of a boundary pedagogy that is based on a keen understanding of the requirements not only of the academic world but also of the world of policy and advocacy outside of the academy. It is arguable that the general orientation of the Disability Studies programme – in particular, its radical political and epistemological mission – dovetailed well with the intellectual resources that these two students brought with them; one had grown up in an intellectually vibrant environment, in a family that was strongly engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle, while the other derived cultural and social capital from his history of student activism and subsequent involvement in mainstream politics, through which he had acquired a love for debate and intellectual contestation as well as a familiarity with policy discourses.

The two adult students who entered the Master’s in Adult Education via RPL both experienced barriers, however, and this may be accounted for – at least in part – by the relative lack of developmental support offered in this programme. Both came from socio-economic positions that arguably did not fully equip them with the economic or cultural capital needed to succeed in higher education. One of the students came from a ‘white’ working class family and had pursued an artisanal career; the other came from a working class ‘coloured’ family where an early pregnancy and family tragedy prevented her from completing her schooling. Both of these students experienced the Adult Education RPL process as engaging of their prior experience and enjoyable, but they both subsequently experienced difficulties when it came to meeting the academic demands of the master’s programme. There was a difference, however, in how they came to understand the roots of the barriers they encountered. While one saw the problems he experienced as originating from deficits in his own cultural capital, the other was far more critical of the programme itself. She expressed the view that the programme demanded that students adapt to its abstract, theoretical discourse without offering any structured support to enable them to acquire these abilities. She had the confidence to assert that ‘not all theories are correct … I learned basically, you know what? Sometimes people [theorists] just talk crap, in a nutshell!’ Interestingly, the epistemological barriers that these two students encountered curtailed but did not destroy their confidence in themselves, nor did these constraints preclude the agentic moves that allowed them to succeed – to a greater or lesser extent5 – in their studies.
Learner agency: strategies for navigating across learning pathways

In exploring factors that seemed to enable or disable learner agency, we found that the selection of students we interviewed came from extremely diverse class, language and cultural backgrounds, and, for most of them, there was a considerable gap between their socio-economic position as well as the cultural capital they inherited, and the cultural capital required of them to be successful students particularly at postgraduate level. Despite this, they all achieved ‘success’ to a greater or lesser extent. Thus neither socio-economic position nor inherited cultural capital was totally determinant in enabling or disabling their ability to take up learning opportunities.

Whatever the nature of the RPL pedagogy, all of the RPL students gained significant self-confidence in their own intellectual abilities, and some underwent important transitions in their personal identities. Furthermore, they were all able to exercise considerable agency in navigating their way through the RPL process and programme of study, and actively deployed a range of strategies to do so. These strategies largely involved strategically drawing on key social contacts or networks of support (i.e. social capital in Bourdieu’s terms) to help them navigate the boundaries embedded in the RPL process and the boundary of re-entry into a higher education institution. These moves to use networks of support included proactively seeking workplace mentors, seeking help from lecturers or other members of their class, and/or turning to family members as a resource or support.

In looking at these students’ life histories, it is also noteworthy that this capacity for agency did not begin with their decision to re-enter formal study via RPL. Most had encountered a number of significant crises in their lives, for example, the deaths of close family members when they were still young, economic hardship, early academic failure and struggles to find a career that matched their potential. An interesting element common to many narratives is that of ‘charged turning points’ – moments in students’ lives that seemed to pose important ontological questions and act as important catalysts of agency. For one it was her child’s illness and near death; for another it was the murder of her brother – the only member of her family who had succeeded in building a professional career; for a third it was a re-awakening after nine years of mourning after the murder of her husband:

> So for me that was sort of a key point, him dying … I was in mourning for nine years … I suddenly woke up one day and realised but I’ve been in mourning, life has passed me by … you come to a crossroads where you realise oh my gosh, I can’t work in this factory for the … rest of my life. (RPL student)

Finally, it is interesting how lecturers’ emphasis on dispositional factors as indicators of RPL applicants’ potential to succeed found echoes in their biographical data. We concluded that personal dispositions – or what Field et al. (2012: 82) call
‘psychological capital’ – also play an important role in enabling learner agency. It is not easy to generalise, but among those dispositions that seem important were

- determination and resilience;
- preparedness to take risks (one enrolled for RPL even though she feared ‘I’d never do it’, and another talked of his ‘love of a challenge’);
- a love of learning;
- life experience and maturity;
- self-confidence and ambition.

As an illustration of the latter, one described how frustrated she was in one of her early factory jobs. She wondered: ‘Do these people [her employers] know who I am? … that I’m actually very clever? … And it really killed me I was doing menial jobs that didn’t even require me to think!’ At one point, she approached the company trainer and said, ‘You don’t know me, but I am actually quite intelligent, and I really can’t be a cleaner, I can’t.’

**Conclusion**

This research originated in a concern with why the uptake of RPL within higher education more generally and within this institution specifically had been so restricted. Was the problem one of epistemological barriers or simply the lack of political will? The research explored the following questions in relation to RPL access into postgraduate programmes that are grounded in more advanced, specialised forms of knowledge:

- To what extent does the nature of the knowledge field to which access is being sought determine the feasibility of RPL?
- Is it possible for RPL to grant access to a postgraduate programme to someone who does not have the usual requirements of an undergraduate degree in that discipline or field?
- Are some fields of study – on account of their knowledge structure or disciplinary context – easier to access via RPL than others?

The survey of academic leaders of postgraduate programmes found that the nature of the knowledge domain may well make RPL access difficult, but the question of access is far more complex than that. Contextual factors rooted in institutional, faculty and departmental cultures, as well as academics’ attitudes towards RPL and the extent to which their personal philosophies of pedagogy value experiential learning, are equally important.

The in-depth study of established RPL processes in relation to three postgraduate programmes found that while their ‘4th generation’, professionally oriented nature served to make them more amenable to alternative forms of access, the purpose and structure of the mainstream curriculum in each case was crucial. For example, the transformative purpose of the Disability Studies programme, its cross-disciplinary orientation and its willingness to transcend organisational boundaries in the
process of curriculum development translated into a very inclusive approach to RPL. Innovations in curriculum were made possible by the pedagogic agency of the academics concerned and findings showed that this could find expression in a number of different ways – namely that there is no single, correct way to design RPL at postgraduate level. However, this part of the study also showed that the faculty/departmental culture can play an important role in making it possible (or not) for academics to assert their pedagogic agency.

Finally, the study showed that candidates themselves contribute actively to the degree of inclusivity of RPL. Their preparedness to take risks, their utter determination to succeed (whatever the odds), and their openness to learning and growing are crucial ingredients in ensuring success.

**Notes**
1. See Cooper and Jones (2011) for a detailed report on this research.
2. An account of this part of the research has previously been published in Cooper and Harris (2013).
3. Under apartheid, black nurses had access to segregated nursing colleges only.
4. Since the research project was concluded, this has changed and the RPL portfolio development process now precedes the start of the mainstream curriculum.
5. One of the students has graduated with his master’s degree while the other is still trying to complete her coursework.
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4 RPL for access to undergraduate study: Navigation tools

Alan Ralphs

From swept floors to chalk boards

The quotation cited above is the title of an article in the community newspaper, People’s Post, Mitchells Plain (25 October 2011), which tells the story of Peter Hendriks, who at 45 graduated with a teaching degree. Hendriks was made redundant from the clothing industry in 2004 and for two years thereafter did voluntary and contract work as a cleaner and caretaker at local schools in the Cape Town suburb of Hanover Park. Hendriks completed a Portfolio Development Course (PDC) in 2006 as part of a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) application to study at university and, after a successful assessment, was admitted to a BA degree and graduated as a teacher in 2012. Hendriks continued his part-time contract work as a caretaker for the duration of his studies.

This chapter explores the inner workings of a PDC not too different from the one Mr Hendriks went through in order to access undergraduate study at a modern university in South Africa. The university has its roots in service to working class communities and students who were marginalised during the apartheid era, and who, despite the advances of constitutional democracy, continue to struggle for access to quality education and training opportunities at all levels in the system. The university has had an RPL policy in place since 2001; it provides for two routes of alternative access for applicants who are 23 years of age or older and who do not hold a school-leaving qualification with the necessary endorsements for admission to undergraduate-level programmes. The two routes are the PDC and the Tests for Access and Placement (TAPs). The TAPs comprise a combination of the standardised National Benchmark Test (NBT) and a reading and writing proficiency test that is specifically designed for RPL candidates.

The two routes are quite different in form and purpose, although ultimately they both provide the university with a basis for making judgments as to the readiness of the applicant to cope with undergraduate study. The cost of doing the TAPs is lower than the cost of doing the PDC. The TAPs take place over two days and, as a once-off set of assessment tests, is generally the preferred route for those who are more recently out of school and/or other post-school education programmes. The PDC, on the other hand, takes three months to complete and aims to provide learners with the specialised tools they need to navigate the boundaries between work-based experiential learning and the text-based practices of study.
at university level. In summary, the PDC provides a stronger platform for candidates to evidence their knowledge and skills acquired outside of formal education, while the TAPs provide a standardised indicator of entry level literacy and numeracy skills.

This chapter presents the findings of research that began with a question about the merits of these different routes of entry and how to optimise the affordances of the PDC in particular. The chapter describes the PDC as an evolving combination of curricular and pedagogic activity, illustrated in a case study of the course offered in 2010. Findings highlight not only the design and 'artistry' of the course, but also the affordances and constraints of learners as they exert agency in navigating access to higher education – what Harris (2006: 52) refers to as 'knowing the borders and crossing the lines'.

**The history of RPL as an alternative route for access to undergraduate study**

The first four years of RPL provision at the university were marked by the proactive development of procedures and administrative systems to support a programme of this nature. These included the development of IT-related systems, codes and procedures for the enrolment, registration and tracking of RPL students in accordance with the requirements of the Senate, the Matriculation Board and the national Department of Higher Education and Training. An information and advice system was also set up for interested members of the public, as well as a shortlisting procedure to facilitate the process of recruitment and selection of participants for the PDC and the TAPs.

Figure 4.1 on page 58 illustrates just how rapidly interest in the RPL programme grew after the first four years of implementing the policy – from just over 100 applications in 2001 to 1 050 in 2010. This graph also highlights the constraints on the practice, namely the relatively low numbers of applicants who managed to secure access to undergraduate study through either the PDC or the TAPs.

These numbers attest not only to the growth of interest in RPL since 2001, but also to the capacity of the university to offer RPL information and advisory services in all local languages from 2005 onwards. The numbers also indicate that despite the increase in applications, actual participation in PDC and TAPs activity did not increase significantly, and neither did the number of undergraduate registrations. These patterns suggest an escalation in the scope and scale of public interest in alternative access routes afforded by RPL but, with it, a rapid escalation in the numbers of those who were excluded from participation. Only 188 of the 1 050 people who completed an application for RPL in 2010 took part in the PDC or the TAPs and, of these, only 55 were accepted and registered at the university as undergraduate students.
The success rates of those who did secure access to undergraduate study through either of these routes (the PDC or the TAPs) are, however, a lot more encouraging, as indicated in Figure 4.2 below. The chart provides a comparison of first semester achievements of TAP and PDC cohorts from 2006 to 2011. The indication is that the PDC students do marginally better than the TAPs students and, notwithstanding the comparatively small numbers of TAPs students, the indication is that success on the PDC is a better preparation and predictor of first semester success than the TAPs.

Source: Ralphs & Associates 2012: 45
This brings into perspective the most pressing question for this case study, namely: What can be done to optimise the inclusive potential of the TAPs and the PDC? For this we needed to look more carefully at the pedagogical assumptions and principles associated with these practices. The remainder of this chapter focuses specifically on the PDC and on the knowledge, pedagogy, institutional context and learner agency lines of enquiry of our study.

**Researching the practice: approach and methodology**

The research design on which this case study is based follows that described in Chapter 2. The four lines of inquiry were customised as follows for the specificity of this case study:

- **Knowledge:** The relationship between knowledge gained through experience and knowledge required for entry to undergraduate study. What knowledge is valued or excluded in the practice and how does the PDC mediate the boundaries between formal academic knowledge and experiential learning?

- **Pedagogy:** The content, methods (teaching tools, rules, language, learning relations) and assessment processes used before, during and after the PDC. In what sense is the PDC a specialised form of boundary pedagogy and how effectively does it mediate access to undergraduate study?

- **Institutional context:** The systems, rules and resources governing RPL provision for alternative access to undergraduate study at the university. In what ways do institutional cultures, policies, rules, fees, and so on, impact on the inclusive or exclusive nature of the PDC and related information, as well as advisory services?

- **Learner agency:** The biographical profiles, socio-economic status, cultural dispositions and strategies of learners as they engage with RPL access routes to undergraduate study. How do they experience and engage with the ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’ of the PDC experience, as part of their lifelong learning journey?

Against this background, the specific approach and methodology for study of the PDC drew on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods were used to provide a statistical analysis of the data pertaining to patterns of access and success, as well as inclusion and exclusion associated with the different cohorts of RPL admissions over the period from 2006 to 2011 (as shown in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 on page 58).

Qualitative methods, including a literature review and a documentary analysis of the PDC materials and evaluations, were used as the basis for an exploration of the pedagogic assumptions and principles associated with the history and development of the PDC curriculum over the past 10 years. To this, a case study of the August 2010 course offering was added, and for this purpose, permission was secured from all 54 course participants for different data-collecting activities.
These activities included
- video footage;
- an embedded researcher in the contact sessions;
- observations of a sample of assessment interviews;
- access to completed learning portfolios.

Two external researchers specialising in curriculum studies and academic literacy were invited to evaluate a sample of the completed learning portfolios, and to conduct focus group interviews with academics from four faculties who sat on the RPL assessment panels. Participants who had either left the course prematurely or who did not complete a learning portfolio were contacted and interviewed telephonically, and five of these attended a focus group interview. All of the interviews were transcribed and analysed, together with the observation report from the embedded researcher, and an evaluation report from the two research specialists (Garraway & Hutchings 2012). The full case study report was completed in 2011 and serves as the basis for this chapter.

The learner agency study (Phase 3) was conducted in 2013 and included a brief literature review and interviews with six learners who had participated in different forms of the RPL programme between 2007 and 2012. Five of these learners had done the PDC, and one had done the TAPs. Our analysis of these interviews commenced with a grounded theory approach, allowing lines of enquiry (see above) and multiple readings of the transcribed interviews to surface a first set of generic categories for understanding the nature of learner agency. We then proceeded to explore these categories through a selected set of sensitising concepts, drawn from the literature.

The remainder of this chapter traces the research progress and findings, and our search for a more optimally inclusive model of RPL for access to undergraduate study.

**Portfolio development as a form of boundary pedagogy: The case for a concept of navigation**

Scholars have characterised most RPL portfolio models as developmental and therapeutic (Harris 2000; Osman 2003) and grounded in the liberal humanist traditions of higher education. Portfolio development courses tend to be marked by their focus on adult and experiential learning processes and the generic meta-cognitive abilities required for university-level study. As noted in Chapter 2, Osman (2003) argues that academic staff involved in these practices often face what she refers to as a ‘knowledge paradox’ of how to value the experiential knowledge of students while acknowledging the dominance of academic discourse in the academy.

Michelson (1996, 2006) argues that the origins of this paradox lie in the contested politics of knowledge, and specifically the post-enlightenment privileging of a rationalist epistemology in higher education. This serves to marginalise alternative
forms and sources of epistemological authority outside of the academy, which, she argues, Kolb’s (1984) cognitive theory of experiential learning cannot resolve. Hendriks (2001) suggests the use of a narrative approach as a more inclusive method for recruiting and recognising socially useful experiential knowledge, but this leaves invisible the criteria by which the knowledge is to be validated in an academic context.

Slonimsky and Shalem (2006), on the other hand, suggest that RPL portfolio and related assessment practices cannot avoid the complex epistemologies that define vocational and scholastic discourses and the boundaries between them. They list four distinctive attributes that go along with academic modes of learning in higher education, and that also describe a progression typology for becoming a full member (from novice or outsider) of the community of practice in a specialised field of study: distantiation,7 appropriation, research and articulation.

The notion of RPL as a form of ‘boundary pedagogy’ brings to light important differences in assumptions about the nature of the knowledge and learning in formal education and in the complex activities of everyday life. Social constructivist accounts focus on the historical and socially situated nature of all knowledge and learning practices while realist accounts, by contrast, sharpen the distinctions between the social and the epistemological properties of knowledge. These perspectives constitute different positions on the boundaries between types of knowledge and, importantly for our case, between experiential learning and the knowledge that is acquired at school or university. Social realist accounts assert the importance of the principle of insularity (Muller 2000) in defining the relations within and between different knowledge fields, while constructivist theories assert the principle of hybridity and the permeability of classificatory boundaries. Both of these positions have implications for defining the boundary conditions within which RPL must operate for access into undergraduate study.

Social realists make a strong case for strongly classified and framed curriculum and pedagogical strategies that make epistemological boundaries visible (Harris, 2006), and in this sense provide a more equitable access to what Gee (1990) refers to as the meta-level affordances of a secondary discourse. However, constructivists and the proponents of critical theory (Giroux 1998; Michelson 1996, 2006) establish an equally strong case for opening up pedagogical spaces for the recognition of marginalised sources of knowledge and epistemological authority.

The question for our research is whether these contested assumptions foreclose all possibility of recognition across the boundaries – or whether a more nuanced understanding of experiential learning could retain the possibility of a more inclusive RPL practice. This question is central to Cooper’s (2006) ethnographic study into the nature of trade union knowledge and ways of learning, most of it outside of the academy. Cooper identified a complex range of linguistic, performance, narrative and written tools for mediating the production and distribution of knowledge.
and skills at all levels and sites of activity in the union. These learning tools were contextualised within the ‘local and particular’ activities of the union but ‘draw on different forms of knowledge ranging from local, practical forms to more analytical and conceptual forms, including elements of highly codified forms of knowledge such as economics and law’ (Cooper 2006: 234). The significance of Cooper’s study for our understanding of the term ‘prior experiential learning’ lies in its rich description and analysis of the ‘mixed pedagogical palette’ of trade union knowledge and modes of learning, with much of this learning being acquired outside the academy, and not adequately defined as everyday knowledge or simply as learning from experience.

This resonates with Eraut’s (2004) research into the nature and form of informal learning among professionals and managers in the workplace. Eraut makes a break from attempts to reduce the notion of ‘informal learning’ or ‘learning from experience’ to procedural knowledge or general notions of common sense. His concept of informal learning includes distinctions between implicit, reactive and deliberative learning, while his classifications of knowledge and learning in the workplace distinguish between personal and cultural knowledge, and between the codified and uncodified assemblages of both.

In this chapter we draw on these concepts to explore the design and artistry of the PDC as it emerged over a number of years. ‘Design’ refers to the content and structure of the PDC curriculum as set by the course facilitators, that is, the knowledge and learning tools (skills) that learners require to navigate their way between the two contexts and to produce a learning portfolio as part of their application to study at university. These knowledge and learning tools include a meta-cognitive understanding of the concepts and rules required for learning in different contexts and for participating in an academic community of practice. The design of the PDC is expressed as a movement between the modalities of experiential learning and narrative ways of knowing, and into the text-based practices and assessment for access to undergraduate study.

The ‘artistry’ of the PDC as a pedagogical practice refers to the complex set of interactions and choices made by the facilitators and learners as they engage with the sequence and pacing of the course, and with different methods and tools to mediate the construction of the learning portfolio over the duration of the course. This artistry, together with the curriculum, is what constitutes the specialised nature of the practice and what distinguishes it from other forms of pedagogical practice in formal and informal contexts.

**The PDC: Course structure and curriculum framework**

At the time of the research the PDC had been in operation for nine years. The original design included three one-day workshops interspersed with academic mentoring and counselling through which participants were assisted in building a learning portfolio for submission and assessment. The focus of the course
was on a largely unfettered articulation of participants’ prior knowledge and skills combined with an orientation to academic study. Although the content of the first two workshops included inputs and discussion with examples of adult learning principles, transferable skills and academic literacy, the focus was on the autobiographical narrative as a genre and method of providing ‘the space for RPL candidates to write about their situated, localized and partial experiences’, which the course facilitator described as ‘a fundamental departure from the common RPL practice of articulating learning in relation to pre-determined competence specifications’ (Hendriks 2001: 94). Therefore, workshops 2 and 3 were used mostly for group presentations and feedback on drafts of the portfolio for which no explicit assessment criteria other than generic competencies associated with entry to university-level study were indicated; for, as Hendriks argued at the time, ‘it is the assessor who does the reflection and extraction and makes an inference about learning’ (Hendriks 2001: 105).

In 2005 a new team of course facilitators, including the author of this chapter, took on the design and running of the PDC. Collectively, the team had formal academic qualifications in commerce, education, adult education and gender studies, and culturally, a combination of progressive working and middle class male and female identities, mediated by substantial involvements in anti-apartheid social movements. Together we shared close to 40 years of experience in teaching, adult education, business administration and NGO management.

The new team introduced a number of changes to the design of the PDC commencing with a course outline and set of assessment criteria for each section of the learning portfolio. To this was added a number of new conceptual, practical and text-based activities to enrich the course and improve the completion rates. We began to experiment with a limited introduction (usually with diagrams on flipcharts during a session) to the theoretical models and concepts associated with these different ways of knowing and learning at work, at home, in the community and at university. Some examples include Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning, Illeris’ (2002, 2004) three-dimensional model of learning, Bruner’s (1986, 1996) narrative theory, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory, and Bernstein’s (2000) classifications of knowledge and curriculum. These models and concepts were inserted pedagogically at appropriate moments in the programme, usually preceding a new activity or in advance of a homework assignment, and then revisited after the activity was completed.

Reflecting on this development as part of the research, we noticed an interesting correlation between the portfolio structure and concept development. This correlation is illustrated in Table 4.1 on page 64, and suggests a curriculum sequence that moves conceptually from basic propositions on how and what we learn in different contexts, through to narrative ways of knowing, and then into text-based practices and capabilities required to evidence learning in an academic context.
Table 4.1 The PDC curriculum: Concept development and structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning portfolio structure: Content and outcomes</th>
<th>Concept development: Selection and sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation statement</td>
<td>Adult education and experiential learning theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills profile and extended CV</td>
<td>Situated learning theory and the sociology of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical learning history</td>
<td>Narrative theory and learning history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article review</td>
<td>Learning and academic practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project report (literature search)</td>
<td>Learning and academic practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting evidence</td>
<td>Learning and assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ralphs and Associates 2012: 36

Viewed conceptually, this structure indicates a twofold development: an increase in the visibility of the outcomes and assessment criteria for the learning portfolio, and a strengthened theoretical framework underpinning its construction. Learners are provided with the conceptual skills to navigate between both worlds, and to express their competence in this regard through the narrative and additional academic practices that make up the learning portfolio. The learning portfolio could now be described in Wenger’s (1998) terms as a ‘boundary object’ reflecting in its composition a hybridised representation of the narrative and text-based conventions of experiential learning and academic practice.

**Course methodology and evolution of the practice**

As with the evolution of the curriculum, interventions in the methodology of the PDC after 2005 were initially quite experimental and exploratory. Any changes had to find a place in the sequence and pacing of the delivery of the course and its specific objective: the successful construction of a learning portfolio for admission to the university. This foregrounds the artistry of teaching and learning on the PDC, which might best be described as a complex choreography of activities, aimed at mediating an equally complex engagement with primary and secondary discourses on knowledge and learning, within a transitional community of practice over a relatively short period of time. These are not unfamiliar challenges for any teacher, lecturer or course facilitator, but what is unique about the PDC is the heterogeneous nature of the participants on the course: learners from many different occupations and learning histories seeking access to undergraduate study across a wide range of fields, typically including social work, commerce, humanities, education and law.

The 2010 case study gave us a chance to document and observe this artistry in action, and to evaluate its effectiveness through a careful analysis of the learning portfolios to which it gave rise, and the assessment criteria against which candidates were judged to be ready for admission or not. The course structure provided for five contact sessions, which ran consecutively every Saturday morning from
09h00–13h00, after which participants had a month to complete their portfolios with support from a mentor (usually over a minimum of two sessions). At the start of each course, participants were given a course outline and the assessment criteria and thereafter, for each of the contact sessions, received a detailed programme with worksheets as required. Additional materials, including two prescribed book chapters and three articles, were provided for reading at home and for completing assignments. See Chapter 4 Appendix 1 in the Appendices section at the end of this book for a brief description of the five contact sessions and mentoring processes that made up the enacted PDC.

The diagram in Figure 4.3 below metaphorically segments the design of the PDC into two scenes through which to view the enactment (artistry) of the pedagogy as it moves conceptually through the different sessions of the course.

**Figure 4.3 PDC design metaphorically segmented into two scenes**

![Diagram](image)

**Scene 1**

Scene 1 (sessions 1–3) signifies the gathering of the company of actors (S), an introduction to the main themes (academic and experiential learning), and the commencement of a facilitated dialogue on learning within different social and academic contexts. This open learning dialogue (OLD) is peppered with theoretical and practical illustrations that cast light on the differences and similarities between the two discourses (recognition rules) and is embedded in lively discussions between the company of actors. This scene ends with the construction of an autobiographical historical narrative (autobiographical learning history or ALH) that illustrates, on the part of those who produce it, a first-level engagement with a meta-cognitive discourse on social theories of knowledge and learning.

**Scene 2**

Scene 2 commences dramatically with a lecture on how to read and write academic text, and signals a shift in the play from a largely oral and narrative discourse to the academic literacies (Ac.Lit) required in a text-based practice (TBP). This shift is shown in Figure 4.3 above by the OLD triangle with its dotted lines to illustrate
the porous socio-material world of prior learning moving to the TBP triangle with its solid lines to illustrate the more bounded and discipline-based world of academic practice. The dialogue becomes more formalised and the focus turns to an understanding of prescribed texts and the rules of argument. The pacing of the play intensifies as the cognitive complexity of the work escalates into an article review and the written work takes centre stage. The scene ends with a simulated assessment interview as the faculty-based adjudicators and course outcomes (O) loom into view. The actors disperse off the common stage and take up the completion of their learning portfolio work with their mentors. Some leave and do not return.

**Pursuing inclusion: The affordances and limitations of a portfolio development course**

So what can be learnt about the effectiveness of this boundary pedagogy from the detailed exploration of this course? Why did some participants succeed and others not, and what factors account for the difference? In pursuing these questions we draw on, and to some extent triangulate, three different perspectives on the PDC:

- The first is based on a research report produced by Garraway and Hutchings (2012) in which they evaluated the effectiveness of the 2010 PDC through a detailed analysis of a sample of the learning portfolios.
- The second draws on focus group interviews with a small number of academics from across four different faculties who took part in the 2010 assessment interviews.
- The third draws on interviews that were conducted with learners who withdrew from the 2010 PDC without completing their learning portfolio, as well as six other learners who formed part of the separate learner agency study, which was conducted in 2013.

All three perspectives – the learning portfolio, assessment and learner agency – converged on the merits of the PDC as a whole, but looking across the perspectives, some aspects of the pedagogy appear more enabling and inclusive than others, and some learners responded more favourably to the programme than others.

**A learning portfolio perspective**

Garraway and Hutchings (2012: 13) commend the ontological and boundary-crossing success of the PDC pedagogy ‘in providing a reflective space, a sense of becoming, a finding of voice and a growth in confidence’. The merits of the PDC lie, in their view, in the supportive nature of the community it creates, within which participants are able to engage in a number of boundary-crossing activities and projects. Some of these activities are more successful than others and their analysis of the learning portfolios suggests ways to exploit the creative possibilities for boundary
work, while at the same time providing a more explicit engagement with the kind of academic literacies required for university study:

More input on writing would more enable boundary crossing from social to academia, and the articulation of the written voice. It would also help with the notion of learning from one's writing – the skill of reflection and constructing of meaning. (Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 23)

Their primary concern is that the exercises and assignments in the PDC programme focus too much on participants' own knowledge and do not do enough to orient them to the nature and form of text-based practices at university. For instance, the activities mediating the requirements for the article review are limited to a summary and discussion of a single quasi-academic article. Garraway and Hutchings suggest extending these activities to include an intertextual engagement with two or more articles on the same subject. They also suggest that the limitations of the single session on academic writing be addressed through extending the sessions to include a range of reading and writing exercises, with the explicit support of mentors and with a revised 'academic reading and writing guide' geared to the requirements of the PDC curriculum.

In a similar vein, Garraway and Hutchings acknowledge journal writing as a useful and safe space in which students can practice writing, but they make the point that as a solitary exercise it can remain descriptive and non-reflective. They contrast this with illustrations from the literature on dialogue journals, which have the advantage of orienting students to the idea of writing for another reader (Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 21). Dialogue journals provide spaces for a conversation between the learner and teacher or mentor, which promotes reflective thinking, reflective practice and reflective writing.

The autobiographical learning history component of the learning portfolio indicates students’ ability to reflect on, document and speak to their life history, and a level of maturity and self-understanding that is valued by academic staff. It also provides an opportunity for students to write 'in a depersonalized way' and to evidence their capacity for reflective action – which Garraway and Hutchings (2012, citing Mezirow 1990 and 1991) contrast with non-reflective action. Non-reflective action may be thoughtful or introspective, but reflective action includes an exploration of the process and premise upon which arguments are made or relationships asserted. This statement by PDC participant 'TM' in her ALH is cited as an example of reflective action:

The most important thing that school managed to teach me is to read and write. Reading allows me to explore a new world, a way of thinking that only words can make possible. Writing gives me a chance to create and present the world as I perceive it. Writing for me is like giving birth to words, words that come through me, not mine, and gets interpreted in different ways and meanings. (TM, cited in Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 11)
Sounding a more cautionary note, Garraway and Hutchings cite a comment by one PDC participant in the observation report that writing the ALH ‘forced her to open doors that were closed down’; they question whether, from an ontological perspective, ‘some [traumatic] experiences are best not dealt with than faced?’ (Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 11). The autobiographical learning history component of the learning portfolio often presents a conundrum for academic staff who read and assess it. Garraway and Hutchings acknowledge the ontological and epistemological affordances of writing the ALH but they question its role in surfacing some disturbing, even ‘shocking’ experiences of personal and social violence and trauma (Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 11). They return to this issue later in the report, noting that ‘as readers we found that many of the experiences were disturbing and sometimes shocking’ and suggest that these signify weak forms of academic distantiation; for example, TM’s account of abuse and rape as a motivation for a decision to start a foundation ‘to counsel and develop primary school children’ (Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 11).

These questions, we would argue cannot be easily answered from within the conventions of an academic development discourse. An alternative convention is available in the work of Jerome Bruner (1986, 1996), whose writing on narrative ways of knowing has been influential in the design of the PDC, and specifically in activities related to the production of the autobiographical learning history as a central artefact of the learning portfolio. Bruner (1986) distinguishes between narrative and paradigmatic ways of thinking, and this provides a useful perspective from which to examine the discourses used by different participants in the construction of their learning histories, arguably in quite a hybridised fashion.

The paradigmatic mode is modelled pre-eminently on the discourse of natural science, attempting ‘to fulfil the idea of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation’ (Bruner 1986: 12), and hence a focus on explanatory concepts and specialised procedures for testing these concepts through empirical research. RPL students sometimes recruit these concepts and/or procedural knowledge into their autobiographical learning history; for example, TM’s reference to ‘Bantu Education’ in explaining her engagements with formal schooling, and another participant’s reference to her ‘Right Nephrectomy’ when explaining her own illness (she is an enrolled nurse).

Narrative modes, by contrast, are rooted in social, cultural and historical stories through which people make sense of often troubling events and experiences of their lives. They do this by drawing different events and activities into a coherent chronological whole, through the construction of a plot that reflects the consciousness of the narrator and the socio-linguistic resources of the narrator’s community or culture. Stories in this sense reflect the dual construction of the ‘landscape of action’ and the ‘landscape of consciousness’, where the latter engages ‘what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think or feel’ (Bruner 1986: 14).
The following quotation from TM’s autobiographical learning history on her parents and her upbringing is a good illustration of what Bruner means by this:

Through all of that I learned a very deep state of confusion … They wanted to be traditionalists and Christians at the same time and the two did not gel. They interpreted the Bible according to what suited them. They practised traditional ceremonies that seemed modern enough to feed their confused hunger to fit in the modern world. (TM, cited in Garraway & Hutchings 2012: 11)

Sense-making in this mode reflects a profoundly personal and social construction of reality. As Murray (2003: 99) reminds us, unlike dreams, ‘stories exist in a social world’ and are created at the interface between the narrator, the audience, and the broader social and cultural context. Narratives, in this sense, need to be read and understood as a whole and this includes disturbing aspects of people’s experience, which some scholars may find questionable in the autobiographical learning history. So, following this line of analysis, we argue that while the autobiographical learning history is firmly located within the narrative paradigm, and is best viewed through the lens of narrative analysis, its content and form make it a vital boundary crossing artefact through which learners are able to evidence their epistemological and meta-cognitive capabilities in a discursive written document. These qualities are highly valued in the assessment judgments made by academic staff, as we indicate below.

**The assessment perspective**

Attention now turns to a discussion of the assessment perspective, and analysis of the focus group interviews conducted with academic staff involved in assessing PDC participants’ eligibility for admission to university study. We identified four categories for describing the attributes most valued by academics in their decision to admit or decline a candidate. It is interesting to note that three of these attributes reflect forms of *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’ that have been acquired and developed over time, often outside of formal study.

The first attribute is a *reflective disposition*, captured in the quotation below as ‘an ability to reflect on experience and reflect on a text’. This suggests a particular maturity on the part of the candidate (recognised by the assessor) and an ability to process and document learning from different ‘texts’, including the complex and often traumatic experiences reflected in their historical narrative. In the words of one of the assessors:

> I guess one of the things that marked them was that judging from their life histories and the way they approached the tasks they were set … they already had an ability to stand back from their own experience and from the text they were given, and reflect on it. I think that was crucial … there was no parroting, there was quite a maturity, that critical judgment
that I’m never quite sure what that means, so let me be more explicit – an ability to reflect on experience, and to reflect on text. And of course a desire to use the university study, to use text, is what really struck me about all four of them, to reflect on their own turbulent and difficult lives, that they really wanted to come here to understand. That stood out for me. (NK focus group 2 report: 1)

The second attribute is academic readiness, which refers among other things to the kind of text-based knowledge practices that make it possible for the candidate to

- produce a learning portfolio and to engage with questions in the assessment interview (SC focus group 1 report: 10);
- produce a coherent and readable learning portfolio;
- understand that ‘the nature of the game at university is to be able to read and write’ (NM focus group 1 report: 9).

The third attribute is the ability to plan and manage a programme of study in addition to the multiple responsibilities of adult life. The availability of support (financial and other) from family, work and other networks is acknowledged as an integral part of this capacity:

it was quite obvious that in most of the candidates, lots of planning went into, they were well prepared to accept, they knew exactly how to manage their time, were going to take leave, ‘we’ve spoken to our superiors’, take sabbaticals, and even the practicalities at home – they knew exactly who was going to look after the children and so on. (JK focus group 2 report: 6)

Finally, academic staff value candidates with a realistic grasp of qualification and career requirements. This attribute, perhaps more than the other three, is perceived by assessors as not only valuable for admission purposes, but also for its experience and understanding of the field of practice, for example, teaching or community development work or business practice. In its most positive articulation, it describes the value and transferability of prior field-specific knowledge and experience in relation to the academic curriculum:

I think that preference for mature students, however, they do bring a certain kind of dynamic in the class, their experience of prior learning and so forth. Like I said, many of them are community involved, empowerment and that type of thing, so they bring that experience into the classroom and other, the younger students can make sense of and that for me is, that dynamic is good in the class because the younger ones with the older RPL students, the mature students, they create knowledge together. (SC focus group 1 report: 2)

In many respects the PDC assessment practices serve as a crucial focal point, at which the generic and discipline-based discourse of the academy engages with the hybridised and narrative representations of knowledge and learning of the
applicants. The research suggests that this engagement cannot be reduced to a simple manifestation of the dichotomy between narrative and paradigmatic ways of knowing, but is more usefully seen as a constructive space, for engaging with the ‘knowledge paradox’, in which both academic and experiential ways of knowing are recognised and valued. For PDC participants, this requires a certain level of familiarity with the nature of academic discourse and, importantly at this point, an ability to evidence their appropriation of the four attributes identified above, in oral and written formats. For academic staff it requires the analytical skills to ‘look both ways’, that is, to engage equally with the narrative and the contextualised representations of knowledge and skills in the learning portfolio.

Learner agency perspective

A key proposition of this research is that RPL activities constitute a transitional space and practice through which learners evidence their prior knowledge and ability to navigate between specialised discourses of experiential learning and those required for successful entry to academic study. Biesta (2008) defines agency as ‘the situated ability to give direction to one’s life’. In the research proposal, agency was described as the cultural disposition and strategy of learners as they engage with RPL provision, inclusive of the opportunities and limitations that characterise their participation at university after their RPL experience. In pursuing this aspect of the research we needed to know more about how learners in our programme perceive the affordances and constraints of the RPL practice in the context of their complex learning journeys and the changes in the national learning system that have been introduced since 1994.

Findings are based largely on two studies carried out during the course of this research: the first with 26 learners who did not complete the PDC course that was offered in May 2010; and the second as part of a more in-depth learner agency study (Ralphs & Mokadam 2013) with a cross section of six learners, one of whom wrote the TAPs, and five of whom completed the PDC over the period 2007–13. The learner agency study is discussed first as it was the more substantial of the two studies, and provides valuable insights into the attributes of learner agency and how these articulate with the transitional nature of the PDC pedagogy.

The six interviewees included five university students who were admitted to the institution via RPL over the period 2007–13. Two of the interviewees had been admitted after their second PDC attempt, while another had not been admitted after completing the PDC in 2012. Four of the interviewees were women and the age range of the whole sample was between 26 and 45 years, averaging 35.7 years (on admission to the PDC). Five of the six had not completed their matriculation (or matric – final school-leaving examinations) while at school and two returned later in life to do so and were successful. In fact, one of the latter completed his matric – in seven months and with two distinctions – after graduating with a degree in public administration. We discuss this anomaly in more detail below.
The sample covers admissions to undergraduate study in the following fields: law, commerce, public administration, social work, and the arts. Two of those interviewed were in their first year of study, three were in their final year, and one person had graduated with an honours degree. (A brief profile of the interviewees is provided in Chapter 4 Appendix 2 in the Appendices section at the end of this book.)

The first finding relates to the nature of learner agency and suggests that successful learners exemplify combinations of two or more of the following four attributes:

- A motivation to study that originates in their commitment to change the legacy of marginalisation and exclusion that most have experienced directly at some point in their lives and communities.
- A resilient personality and temperament that has known and overcome the fragility of illness, isolation, failure and despair.
- A sustained enjoyment of reading, writing and learning activities beyond formal schooling, and a predisposition to the kind of thinking and reasoning skills required in higher education.
- A point or stage of readiness in their lives to take on the challenges of undergraduate study; this attribute is seldom realised in isolation from the support and encouragement of significant others in their lives.

The second finding relates to how these learners experienced the RPL process, that is, the PDC and, in one instance, the TAPs.

Turning now to the PDC, the responses of the five learners generally reflect the positive affordances of their encounter with the RPL experience (although this should not necessarily be equated with optimal inclusion). Eleanor’s first experience of the PDC left her with the recognition that she could not cope with the standard of the course, but this did not deter her from a successful return two years later after she had written her matric exams and passed. Portia’s experience is different. She appeared to thrive and excel on the course itself, but failed to secure one of the few places for RPL applicants on the very competitive Social Work degree programme. Significantly, this disappointment did not negate the value of the course per se, and certainly did not deter her motivation to pursue her ‘mission’ in life, which at the time of our interview had changed to teaching and not social work.

In the case of Thembi, Portia and Nadeen, their more literate histories easily resonated with the reading, writing and thinking opportunities provided by the course, while Brian, Nadeen and Eleanor pointed specifically to the affordances of the course in affirming their self-worth and competence, and in mapping out the important transitions in their lives and decision to study further.

It catered for people like me in a way, because we were dealing with written work and written words … the fact that this course didn’t want to change me or feed me into some kind of mainstream, allowed me to be the person that I am and embrace that. (Thembi on the course as a whole)
It was like the pen was writing by itself, but it was nice; it also healed me, because with the mind map it opened some emotional spots, but journal writing helped to heal it. (Portia on journal writing)

I realised at that stage that I could actually choose, I could actually design how I want my future to pan out from now on, going forward. (Brian on the ALH)

That’s what I learnt, because before I got married, my parents did everything for me. When I got married my husband did everything for me. I never filled out a form, I never went into the bank … So, in the PDC course, I learnt to do things for myself and speak for myself … (Nadeen on the course as a whole)

That is why … they valued me as a person; that my life out there wasn’t meaningless; because if you go through all the struggles and the stuff that I went through dan dink jy jou leewe [then you think your life] is doomed; here they come and they take all this doom and gloom and they turn it into something positive … as a mother, a worker, not just that but most importantly they valued me as a person. (Eleanor)

These excerpts provide powerful insights into the articulation between learner attributes and the affordances of the PDC as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy. These are both ontological and epistemological in nature and clearly support the developmental and navigational purposes of the course. Brian, Eleanor and Thembi all referred to the feedback and encouragement of the course mentors during the preparation of their learning portfolios, ‘that kind of faith he had in my abilities’ (Thembi), and the value of the skills and friendships gained on the PDC for their subsequent entry into undergraduate study.

Brian made the point that the validation of his prior learning was not simply a question of verbal or psychological affirmation, arguing that its impact had gone far beyond his admission to undergraduate study:

But when I actually came here and I started getting that validation, I don’t mean people telling you, it’s just every time you pass a test, every time you set a goal and you say you want to score 65 in that test and you end up scoring 75; every time you finish an assignment and people comment and you get good reviews from the lecturer … that validation builds you up in a sense that it sort of makes you know that you are worth something. And that for me is valuable. So my self-view, the way I look at myself has changed, because now I am a much more confident person … I’ve changed jobs three times in the last year, not because I’ve got a degree, but because my confidence levels have allowed me the ability to go after what I want knowing I can achieve it, and knowing I can do something better. (Brian)
Finally, Ruaan, who took part in the learner agency study, had very little to say about his perceptions of the TAPs experience but was very critical of the ignorance about RPL outside of the university. With regard to the TAPs, he wrote the tests on the set date and was admitted to the university on the basis of the results. His substantive background and prior knowledge of management practices was not formally acknowledged in the tests or subsequently, although it is clear from his reflection that he had more than the entry-level literacies to succeed in his studies for the B Admin degree: ‘the skills I acquired obviously aided me in my assignments, my classwork and I assume, in that way, it sort of was a benefit for me.’ The affordance of the TAPs option in this case is its efficiency: it is much less expensive and time-consuming than the PDC in providing access to undergraduate study, but it falls short of giving substantive recognition and credit to the field-specific knowledge and skills that Ruaan clearly had already acquired from work experience and related formal and non-formal training courses.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Ruaan’s narrative raises a much more serious constraint of the RPL programme as a whole in that despite his success at university he finds himself severely restricted in applying for posts in the public and private sector without a matriculation certificate:

So yes, the only down side is that people within industry aren’t aware of the RPL process, are not aware of the benefits, they aren’t aware of the value it adds to learning, not just to learning but to the broader community, because there are sadly those people who think it’s a cheap access to university. Some don’t even understand it. (Ruaan)

This suggests systemic problems where labour market recruitment and selection policies fail to connect with those of the education and training system, although in Ruaan’s case, he decided to register for his matric and completed it, ironically, in the same year that he completed his submission for his Honour’s degree in Public Administration!

It is important to temper these largely positive representations of the PDC experience with the experience and reflection of those who for various reasons decided to leave the May 2010 course prematurely. Our survey and focus group interview with these learners (Ralphs & Associates 2012: 64–67) indicate that some struggled to cope with the language of instruction and with the text-based nature of the activities in the second half of the course. These struggles were almost always compounded by social, personal and financial conditions such as ill health, unemployment, personal or family crisis, and changing work commitments. For some, writing their life histories turned into moments of confrontation with past experiences and precipitated a crisis; for others it was the lack of direction and not knowing what field of study they were most suited to that left them without direction and motivation to continue. Interestingly, all of those in the focus group interview said that given the opportunity, they would try again.
Conclusion

This chapter presents the results of research into the inner workings of the Portfolio Development Course as one of the access routes to undergraduate study for mature students who do not meet the conventional requirements for admission to university. It began by assembling a set of conceptual tools for describing the design and artistry of the course as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy aimed at providing the tools (knowledge and skills) learners require to navigate between the discourse and practices of experiential learning and formal education. More specifically, the design sets out the content and structure of the PDC, i.e. the planned curriculum, while the artistry refers to the enacted curriculum, better theorised as the choices facilitators and learners make as they engage with the sequence and pacing of the course, and with different methods and tools to mediate the construction of the learning portfolio.

In the second part of the chapter, these concepts – together with those of paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing – were used to explore the history and evolution of the PDC curriculum and a case study of its enactment from August to October 2010. The design of the 2010 course was grounded in the curriculum and methodological changes tried and tested after 2004 – changes described as a move along the continuum from an adult learner-centred pedagogy to a text-based practice that has retained the discourse of narrative and experiential learning, while providing learners with a more structured exposure to the conceptual tools and evaluation rules of learning in an academic context.

Figure 4.4 below offers an interpretation of the PDC as occupying the space between these different realities: the somewhat porous (dotted lines) socio-material world of prior learning on the left-hand side, and the more bounded (solid lines) and discipline-based world of academic practice, on the right-hand side. The scenario is a daunting one for while the hybridised nature of prior learning (personal and
cultural) may well include elements of academic knowledge and a familiarity with academic practices, its discourse is generally narrative and procedural in character, and difficult to disaggregate from the cultural and historical realities of its context.

The centre triangle in Figure 4.4 on page 75 suggests the external and internal coordinates of an RPL-for-access model operating in and between the boundary spaces described above. Here the PDC is depicted as a distinctive pedagogical practice with links through its subjects (S) to the socially situated learning and the complex knowledge and learning realities of work and everyday life, and through its objective (O) to the specialised knowledge and academic practices of the university.

This implies a specialised curriculum, methodology and community of practice through which learners are able to acquire the navigation tools (NT) needed to build a learning portfolio in this transitional space – a learning portfolio that adequately represents a mixed ensemble of prior experiential learning and the potential to succeed in a more formal context of higher education. Our proposition is that without these tools, learners would be restricted to a procedural understanding of RPL and would not know what to include or exclude in a learning portfolio, or how to represent their capabilities in the text-based discourse of the university. We characterise this activity as a specialised pedagogical practice that is distinguished not only by its function as a mediator of learning between different contexts, but also by its pedagogical features and practices, which engage with different knowledge and learning discourses in particular ways.

However, there is a complexity in the implementation of the PDC that defies too structural an explanation of what worked and what did not. Course participants, facilitators, mentors and assessors combine in space and time to give shape and form to the enacted curriculum of the PDC – the artistry of the practice. This is evident in the heterogeneity and agency of the learners, in the selection, sequencing and pacing of the course, and in the social and pedagogical activities that constitute the course as a transitional learning community for a relatively short period of time.

The evidence presented in our case study of the 2010 course suggests a strong convergence of perspectives around the affordances and constraints of the PDC, and the attributes of learner agency. The assessment perspective is particularly informative because, in many ways, it brings into view the affordances and limitations of the PDC pedagogy and all those who participate in its design and implementation. The assessment activities serve as a focal point at which the generic and discipline-based discourse of the academy engages with the hybridised and narrative representations of knowledge and experiential learning presented by the participants in their learning portfolios and in their interviews.

This research suggests that RPL cannot be reduced to a simple manifestation of the dichotomy between narrative and paradigmatic ways of knowing, but more usefully, as a space for engaging with the ‘knowledge paradox’ in which both academic and experiential ways of knowing are recognised and valued. For participants, this
requires a level of familiarity with the nature of academic discourse and importantly, at this point, an understanding of the rules of assessment in an academic context. For academic staff, it requires the analytical skills to 'look both ways', that is, to engage as much with the narrative as with the more academic sections of the learning portfolio.

What this study has offered is a conceptual model for describing the design and artistry of the PDC as a specialised pedagogical practice for mediating access to higher education. The challenge for the future is how to increase the efficacy and reach of this practice, not simply in statistical terms, but also in terms of the epistemologies and sociologies at stake.

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Notes
1 The NBTs are an assessment for first-year applicants to higher education and consist of two tests. The AQL combines Academic Literacy and Quantitative Literacy in one multiple-choice test. The second test, which is only required for applicants to programmes in the Natural or Health Sciences, is a multiple-choice Mathematics test.
2 This test includes a comprehension and a section in which candidates have to write answers to questions about their prior knowledge and experience. It tests for both the receptive and productive literacies.
3 The maximum enrolment for the PDC is 65, and two courses are run each year.
4 This reflects the decision made in writing up the original case study report; core researchers had not had the expertise or the time to do a substantive analysis of the standardised tests. There is of course substantive literature on the development and use of standardised admissions tests in South Africa (Griessel 2006) and in RPL contexts (Cliff et al. 2011). Some of that material was drawn on for the purposes of the case study but limitations in this regard need to be noted and certainly present a case for further research.
5 The course ran over the period from 14 August to 11 October 2010.
6 Of the participants on the August course, 28 people did not submit a learning portfolio, but these people were not interviewed as there was concern that year-end logistics would constrain options of reaching them. Instead we opted rather to contact and interview those who had dropped out of the May course.
Distantiation means ‘establishing some cognitive distance from one’s own established knowledge and taken for granted assumptions’ in order to explore new categories, concepts, arguments and methods associated with discipline or field of study (Slonimsky & Shalem 2006). Appropriation on the other hand, is a more constructivist concept, in that it requires the student to actively engage with the new concepts in order to make them their own, which is not to suggest a simple process of assimilation or even accommodation, but rather a complex ordering and integration of new understandings, patterns and conceptual frameworks.

The book by Michelson and Mandell (2004) had a profound influence on our thinking about the redesign of the PDC at that time.

Detailed assessment criteria for each of these outcomes were provided in the course descriptor, e.g. for the article review: ‘Participants are required to complete an article review indicating their ability to read, comprehend, analyse and discuss matters broadly relevant to their chosen field of study. Articles are to be selected from those that have been recommended by the relevant faculties or the PDC course coordinator. An article summary should be no longer than 800 words, and participants must be able to discuss their views in an interview if requested by the assessment panel’ (PDC 2010 course outline).

These are usually articles written by academics but edited for public consumption in newspapers or magazines or on the Internet.

The report based on this survey and focus group interview was produced by Prof. Astrid von Kotze and Ms Betty Damon, and is entitled ‘The Portfolio Development Course: Where is room for improvement?’ Of the participants who did not complete the PDC and who were interviewed, 17 were women and 8 were men. The majority (12) were in the 25–35 age category, with roughly the same number (6) in the 35–45 age category and (7) in the 45–55 age category. While 7 were unemployed, the majority (18) were employed, mostly in semi-skilled jobs such as finance clerks, domestic workers and caring professions. In all, 15 indicated that they were the primary breadwinner in the home, with the majority being responsible for 3 and up to 9 dependents.

Breier and Ralphs (2010: 490) discuss phronesis as ‘a form of knowledge and of reasoning that is ethical and directed at the achievement of a good life, where “good” is used in the Aristotelian sense to refer to a life that seeks to be virtuous as well as comfortable with an orientation towards a wider community’.

The responses are included here verbatim.
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RPL as ‘radical pedagogy’: The recruitment of experience in an alternative education programme

Kessie Moodley, Anitha Shah and Mphutlane wa Bofelo

We taught one another what we knew, discovering each other’s resourcefulness. We also learned how people with little or no formal education could not only themselves participate in education programmes but actually teach others a range of different insights and skills. The ‘University of Robben Island’ was one of the best universities in the country … it also showed me that you don’t need professors.

– Neville Alexander

This chapter presents the findings of a study aimed at exploring a model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a tool to achieve a range of outcomes simultaneously: to build the competences of activists in labour and community organisations working for social transformation, to facilitate their self-affirmation and dignity, and to provide an access route to post-school education. The study focused on a Workers’ College and the programmes it runs for activists in labour and community organisations, and explored how RPL is integrated into the classroom pedagogy, the content of educational materials, and the assessment tools.

RPL usually assumes the form of an assessment practice that takes place before entry into a programme of learning. The distinctive feature of RPL at the Workers’ College is that it forms an integral part of the pedagogy of the college. Furthermore, this version of ‘RPL as pedagogy’ is located within a strong conceptual framework (critical Marxist theories and activist values) and within an educational agenda geared towards the benefit of the collectives from which the individual learners come, and through which they are recruited onto the programme. Therefore, it is the college’s intention that the RPL content and process will be informed by, and relate to, the experiences and practices not only of the individual learners – but also of the labour and community organisations in which they are based. In addition, individual experiences are not merely recruited; they are interrogated through personal reflections, robust debates, group and class discussions, and inputs and interventions by the facilitators and through exposure to, and critical engagement with, texts, concepts, theories and debates from mainstream academia.

The educational philosophy and approach of the Workers’ College is to begin with learners’ ‘struggle knowledge’ – knowledge gained from their experiences as
activists in the labour movement or community – to reflect on it, validate it through peer engagement, and link such experiential knowledge to the theoretical, codified knowledge base of academia. In this way, the college aims to create a different knowledge base – one that will interact with and start to modify formal disciplinary knowledge bases, giving them greater value and relevance for college learners. This approach also seeks to engage critically with dominant discourses and to challenge the social injustices that lead to some kinds of knowledge being undervalued and unrecognised. In order for the Workers’ College education project to achieve its goal of contributing to the formal knowledge base of academia, it acknowledges that there is conventional or formal knowledge that resides in institutions of learning that has always been dominant. It acknowledges equally that experiential knowledge is often dismissed as being less important. The college’s approach to RPL explores, and if necessary, challenges, the relationship between formal knowledge in the academy and experiential knowledge.

The recruitment of knowledge, and in particular, experiential knowledge, is not restricted to that of the learners. Over the years, the college has encouraged the recruitment and involvement of facilitators or educators in its education programmes from the broad landscape of trade union, community, NGO, civil society and academic backgrounds. Their experiences have also contributed to a rich exchange of varied experiential knowledge, which has shaped the education programme and discourse of the college. This exchange of experiential knowledge has impacted on the organisation itself and the way in which it interacts with learners, and the broader constituency that it serves.

This chapter therefore describes a model of RPL that we call ‘RPL as radical pedagogy’. The chapter first provides an overview of the educational philosophy of the Workers’ College, against the background of its history. It then explores in greater detail how this educational philosophy is enacted in classroom pedagogy, and demonstrates the significance of activism as the organising principle of its curriculum. It also presents the findings of a biographical study of a select group of learners to show how learner agency is influenced by life experiences in particular socio-economic and socio-political contexts and how such agency is enhanced by the Workers’ College diploma programme. The chapter concludes by noting some of the tensions, contradictions and challenges that the Workers’ College is grappling with while also acknowledging its unique contribution to our understanding of ‘RPL as pedagogy’.

**Background to the Workers’ College**

The Workers’ College was established in 1991 originally as part of the University of Natal, Durban, (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal, or UKZN), but subsequently became independent. The decision to establish the Workers’ College was born out of the realisation that there were very few worker education organisations and institutions in South Africa that addressed the specific education needs and
realities of trade unions and community-based organisations. In addition, education programmes that were designed for trade union activists were usually in the form of seminars and workshops conducted over a few days, without any form of assessment, and with little or no continuity or follow-up. From 1992, the Workers’ College started providing a variety of education programmes for trade unionists. These programmes were originally designed as one-year certificate courses requiring learners to attend classes once a week.

The decision to seek formal accreditation for the courses arose as a result of pressure from the various trade unions for formal recognition of their members’ learning. However, it must be noted that the Workers’ College’s education programmes are designed around particular content and outcomes geared to the needs and challenges facing union and community organisations, and therefore not easily comparable with programmes offered by traditional higher education institutions. Initially, an agreement around formal accreditation was reached between the Workers’ College and Ruskin College (a similar kind of workers’ college in Oxford, United Kingdom) but because of the geographical distance between the two institutions, the arrangement became impractical.

In 1997, an arrangement was established with the University of Natal (now UKZN) giving effect to an accreditation link in the following way: the four one-year Workers’ College diplomas received university senate approval as alternative access qualifications into a degree programme. Assessment of learners’ performances in the four diplomas would be in the form of class participation, assignments, and written and oral examinations, moderated by the university; and a joint Workers’ College/University of Natal diploma would be awarded, to all successful diploma graduates, at a graduation ceremony held at the university.

In 2000, a part-time five-year Bachelor of Social Science (B.Soc.Sci.) degree was designed for Workers’ College diploma learners, in collaboration with the Industrial and Working Life Project (IWLP) based at the university. On successful completion of one or more of the Workers’ College diplomas, learners would qualify to enrol for this degree. The diploma served as an entry qualification should the learner not have a matriculation (matric – i.e. final, Grade 12 school-leaving) qualification; or, if the learner did have matric, then the diploma served as a 16-credit module at the university. Prior to 2000 only trade union representatives served on the college’s governing structures, but in 2000 the Workers’ College amended its constitution to include community activists and organisations as learners and as part of its governing structures.

**Education philosophy**

As the college sees it, the education philosophy and method of engagement with the curriculum is that of connecting the experiential knowledge of the learners, all of whom are activists, with theoretical and academic knowledge. This pedagogy is
steeped in an adult education approach with a specific focus on equipping trade union and community activists with practical and theoretical capacities to strengthen their activism and their organisational practices. This approach is shaped by the history of the Workers’ College as a worker-centred, civil society-based organisation born out of the liberation struggle and grappling with the complexities and intricacies of a neo-liberal, democratic dispensation in a globalised world.

It follows therefore that the pedagogical practices of the college are informed by the experiences of the liberation struggle and related practices and discourses within today’s organised civil society. It is in this sense that the college understands the potential of education to be a tool of liberation and justice (or oppression and injustice), a weapon of struggle (or of the maintenance of the status quo) and a means of empowerment (or disempowerment).

It is particularly important to consider that the Workers’ College inherits and is part of a rich history of trade union education, mass mobilisation, political education, popular education and popular theatre in South Africa that has long-established traditions of participatory, democratic educational practices (Kallaway 2002; Cooper 2006). The recruitment of people’s experiences and the confirmation, affirmation and reconstruction of their knowledge base featured prominently in the educational practices of the liberation movement and organised civil society organisations in South Africa. These practices took place within a problem-solving pedagogical framework, out of which evolved a conceptual framework. At times people’s material conditions, and the problems and challenges they faced, would be used to highlight and raise awareness of the systemic, institutional and structural issues responsible for their suffering – and therefore introduce them to concepts and ideological constructs such as capitalism, socialism, racism, sexism and democracy. At other times, the concepts would be presented and then related to people’s experiences and conditions.

As much as there has been a tapping into various theories, from Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed to Marxist pedagogical traditions and critical pedagogy approaches such as that of Giroux’s (2012) borderless pedagogy, the Workers’ College educational practices have mainly been developed in the midst of action, shaped by practice, experience and experiment, and informed by the ever-changing socio-economic and political landscapes, as well as by the fluid and dynamic organisational environment of the labour movement and community organisations.

**Policies, programme structure and purposes**

Learners who come onto the Workers’ College diplomas are primarily activists within trade unions, as well as community-based organisations and local branches of civil society organisations. As the college director remarked: ‘The context of the education discourse in Workers’ College is educating workers for the community and for the trade unions’ (Focus group interview – FGI 15/06/2012). They are selected through the following processes:
• **Notices and application forms:** These are sent to labour and community organisations that have an existing relationship with the college.

• **Submission of the application form:** This form requests information on applicants’ personal details, prior education within their organisations and in education institutions and programmes, their organisational membership and positions held, and an undertaking from their organisation to support their application.

• **Invitation to write an assessment test:** Should the application be in order, the applicant is invited to write a test. The test seeks to determine applicants’ ability to communicate in English as well as their understanding of their roles in their organisation and broader society.

• **Invitation to an interview:** Successful completion of the assessment test (a 50% mark) results in the applicant being invited to an interview, which allows the college to get to know the applicant, assess their verbal skills, understand their personal and organisational circumstances, inform the applicant about the diploma programme, determine which diploma is most suitable, explain some of the rules of the programme, and determine whether the applicant can get time off from work to attend the residential blocks, the revision programme and the examinations.

Although basic English literacy skills are considered in the entry test, emphasis is placed on experiences and competences related to labour and community activism, and a basic understanding of the historical and current social, economic and political realities of South Africa. The admission policy allows applicants without matric to be considered, based on how they fared in the entry test, on recommendations from their organisations, and on their length of experience, and the leadership position they hold in their organisation.

The Workers’ College offers four one-year diplomas equivalent to a Level 5 qualification in terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The four diplomas are the

• Labour Studies Diploma (LSD);
• Labour Economics Diploma (LED);
• Political and Social Development Diploma (PSDD);
• Gender and Labour Studies Diploma (GLSD).

These diplomas are all recognised for the purposes of access (with limited credit) into a Bachelor of Social Science degree programme offered by the Industrial and Working Life Project (IWLP) at UKZN. Each diploma is structured into six modules, with the first five modules each delivered in five-day residential blocks. In each normal (five-day) programme, a day consists of four sessions: two in the morning with a tea break, then lunch and two more in the afternoon with a tea break. Included in the design of each module or block are extramural activities such as site visits, debates, guest speakers, sporting activities, and viewing of documentaries, which act as enrichment for the course. The sixth module is based on a project or fieldwork carried out at the activists’ sites of practice or at a site chosen by the college.
In 2010, one of the six modules (the first module in each diploma programme) was designed to focus on activism, which has helped to further develop the college's approach to 'in-curriculum' RPL (Breier 2006). This 'Activism' module serves as a generic introduction to the themes and focus areas of the diploma programmes. Its goal is to facilitate a process of learners drawing on their experiences, skills and knowledge – including political, social and economic – acquired through life struggles and activism, and to have such knowledge documented, acknowledged and recognised as being of value to these organisations. The themes and values adopted in this first module are threaded through the diploma programmes and joint sessions with all the learners, engaging holistically with learners' experiences and informing their further engagement as activists in the workplace and the communities in which they live.

Some typical learners and their early education experiences

As part of the research project, a biographical study of five learners from the diploma programme was conducted. Aimed at an in-depth understanding of the agency of learners in an RPL situation, the study adopted a qualitative research approach using interviews. The interview schedule was designed to produce a broad background and a set of narratives related to learners' histories; to generate more specific data in relation to learners' educational experience at the Workers' College; and to measure the impact of the programme and the application of their knowledge and skills in different settings or different aspects of their lives – personal, workplace and/or community. The biographical study also sought to bring to the fore learners' voices, insights and world views using the life history approach (Field, Merrill & West 2012) with an emphasis on the importance of presenting the individuals' subjective evaluation of their experiences, and of giving information about their social experiences.

The biographical studies commenced with the selection of a purposive sample of three men and two women. The selection took into account gender, age, academic background, academic performance, organisational culture, dropout from the programme, completion of the programme, and current study. Of the five, three had completed a Workers' College diploma in 2012: one had completed the Gender and Labour Studies Diploma; one – a disabled learner – had completed the Labour Studies Diploma; and the third learner, who possessed a postgraduate degree, had completed the Labour and Economics Diploma. The other two respondents included one learner who had dropped out of the Political and Social Development Diploma in 2012; and one learner, a community activist, who had completed her diploma in 2011 and was at the time of the interview studying on the degree programme at UKZN.

All five of the learners described themselves as coming from poor families, and mentioned financial constraints as a key barrier in their struggle to access formal education. These poor socio-economic conditions had instilled in them a spirit
of self-reliance, and prodded them to make efforts to excel in their studies and related activities so that they could acquire a good education. As one learner stated, in the absence of enabling socio-economic conditions and in view of the lack of a supportive family environment, ‘it was all about discipline and self-determination.’

The disabled learner’s experiences were marked by three great struggles: firstly, the struggle to access schools that accepted disabled learners and that were conducive to them; secondly, the struggle to endure the discrimination and victimisation of disabled people in society; and thirdly, the struggle to exert herself above the generally poor, disempowering and brutalising socio-economic conditions experienced by the black working-class majority. She reiterated her need to persevere, expressing her experience of battling against heavy obstacles and barriers to realise her goals.

Some of the learners attributed their struggles to access education to systemic and structural conditions, as well as to the political dynamics of South Africa in the turbulent era of apartheid. One of the learners experienced her first great barrier when her final, school-leaving results were held back in 1988. It was the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system of education at the time that presented this barrier, and it marked the beginning of her struggle to further her education. Her experience of these barriers strengthened her passion for activism and her determination to fight inequalities and discrimination. This took her down the path of community activism and revealed capabilities and strengths in community work. At the same time, she continued to work hard for a qualification, which she believed would give her credibility and recognition as a leader in her community.

For one of the learners, his disillusionment with the school system began in high school, where he had a serious lack of subject choices and was forced to do mathematics, his weakest subject. Another of the learners related how he was emotionally troubled by his parents’ disapproval of his student activism and how they made him feel that he was a ‘troublemaker’. This was after his teacher had informed his parents that he had ‘failed’ Standard 6 (Grade 8) because of his role in protests against discriminatory practices at his school and against the inferior education system. Another learner had to fight his way through the social problems of gangsterism and drugs that prevailed in the townships. His self-determination and self-discipline also emerged through his narrative of how he fought his way out of the ‘bad path’ of drugs and gangsterism and chose the ‘good path’ of education by forming a different type of ‘gang’ called ‘Isiqenqe’ (the intellectuals).

Issues that emerged in the narratives of these learners included the poor quality of the education, the negative attitudes of teaching staff, barriers presented by admissions and access policies, the poor quality of and lack of access to facilities, the generally unsettled school environment and the broad political and policy environment that affected the nature of education and the policies of the schools. It was clear that learners’ experiences in the education arena led to insights into the
broader socio-economic and political situation, and a growing awareness of their capacity for agency. Most were forced to leave school and seek employment at an early age, where they encountered the harsh realities of black working-class life in South Africa. But they hung on to their dream of acquiring an education that would provide them with access to a good career and improvement of their socio-economic conditions.

The agency they gained from these experiences prepared them for active participation in trade unions and community organisations. They developed a commitment and passion to fight for human rights and were equipped with strong personal traits of determination and resilience. These experiences and traits were recognised and acknowledged by their organisations and earned them their leadership positions. In turn, these positions opened the door to further education at the Workers’ College – an opportunity that most of them would otherwise not have had. Later in the chapter, we return to these learners to explore their experiences of the Workers’ College pedagogy.

**Workers’ College pedagogy**

The first phase of the research project sought to document the historical development and educational philosophy of the Workers’ College (its findings are set out in an earlier section of the current chapter). In the second phase, the research sought to obtain a more detailed picture of, and a critical ‘outsider’ perspective on, forms of pedagogy in use at the Workers’ College. This part of the research focused on both ‘curriculum as planned’ and ‘curriculum in action’. In particular, it focused on what experience is valued and recruited, and how such experience is recruited for learning and knowledge production. Thus, the research focus was on the pedagogical methods used to recruit experiential knowledge, which included the teaching/learning orientation (teacher- or learner-centred); the teaching methodologies and tools of mediation (Daniels 2001); the teaching and learning materials; and the forms of assessment.

Data collection took place during module three of the 2012 residential diploma programmes and was carried out by two researchers who had no previous involvement with the Workers’ College, but who were part of the larger South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) RPL research project. Their research entailed observations of one session of each diploma programme over two days; an observation of a supervision session for Module 6, where supervisors gave individual feedback to learners on the progress of their projects; two focus group interviews with college staff and facilitators; and a systematic analysis of course workbooks, readers and assignments from Module 3 (the ‘curriculum as planned’).

It is acknowledged that focusing on only one module of the diploma programmes was insufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of what experiential knowledge was recruited and how, but it did provide an insight into one section of
the planned curriculum and snapshots into the pedagogical approaches of different facilitators. Findings revealed that RPL was functioning at different levels and in multiple ways at the Workers' College:

- At pre-entry, where admissions criteria prioritised certain types of activist experience.
- Within the diploma programmes themselves, where learners' experiential knowledge provided the scaffolding for epistemological access to the Workers' College curriculum.
- At the end of the programme, as a route for successful learners from the diploma programmes to access the specialist higher education B.Soc.Sci. degree at UKZN.

Despite the prioritising of activists' experiential knowledge, the planned curriculum of the college, as characterised by readers and resource packs containing mostly academic texts, is conceptually dense with a strong conceptual orientation. This was confirmed by facilitators in the focus group interviews, where the point was made that the Workers' College sees this conceptual knowledge as providing a necessary 'specialist discourse' for trade union and community workers to become better activists in their sites of practice. Although it was acknowledged that some of the concepts were complex, it was pointed out that many of the learners would already have encountered them in their line of work, and therefore would not be unfamiliar with them.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the apparent conceptual orientation of the curriculum, in practice this theoretical knowledge is largely mediated through learners' experience. Observations of classroom practice showed that this process frequently begins in an inductive way, where the facilitators draw on learners' experiential knowledge, and interpret and recontextualise this in relation to conceptual knowledge. Concepts are then once more applied to the real world and learners' concrete experience: working deductively, the concepts are either applied to case studies or recontextualised alongside learners' experience in order to deepen their understanding.

For example, in one class of the Gender and Labour Studies Diploma, the facilitator showed a DVD of an informal settlement linked to one of the major mines. At the end of the film, she explored what the learners had observed, linking their observations and own experiences to forms of oppression and exploitation observed in the film (sexual oppression, gender oppression, and oppression of labour and of migrant workers). She then led the discussion to a more abstract level, focusing on the 'feminisation of poverty' and how 'class' has taken over from 'race' as the distinguishing feature of oppression in South Africa. The facilitator drew more and more heavily on theoretical concepts during the course of this discussion – concepts such as horizontal and vertical oppression, and the notion of agents and targets of oppression – continuously linking these concepts back to the real life experiences of the participants in the class. The class ended with a discussion on what their commitments and responsibilities are as activists in addressing these issues.
The study revealed that the facilitators’ pedagogy acts to mediate the engagement between learners’ individual and collective (organisational) experiential knowledge and the conceptual knowledge of the curriculum. One of the facilitators remarked: ‘It’s about taking the learners from where they are and developing them further, and that ‘we demystify concepts first, by describing them in experience, and then explore them in a more distanced, measured way’, for example looking at how globalisation affects learners’ daily lives (FGI 15/06/2012). Working with learners’ experiential knowledge to arrive at more abstract, conceptual understandings provides learners with an academic language of description. When the facilitator subsequently works backwards from abstract concepts to learners’ experiential knowledge, this academic language helps learners to understand and critique their experiential knowledge, their assumptions and their organisational, activist practice: ‘… (we are) pulling them out of their context in order to put them back in again’ (FGI 15/06/2012).

Drawing on learners’ personal experience as the starting point for creating knowledge is seen by facilitators as particularly significant as a means of empowerment. As emphasised by the director of the college, ‘the hierarchical structures of the unions disallow the personal’. The Workers’ College’s emphasis on the personal is important in strengthening an activist identity: ‘If you can’t transform yourself you cannot transform broader society’ (FGI 14/06/2012). The recruitment of learners’ personal experience is also seen as facilitating their assimilation of theoretical knowledge: ‘They appropriate the knowledge for themselves and can operationalise it, they are not just acquiring it’ (FGI 15/06/2012).

Facilitators emphasised that learning does not take place only in the classroom. The facilitators spoke of field trips they had organised, such as to the informal traders’ market in Durban, where the learners could see ‘concepts in operation’. Poetry, drama and other creative activities, such as drumming, were used to explore some concepts experientially – for example, the issue of diversity.

The dialogical process of inductive recruitment of experience, relating experience to abstract concepts, and then deductively relating these to particular contexts, seems to enable learners to ‘transcend their local context’ and ‘access the academic and specialised knowledge that gives rise to abstract, specialised and context-independent knowledge structures that are the prerequisite for [formal] self-directed learning’ (Haupt 2005: 47).

**Activism as the organising principle for the diploma programmes**

A research study by an exchange student at UKZN, Elayna Tillman, in which she sought to explore how the Workers’ College ‘develops in its learners a consciousness about their role as activists in transforming society’, shows that the notion of activism is key to the purpose and methodology of education at the Workers’ College of ‘developing critical and informed activists in civil society’ (Tillman 2012: 4). This topic was further explored in the focus group interviews with Workers’ College
facilitators and staff, in an attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of how this manifests in the diploma programmes.

As explained by Workers’ College staff, all four diploma courses start with a common ‘Activism’ module (Module 1) in which learners’ experience of activism is explored in relation to their life, community and work, and this forms the basis for all further learning at the Workers’ College. Activism is defined in this module as ‘when an individual or community or organisation engages in activities ... to address challenges facing their respective constituencies ... and all forms of oppression and exploitation based on class, race, gender ... for the betterment/improvement of their livelihood’ (Workers’ College 2012: 1). The module explores and exposes the learners to different values, as ‘... people may be walking the same road but have different values’ (FGI 15/06/2012) and it shows how their values are shaped by the predominant values of their organisations. Facilitators argue that ‘not all the unions have the discourses of change, even though we assume they do’ (FGI 15/06/2012); in other words, there are different forms of trade unions – those that want to bring about social change and those that confine their work to addressing ‘bread and butter issues’ within the workplace, thus working within the system. Not all the learners have an awareness of themselves as activists for change when they come to the college, ‘but we make them into activists’ (FGI 15/06/2012).

The diplomas, therefore, expose learners to activist discourses, especially socialist perspectives on oppression and exploitation, the inter-relationships between various forms of activism and the issues and causes advanced by these forms, and related activist strategies for action. Activism is explored broadly in relation to learners’ life struggles (by drawing on their personal experiences), as well as more specifically in relation to their organisational experience (drawing on their activist experience), from the perspectives of the four different diplomas respectively. A facilitator explained: ‘The discussions help raise their [learners’] consciousness and embrace other perspectives and understandings – for example, looking at homophobia and “corrective rape” and how this is a violation of personal rights, and how in a similar way workers’ rights are abused in the workplace’ (FGI 15/06/2012). Learners are urged to develop a balanced perspective and to challenge existing ideologies and knowledge – both their own and those of others in academia, in the trade unions and in their communities – but they are also constantly reminded to respect differences at all times.

The college director observed that all sessions were geared towards building not only understanding of social structure but also consciousness of agency, so that the participants learn to act as agents in their organisations, which further ‘heightens their consciousness’ (FGI 15/06/2012). It was clear that this notion of ‘consciousness’ is an important one at the Workers’ College; in particular, consciousness of being an activist and what this means. The curriculum of the first module outlines how learners are explicitly oriented to the principles, values and ethics of activism, which they then apply in the context of the college, actively
learning these roles in social interactions and ‘conscientising others not to oppress them’ (FGI 15/06/2012).

The values of activism are lived at the college through participatory and critical learning processes and through open, democratic and non-discriminatory debate, which draw on learners’ prior learning experiences. Of key importance is that learners learn to think critically, to ‘turn the lens on themselves’ (FGI 14/06/2012) from the outset. It was explained, for example, that learners are asked the same questions at the beginning and again at the end of this first module, and they then reflect on how their perspectives have shifted during this short time.

It was further explained that the diploma programmes emphasise collective learning, through group work as well as peer review of each other’s assignments. As the director remarked: ‘Collectivism has become an underlying theme and value, which is reflected in how they help each other’ (FGI 15/06/2012). With learners from all four diploma programmes together in the first four sessions of the ‘Activism’ module, learners are introduced to collective and collaborative learning and activist values right from the start. Activist values are also woven through all other sessions, learning activities and social interactions.

These activist values become embedded in the facilitators as well, as they ‘learn from each other and from the learners’, sharing their own experiences and struggles in a collective fashion. This process has the effect of shifting and equalising power relations and eliminating ‘the disjuncture between the values of the lecturer and what they are teaching’, which is so often evident in higher education institutions (FGI 15/06/2012). This sharing of learning and experiences was clearly observed in the different sessions; one of the facilitators from the Gender and Labour Studies Diploma commented that she shared things with her learners that ‘not even my mother knows’. An example of egalitarian social relations between learners and staff, and of identifying collectively with activists’ struggles, was observed on two occasions when all learners and facilitators were assembling for a late afternoon seminar, and some learners spontaneously started singing activist, ‘struggle’ chants. Within minutes, all the learners, staff and facilitators present were chanting, whistling and ‘toyi-toying’ (a form of collective singing and dancing to protest or send a message) in solidarity.

The Workers’ College pedagogy also encompasses the emotion and the body. The theme of healing appeared several times in the course of the research: a restoring of people’s humanity was considered a vital outcome of the diplomas, helping learners to overcome feelings of inferiority in terms of their educational backgrounds and knowledge capital. As the college director pointed out:

Healing happens quite naturally within the class, because of what they do. Their story comes through in the broader story of the collective – they locate themselves in a context through their stories: ‘I am an activist because …’ These stories are then located in the broader histories and
current contexts of activism, and the values that bring them all together. (FGI 15/06/2012)

As Tillman (2012: 8) observed: ‘Once the humanity of the oppressed is restored then it follows that they will recognise themselves as agents and will act to effect change and transform their environment, essentially what the Workers’ College sets out to do.’

It seems that the ‘Activism’ module, and especially the first four sessions thereof, which the learners from all four diplomas do together, acts as an RPL module in itself, locating learning within learners’ experiences and initiating them into the normative discourse of the college. In the other modules, RPL is integrated into the learning activities, which are based on diploma-specific subject matter. The discourse of critical activism, with its embedded values, principles and ethics for social change, is the ‘golden thread’ for all four diploma curricula and for all social interaction at the Workers’ College.

**Learners’ experiences of the Workers’ College pedagogy**

Biographical interviews with the selection of five learners sought to explore their experiences of the Workers’ College programme, as well as their views on the impact of the programme. We deal first with learners’ experiences of the Workers’ College pedagogy.

The community activist who subsequently pursued the degree programme at UKZN, and who had a range of education experiences, spoke with great excitement and relief about the uniqueness of her experiences at the Worker’s College, comparing them to previous experiences at a teacher training college:

> Ha – and then I found the engagement – everybody must … like take part in this thing – you must talk – how exciting! There used to be a lecturer standing there [at teachers’ college] – read, read read – there’s the assignment then go home – that’s it, finished. Next day ask whatever, whatever … But here, God – even this pen means something. I must analyse: why it is black? Why did they choose the colour? Why is this? Why is that lying there? Who is this? What is he doing in this organisation? So many questions – and it’s so exciting for me you know – ooh God – it was so exciting! (Workers’ College 2013)

In comparing the Workers’ College experience with her subsequent university experience, she said:

> I thought the lectures were going to be the same as Workers’ College ones. But when I got there they got this lecturer’s notion – way of doing things – still lecturing. So then gradually they learnt to engage. It’s the way like we were raised here at Workers’ College. At least now they understand we are the working class. (Workers’ College 2013)
Learners found the pacing and the structure of the Workers’ College programme – as well as issues of group dynamics and their engagement with academic concepts and theories – challenging. They met the difficulties of learning in a formal environment, and balancing this intensive programme with work, family and community commitments, by using various coping strategies.

In comparison with their previous learning experiences, learners found the environment and culture of the Workers’ College friendly and non-threatening. They were particularly encouraged by the manner in which the facilitators and staff presented themselves as comrades and their equals. The learners felt that the activist identities of the facilitators allowed them (the learners) to do well in a learning environment that is centred on activism. The interactive nature of the education practice strengthened this idea that all were equal and their experiences received an equal recognition. Learners particularly highlighted the fact that the programme was centred on socialist principles and values, and that it focused on current issues related to race, gender, class and ecology.

Another aspect of the Workers’ College practice and culture that all learners made reference to was its non-discriminatory ethos. They felt that there were concerted efforts at the college to make everyone feel respected and accepted irrespective of their gender, political affiliation, age or position in their organisations or status in society. Learners found the facilitators to be exemplary in this regard. They referred to how the facilitators engaged with learners and made efforts to let them ‘feel free’, and joined learners in cultural and sporting activities, as well as informal conversations and interactions.

As far as the pedagogic traditions of the Workers’ College are concerned, all learners mentioned that they had found the education practice participative, and centred on acknowledging and recognising their experiences and ‘struggle’ knowledge. They valued opportunities and spaces to reflect on and critique their life histories and experiences. They particularly appreciated the platform to share their experiences, and the inclusive nature of the education discourse that encouraged critical engagement. They recognised that the facilitation was based on empathetic listening, an understanding of working-class issues and the learning drawn from such content, and sensitivity to their social and personal circumstances.

Some tensions and disjunctures

There seemed to be two main tensions or disjunctures that were visible to the outside observers and that were raised in the focus group interviews in order to ascertain staff’s responses: the question of how to effectively integrate text-based learning materials into the curriculum; and the tension in the relationship between the overall aims and objectives of the Workers’ College and the nature of the tools of assessment, that is, assignments and exams.
Classroom pedagogy at the Workers’ College draws substantially on oral methods and visual resources that are familiar to learners. However, the college’s pedagogy also relies heavily on texts that are often conceptually dense. A common problem experienced by facilitators, and raised in one of the focus group interviews, was the difficulty learners have in coping with the text-based material, struggling not only to read, but also to understand the texts. This may be understood against the fact that most learners come from black, working-class backgrounds where their schooling was poor; furthermore, English is in most cases their second or third language. The facilitators discussed and shared their different techniques for dealing with academic texts. These included learners choosing one of their members to read the text aloud to the class, people in the class each taking turns to read out one paragraph, or the facilitators themselves reading key excerpts or short sections from long texts to stimulate discussion. However, although these strategies may enhance learning, explaining the texts was still time-consuming. Facilitators suggested that local written accounts of case studies should be sought as much as possible for interrogation and critique, as this would make it easier for learners to understand the readings conceptually. The issue of text-based learning materials nevertheless presents a challenge to that dimension of RPL at the Workers’ College that seeks to enable access for learners to higher education, because learners need to acquire the ability to engage confidently with academic texts in a higher education context.4

Another tension or disjuncture lay between ‘RPL as radical pedagogy’ and the nature of the assignments and exams. The college director explained that the final mark for each of the first five modules of each diploma comprises a combination of examinations (50%), assignments (40%) and participation (10%). The fieldwork module, Module 6, is marked incrementally, as the different stages are completed. To an outside observer, the assignments in the learners’ workbooks appeared very academic in nature, with a focus on assessing understanding of general, abstract concepts and contextual issues, and not explicitly drawing on experiential knowledge in any way. Similarly, there seemed to be a disjuncture between having a formal examination at the end of each of the first five modules, on the one hand, and the experiential emphasis of the pedagogical approach that characterised classroom practice at the college, on the other.

In the focus group discussions, facilitators argued that the assignments are based on issues that affect the learners in the community, in their organisations and in the workplace, and that they are given ‘the tools to critically reflect and critique these’ in class. They argued that because of the way learners process this knowledge in class through ‘RPL pedagogy’ and in terms of their own trade union and organisational discourses, they are able to make meaning of the questions in the assignments and exams, and to use examples from their own lives to answer them. They emphasised that the aim of the diploma programmes was for the learners to acquire ‘a way of interrogating the world’, as this interrogation helps them to highlight their own values and put these values under scrutiny, rather than acquiring knowledge for its
own sake. However, it remains an interesting challenge as to how to devise creative approaches to assessment that are compatible with, and that promote ‘RPL as radical pedagogy’.

**Towards some theoretical implications**

The Workers’ College case study raises some interesting theoretical issues, challenging some of the assumptions often made in the literature about ‘experiential learning’ and ‘experiential knowledge’, as well as putting pressure on dualist models of pedagogy.

As noted in Chapter 2 of this book, traditional theorisations of RPL draw extensively on adult learning and experiential learning theories (Andersson & Harris 2006). The classic experiential learning cycle of Kolb (1984) starts with experience, and proceeds to abstraction from that experience in a fairly ‘open’ way. That is, it draws preliminary lessons, understandings and concepts from that experience. These understandings or concepts are seen as having primary relevance for the individual learner concerned. In Kolb’s (1984) model, after this initial process of conceptualisation, ideas, concepts or information from outside of learners’ experience are brought in to deepen or challenge understanding. The resultant ideas and understandings are then used to inform practice. This model, therefore, uses experience in a primarily inductive way.

However, with the Workers’ College, a close analysis of the lesson plans in the learners’ workbooks, as well as the pedagogy in the classroom, shows a different pattern. Generally speaking, experience is first recruited in an open inductive fashion (where no specific conclusions are pre-figured), followed by a move towards ‘closed’, inductive recruitment of experience, where learners engage in individual and collective dialogue between their experiential knowledge and the conceptual and theoretical content of the curriculum. There is therefore a dialectical movement between ‘theory’ and ‘experience’ – often ending with the application of concepts back to concrete experience, in order to deepen understanding of the concepts or to reorder and reinterpret experiential knowledge.

It seems that the model of experiential learning in use at the Workers’ College is not that of the humanist, Kolb, but rather that of the more materialist thinker and educationist, Vygotsky. Both models provide a role for formal theory or formal concepts. In Kolb’s model, however, these are secondary and brought in later to test or enrich the ‘everyday’ concepts; it is the everyday concepts, organically derived from personal experience, that are given primacy.

Vygotsky presents a far stronger role for formal theory, while retaining a role for ‘everyday concepts’. Vygotsky (1986) differentiated between two kinds of concepts (or processes of concept formation), which represent two different forms of
reasoning: what he called ‘scientific concepts’ (i.e. formal concepts) that develop through instruction, and ‘spontaneous concepts’ (or ‘everyday’ concepts) that develop through experience. Although their paths of development are different, they are related and constantly influence each other; the process is essentially a unitary one. Both formal and ‘everyday’ concepts have a development curve, but the development of formal concepts leads the development of spontaneous concepts: ‘Systematic reasoning, being initially acquired in the sphere of scientific concepts, later transfers its structural organisation into spontaneous concepts, remodelling them from above’ (Vygotsky 1986: 172).

The Workers’ College case study seems to present a fruitful example of how a formal body of theory (what Vygotsky would have called ‘scientific concepts’), derived mainly from Marxist/neo-Marxist, critical and feminist theories, is introduced to learners consciously and explicitly. Initially, ‘everyday’ experience is drawn on selectively to illustrate the meaning of concepts. Thereafter, conceptual tools are used to recontextualise ‘everyday’ concepts, deepening their understanding and, most importantly, systematising everyday thinking. This process seems to act as a good springboard for a form of RPL that is inclusive of everyday, experiential knowledge and that prepares learners for the demands of academic study.

In accounting for this approach, a key factor seems to be the strong contextual purpose of the Workers’ College curriculum, and its notion that the task of bringing about radical social change is served and enhanced by providing learners with a strong set of conceptual resources. However, these theoretical resources – while being general and abstract in form – must at the same time be meaningful, and useful to learners as social activists. Furthermore, the Workers’ College philosophy is clearly one that does not regard established conceptual frames as remaining untouched in this process. The college holds the view that in the process of recontextualising learners’ experiences, these experiences may in turn act to challenge or change established theory.

Given the strong political and social activist orientation of the Workers’ College, how did learners experience the impact of this programme on their lives and practices as activists?

**The impact of ‘RPL as radical pedagogy’ on activists**

All those interviewed indicated that the programme had impacted on their personal lives and on how they conducted themselves in the community and at the workplace. They provided several examples of how they applied the knowledge/skills in their workplaces and in their organisations. One of the learners, who did not complete the diploma, said: ‘After Workers’ College I was confident enough to go to the front, draw up the agenda, you know, consult where do we start, basically speak with confidence – although most of them (are) older than me.’
At the workplace, he felt able to take over when his senior was not able to attend South African National Community Organisation (SANCO) meetings. He had also learnt to confront issues at his workplace, such as challenging employers who discriminate between different levels of employees.

The community activist who subsequently pursued the degree programme at UKZN felt that, in her leadership role in her organisation, she had learnt to be more democratic and not make decisions on her own. The Workers’ College programme had helped to change her perspectives: she had learnt that there are many points of view and no one view is correct. The programme had also taught her the importance of tolerance and respect for others, and the need to listen to others:

> When I came here this notion of being a leader, sort of like, strengthened me – coming here strengthened my leadership, strengthened the way I thought, and strengthened the way I looked at the things in all angles of life … Here I learnt more of leadership. I learnt of being democratic. [What] I learnt strengthened my passion. (Worker’s College 2013)

She tried to synthesise all these learnings, and with the new knowledge and experience gained, she felt better able to understand her community and people's behaviour. She argued that people in her community should learn to understand one another, be tolerant and live with one another. She described this as being 'like weaving a warm blanket and then going underneath'.

The college’s recognition of her knowledge, skills and experience had given her the opportunity to attend a conference on ‘Co-operative and Policy Alternatives’, which focused on conducting an action research project in the solidarity (community-based, non-profit) economy. Her involvement in an action research project on waste management and climate change had contributed to her development in various ways, including building her organisational and leadership capacity, research skills, and computer and information literacy skills, and her passion for developing and transforming her community and its environment. This experience, in turn, was instrumental in her receiving a Centre for Civil Society (CCS) scholarship for community research, and the opportunity to travel to Brazil to learn how they have reduced their waste.

The learner who already had a university degree felt that the fieldwork project was most valuable to him in terms of his work as an Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU) shop steward. He had investigated the effectiveness of shop stewards at his workplace because he had a problem with them not effectively representing workers. IMATU is currently implementing his recommendations in training and retraining shop stewards. The confidence and knowledge he gained from the Workers’ College course also helped him to implement some of the methods used in the course. For example, as a manager, he has begun to create forums for all workers to come together and discuss their problems with him, where he attempts to resolve as many issues as possible directly.
The disabled learner related how, at her workplace, she and her colleagues who attended the Workers’ College started engaging with managers at a different level:

Managers [were] surprised at the language [we] used – scared … The course made a difference – too much – in a practical way. For example, in [the case of] Injured On Duty (IOD), [we] explained what is IOD, made them understand. The way I was taught here helped me to teach others in the same way. (Workers’ College 2013)

One of the learners had initially been reluctant to pursue the Gender and Labour Studies diploma, but when he went back to his workplace, he realised that gender equality was not practised:

At work, as a shop steward I realised that we need to treat each other equally – give each other space, respect … women … [I] learnt about sexual harassment. The class shared a lot about sexual harassment and policy and things we do. These are the things that helped me to change – (to) tell workers ‘don’t do that, you are going to be in trouble; as shop steward I can’t help if you do something bad to a woman’ … Workers’ College taught us a lot to work collectively – activism and all – I applied all this, it helped me a lot. (Workers’ College 2013)

While there were differences in the backgrounds and personal experiences of the learners, there was a common thread in their narrative with regard to how the Workers’ College programme had impacted on their lives. All of the learners interviewed felt that the programme had enhanced and affirmed their agency as activists; empowered them with different skills and strategies that they could apply in different social contexts; raised levels of understanding and competence; broadened and changed perspectives; built their confidence; and inculcated socialist principles and values.

**Conclusion**

The radical approach to pedagogy used at the Workers’ College is not new in South Africa, especially in adult education and within organisations that work towards social change. There are many such organisations that have mediated and continue to mediate experiential and academic knowledge, in an attempt to find new and alternative solutions.

‘RPL as radical pedagogy’ as practised at the Workers’ College, attempts to mediate between the ‘struggle’ knowledge of activists who come onto the diploma programmes, and a set of theoretical frameworks the concepts of which relate to such experiences, directly or indirectly. RPL at the college also attempts to facilitate a process for activists to understand their current existence and develop their own, independent world view in opposition to the dominant knowledge system and culture that prevails in our globalised society. With the embedding of ‘RPL as radical...
pedagogy’ into an accredited programme, however, the college also seeks to provide an access route to the academy, and therefore a way into the dominant knowledge system – a knowledge system that may undermine learners’ own experiences and world view. The Workers’ College has to work within this tension, all the while strengthening the confidence of its learners to challenge dominant knowledge paradigms.

The Workers’ College views education in the broad context of bringing about change in intellectual understanding, contributing and developing new knowledge, and responding creatively to societal conditions and realities. The aim of RPL within the Workers’ College and similar institutions is not primarily one of credit seeking but rather one of liberating the individual and communities; the view of the college is that this liberatory pedagogy should be integral to wider pedagogical discourses and education practices.

This case study has cast light on the Workers’ College’s RPL practices and provided an opportunity for the college to address the possible gaps identified and to build on the innovations identified by the study. Participants in the research project believe that it will strengthen the Workers’ College’s attempts to develop ‘best practices’ of RPL in the context of a developing country where the struggle to achieve equality, redress, restoration of dignity and social cohesion is of the utmost importance.

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Notes
1 Neville Alexander was an acclaimed educationist, academic and anti-apartheid struggle veteran, who authored of a number of influential books. He was a political prisoner on Robben Island from 1964–1974.
2 An earlier version of this chapter has been published in Bofelo et al. (2013).
3 The learners from all four diploma programmes are brought together in the first four sessions of the ‘Activism’ module.
4 For further discussion on the role of tools of mediation in RPL in relation to workers’ education, see Cooper (2006).
References


Workers’ College (2012) Activist Workbook

RPL and occupational competence

Karen Deller

The focus of this case study is the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for credit in relation to an occupationally directed qualification. The provider in this case is a private FET College (FETC) specialising in the design and implementation of RPL programmes and services to the private sector. The focus and timing of the case study is interesting in that it explores the implications for RPL of the first Curriculum and Assessment Policy statement of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO 2011a).

South Africa has three statutory bodies – Quality Councils – responsible for quality assurance in different sections of the education system. The QCTO is responsible for assuring the quality of those occupational qualifications not offered by higher education institutions,¹ or by the schooling sector.² The publication of a new Curriculum and Assessment Policy by the QCTO in 2011 marked a decisive shift from the outcomes-based discourse that was prevalent at the time. Whereas previously, occupational qualifications had been based on competency-based unit standards, the new policy directed that the design and assessment of occupationally directed qualifications would have to be grounded in a curriculum framework that included three distinctive components: conceptual knowledge components, practical knowledge components and workplace components; and that the successful completion of an External Integrated Summative Assessment (EISA) was required to earn the qualification.

The issue for those providing RPL services in relation to occupational qualifications is that under the previous design, an integrated approach to assessment was possible, whereas the new policy specified that different components of the curriculum would have to be disaggregated and assessed separately. Furthermore, under the new policy it appeared that the same rules would apply to RPL assessments for experienced workers as for new entrants to the field. A concern over the implications of these changes served as the motivation for this case study in which the private FETC set out to test the viability of an RPL process based on the new ‘disaggregated’ curriculum and comparing it with the more established ‘integrated’ model.

The chapter commences with a brief conceptual overview of the changing policy framework and related models of RPL in the workplace followed by the case study report, and analysis. The final section of the chapter provides an account of the learner agency study that explored the perceptions and capabilities of those workers who successfully complete these processes and gain the qualification.
Workplace RPL in a changing qualifications framework

The advent of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa gave rise to the development of structures and systems to register and quality assure unit standards (i.e. statements of competence) and associated qualifications. Occupational qualifications in the original NQF format (i.e. pre-QCTO) consist of a planned combination of unit standards, where each unit standard is in turn an integrated combination of theory, practical and reflexive outcomes. Together the outcomes of a single unit standard define a competent, integrated performance, and here ‘integration’ refers to ‘performance with understanding’ such that the competent person would be able to adapt to changed circumstances and explain the reasons behind those adaptations (HSRC 1995).

These NQF structures and the agreed unit standards and qualifications together created conditions favourable for the implementation of what Harris (2000) and others refer to as the ‘credit exchange model’ of RPL in the occupational sectors. In the years that followed the establishment of the NQF, a number of large-scale RPL projects were initiated by the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) in various sectors. Reports emerging from some of these projects (Deller 2008; Volbrecht et al. 2006) make it clear that, while the focus was predominantly on RPL as an assessment process, many of the projects also developed particular pedagogic strategies to assist candidates to understand and engage with the specialised language used in the unit standards. These strategies served to bridge the candidates into the discourse of the unit standards, enabling them to give expression to their tacitly acquired and contextually bound workplace knowledge and skills, and to map them against the assessment criteria of the unit standards.

The RPL model used under the ‘original’ design of unit standards-based qualifications was distinctive in that it provided for an integrated approach to the preparation and assessment of experienced workers. (See Table 6.1 on page 104.) This approach was grounded in the understanding of the differences between the integrated nature and discourse of the skilled worker and the more generic discourse of knowledge and skills represented in the unit standards and related qualifications.

Research conducted by Deller (2008) prior to this case study found that RPL candidates are generally more able to demonstrate their prior learning against the practical and reflexive outcomes in the unit standards than to articulate their prior learning in ‘unit standards speak’; they often lack the codified conceptual knowledge and language necessary to be found competent against the ‘knowledge outcomes’ of the unit standards. This means that without a pedagogical RPL intervention, and an integrated approach to the assessment of the outcomes, very few candidates would be awarded the unit standard or qualification.
### Table 6.1 Integrated and disaggregated models of RPL for occupationally directed qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrated RPL model (Unit standards-based framework)</th>
<th>Disaggregated RPL model (OQ curriculum framework)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment of underpinning knowledge concepts is an integrated feature of workplace-based observations of candidates performing tasks. This is often supplemented by a separate ‘learning discussion’ to assess embedded knowledge and to surface tacit knowledge and skills. Candidates can link their knowledge to a task in context and use familiar workplace terminology. If a candidate cannot think of an answer to a knowledge question in the learning discussion, the question can be asked in a different way in the observation-linked questioning and again in a simulation, so there are multiple mediation points where theoretical concepts can be interpreted, mediated and assessed.</td>
<td>Underpinning knowledge concepts are assessed as distinct subjects, separated from the workplace, usually in the form of a questionnaire, using academic terminology that may be unfamiliar to the candidate. There is no opportunity to revisit the concepts and collect additional evidence of their embeddedness in workplace-based practices; especially as each component is to be mediated and assessed by different providers and assessors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of practical and workplace components</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical and workplace-specific outcomes are integrated. Assessment of the two components is flexible and workplace driven and is negotiated with the employee based on access to artefacts, and issues of confidentiality, safety, risk, and so on. Simulation is used to assess only what is not available in the workplace. A real workplace observation can incorporate additional evidence from other components, (e.g. a bank robbery during real bank teller skills assessment would allow for assessment of analytical reasoning, stress management, communication skills, and so on).</td>
<td>Practical and workplace components are pre-defined and prescribed. Both are to be independently assessed by different providers in different contexts. Practical competence is to be simulated and workplace competence assessed in the real workplace. Evidence of competence in either component is not transferable to the other, as different providers are responsible for teaching and assessing these.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final summative assessment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final summative assessment is not a standardised part of the unit standards-based NQF requirements for all occupational qualifications. Some SETAs have introduced it as an integrated final assessment, but most have not.</td>
<td>The EISA has been introduced as an overarching assessment to test that candidates have comprehensive and not fragmented understanding and competence. The proposal is that it be examination based. The EISA is to be the only exit point for awarding the qualification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of the RPL advisor</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A single RPL advisor acts as a ‘boundary worker’ between the RPL provider and the workplace. This advisor gets to know the candidates, knows within which contexts they are most likely to be able to show their competence and helps them to achieve by contextualising and decoding information, both for them and with them. Jointly the advisor and candidates go between the workplace and the formal learning environment, to enable the candidates to translate and present what they know and can do in assessment discourses.</td>
<td>Potentially there are three separate RPL advisors – one per component – with each focusing on his or her own area. In terms of RPL, there will be little opportunity to do anything other than recognise what each advisor sees from his or her own component. The foundational learning (FL) component (compulsory for NQF Levels 3 and 4) can only be achieved via an exam, to be set by the Independent Examinations Board (IEB); no RPL or exemption will be possible for this component.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tendency of experienced workers (RPL candidates) to perform less well on the theoretical, knowledge-based outcomes makes sense, given that much of their knowledge would have been acquired tacitly in the workplace, and is contextually bound (Engeström 2004), socially constructed and ‘shared’ with other workers who have a hand in creating it (Billet 2004). In contrast, the outcomes of most unit standards include underpinning knowledge and an expectation that this knowledge can be expressed and assessed explicitly by each individual candidate (Winch 1998). The assumption that knowledge can be readily brought to mind as clear and distinct ideas (Beckett & Hager 2002) is valid for the type of knowledge that is best acquired and assessed in a traditional classroom, but this is not the case for many competent workers whose knowledge and skills are acquired in and through workplace-based practices.

The pedagogical strategies associated with an integrated RPL model assist the experienced worker/RPL candidate to articulate the underpinning knowledge/theory in relation to their own context-bound practices. Billett’s (2004) notion of group discussions away from the workplace is particularly useful in assisting candidates to make their tacit knowledge more explicit, and to help them locate the theoretical discourse as closely as possible to the routines of the workplace.

The decision in 2008 to revise the NQF led to the establishment of three sub-frameworks, each headed by a national Quality Council. The QCTO was allocated specific responsibility for the development, registration and quality assurance of occupational qualifications. In addition, the amended Skills Development Act (No. 37 of 2008) defined an occupational qualification under the QCTO as ‘a qualification associated with a trade, occupation or profession, resulting from work-based learning’ (emphasis added). This definition was subsequently extended in the QCTO Curriculum and Assessment Policy (QCTO 2011a) to include ‘knowledge unit standards, practical unit standards and work experience unit standards’6 (QCTO 2011a: 4). This policy specified the design required for qualifications and curricula in the sub-framework, inclusive of the following components:

- **Conceptual knowledge/theory and information components**, which are acquired systematically and delivered or assessed by an accredited skills development provider.
- **Practical/applied knowledge components**, which focus ‘on the ability to perform certain skills at a particular level safely, productively, within legal prescripts …’ (QCTO 2011a: 3) and which ‘may be acquired in a simulated environment’ (QCTO 2011a: 3).
- **A workplace experience component**, which focuses on the individual’s ability to integrate theory and practical skills in a real working environment (QCTO 2011b).
- **A foundational numeracy and literacy component**, which is optional at NQF Levels 1, 2, 5 and 6, and compulsory at NQF Levels 3 and 4.
- **The EISA to earn the qualification**; it is important to note that successful completion of the first three components is a prerequisite for entry into the EISA, and for being listed on a Statement of Results.
The key to understanding the implications of this new design from an RPL perspective lies in the principle and degree of integration. Under the unit standards-based framework, RPL practices are based on a strong integration principle, whereas the new QCTO design is based on a strong disaggregation principle, with separate RPL assessments for the different components of the qualification. Table 6.1 on page 104 projects and compares the RPL implications of the new Occupational Qualifications (OQ) curriculum framework, with the previous approach, that is, an integrated model based on the unit standards-based framework.

It is important to note that the formulation of the disaggregated model above is a projection based on statements made by policy makers in 2011. As Adrienne Bird, the acting CEO of the QCTO at the time, confirmed in her address to the SAQA RPL research conference:

The QCTO is at the beginning of its journey on this RPL path. However, even at this stage, it has plans to ensure that those who come with skills learnt at and through work are given full recognition for them. For instance at minimum, it will be possible for learners to go through RPL processes for each of the components of an occupational qualification – the knowledge, practical, and work experience components – with accredited providers for these components. Where individuals are successful, they shall be credited for that component again in full or in part. It will also be possible for a learner who meets the basic entrance requirements, to take the final external, summative assessments. (Bird 2011, emphasis added)

Case study: Purpose and research design

The primary purpose and focus of the case study described in this chapter was to explore the implications of the new QCTO policies for RPL. To achieve this, an RPL intervention was planned along the lines of the new, proposed QCTO principles of curriculum design and assessment. This intervention provided a basis for comparison with an integrated model of RPL implementation that had previously been developed and tested by the author (Deller 2008) in the context of unit standards-based qualifications. Findings, recorded in this chapter, compare the effectiveness of the two RPL models (integrated and disaggregated) and make some recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of RPL within the emerging QCTO framework.

The RPL candidates in the case study were experienced office administrators and support staff from three different companies in Johannesburg. The candidates were ‘RPL-ed’ against an existing entry-level business qualification selected by the employers: the General Education and Training Certificate (NQF 1) in Business Practice. It was necessary to use an existing qualification so that the candidates could be certificated at the end of the RPL process. For the purposes of the research, the qualification was reformatted to meet the requirements of the QCTO
guidelines, and following this logic, was disaggregated into four separate and distinct components (knowledge, practical, workplace and foundational learning) each with its own assessment strategy and process. The design, roll out and evaluation of this simulation is explored in more detail below.

The RPL candidates in this case were all working adults, with formal schooling up to Grades 11 or 12 (the last two years of high school). Employers sponsored their participation in the RPL process to enable them to acquire a basic business qualification that would, hopefully, lead to advancement. The employers selected the candidates based on strong workplace performance. The candidates reported not having attended any formal or non-formal training programmes after leaving school, so it was assumed that most of their competence had been developed ‘informally’ in and through participation in workplace practices (what Wenger 1998 would call a ‘community of practice’). Their competence in this sense was bound by workplace rules, divisions of labour and company-specific terminology. One of the key challenges explored in the current case study was how to assess this context-bound occupational competence, while following the QCTO curriculum design mode.

The project was designed and implemented by a private FETC that had been operating within the NQF framework for the previous nine years. As noted earlier, the whole case study was designed as an experiment to test out the implications of a disaggregated RPL model within the new curriculum framework. This required a fair amount of creative thinking and planning, as it was necessary to rearticulate the existing unit standards-based qualification to align it with the knowledge components of the OQ curriculum framework. The main steps in this process were as follows:

- **Curriculum design**: Knowledge, practical, foundational and workplace components were teased out of each unit standard and allocated to one of the four components (knowledge, practical, workplace or foundational learning) as required for the new QCTO-type curricula. (See Chapter 6 Appendix 1 in the Appendices section at the end of this book for an example.)

- **Implementation design**: Each component of the curriculum was then programmed for presentation to the candidates in different contact sessions. Readers should recall that the OQ framework suggested that each component be independently assessed by different providers, so a way to simulate that arrangement needed to be found. This was achieved by planning a different ‘look and feel’ (pedagogical mix) for each component, that is the advisors, assessment tools, assessors and institutional rules (time to get feedback, pass marks, and so on).

- **Appointment of advisors**: Four different RPL advisors and four different assessors were appointed, in a bid to simulate four different providers as proposed in the OQ curriculum framework.

- **Roll-out process (sequence and schedule)**: A roll-out process consisting of four different contact sessions and the EISA was then finalised and presented to the candidates and their employers. The planned RPL roll-out schedule of activities is presented graphically in Figure 6.1 on page 108.
• **EISA:** The EISA was the final assessment to be written once the RPL candidate had been found competent and issued with a Statement of Results for each of the preceding components.

**Figure 6.1 Planned roll out of the disaggregated RPL model**

| Session 1 (2 days): Preparation of candidates for assessments of the knowledge and FL components. | Candidates take the knowledge and FL assessments. | Session 2 (1 day): Preparation for RPL of the practical component. | Candidates take practical assessments. | EISA – as per QCTO draft regulations. | Assessment observations in the workplace. | Session 3 (1 day): Preparation for RPL of workplace learning component. |

Source: Adapted from Deller 2012: 18

To recap, the case study involved an existing unit standards-based qualification. Each individual unit standard was disaggregated into one of the QCTO curriculum components: knowledge, practical, workplace or foundational learning. The knowledge and practical components were then regrouped into subjects (such as ‘marketing’, ‘finance’ and ‘computer literacy’) to simulate the make-up of these components according to the QCTO curriculum guidelines.

An experimental simulation, therefore, was key to the research design of the case study, although as described below, the actual implementation resembled features of an action research project, with substantial changes being made as the model encountered problems. The analysis of the whole ‘experiment’ draws on the four lines of enquiry (knowledge, pedagogy, institutional conditions and learner agency) pertaining to the study as a whole (see Chapter 1, this book).

**How the simulation unfolded in practice**

The simulated model did not roll out as planned. The process commenced with the preparation of candidates for the first stage of the process and this was followed by the assessment of the knowledge and FL components. The results were far poorer than expected (discussed later in this chapter) and this necessitated a set of interventions that changed the design of the model. The final roll-out model is summarised in Figure 6.2 and discussed in more detail on page 109.
Stage 1: RPL – knowledge and foundational learning

As illustrated in Figure 6.2 above, the RPL process commenced with the assessment of the theoretical knowledge and foundational learning components. Candidates were assessed in writing, without direct reference to their workplace practices. Not a single candidate was found competent after the first assessment. This occurred despite the candidates having attended a two-day orientation programme with a specific focus on the knowledge component. This is significant, because all of these candidates were considered by their employers to be above-average performers, and therefore job competent.

One candidate in particular scored below 20% on the computer knowledge assessment (see example below) despite her (subsequent) 100% competent result on the practical assessment. Indeed, her manager asserted in the interview that she was a top performer in their computerised accounting department, where she used the computer all day. In this case, the candidate had learnt her accounting computer skills from the other finance staff in the department and the language of her practice was not that of the generic computer literacy knowledge standards specified in the qualification. For example, her accounting department used the term ‘books’ not
'files' when referring to the accounts that were stored on the computer, as in these test questions:

- Explain the concepts of files on a computer in a GUI environment.
- Locate files in a GUI environment.

Having never heard the term 'files' (or 'GUI' for that matter), and in a context-independent written assessment, she did not recognise what was being asked of her. The department still used the language of the profession (i.e. 'books'), even when referring to computer-generated accounts and functions, whereas the test drew on terms from the context-independent subject of 'computer studies'.

Given the poor knowledge assessment results, the private FETC decided on a more proactive pedagogical strategy to support the candidates who were clearly struggling with the separation of the knowledge component from their workplace practice. This intervention involved an additional three days of discussion and learning activities (see Figure 6.2 on page 109), which acknowledged that the candidates’ workplace learning existed but that that it was mainly procedural and context dependent and that the difficulty involved matching this to the more principled and conceptual discourse of the underpinning knowledge.

The pedagogical nature of the intervention enabled the candidates to make the connections with their existing procedural knowledge. They were provided with contextual understanding of the theoretical concepts, which helped them to decode the unit standards and recode them into more conceptual language. This in turn empowered them to 'pass' the generic knowledge assessment. Tables 6.2 and 6.3 below and on page 111 illustrate the gap between contextual and theoretical understanding pre- and post-intervention for one of the candidates (a tea lady/clerk) in response to the question in italics.

### Table 6.2 The gap between contextual and theoretical understanding: Pre-intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge question: Customers are very important to any business. Explain what is meant by the following terms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terms to be explained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments of truth in customer interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of customers to a business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My role in dealing with customers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Deller 2012: 31–32

After discussing the concept of customers (within the discourse of marketing and business economics), and how everyone in the business serves customers of some
sort (internal and external), and identifying every person that each candidate comes into contact on a daily basis, the revised answer from this candidate is shown in Table 6.3 below.

**Table 6.3 The gap between contextual and theoretical understanding: Post-intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal customers</td>
<td>People I work with every day, like the receptionist I help to make tea for people who have appointments at my company. Also the other staffs who I must help make tea and coffee for and go get their lunch. They are all my inside customers. I serve them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External customers</td>
<td>They don't work for XXX. They buy our things and give us money. I see them sometimes in meetings when I make tea. I know some of them and I know their names.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments of truth in customer interaction</td>
<td>Every time I serve a customer I must do it good so they are happy. If they are happy they will like it and remember it and tell 10 people. If they don't like it they tell more. It is the time they talk to me and I help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of customers to a business</td>
<td>Both are important. If the inside ones don't like me because I don't make tea well they will complain and be unhappy. I may be fired. But the outside ones are very important. They might go to another company with their business and that could be bad if lots go. No customers = no business = no job. We look after customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My role in dealing with customers</td>
<td>I have lots of customers – maybe more than anyone. Everyone inside is my customer and I serve them. The outside customers who come in I also help – with tea and biscuits. I look after them all. I make all happy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Deller 2012: 31–32

The candidate had always dealt with ‘customers’ – that had not changed. What had changed was her understanding of her role in the operations of the company as a whole. Her first answer was insufficient for a competent result – but the mediated process provided her with: a) an expanded understanding of her customers, and b) the language to describe her role in relation to the general principles of customer service and satisfaction. Her reflective comment on this process was as follows:

> It made more sense. I was worried. It was not enough (that I wrote). But I could not understand why I had customers. I make tea but I don't sell it. I give it. Now I know that I do I am trying hard to work with them and I feel proud I make a difference I can see. (Deller 2012: 33)

**Stage 2: RPL – practical skills and workplace learning**

Once the knowledge component had been reassessed and the candidates had been found competent, the project moved onto the practical and workplace learning components. Compared to assessing the knowledge components, assessing these components was more straightforward, although there was a great deal of overlap
between workplace and practical components. Table 6.4 below illustrates some of the assessment tasks that the candidates had to undertake.

Table 6.4 *Practical and workplace assessment tasks*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NQF unit standard</th>
<th>Practical assessment tasks</th>
<th>Workplace assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>119635 (Speaking and listening skills) Fundamental</td>
<td>Candidates will be assessed on: their speaking skills, listening skills and body language; how well they present to their audience, plan their communication, can summarise what they have heard and can pick up emotion, fact and fiction in what others are saying.</td>
<td>The assessor must observe and record instances of the candidate in speaking situations, e.g. meetings, presentations, interviews, coaching sessions, and so on. Video or webcam technologies may be used for this purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyboard techniques (SO1)/ Produce text (SO4)</td>
<td>Candidates will need to: type the article on the last page and save it as: ‘your surname initial9357’; use the following functions: set line spacing, set font size, set page margins, use shift key, use caps lock, use enter, use space bar, and so on.</td>
<td>The assessor must acquire copies of documents that candidates have compiled on the PC that show the ability to use all aspects of the keyboard as listed on the observation sheet.¹⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was some difficulty collecting naturally occurring evidence and artefacts that demonstrated competence against some of the workplace learning components for individual candidates; for example, candidates had to submit a report and an operational plan that they had written alone. Candidates at this level often do not work alone in the workplace so many artefacts submitted for assessment were the outcome of collaborative practices and processes (operational plans being a case in point). In this study, therefore, the testimony of the managers had to be relied on to corroborate the competent performance of the candidates in these collaborative (real workplace) contexts. In its new policy, the QCTO sees the workplace performance and evidence as observed and assessed by workplace coaches, who could be managers. This could be problematic where relationships between worker and manager are not good.

The assessment of the practical components was done in a classroom, as a series of simulated activities. The candidates were prepared for this during their day of preparation (see Figure 6.2 on page 109). This session built upon the three-day interaction described in the knowledge stage in that the candidates were now prepared for not-real-life assessment. It was explained that, although the researchers knew the candidates did things differently at work, the practical activities had to be assessed in this specific way. For example, at work most of the candidates use templates, with pre-set margins, fonts, date fields, formats, and so on, but for the practical simulation candidates were required to create documents from scratch to simulate the requirements of the practical assessment. Only when it came to the assessment of workplace learning could the artefacts created at work be used as evidence of competence.
**Stage 3: RPL – External Integrated Summative Assessment (EISA)**

The last step in the process was to simulate the EISA but only once the candidates had been found competent in all of the individual components. The QCTO policy provides for the EISA to be written by novice learner and expert RPL candidate alike, as it is the only way to earn the occupationally directed qualification. The QCTO policy states:

> The purpose of an external summative assessment or assessment against the occupational qualification or part qualification is to promote consistency and credibility of the occupational qualifications or promote articulation of part qualification issued … Assessment of the individual components is not sufficient to confirm competence to perform an occupation and the associated occupational tasks. Assessment of occupational competence is conducted by registered assessors applying nationally standardised assessment instruments and procedures at accredited assessment centres or registered sites. (QCTO 2011a: 9)

For various reasons, the candidates in this study chose not to take the simulated EISA despite their full understanding that it would have been purely for research purposes. The candidates and their managers alike felt that the EISA was unnecessary because they had already been found competent in each component of the qualification. The candidates were also concerned about writing an examination as it reminded them of the bad experiences many had had with the knowledge assessment component of the roll-out, and with their formal schooling.

However, once they had a chance to view the simulated EISA that had been set by the private FETC, they commented that they would probably have ‘passed’ with at least 50% based on the learning they had acquired during the three-day (extra) enabling intervention added for the knowledge component. On the other hand, candidates and employers alike felt that without the RPL enabling intervention of this project, the candidates would probably have failed the EISA had they written it.

**Towards an integrated model of RPL for occupationally directed qualifications**

The purpose of this case study was to explore a model of RPL geared to the needs of experienced workers/RPL candidates within the requirements of an occupationally directed qualification as envisaged by the QCTO. What happened in the attempt to simulate a disaggregated model of assessment was not too surprising, and the plan had to be changed to incorporate a more pedagogical intervention particularly around the knowledge component of the qualification. In analysing this experimental case study, we draw on the four lines of enquiry from the overarching research project as follows:
• Knowledge: The relationship between knowledge gained in the workplace and knowledge required for the occupational qualification.
• Pedagogy: The content, methods and assessment processes used during the RPL process.
• Institutional context: The systems, rules and resources impacting on RPL provision in this context.
• Learner agency: The biographical profiles, socio-economic background, cultural dispositions and strategies of the RPL candidates.

Knowledge

Shalem and Steinberg (2006) argue that the pedagogy of RPL is situated between the complex cultures of knowledge production and learning in the workplace and those of the academy. The pedagogical aim of a RPL process is to enable a dialogue or convergence between these different cultures and practices, and in so doing, attune candidates to the different representations of knowledge involved and the specialty of the context in which their knowledge is to be assessed.

In this current case study, the boundaries between these knowledge types were more pronounced because of the QCTO directive to disaggregate (for curriculum purposes) the knowledge and workplace components. This stands in contrast to the earlier unit standard-based model, where the principle of integration makes it possible to customise assessment activities for each workplace (using their own workplace terminology and documents as far as possible). This appears to mediate the translation of knowledge between the two discursive fields in an effective and efficient fashion (Deller 2008). Following the QCTO model the attempt to separate theory and practice into separate components meant that a different pedagogical mediation was needed.

This artificial disaggregation of the standards (and therefore, assessment) meant that in this study, the candidates could see no overt link between what they actually did at work and the qualification against which they were being assessed. This is ironic given that this generic business practice qualification covers general knowledge and skills that competent workers are familiar with such as computer skills, knowledge of how businesses work, types of businesses, basic legislation covering business, functional areas of a business, and so on. Evidence of the alienation candidates felt after going through their knowledge assessment is expressed in the comments below:

The knowledge was bad – we don’t do this in my job.
I don’t know this questions – the words are not clear for me.
It’s tough. I asked my manager and he didn’t know why I need it either.
I don’t do spaces and taking them apart, it makes me frustrated and I don’t understand. (Deller 2012: 26)
This may be understood with reference to Barnett (2006), who theorises that situated knowledge often does not readily mix with, or easily relate to, disciplinary knowledge. It is often trapped within its context of application, while disciplinary knowledge generally aspires to some level of context-independence, to rising above particularities, to some measure of general applicability. Situated knowledge is frequently tacit and difficult to put into words, sometimes even tactile in terms of how it feels to do a job correctly, and therefore it is hard to codify. (Barnett 2006: 146)

Our recognition of the effect of this alienation and the introduction of the three-day intervention as discussed above marked a critical turning point in the research. This intervention appeared to affirm the pedagogical logic of RPL in an occupational setting, namely, an integrated approach inclusive of workplace-based team discussions and assessment where appropriate. It is as if the RPL process helped the candidates to expand their learning and gave them a deeper understanding of their work practices.

**Pedagogy**

Drawing on the discussion above, where RPL is positioned as a specialised pedagogical intervention rather than simply a ‘make or break’ assessment, it is clear that RPL requires specialist facilitation to help candidates navigate their learning and mediate the exchange of meaning across the different contexts and related discursive practices. The facilitation ‘tools’ used in this case study include a facilitated discussion of the underpinning knowledge components as well as group discussions of work-based practices.

The private FETC in this study typically uses an outcomes-oriented portfolio of evidence, in which candidates are taken through a variety of simulated and real workplace activities that are explicitly related in an integrated way to selected combinations of unit standards and related curriculum outcomes. This pedagogy encourages the candidates to read and engage with the outcomes before tackling each activity, to make sure they understand what is required and how to demonstrate the required competence. In this case study, the same approach was applied albeit to the four disaggregated components, and this proved to be very difficult and alienating for the candidates.

It is widely recognised that portfolio-assisted assessments tend to give candidates who already have serviceable academic skills an advantage (Osman & Castle 2001: 58). This could be extrapolated in our case study to include administrative skills such as report writing, filing, cataloguing and research skills. This could explain why those in more administrative positions, as compared to those in retail, customer service or supervisory positions, fared better in documenting their knowledge, that is, in the written portion of the RPL process.
A related concern is that non-administratively oriented and less academically prepared workers fared worse in the disaggregated model, particularly on the knowledge component, where the written assignments and test preclude the use of oral explanations to illustrate conceptual capabilities. This has serious implications for the design and implementation of RPL as a disaggregated model because the theory/knowledge components of the RPL process will tend to give preference to written assessments. This could become a major stumbling block for many RPL candidates in acquiring a qualification, even if they are deemed competent against other components (practical and workplace). Furthermore, even if they do make it through all four components successfully, they may be further disadvantaged by the written requirements of the EISA.

**Institutional context**

Broadly stated, RPL is a practice that gives currency and recognition to a person’s previous learning, although the way that RPL is defined and implemented is largely determined by the educational context and policies of the institution concerned (Harris 2000).

In this research, the private FETC tried to simulate the envisaged QCTO model, where different providers would need to be involved in the assessment of different components of the qualification. This was done, as far as possible, by using different tools, languages, approaches, methodologies, assessors and advisors for different stages in the RPL process. As the simulation caused much confusion on the part of the candidates, the RPL researchers were compelled in the end to bring in more ‘institutional cohesion’ so as not to jeopardise the whole project.

The QCTO model – as it was designed at the time of this research – does not allow for any one provider (college and/or workplace) to manage the whole RPL process leading to a full occupational qualification. This means that RPL candidates are likely to encounter different terminologies, personnel, rules, venue, assessors and RPL advisors as they move through the stages and providers in the process. In relation to terminology, for example, the ‘theory’ provider will be looking at generic theory and is more likely to use the language of unit standards, while the workplace provider will use the language of the individual workplace, (which will vary from workplace to workplace), and the practical provider may use still different terminology. This arrangement could also impact negatively on the relationship between the advisors, facilitators, assessors and the worker candidates. There may not be much opportunity to build the supportive relationships that need to exist between RPL advisors and candidates.

We now turn to the learners and their perceptions of what really works or doesn’t work for them in the RPL process.
Learner agency

A further part of the research project as a whole was to investigate learner agency, with the aim being to explore candidates’ engagement with the RPL experience through the narrative of their own learning journeys. Unfortunately, unforeseen factors meant that access to the original candidates who took part in the original study (above) was no longer possible, so a second group was identified and interviewed for this purpose. Care was taken to ensure that this second group of candidates was similar in socio-economic background, formal education levels and had similar reasons for going through an RPL process to secure a similar qualification.

The method included semi-structured interviews with five candidates at their place of work. The workplace arranged the interviews based on who was available at the time – three women and two men were interviewed. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach to surface key attributes, contributions and responses to the RPL experience. Selected quotations from the interview transcripts are used below to highlight different dimensions of learner agency emerging from the study. Names have been excluded to ensure anonymity (Deller 2013).

Biographical profiles

The interviewees shared fairly similar socio-economic backgrounds, and their ages ranged from late 30s to 63. All candidates were black South Africans; all held similar job grade positions and all lived either in employer-provided housing or in the local, middle-class suburb. They had all been nominated by their employer to do RPL, and were all considered to be ‘high flyers’. They were similar to the candidates in the case study in that they held similar jobs (clerical and supervisory) and very few had a school-leaving qualification. All had been successfully RPL-ed against an NQF Level 4 Generic Management qualification (although some achieved it more quickly than others).

Learner attributes

In the course of being interviewed, all of the candidates reported some personal tragedy in their youth that had prevented them from continuing their studies (e.g. schooling and post-schooling). Despite their lack of formal education, however, not one of the candidates had remained without a job for very long after leaving school. They attributed this to their own efforts and willingness to start at the bottom (although two admitted it was also easier to get a job in earlier times). Interestingly, all of the candidates described themselves as avid readers prior to the RPL process (reading English texts – newspapers mostly, but also novels and trade union documentation). It is likely that this reading skill gave the candidates enough vocabulary to negotiate the academic texts that they were presented with during the RPL process.
Other key attributes that emerged were as follows:

- Four out of five of the candidates had completed some ‘non-formal’ post school training.
- All candidates saw the link between formal qualifications and career success (one of the candidates described herself as ‘hungry to get the accreditation for my studies’).
- Four out of five of the candidates saw English as ‘easy’ to study and debate ideas in.
- All candidates reported being a naturally positive and optimistic type of person.

In addition, all candidates reported that they had volunteered to be part of the RPL process because they had hoped it would lead to promotion and better opportunities. One candidate was at retirement age, but still felt that the RPL had been a success as it would help her to help others in her community: ‘You know I think of doing some old-age education, those who didn't totally go to school; they don't even know how to write their names. So I think it's a weapon to me, I’m going to use it.’

A few of the candidates came from a prior learning context that could have undermined their confidence and self-esteem. None had completed school, which in itself can undermine self-esteem. In addition, many had survived traumatic events. One interviewee reported:

I think it’s uphill when we start to do this [RPL] … before you must remember with me my two husbands passed away, my two kids passed away … So these things make me not talk to people. I was reserved and then when I get this I start to mix with people, start to talk … these things out. I start to be brave.

One of the male interviewees stated:

I never actually failed until I reached matric … then I got stabbed … my hand was like useless … I requested my teachers to do like an oral examination of me but that wouldn't be agreed for some reason … so I left my school, bitter about the whole thing.

However, despite their various difficulties with formal education, the candidates did report being positive prior to the RPL. One woman's comments summarise this point; when she was asked why she had succeeded, she replied: ‘I was very much positive … and willing to do anything.’

**Candidates’ experiences of the RPL process**

The candidates all reported being surprised initially by the RPL journey. They had anticipated it would be more school-like, with a teacher who would tell them what to do; instead they found it ‘accommodating’ and ‘more rich than training or teaching’ because it allowed them to share their own views on topics and to brainstorm ideas. As one candidate explained: ‘The classroom takes long. The classroom is
like too much of like a straight line cut, like if you have to do like an assignment or something, it is like restricted then you don't have the diversity of experience.’

All the candidates spoke of group discussions that allowed them to explore new concepts safely in class under the guidance of the RPL advisors, who acted as a sounding board for their questions, helping them to reflect on theory and compare it to the workplace. One candidate commented:

He [the RPL advisor] wouldn't give answers at any rate, he would just guide you … At other times you would find yourself in a situation where you don't know if you've reached the answer or whether you're still exploring to get the answer … At times he was quite challenging in the sense that he would question what we view as an answer … and that was concretising the understanding in our minds. I mean life is all about the exploring; it’s nothing that’s impossible.

Candidates reported that the RPL process had, in some way, developed their self-esteem and confidence, and given them far greater insight into themselves and their jobs: ‘Look, before RPL came in, we were just doing things, but we never knew why we're doing them.’ Three of the five candidates were promoted after gaining the qualification, which also added to their delight at having been through it. One of the interviewees said: ‘We were very excited! We didn't think that one day [name of the company] will come up with this magic thing called RPL.’

But the candidates also spoke of the challenges of RPL, which was hard work and frustrating at times. It was definitely not an easy way to get a qualification, although they felt they had learnt more from it than they would have if they had completed the qualification in the traditional way. One of the interviewees said: ‘RPL it was very difficult. I must be honest. For the first time, yes, it was hard. But when you dig, you make research, you see things clearly and it’s then that you get things very easy.’

**The affordances of team discussions and a work-integrated RPL processes**

A few observations can be drawn from the biographical analysis. The candidates quickly took to the concept of team discussion, as one candidate put it:

It [RPL] is easy as it is because they give us a chance … We do it in a group, its easy like that … if you don’t understand, you go to the next person, you sit around the table and talk about it and then it is easy …

Team discussions made the RPL process a lot easier because it allowed candidates to explore theoretical concepts in relation to work-based practices with which they were familiar. The affordances of this approach meant that candidates were able to explore the tacit dimensions of their knowledge and make it more explicit. The RPL advisor helped them link the explicit, but still contextually bound, knowledge to the
context-independent knowledge of the qualification.

This points to the merits of an integrated approach in terms of helping candidates relate to the concepts embedded in their practice. However, an integrated approach is only likely to succeed if a single RPL provider is responsible for mediating the RPL process across all three (or four) of the QCTO components in an integrated way. Conversely, if the RPL process is implemented as a disaggregated activity by different RPL providers in isolation from workplace practice, the workplace-based discussion will not be possible and experienced workers/RPL candidates will be disadvantaged.

**The role of the RPL practitioner**

In the integrated RPL model, the role of the RPL practitioner is quite different to that of a facilitator or assessor in a formal learning situation. The RPL practitioner (advisor/facilitator/assessor) is a boundary worker, playing a role that Barnett (2006) describes as follows with reference to vocational teachers:

> A teacher involved in ‘boundary crossing’ pedagogy needs reasonable familiarity with the ‘discourses’ on either side of the divide … He needs a degree of insight into the scope and nature of the ‘reservoir’ of disciplinary knowledges on which the particular syllabus has drawn, as well as some of the realities of the workplace setting to which this knowledge is deemed relevant. This is a considerably more demanding agenda than that which confronts the subject teacher … (Barnett 2006: 155)

This study suggests that RPL advisors in the new QCTO framework will find it difficult to hold the tension between the integrated knowledge practices of experienced workers/RPL candidates, on the one hand, and the disaggregated specifications of the QCTO curriculum, on the other. Disaggregation is counter-productive to pedagogic interventions that assist competent workers to acquire the conceptual language necessary for describing and interpreting their integrated practices.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings of a workplace-based RPL case study based on an interpretation of QCTO policies regarding curriculum and assessment. The QCTO (2011) policy states:

> The curriculum model recognises that expert practice requires a complex interplay of knowledge and skills in a range of working environments; … the pathway to that end requires the disaggregation of the different component parts and the development of a reflexive ability to apply the knowledge and skills in each context. (QCTO 2011a: 6)
It would appear that this QCTO curriculum model is focused on the training of novice learners who are required to move incrementally through different components of the programme, in a disaggregated manner, that is, through the formal and informal activities offered in two or three different institutions, such as the college and workplace.

A conclusion to be drawn from the current research is that the potential for RPL in this emerging occupational and professional pathway could be limited by requiring RPL candidates who already have significant workplace experience to undertake a disaggregated assessment of their prior learning. Experienced and competent workers have an integrated and tacit understanding of the complexities of their practice at work, and that these are not easily mapped on to the disaggregated components of the QCTO curriculum framework. Experienced and competent workers, unlike novices, require a different assessment approach – one that recognises where they are coming from, where their knowledge was learnt and how it is formulated. Furthermore, such candidates need a customised and integrated pedagogical approach that will help them, and others, recognise their prior learning.

**Acknowledgements**

Alan Ralphs commented and made suggestions on the drafts of this chapter and Mary Ryan worked with meticulous attention on the interview transcriptions.

**Notes**

1. These are controlled by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC).
2. These qualifications are quality assured by a body called UMALUSI.
3. The ability to integrate performance with understanding and adapt to changed circumstances as required of a competent person.
4. This is effectively RPL-for-credit, where the outcome of the RPL process is anticipated to be a full or partial qualification.
5. These statutory bodies, with representation from business, labour and government, carry responsibility for skills development in each economic sector. Sectors that established large-scale RPL projects included real estate, financial advisors, insurance personnel, teachers, building craftsmen, etc.
6. By contrast, the pre-QCTO model provided for a single unit standard that integrated these three components as separate outcomes.
7. This research is largely based on Deller (2008).
8. For example, in some instances such as computer skills or bank telling, assessment of the skills would need to be simulated, whereas in other instances it could take place in the real workplace.
9. This is an extreme example, but it could also be a power failure, a drunken customer or a person fainting in the bank queue.
10. So the knowledge RPL advisor could be a lecturer with little workplace exposure, while the workplace coach/RPL advisor may have limited theoretical, context-independent knowledge.
11. But reformulated to match QCTO components.
12 This qualification is positioned as a business ABET qualification and consists of computer literacy, basic business communication, basic numeracy (including budgeting and basic accounting), factors of production, marketing and customer behaviour, self-esteem, analytical reasoning and workplace etiquette.

13 The terms ‘formal’, ‘informal’ and ‘non-formal’ are used by SAQA so they have become part of the vernacular of the NQF; however, we caution that these terms often conceal a tacit interpretation that workplace-based learning is less useful or significant that formal education.

14 As this was an existing qualification, albeit at NQF Level 1, the fundamental unit standards also needed to be assessed, but this was done as a stand-alone component (which is how it will be done under the QCTO for NQF Levels 3 and 4 via the IEB).

15 These advisors guide the RPL candidates in compiling their portfolios and in making their tacit knowledge visible by helping them ‘translate’ their experiential knowledge into the language of the qualification.

16 This session covered the orientation to the process, assessment principles, how they would be assessed, the knowledge component content, etc. Note that the knowledge discussion was theoretical and general – it was not linked to the workplace context or the job tasks.

17 Note that the observation sheet is not reproduced in this chapter.

18 Note that registered assessors will only be used for the EISA component – they will not be necessary for the individual components.

19 Under the QCTO model this would be done by the ‘Assessment Quality Partner’, not the provider.

20 No information is currently available about the EISA and how the pass mark will be set in terms of all criteria.

21 A combination of factors contributed to this situation, including the sale of the ‘business’ at which the researcher was employed at the time of the original study.
References
QCTO (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations) (2011b) QCTO policy on delegation of qualification design and assessment to DQPs and AQPs. Pretoria: QCTO

RPL AND OCCUPATIONAL COMPETENCE

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As argued in Chapter 2 of this book, although Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices have historically been theorised as a specialised form of assessment practice, our position is that they are more accurately represented as specialised pedagogy for acquiring the tools to navigate learning and assessment practices in and across different learning contexts within a system characterised by the differentiation of knowledge.

In this chapter we extend the search for the underpinning principles of RPL as a pedagogic discourse. The search is grounded in the need to locate RPL in relation to other forms of pedagogy, and to explain the specialised nature, form and purpose of pedagogic activity in RPL-related practices. Our own comparative study is small in scale but does offer four quite different contexts through which to view and compare these practices. These include:

- The higher education sector and related access routes into undergraduate and post-graduate professional qualifications in fields like Disability Studies, Adult Education, and Business Management.
- An intermediate-level Workers' College offering diplomas in areas such as labour studies, gender studies, and political economy.
- A private FET College (FETC) specialising in RPL programmes and services for white collar workers in the financial services, real estate and business administration sectors.

These contexts are not untypical of many contexts within which RPL is practiced in South Africa.¹

The aim of this chapter is twofold: firstly, to understand the nature of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice, in other words, to understand what is common across the different practices and to provide a theoretical framework and conceptual language for describing these practices; and secondly, to compare and contrast the different forms of RPL pedagogy across the four sites, and to identify the conditions under which RPL optimally advances the inclusionary objectives of the education and training system in South Africa.

The first aim requires that we situate our conception of RPL within the complex and not uncontested terrain of pedagogical discourse and related sociologies of knowledge and education, located historically in the political economy of South Africa and, more recently, in the comprehensive reorganisation of recognised
qualifications in the education and training system. The decision to build a single National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was part of a larger set of government reforms aimed at ensuring effective access, equity and quality in the overall provision and registration of all qualifications. This is not to suggest that the NQF is fully representative of all of the country's store of knowledge and skills, nor is it a static structure in the system; indeed, much has been written about the socio-material constructions of knowledge on the margins and across the networks of the knowledge economy (Castells 2001; Cooper & Walters 2009; Fenwick et al. 2012), elements of which also emerge in RPL practice and theory, testing the system on its criteria for legitimating claims to knowledge recognition and certification.

The second aim requires a close examination of

- the internal workings of RPL practices, including the methods and strategies available to RPL learners and to RPL facilitators for realising the different social and epistemological purposes of the practice;
- the external conditions (institutional, financial and systemic) that impact on the effectiveness of RPL as a pedagogical practice for mediating recognition and access to qualifications.

This chapter has three sections. The first section situates and defines RPL conceptually as a specialised pedagogy in relation to differentiated fields of knowledge production and recontextualisation. The second section defines the generic and distinctive features (inner workings) of the practice as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy, while the third section illustrates how these inner workings play themselves out in the four case studies. In Chapter 8 we extend our analysis to include three applications of RPL as specialised pedagogy, each of which offers affordances for and constraints on the practice in different contexts.

**Conceptual framing of RPL as a specialised form of pedagogy**

As noted in Chapter 2, we began this research project with a number of theoretical assumptions that we drew from the literature documenting earlier research on RPL. More specifically, these assumptions included starting from the basis of the differentiated nature of knowledge, and the view of RPL as a form of boundary pedagogy mediating the engagement between different knowledge cultures and related assessment practices. From an early stage of the project, we drew on the work of Basil Bernstein, who in turn drew on Durkheim, 'the exemplary sociologist of the boundary' (Muller 2000). Bernstein (1996) provided us with a conceptual vocabulary for talking about the different forms of knowledge that are brought into play in RPL practice, and for interrogating the nature of the boundaries between these different forms of knowledge. For Bernstein, power relations are embedded not only in the different structural forms of knowledge, but also in the relationship – or boundary strength – between different knowledge discourses. He used the term 'classification' to describe the strength of knowledge boundaries and the term
'framing' to describe the social relations of control over knowledge boundaries in and through pedagogical practices.

Bernstein (2000) provides a model for explaining different forms of pedagogic discourse, based on the pedagogic codes that signify variations of power and control – in his terms, the classification and framing of the discourse. The codes (and the evaluative rules embedded in them) are crucial in orienting learners to the specialisations and distinguishing features of learning in different contexts, that is, the discourses and practices (recognition rules), and ways of speaking or producing legitimate texts (realisation rules) in those contexts.

Variations in classification and framing are also associated with different models of pedagogy and Bernstein (2000) distinguished between competence and performance models of pedagogy. The competence model – usually associated with weak classification and framing of the knowledge boundaries – is classically learner centred, and in the case of RPL would draw extensively on narrative and experiential learning methods to give expression and form to learners’ prior knowledge and skills. A performance model – usually associated with strong classification and framing (where control over the selection, sequence and pacing of the learning activities lies firmly with the facilitator) – is where outcomes are determined independently of learners and the concern is with what is missing in the learner’s repertoire of skills or knowledge, rather than that which they already possess. These are ideal model types and, in practice, pedagogy tends to include dimensions of both, although differently weighted.

While these concepts helped us to compare and contrast different approaches to mainstream and RPL curricula and pedagogy across our case studies, we found that in our search to identify the common, underpinning principles of RPL, we also needed to understand RPL pedagogy in relation to the processes of knowledge production and distribution that underpin the affordances and the constraints of the practice. For this, we turned to Bernstein’s later work, in particular, his concept of the pedagogic device.

The pedagogic device (Bernstein 2000) theorises the set of principles or ‘rules’ that regulate the production of educational knowledge and its transmission as pedagogical discourse. The notion of the pedagogic device allowed us to locate RPL in relation to three interlinked fields of educational knowledge production and distribution, as shown in Figure 7.1 on page 127: the field of knowledge production, the field of recontextualisation and the field of pedagogic practice. Bernstein’s pedagogic device illustrates the changes that take place as pedagogic discourse moves between these three fields, and in so doing activates the translation of social power into symbolic power. It is important to note that the pedagogic device is subject to and reflects ideological contestation by agents of the state, specialists in the field, and different social groupings. Also important is that
each of its fields are sites of struggle over who will control the device, and what will ‘count’ as socially valuable knowledge:

As the discourse moves from its original site to its new positioning as pedagogic discourse, a transformation takes place. The transformation takes place because every time a discourse moves from one position to another, there is space in which ideology can play. No discourse ever moves without ideology at play. (Bernstein 2000: 32)

**Figure 7.1 The pedagogic device**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the field of knowledge production, the distributive rules normally privilege vertical knowledge discourses produced in sites of specialised knowledge production.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recontextualising field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In this field, knowledge is recontextualised from the field of knowledge production into educational knowledge and related qualifications and curricula. The recontextualising rules are usually oriented towards knowledge produced and transmitted through conventional schools, colleges and universities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogic field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This field reproduces knowledge and dominant forms of specialised consciousness, and the evaluation rules structure what should be acquired.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is our contention that RPL as a practice is inevitably drawn into these struggles and contestations.

**The field of knowledge production**

The field of knowledge production includes all forms and sources of knowledge-making, including scholarly research and professional, occupational and ‘everyday’ knowledge-making. This field is underpinned by distributive rules that control access to these sites of production. Analytical distinctions between the sacred and the profane, ‘scientific’ and ‘spontaneous’ (Vygotsky 1986), and vertical and horizontal discourses (Bernstein 2000), point to the specialised structures, institutions and socio-cultural identities associated with the different modes of knowledge production and their relation to macro-level divisions of labour in society. The field of knowledge production is the primary source of pedagogic authority and its associated power relations; here, the distributive rules determine which knowledge will be viewed as more or less worthwhile, and who (sociologically) will have access to which knowledge.
We argue that the issue of knowledge differentiation and the locus of epistemological authority is one of the keys to understanding the specialised nature of RPL pedagogy and its role in struggles contesting the origins of society’s most valued knowledge assets. Since the scientific revolution and the growth of universities as sites of knowledge production, it is vertical discourses (abstract, propositional knowledge) that have the greatest asset value, and have long held power and epistemological authority in the field. A key distinguishing feature of RPL is that it requires the recognition of dual sources of epistemological authority across and beyond different cultures of academic and non-academic knowledge; in other words, RPL necessarily disrupts the dominant distributive rules of the pedagogic device by affording recognition and access not only to mainstream ‘scientific’ discourses but also to other, selected or specialised discourses of what is broadly known as experiential learning.

The question of RPL recognising selected or specialised discourses of experiential learning is important to clarify. Not only are there cleavages between the two major discourses – of ‘everyday’ knowledge (horizontal discourse) and ‘scientific’ knowledge (vertical discourse) – but there is differentiation within each of these knowledge discourses. A significant amount of theorisation has taken place around differentiation within vertical discourse (see Bernstein 2000 and Muller 2010 respectively on hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures, singulars and regions, as well as Maton 2007 on code theory and the legitimation of knowledge claims across different disciplines). Very little comparable work has been done, however, on the theorising the nature of knowledge differentiation among those forms of knowledge produced and reproduced in sites of non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, the convenient categories of informal and non-formal learning no longer hold the same heuristic value as they did, given the increased formalisation of learning (within national qualifications frameworks) in recent decades.

Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that ‘everyday’ knowledge is not a ‘flat’, homogeneous terrain and that, increasingly, specialised forms of experiential knowledge are being produced and circulated outside of the academy – not specialised in the same way as vertical discourses, but in their own way. Thus Gibbons et al. (1994) talk of ‘Mode 2’ knowledge, while Knorr-Cetina (1999) has written about ‘knowledge cultures’ within ‘expert communities’ or professional fields. What Knorr-Cetina (1999) describes as the ‘spill-over’ of epistemic culture from traditional research communities to other areas of social life is not restricted to the world of work, but also applies to civil society more generally, including labour and social movements. Harris (2004), too, refers to the phenomenon of vertical discourse circulating in the realm of experience. In other words, it is important not to conflate ‘site’ with ‘form’ of knowledge: Cooper’s (2005) study of knowledge in the trade union context shows how such knowledge incorporates elements of vertical discourses, and how these articulate with horizontal discourses.
in complex ways. What makes trade union knowledge distinctive is not so much its ‘everyday-ness’ in the Bernsteinian sense but rather its hybridity – the way it weaves together different categories of knowledge, and thus transgresses the boundaries proposed by dualist accounts.

In this chapter, we avoid using the term ‘everyday knowledge’ because of its connotation of being ‘common’ and undifferentiated. We hold that outside of the academy, in the spheres of work, civil society, politics, community and family life, knowledge is generated and circulated that is different to vertical discourse – it is often hybrid in nature and comprises complex articulations of different forms and dimensions of knowledge – but that nevertheless carries its own specialisations, very often determined by context. It is also our contention – not yet demonstrable – that particular specialisations within such knowledge present particular affordances (or constraints) for RPL. We do not yet have an adequate theoretical language with which to talk about the differentiated nature of knowledge in what Bernstein (2000) refers to as horizontal discourse, and further theorisation of such knowledge will be extremely important in the longer term for refining our understanding and conceptualisation of RPL. Meanwhile, for the sake of convenience, in this chapter we refer to such knowledge as ‘specialised discourses of experiential learning’.

**The field of recontextualisation**

The field of recontextualisation refers to the production of educational knowledge, which derives from the field of knowledge production but differs from it in as much as the original discourse has been filtered and transformed – recontextualised – for educational purposes. This process is regulated by the second of the three sets of rules that make up the pedagogic device – the recontextualising rules. These rules regulate the selection, coding and form of the knowledge to be included or excluded in formal qualifications and curricula, and inform the evaluative criteria that will guide the transmission and acquisition of the discourse and related assessments of competence. Maton (2007) adds to these analytical resources the concept of the ‘epistemic device’, which operates as a set of underlying principles or codes for specialising the actors, discourses and practices of educational knowledge. For example, while curricula in the natural sciences are structured via a ‘knowledge code’, which emphasises knowledge concepts, procedures, skills and techniques, curricula in the humanities and social sciences tend to be specialised via a ‘knower code’, which emphasises the disposition, status and/or social position (class, race, gender, and so on) of the ideal learner or specialist in that knowledge field.

The above concepts provide a useful set of principles for understanding the complex nature and contested representations of educational knowledge in qualifications and related curricula. They provide the recontextualising rules
for determining what will ‘count’ as education knowledge and how it is to be distributed pedagogically in that context.

It is worth noting that while we would locate RPL practices predominantly in the field of pedagogic practice (see below), this does not preclude RPL facilitators (or their institutions) exercising pedagogic agency in the recontextualising field. Bernstein (2000) argues that as knowledge is recontextualised from the field of production (research) into the field of curriculum and pedagogy, a space – or a ‘discursive gap’ – opens up. Here it is possible for pedagogic agency, the curriculum developer’s ideas around the purpose of education, his or her notions of an ideal learner and assumptions of how learning best takes place, to come into play.

The field of pedagogic practice

The field of pedagogic practice, with its related evaluative rules, refers to the complex coding and enactment of pedagogical discourse in formal and informal contexts. Bernstein (2000) emphasises the significance of the evaluation rules (assessment criteria) in shaping the instructional (content, sequence and pacing) as well as the regulatory (norms and values) aspects of the discourse – in this case, between the external discourses (personal, community, governmental, professional and institutional) and the internal dynamics, purposes and specificities of an RPL programme (portfolio, standardised tests, and so on). We discuss the differences in internal workings and activities of RPL as a pedagogical practice across our four sites in the section that follows. At this stage, however, we must point to what appears to be a distinguishing feature of RPL in the field of pedagogical practice.

What distinguishes RPL as a pedagogic practice is that it cannot be theorised as a conventional form of transmission, acquisition and assessment of knowledge from a single body or source. In conventional education and training practices, it is usually codified, vertical discourse that is recontextualised into pedagogical discourse. By contrast, RPL is a distinctive and specialised process for mediating knowledge claims that originate from two or more sources: claims originating in ‘experiential learning’ acquired in context ‘x’ on the one hand, and knowledge claims based on the evaluation criteria specified in the curriculum of codified knowledge ‘y’ on the other. By mediating between knowledge claims originating in the recontextualised discourse of ‘experiential learning’ and the recontextualised discourse of codified knowledge, RPL functions as a form of boundary pedagogy, and attempts to broaden the evaluative rules of the pedagogic device.

In each of the above fields, RPL might be described as a form of pedagogic practice that attempts to ‘reset’ the established, conventional rules of the pedagogic device, as shown in Figure 7.2 on page 131.
The distinctive features of RPL as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy

Bernstein’s notion of the pedagogic device allowed us to define the specialised nature of RPL pedagogy in relation to the production and distribution of knowledge, and to identify the assumptions we make about knowledge and knowledge boundaries across the case studies. However, we also needed a way to conceptualise how RPL practice varies across our sites, and what implications these varied practices have for optimising social inclusion. In order to explore these ‘inner workings’ of RPL pedagogy, we turned to Vygotsky and to Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Daniels 2001). One factor that makes these socio-cultural approaches appropriate to our task of developing a conceptual framework to account for the specialised nature of RPL practices is that while Bernstein’s (and Durkheim’s) forms of specialisation are cast in binary terms,
Vygotsky (1986) points to the centrality of a dialectical movement *between* what he calls ‘spontaneous concepts’ (what Bernstein would refer to as ‘everyday’ concepts) gained experientially and ‘scientific concepts’ acquired through pedagogy. This is a dynamic and relational model of learning and pedagogy: it has the ability to locate pedagogy in particular contexts and practices, and to afford insight into the nature of interactions between the different elements of the practice, and its relation to other institutional or organisational practices.

The adapted CHAT systems model in Figure 7.3 below provides a particular way of identifying the distinctive features of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice by locating key elements that shape RPL’s unconventional tools and methods within a dynamic and purposeful community of practice bounded by particular rules and divisions of labour.

**Figure 7.3 RPL as a specialised pedagogy: Inner workings and artistry**

The first element in the activity system that distinguishes RPL from other pedagogical practices is the *nature of the tools* (methods, texts, discourse, technologies, and so on) used to mediate the communication (monological, dialogical) between the different academic, occupational and experiential learning discourses. All *tools of mediation*
have particular histories and cultures embedded within them; while text-based tools will tend to be more monological (Bakhtin 1965/1994) in orientation, tools such as narrative, oral discursive, visual and performative tools that seem to ‘speak’ more directly to learners’ history and culture may be regarded as more dialogical in orientation. According to Cooper (2006), the selection and use of such tools play an important role in determining whether the RPL facilitator is able to ‘unlock the knowledge’ that learners potentially bring with them, and provide an important starting point for developing the scaffolding necessary for learners to acquire the discourse for learning in an academic environment. In order to deploy such tools, the facilitator needs to be a ‘boundary worker’ and to have some understanding of boundaries between different forms of knowledge, and the nature of knowledge resources and related modes of learning on different sides of these boundaries.

Tools of mediation will vary depending on the coding and structure of the different discourses and the strategies (content, sequence and pacing) selected by the pedagogic agents for the specific purposes of their RPL practice. Our research suggests that the purpose or directionality (object) of an RPL practice is particularly significant in the selection of these tools and strategies. There seems to be some resonance between Barnett’s (2006) conception of vocational or professional curricula as having to ‘face two ways’ and our view of tools of mediation needing to ‘look both ways’. Thus the purpose of an RPL programme is usually directed towards some combination of the ‘use value’ of the knowledge, (for example improved business or trade union practices), and the ‘exchange value’, that is, credit towards a qualification. This is particularly clear in the case of the private FETC described in Chapter 6. The recruitment of experience in RPL practices can vary along the lines suggested by Gamble (2009) in relation to vocational curricula; Gamble distinguishes between curricula that recruit experience primarily in order to build understanding of abstract principles (i.e. directionality is towards knowledge or concepts) and those that are oriented primarily towards the application of theory to practice or experience (i.e. directionality is towards practice).

A further element shaping the nature of RPL pedagogy is both facilitator and learner identities and agency (the subjects) in these practices. The inclusive intentions of the NQF in South Africa has attracted RPL facilitators from a diverse range of educational and professional fields – including, for example, adult education, cognitive or industrial psychology, sociology of knowledge, critical theory, human capital theory, and even ‘RPL theory’ as in the case of a facilitator with a formal qualification in RPL assessment – that shape the nature of the pedagogic agency of the RPL.

These backgrounds shape the assumptions (visible or invisible) held by RPL facilitators about learning and knowledge, as well as about their learners and how best to engage their agency and related ‘attributes’, ‘dispositions’ or ‘traits’.

Due to the principle embedded in RPL of recognising ‘dual epistemological authority’, learners are viewed as potential bearers of specialised forms of experiential knowledge.
and are thus constructed significantly differently to those learners in conventional education and training practices, who tend to be viewed in terms of the competences that they lack. This suggests the need for a conceptual model to understand the hybridised nature of learning in which learners are situated both as subjects who need to acquire and evidence the specialised knowledge and dispositions of the qualification and as agents who play an active role in the construction and mediation of pedagogical knowledge in their own contexts. There was a need in our research to locate the generic and particular forms of agency and the kinds of identities that learners adopted in the different contexts of RPL practice, and to analyse how these are shaped by their complex learning histories and cultures in and beyond formal education.

Engeström (1996) expanded the original triangular representation of learning as a mediated activity, extending it ‘downwards’ in order to flesh out the social and regulatory elements of an activity system. To this end he focused on the elements of community, rules (the values, norms and forms of control within that community) and division of labour (different roles, forms of specialisation, and accompanying power relations). Together these concepts provide a framework for understanding the particular specialisations of different RPL practices not simply in terms of the mediation tools (discourse and methods) in use but also within their institutional contexts – that is, as part of a dynamic, interlocking activity system with particular rules and role specialisations or power relations that define the affordances and constraints of the whole community of practice. This was particularly evident in the case studies where it is clear that none of the RPL practices can be understood in isolation from the other (union or university or college or company) activities and practices.

**Analysing the case studies**

We now turn to an analysis of the case studies described in earlier chapters, using the conceptual framework outlined above. In each case, we deploy a selection of the conceptual tools in order to compare and contrast the forms that RPL pedagogy assumes across the different sites and contexts. The analysis begins with the purposes of RPL in relation to each case, and thereafter is organised and sequenced according to our original lines of enquiry, (namely institutional context, knowledge, pedagogy and pedagogic agency), and related concepts.

A comparative analysis and summary of these four cases is provided in Chapter 7 Appendix 1 in the Appendices section at the end of this book.

**Postgraduate access and knowledge specialisation**

**Purpose/object**

The primary purpose of RPL in this case is access to postgraduate study and, because access is being sought at this level of study, the goal of knowledge specialisation and knowledge research is salient. However, there is a dual objective involved: the
application of knowledge to, as well as the enhancement of, professional practice – a notable priority in the more professionally oriented postgraduate programmes in this case study.

With regard to the three programmes investigated in this research project, the RPL model that predominates is a version of Harris’ ‘development’ model, but there are also elements of Harris’ other two models – the ‘credit exchange’ model and the ‘transformation’ model (Harris 2000). In a manner similar to the RPL practices at the Workers’ College, elements of the transformation model are particularly visible in the Disability Studies curriculum, which aims to transform knowledge in this field, and shift both research in the field and national disability policy from a biomedical to a critical theory paradigm. The radical nature of this goal is also evident in its aspiration to engage in co-construction of ‘new knowledge’ by drawing on an unconventional source: activists’ experiential knowledge.

Institutional context

In this case it is necessary to take three levels of context into account: the character and history of this university as an institutional context; the nature of the discipline or field of study (including its knowledge structure); and faculty and departmental organisational cultures.

At the level of the institution as a whole, some generalisations can be made: this is the oldest university in South Africa, it is epistemologically conservative and it aspires to be the elite, research university in the country. All of this points to the power of knowledge specialism in this context. The research survey of academics’ understanding and views on RPL (see Chapter 3, this book) shows that the differentiation of knowledge (in this case at the level of discipline/knowledge structure) does impact on perceptions of the feasibility of RPL for access to postgraduate study. At the same time, however, we found that the cultural practices and norms of different faculties and departments varied, and this affected both the feasibility and the shape of RPL practice.

Knowledge and curriculum

We found that RPL cannot be reduced to ‘one size fits all’ but assumes different forms in different disciplinary settings. The boundaries between knowledge disciplines vary from less strong (in the case of interdisciplinary programmes) to strong, as they do between formal, academic knowledge and informal learning from experience, depending on whether the curriculum has a more conceptual or contextual logic, its proximity to practice, and the degree of specialisation of discourse.

The boundary conditions of the three programmes investigated in depth in this case study lend themselves to RPL: they are all professional development programmes of one kind or another, and involve continuing professional education in the newer,
'4th generation' professions (Muller 2008) that have an emergent disciplinary base and weak professional identities. In two of the three postgraduate diplomas investigated in depth, porous boundaries allow a rich and productive exchange between professionally-related experiential knowledge and formal knowledge. In a manner similar to the Workers’ College, in the case of Disability Studies the recruitment of experiential knowledge in the planned curriculum is not only for the purpose of illuminating theories that will later help to frame the student’s independent research, but also for directing the student ‘outwards’ towards the ‘real world’, where theorised experience is seen as providing a critical foundation for policy critique and transforming social practice.

These detailed case studies show that within some knowledge fields, under particular faculty/departmental conditions, and with some pedagogic agency on the part of the academics involved, programmes can be built in such a way as to draw on field-specific experiential knowledge and thereby engage alternative sources of epistemological authority.

**Pedagogy**

Each of the RPL processes investigated in detail in this case study has a different sequencing relationship to the mainstream programme concerned. The Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practices (PDMP) and the Disability Studies programmes (a diploma and an MPhil) seem to offer a more inclusive approach to RPL than does the Adult Education programme. These differences also seem to coincide with the curriculum having a stronger contextual logic as compared to the conceptual logic of the Adult Education programme.

In the case of two of the programmes (the PDMP and Disability Studies), workplace and experiential knowledge more generally are overtly recruited and undergo a double recontextualisation. This double recontextualisation has a dual directionality: experience is used to illuminate theory, but ultimately its ‘translation’ is intended to enhance practice and policy in the field. The orientation of these programmes towards the experiential knowledge of students is reflected in their choice of mediating tools, which include not only standard academic texts and assignments but also more dialogical forms such as group projects and oral presentations. The Adult Education postgraduate programme, on the other hand, recruits experience differently: its starting point is theory and although it ‘works back to experience’, the role of this experience is to interrogate the theory and to question how practice might pose researchable questions.

Despite differences in the boundary strengths between experiential and formal bodies of knowledge, the pedagogy of all three programmes in this study may be viewed as strongly framed. This is visible in their strong evaluative criteria, which range from NQF ‘Level 7 descriptors’ (PDMP) to requirements of specific dispositions on the part of students, as well as the strong regulative discourse of
‘social empowerment of the disabled’ (Disability Studies), and the selection of specific theoretical frameworks (Adult Education). All three programmes require the acquisition of academic discourse and literacies, although only the PDMP and Disability Studies programmes provide academic support for this. Like the other case studies, these programmes involve a complex combination of performance and competence pedagogy.

Pedagogic and learner agency

The survey of academics found that knowledge structure – though important – is not entirely determinant in providing affordances or setting limitations to RPL. Academics who are committed to opening up pathways of learning for those historically excluded can exercise considerable pedagogic agency and power to achieve this, and can play an important role in designing diverse pedagogic interventions that are appropriate to purpose and innovative in form. The converse is also true: academics and managers opposed to RPL on epistemological or pedagogic grounds may act as powerful gatekeepers in relation to access by those whose knowledge bases are primarily experiential and/or work-based.

RPL for access to undergraduate study

Object/Purpose

The primary purpose of RPL in this case study is access to undergraduate study at university. Two different routes of access are offered:

• The Portfolio Development Course (PDC), which is a supported programme leading to the production and assessment of individual learning portfolios, by means of which potential to succeed at university undergraduate study is gauged.

• A set of standardised Tests for Access and Placement (TAPs) in which very little support is provided prior to writing the tests.

In both cases, the overarching objective is epistemological access (Morrow 2007) although, in the case of the PDC, there is a strong developmental objective as well.

Institutional context

There are two major institutional role players in this case study: the first and most visible is the university; the second, which is much less visible but has significant epistemological authority over the regulations for alternative admission and graduation, is the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB). The Senate and executive arm of the university are responsible for the admissions and administrative policy framework, while delivery of the RPL programmes and services takes place through the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL), which operates as a service unit to the central administration and all faculties. The DLL administers the standardised tests (TAPs), while all PDC assessments are implemented by faculty-based assessment
panels. Institutional authority is thus shared between the university, the JMB and the faculty selection committees that are involved in the actual assessment processes and decisions.

**Knowledge and curriculum**

The knowledge focus in this case study is generically defined by the distinction between narrative ways of knowing and academic, text-based practices. Both knowledge forms are engaged in the PDC, while the standardised tests focus largely on academic literacies. In terms of narrative ways of knowing, the socio-cultural nature and specificity of learners’ prior knowledge is recontextualised in narrative form as an autobiographical learning history and is typically a hybridised ensemble of horizontal and vertical discourse, with specific applications in one or more occupational knowledge fields, (for example small business or NGO administration, paralegal advisor, trade union organisation, local government counsellor, pastoral worker, and so on). The learning portfolio also contains a number of more conventional pieces of academic writing: an article review and a special project report. These signify a move towards a strengthening of the knowledge codes associated with entry-level academic practices and a student identity.

As in the case of the private FETC and the Workers’ College, the curriculum framework for the PDC forms a distinctive pedagogical discourse in its own right (a curriculum grounded in principles of adult education, learning theory and the sociology of knowledge) through which learners are oriented to the different purposes, methods and practices of the two primary discourses – that is, narrative and academic ways of knowing, and the relation between the two. The inclusive epistemology of narrative ways of knowing is contrasted with the more text-based knowledge of academic practices; the assessment criteria are designed to see whether learners have understood these differences and have the skills to perform effectively in an academic, text-based context.

**Pedagogy**

The pedagogy of the PDC is clearly different to that of the TAPs. The former provides an orientation and bridge into academic practices within a specially constructed learning community and programme, while the latter focuses only on the assessment of entry-level academic literacies. Our research evidences the variations in classification and framing associated with the instructional and normative aspects of the PDC discourse, and describes this as a form of ‘artistry’ in which the agency and expertise of the course facilitators and learners play a big part.

In practice, learners, facilitators and assessors combine in space and time to give shape and form to the enacted curriculum – the artistry of the practice – and this is evident in the selection, sequencing and pacing of the course, in the mediating strategies of the facilitators and mentors, and in the mix of social and pedagogical
activities that constitute the course as a transitional learning community for a relatively short period of time. We analyse this process as a move from a form of competence pedagogy to a more tightly classified and framed mode of performance pedagogy, characterised by more formal reading and writing activities and related mentor-learner relations.

Our study also highlights the significance and pedagogical nature of RPL information and advising services at the start of these processes and, at the other end, the orientation and agency of faculty staff in the assessment aspects of the practice.

**Pedagogic and learner agency**

Pedagogic agency and authority in this case study is located in the course facilitators, administrators and assessment panels, although it is also shared to a large extent with the learners themselves. Learners arrive to write the standardised tests or take the PDC, with different weightings of social and cultural capital relative to the prevailing discourse of the PDC and the TAPs. The distinction we make is between the affordances and constraints of the PDC as compared to the TAPs, where the former provides the scaffolding required to navigate between the different discourses (narrative and academic), while success on the TAPs is dependent on the learner already having the knowledge and skills to engage with the text-based assessments of formal knowledge and learning.

Similarly, for the course facilitators, administrators and academic staff who sit on the assessment panels, their ability to understand and engage with the complex hybridity of learners’ knowledge is itself a function of their disciplinary dispositions and exposure to other knowledge and learning cultures outside of the academy. Our study shows that learner attributes, along with other socio-economic factors, contribute significantly to the levels of optimal inclusion attainable for individuals and for the RPL project as a whole.

**Workers’ College: Developing ‘critical activism’**

**Object/Purpose**

The objectives of the RPL practices of the Workers’ College reflect the purposes of both credit exchange (diploma-level certification for access to undergraduate study at a local university) and personal and collective (organisational) development. Personal developmental dimensions are visible in the emphasis on individual empowerment, self-confidence, ‘emotional healing’, and academic literacies. However, the main orientation is collective and transformative in nature. The college aims to empower trade union and community activists with the theoretical knowledge it believes can enhance their strategic activism; it aims to afford access to higher education to those historically denied access; and it also aims to challenge the relationship between the academic knowledge archive and activists’ local knowledge by treating...
the perspectives and principles derived from activist experience (seen as collectively held) as capable of making a contribution to ‘new knowledge’ – thus illustrating what is at the heart of the notion of ‘dual origins of epistemological authority’, elaborated earlier in this chapter. However, it is possible that tensions and contradictions may arise between these three objectives, or in the way they are interpreted by different stakeholders. For example, access into and progression within higher education is an individual pursuit, while the Workers’ College’s transformatory objectives are primarily social in nature and aimed at collective empowerment.

Institutional context

The Workers’ College locates itself firmly within the ‘critical pedagogy’ tradition of adult education. Guided by its mission of empowering the individual and the collective, the institution is geared towards recognising and valuing selected and specialised forms of experiential knowledge that challenge established knowledge discourses. There are multiple stakeholders in the Workers’ College but it is arguable that while unions and community organisations share the college’s collectivist vision, the aims of its radical pedagogy sit in tension with those of the academy to which some of its most successful ‘RPL graduates’ might gain access.

Knowledge and curriculum

The Workers’ College diploma programmes draw on two sources of knowledge for the design of its curricula – those of the union and civic movements and those of the academy. However they do so in ways that suggest porous boundaries (weak classification) between formal knowledge and particular forms of experiential knowledge, and a strong emphasis on dialogue between the two. The college sees the primary aim of formal, theoretical knowledge as providing ‘thinking tools’ in order to enhance the strategies of activists in their day-to-day struggles. Epistemological authority is shared: unions and community organisations are recognised as a source of knowledge by the facilitators, who command knowledge of ‘established theory’.

There is also a very close relationship between the RPL process and the college curriculum where apart from the process of initial selection (comprising a test and interview), the recognition of prior experiential learning is integrated with the aim of avoiding a ‘dichotomy’ between academic and ‘other learning’ cultures. The college sees the whole diploma programme as an exercise in RPL.

Pedagogy

As noted above, RPL is fully integrated into the curriculum. However, the first module on ‘Activism’ may be seen as playing a central role in documenting and recognising selected discourses of experiential learning before it is recontextualised in a critical dialogue with the academic discourse of subsequent modules.
Notwithstanding the apparent conceptual emphasis of the workbooks (‘curriculum as planned’), in practice (curriculum enacted in the classroom) theoretical knowledge is largely mediated through the learners’ experience. Generally, experience is first recruited in an open inductive fashion, and then moves towards a closed inductive recruitment, where the facilitator builds links between personal and collective experiential knowledge, and between experiential and conceptual/theoretical knowledge in the curriculum. There is therefore a dialectical movement between ‘theory’ and ‘experience’ often ending with the application of concepts back to concrete experience, in order to deepen understanding of the concepts or to reorganise/recontextualise experiential knowledge.

The process of recruitment of selected experiential knowledge therefore involves cycles of recognition and recontextualisation of experience. This enables learners to ‘transcend their local context’ and ‘access the academic and specialised knowledge that gives rise to abstract, specialised and context-independent knowledge structures’ (Haupt 2005: 47). However, the overall directionality of this recruitment is back towards practice and, in this case, a more strategic and critical practice on the part of the activist-learners (guided by their greater depth and breadth of contextual and conceptual understanding) that will deepen the impact of their ‘critical activism’ back in their organisations and communities. As the Workers’ College puts it:

The goal is to facilitate a reflection of learnings acquired from life struggles, to link such experiential knowledge to the academic, theoretical, documented knowledge base, to then develop a combined perspective that seeks to engage with dominant ideologies and to challenge social injustices. (Moodley et al. 2011)

While the classification boundaries between experiential and conceptual knowledge are weak, framing (control of the dialogue) is strong, although often masked by the facilitative style of pedagogy (what Bernstein would refer to as ‘invisible pedagogy’).

The college facilitators assume a strong role in determining the content, sequencing and pacing of the curriculum, in dialogue with one another. The discourse of critical, transformatory pedagogy is strong and explicit, and guides the selection of theories and concepts for inclusion in the curriculum. Nevertheless, pedagogic authority is dispersed – there is a strong emphasis on peer learning and on ‘each one teach one’ – and power relations between facilitators and learners are relatively egalitarian.

The most easily identifiable tools of mediation apart from the discourse of the facilitators – the workbooks – are text-reliant and appear to be theoretically dense and their language discursively specialised. However, ‘curriculum in action’ deploys the tools of robust oral debate, visual media, peer mediation, performativity such as poetry, drama and music, and site visits; these, together with the fieldwork project, mean that dialogical tools of mediation that ‘look both ways’ (towards theory and practice) actually predominate in practice. There is, however, some disjuncture between these dialogical tools of mediation that ‘speak’ to learners’ experiences and
the forms of assessment (essays and exams) that are academic in nature, primarily asking learners to demonstrate understanding of general, abstract concepts and contextual issues.

**Pedagogic and learner agency**

Pedagogic agency is expressed *collectively* and there is a weak specialisation of roles and disciplinary knowledge, marked by the collaboration among facilitators in developing curriculum and learning materials. All facilitators have an overview of the curriculum and there is also some teaching across the modules.

The Workers’ College curriculum faces two ways: towards the organisations that sponsor the participants’ attendance, and towards the neighbouring university, which acts as a receiving organisation for some of the college’s graduates. Thus the facilitators have to be very creative in carrying out the complex task of mediating between different stakeholders and their respective discourses. Herein lies the ‘artistry’ of these agents and their pedagogical practices. Facilitators are generally, therefore, selected on the basis of their capacity also to ‘face both ways’ – that is, they have activist experience as well as a formal education background, and it is this dual identity that accounts for the specialised agency of the RPL facilitator and the artistry of their practice.

**Private FETC: Credit exchange for career progression**

**Object/purpose**

This case study illustrates the particular challenges of RPL for the purposes of an occupationally directed qualification. For employees, the companies and the private FETC, the overarching purpose and directionality of the practice is oriented to workforce development rather than access to further study; on a more immediate level, RPL aims to provide a qualification to facilitate career progression. This is consistent with a ‘credit exchange’ model of RPL, with its emphasis on the mapping and assessment of specialised experiential knowledge against knowledge standards articulated in an occupationally directed qualification.

**Institutional context**

The two primary institutional stakeholders in this case study are the companies at which candidates are employed, and the private FETC, which specialises in the provision of work-based RPL programmes and services. The FETC also engages, albeit indirectly, with the official statutory body responsible for the generation and quality assurance of occupationally directed qualifications and related curricula, that is, the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). Together these institutions comprise an ‘interconnected activity system’ (Bolton & Keevy, 2012), with each institution having specific investments in the RPL practice. The QCTO is
prominent in the field of qualification design and accreditation, while the role of the private FETC is distinctive in that not only does it facilitate learning and assessment activities, it also acts as a boundary worker in managing the tensions/contradictions that emanate from the disparate interests of employers, providers and professional bodies in the design, implementation, outcomes and quality assurance of the system as a whole.

In this study the key constraint arose from the QCTO’s curriculum directive that occupationally directed qualifications and related curricula be disaggregated into four distinct components (‘knowledge’, ‘practical’, ‘workplace’ and ‘fundamental’ capabilities) and assessed independently. Our research suggests that while this disaggregation might be suitable for the training of novices, it significantly disadvantages experienced workers whose capabilities function in an integrated fashion and who need to be assessed in a manner that allows for the recognition of integration skills.

Knowledge and curriculum

The following three forms of recontextualised educational knowledge are evident in this case study:

- The specialised experiential knowledge of a salaried clerical worker.
- The official curriculum and standards of a vocational qualification designed for clerical workers.
- The RPL curriculum that is structured sequentially into a logical process, which progressively mediates the recontextualisation and mapping of the discourse of the clerical worker against the explicit knowledge standards and assessment criteria of the qualification.

This process attempts to make more visible the concepts tacitly embedded in the applied knowledge and skills discourse of the experienced worker or RPL candidate, while acknowledging distinctions between the experiential and the official (unit standard-based) representations of workplace knowledge. Epistemological authority in this case is located in the official discourse of the QCTO and its agents in the recontextualising field of occupationally directed curricula and qualifications, but as our case study illustrates, this may be contested by knowledge claims originating in differently specialised companies or workplaces.

Pedagogy

The focus and form of RPL as a pedagogic discourse provides for the recognition and documentation of work-based knowledge and skills acquired through prior experiential learning in these contexts. It also provides a specialised set of interpretive texts and examples to assist candidates in recasting their experiential knowledge in the language of the unit standards.
Pedagogic authority is strong and the RPL advisor clusters the official unit standards using the logic of workplace processes and systems, thus providing scaffolded support for the RPL candidates in accessing the recognition rules of the official discourse. Framing is also strong: the advisor retains tight control over selection, sequencing and pacing of the programme. The dominant model of pedagogy adopted is the *performance model*, where the assessment criteria are made explicit and are relatively non-negotiable for RPL candidates. However, there are also elements of *competence pedagogy*, involving the recruitment and recognition of the knowledge concepts tacitly embedded in the specialised practices (experience) of competent employees.

The RPL pedagogy provides for a double recontextualisation of workplace experiential knowledge. The first recontextualising process begins with a general introduction to the discourse and standards of the official curriculum and standards. This is followed by the collection of naturally occurring evidence of competent practice related to these standards and then a second level of engagement with the conceptual discourse (textbook theory) required for the analysis of those practices. The process allows the candidates to establish some cognitive distance from their experiential knowledge, though not negating it – and then re-articulate it using a more specialised conceptual discourse, that is, the underpinning knowledge of the unit standards – hence the double recontextualisation.

The pedagogic process is therefore one that ‘looks both ways’ – that is, towards a workplace logic and towards a qualification or unit standards logic. This is reflected in the tools of mediation used in RPL practice, which range from workplace observations, to oral presentations, to more formal teaching, texts and assignments; together they represent a set of boundary objects that allow for some degree of dialogue between candidates’ workplace experience and the more specialised discourse of qualifications. Overall directionality is, however, towards the formal qualification.

**Pedagogic agency**

Playing the role of boundary worker, the RPL advisor needs to have an intimate knowledge of both the workplace and the qualification requirements, and must be able to mediate between the sometimes competing needs of multiple stakeholders, as well as act as an interpreter between three different discourses: the specialised languages of workplace practice, the conceptual discourse and language of the textbook, and the official discourse and language of unit standards. The pedagogical tools, methods and strategies used by the RPL provider, in this case the private FETC, are indicative of a fourth educational discourse at work in these contexts. It is this discourse that allows the facilitator or assessor on behalf of the provider to intervene creatively to construct a curriculum whose logic shifts from being defined by the workplace context to being defined by the requirements of the unit standard-based approach to qualifications.
Conclusion

In this chapter we have suggested a conceptual framework and language of description for considering RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice within and beyond the knowledge boundaries of the NQF. The suggested framework offers a socially located set of conceptual tools for theorising the key features of RPL as a form of boundary pedagogy that mediates learning and facilitates navigation of learning conventions and practices across different contexts. Our framework locates RPL in relation to three interlinked fields within the contested system of knowledge production and distribution: the field of knowledge production, the field of recontextualisation and the field of pedagogic practice.

Our first proposition in this chapter was that RPL operates as an inclusive principle that recognises dual epistemological authority across and beyond different cultures of academic and non-academic knowledge. RPL in this sense could be said to be a boundary-crossing principle that attempts to disrupt the dominant distributive rules of the pedagogic device by affording recognition and access not only to mainstream ‘scientific’ discourses but also to other, selected, specialised discourses of what we have referred to as ‘the specialised discourse(s) of experiential learning’. Bernstein (2000) reminds us that ideology is present in the struggle to control the pedagogic device, and this applies as much to RPL in the realm of qualification and curriculum design as it does in the spheres of pedagogical practice and assessment in the field of education and training. Struggles in the field of knowledge production and recontextualisation are particularly significant in determining what RPL as a pedagogical practice can achieve in terms of optimal inclusion; that is, in determining what knowledge counts and whose knowledge counts towards what ‘qualification’ on the NQF or completely outside of it.

Our second proposition refers to the purposes and ‘inner workings’ of RPL as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy. In our review of the four case studies, we noted that there are significant differences in the purposes, location and construction of RPL as a pedagogical activity in different contexts. However there is also much that is common and distinctive. The CHAT systems model provides a useful base from which to describe and theorise what is common with reference to the distinctive elements of RPL pedagogy and the overall ‘artistry’ that ultimately accounts for its dynamic nature and distinctive character. These elements or features of the pedagogy, and the artistry of the whole, may be described in relation to the purpose (object) and direction of the practice; in most cases, there was a dual object involved: epistemological access, and application of knowledge to the ‘real world’, although the overarching directionality of the RPL practice tended to foreground one or other of these.

- Specialised mediation tools – methods, languages and technologies – are designed to mediate an engagement with specialised forms of knowledge and skill that originate in two or more knowledge fields, but which may or may not be recognised in the structure and assessment criteria of the qualification concerned.
A distinctive identity and agency exists on the part of RPL candidates and facilitators. RPL learners are recognised as having followed a different pathway to conventional learners in the education and training system, and it is their claim to be knowledgeable subjects that is distinctive to the notion of RPL as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy.

RPL facilitators and assessors exercise a specialised form of pedagogic agency. They ‘have their feet in both worlds’ as it were, that is, in the world of practice and in the world of science. It is this duality (not dualism) that enables them to understand and engage pedagogically with the hybridised discourse of experiential learning, as well as the more strongly bounded discourses of the academy or the occupational qualification.

Finally, like all pedagogical discourses, RPL cannot be understood in isolation from the particular rules, divisions of labour and associated power relations that situate and define the social and regulatory nature and purposes of the practices.

This brings us to what we have called the ‘artistry’ of the practice – the ways in which the different elements outlined above, combine in time and space to produce the dynamic and distinctive nature of the discourse, with its particular affordances and constraints for optimal inclusion.

Our research showed that, as with some other forms of pedagogy, different models of RPL practice involved a ‘mixed palette’ (Muller 2000) or hybrid form of pedagogy involving both performance and competence forms of pedagogy. What is distinctive across the different cases, however, is the combination of weak classification (by definition, RPL relies on porous boundaries between different knowledges) and strong framing (strong control of the educator over RPL process) that is necessary to enable learners to recognise, navigate and engage with the discourse and assessment criteria of the qualification at hand.

Our case studies also suggest that the pedagogical strategies (content, methods, tools and divisions of labour) often change as the process unfolds and summative assessments draw near, that is, from those which Bernstein characterised as forms of competence pedagogy – typically associated with the openness and flexibility of adult education with very porous knowledge boundaries and flat control relations between learners and facilitators – to a form more characteristic of the performance pedagogy typical of formal education provision, where the curriculum is tightly controlled, the division of labour is more hierarchical and facilitator-centred, and there is an explicit focus on the mastery of text-based practices and assessment criteria as required for the summative assignments and/or examinations.

**Acknowledgements**

Prof. Elana Michelson provided insightful comments and suggestions on the first drafts of this chapter.
Notes
1  With the exception of the artisan occupations.
2  We problematise the use of this term a little later in this chapter.
3  This was already suggested in Judy Harris’ (2004) PhD thesis.
4  Monological or ‘univocal’ forms of communication are authoritative in nature and directive in terms of meaning. In pedagogical discourse, these forms of communication are often associated with the concepts of teaching as transmission and learning as acquisition.
5  Dialogical forms of communication open a space for multiple and contested meanings, and are pedagogically associated with concepts of teaching as facilitation and learning as participation.
6  There is sometimes a gap between this aspired goal, and what is actually achieved in practice (see Chapter 5, this book).
7  Open, inductive recruitment of experience is where no specific conclusions are prefigured; a more ‘closed’, inductive recruitment of experience involves the ‘renaming’ of experience through a theoretical, conceptual language.
8  In invisible pedagogy, rules and hierarchical relationships are not absent but are implicit: ‘Power is masked or hidden by devices of communication’ (Bernstein 1990, cited in Sadovnik 1995: 13).
9  ‘Generic’ literacy and numeracy skills.
References


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The research findings reflected in this book offer an interpretation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices across four quite different sites of practice. Our starting point (see Chapter 1, this book) was that RPL was inadequately theorised as an assessment-focused pedagogic practice, and that the perceived failure of RPL practices in South Africa to deliver on the inclusive expectations set out in national policy debates, required a careful study of the inherent principles and inner workings of these practices, and the organisational contexts in which they are implemented. In Chapter 2 of this book, we set out our assumptions about knowledge differentiation and knowledge boundaries, and the constraints and conditions these impose on RPL practices: that there are different forms and cultures of knowledge and learning, and that non-formal, informal or experiential forms of learning do not easily translate into more codified forms of knowledge for the purposes of assessment and certification.

It is this understanding that gave rise to the proposition explored in the case studies and developed conceptually in Chapter 7 of this book, namely that RPL operates as a ‘disruptive principle’ in the fields of knowledge production and recontextualisation (qualifications and curriculum design), and as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy for mediating an exchange of meaning across different discursive practices.

Our task in this last chapter is to look at the implications of this conceptual framework for policy and practice, and how these relate to the key question that drove this research project in the first place:

What needs to change for RPL to become a more optimally inclusive and effective practice in the workplace, in higher and further education provision, and in mediating access and credit transfer across different contexts and learning pathways in a differentiated but interdependent National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?

There have been numerous opportunities at academic seminars, policy forums and conferences to present and engage in critical conversations with researchers, RPL practitioners and policy makers around our findings, and the conceptual framework as it emerged. Consequently, we became aware of different responses to the conceptual framework, depending on stakeholders’ location and role in the education and training system.
Policy makers, statutory bodies and academics are particularly interested in the concept of dual sources of epistemological authority and how to construct a more inclusive system of qualifications design and assessment that does not compromise the quality and integrity of existing qualifications and curriculum standards. We were particularly fortunate in being able to channel our conversations with policy makers into a new RPL policy-making process launched by SAQA in 2012 and we comment briefly below on the outcomes of that process.

RPL practitioners and administrators, on the other hand, are interested in the practical applications of RPL as a specialised pedagogy, in dealing with issues of equivalence and boundary crossing in different contexts, and more optimally inclusive and cost-effective implementation. The challenge we faced as researchers was how to translate the notion of specialised pedagogy into a workable model that practitioners could understand and apply in planning and/or evaluating their own practices. This led to the formulation of three generic configurations or applications of RPL as a specialised pedagogy, which we present further on. First, we consider the ways the research findings resonate with new RPL policies in South Africa.

**Engagements with RPL policy making in South Africa**

The decision by SAQA in 2012 to revise its RPL policy to align with the NQF Act 67 of 2008 provided a fortuitous opportunity for us to engage policy makers on our thinking about RPL as a ‘disruptive principle’ and a specialised pedagogy. One of our researchers was invited to sit on the national advisory body that worked with the SAQA team to craft the new RPL policy, while others took part in the process of public comment and debate.

The revised policy, which was finally published in March 2013 (SAQA 2013), is decidedly different in formulation from the 2002 version that it replaced. The latter was notable for its emphasis on the technical procedures and criteria for implementing RPL as a form of assessment and credit exchange across the learning system; whereas the 2013 version provides the space for a more forthright engagement with RPL that encompasses particular pedagogic principles, and understands RPL as a process for mediating knowledge recognition and certification within and across the boundaries of the NQF and its sub-frameworks. It is this notion of mediation that marks the difference between the old and the new policy: whereas the former was about assessment tools and practices, the latter is about a more optimally inclusive set of specialised pedagogical principles and practices, including assessment.

The new policy is also explicit in its recognition of different purposes and forms of RPL ‘in relation to different contexts and classifications of knowledge, skills, competencies, qualifications and part-qualifications in the national learning system’ (SAQA 2013: 3, Clause 6d) and in its definition of RPL as ‘the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and
admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development' (SAQA 2013: 5, Clause 26).

The policy, advisedly, does not use the term ‘specialised pedagogy’ per se, but elaborates on the understanding of RPL as a pedagogic process as follows:

The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access or inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, and extended preparation for assessment.

(SAQA 13: 5, Clause 30)

The policy goes on to define a number of policy priorities for the resourcing, quality assurance, effective delivery and coordination of RPL by different stakeholders in the system. These are aimed inter alia at addressing defined barriers to implementation (SAQA 13: 3, Clause 6c) and ensuring ‘equitable access to RPL programmes and service’ (SAQA 2013: 8, Clause 46b) across the system. The policy is also explicit in assigning responsibility for the promotion, implementation and monitoring of RPL practices to statutory bodies and providers at all levels in and across the system.

Together these clauses reflect a new policy environment, which better understands the complex knowledge boundaries and learning pathways of the NQF and its sub-frameworks, and, at the same time, helps to create the enabling conditions under which the provision of RPL programmes and services can be developed, resourced and implemented. We do not see this new policy as a simple endorsement of the research, but certainly one that has taken our findings and the goal of optimal inclusion seriously.

Configurations of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice

In Chapter 7 of this book, we illustrate how it is possible to draw on the conceptual tools offered by both CHAT and Bernstein’s pedagogic device, to offer a more fine-tuned description and analysis of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice. However, this proved difficult to explain to practitioners who are not necessarily familiar with these concepts, and so we decided to elaborate three generic configurations (or applications) that RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice may assume in different contexts. This elaboration complements models of RPL practice previously proposed by RPL researchers, which were briefly summarised in Chapter 2 of this book. While the models capture the different purposes and curriculum locations of different RPL practices, each application focuses on the pedagogic practice itself, and expresses a distinctive combination of pedagogic discourse (in the fields of knowledge production and recontextualisation) and internal workings (varying dimensions) of the practice. These configurations define but do not prescribe the specialised
nature of RPL as a pedagogical practice in different contexts, nor do they necessarily determine the affordances and constraints on optimal inclusion associated with the practices.

We have defined our three configurations as translational, navigational and dialogical models. Each is differentiated in relation to seven generic criteria, namely

- the field of knowledge production and related sources of epistemological authority with which they are associated;
- the field of recontextualisation and related rules shaping and/or contesting the qualifications and/or curriculum to be recognised and compared;
- the specific purposes (exchange and/or use value) and directionality of the practice;
- the nature and form of the tools (methods, portfolios, demonstrations) used to articulate and recognise prior learning in relation to the particular objects (understandings) and directionality of the practice;
- the evaluation rules (assessment criteria) governing the forms and outcomes of the practice;
- the distinctive forms of pedagogic agency (practitioner and learner identities and roles) involved in the practice;
- the distinctive set of institutional and/or organisational conditions (policies, regulations, resources, tensions) impacting on the practice.

It needs to be noted that these models are necessarily ideal types, which as our case studies have shown, are more likely to exist in more hybrid forms when located in real historical contexts and conditions.

Each of the models is briefly described in relation to the three configurations of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice. We have edited the descriptions so as to foreground the application and background the conceptual framework.

**The translational model**

In this configuration, the essence of the practice is to facilitate a process of articulation and translation of the (specialised experiential) knowledge and skills of competent workers, usually in employment, into the language that is used in the specification of an occupationally-based qualification and a related curriculum. The assumption in this model is that the production and circulation of formal knowledge concepts do happen outside of formal education contexts, but in the particular, contextualised form deployed in workplaces and/or organisations. Much of this knowledge is embedded (tacitly) in the socio-cultural practices and discourse of these organisations and/or workplaces (activity systems). The model requires a specialised set of interpretive tools to render that knowledge comparable with the more explicit discourse of the standards. The immediate objective is to build a portfolio of evidence for assessment and certification (credit exchange), that is, to provide participants with the tools they need to translate their practitioner...
knowledge and skills (specialised discourses of experiential learning) into the standards and naming conventions of the target qualification.

Specialised methods, usually a combination of practical, oral and/or written activities and assignments, are used to assist participants to get some distance from their experience and to familiarise themselves with the principles, theoretical language and assessment criteria associated with the qualification. The process is controlled by RPL practitioners and assessors, although the agency and expertise of the participants is clearly essential to the success of the whole process. Participants must be able to rearticulate and/or demonstrate their competence to the standards specified in the qualification and/or curriculum outcomes. Institutional policy, regulations and resources also play a significant role in shaping this type of RPL practice, for example the policies of the QCTO in regulating curriculum and assessment specifications for novices and experienced practitioners in the private FET College (FETC) case study.

There are two variations of this model: the Procrustean variation (Harris 2000), which requires a high level of equivalence (strong classification of the boundaries) for the award of credits, and a more flexible variation with a more porous boundary, which does not insist on an exact match with criteria in order to award the credit or the qualification. Each variation is associated with particular methods and tools for preparing candidates and conducting assessments, but it is the translational nature of the pedagogy that distinguishes this model from the others described below. Translational models provide access to linguistic and conceptual tools that are directly related to the specialisations of the competent worker and to the relevant assessment criteria for the qualification.

The private FETC case study in this book exemplifies an interesting example of the translational model – and the tension between its Procrustean and more flexible variations.

**The navigational model**

In this configuration, the practice is less concerned with establishing equivalence between different forms of knowledge, and more concerned with the different rules and literacies associated with the production and acquisition of knowledge in different contexts. The goal of the RPL pedagogy is to provide participants with the necessary understandings (cognitive, narrative and text-based literacies) to navigate their way between the different cultures (forms and practices) of knowledge and learning associated with work- or community-based experiential learning on the one hand and formal education and training on the other. The aim is to highlight not flatten the differences, and to familiarise participants with the rules, values and assessment criteria (recognition rules and realisation rules) appropriate to learning in different contexts, so as thereby to promote epistemological access to formal knowledge codes. In other words, in contrast to the translational model, this model
involves the acquisition of significant new understandings and skills to navigate and adapt to learning in the formal education contexts.

Typical applications of this model, which is also referred to as the developmental model (Harris 2000), are for access to undergraduate or postgraduate study. In the case of the former, the focus is on a transition from the narrative ways of knowing of the workplace or community to text-based academic practices; and in the case of postgraduate study, from the specialised identity and knowledge of professional practices or social movements to the specialised forms of academic discourse associated with research and knowledge production at postgraduate level.

Specialised methods are used to generate a meta-level engagement with the tools and rules governing the teaching and learning practices (construction, distribution and acquisition of knowledge) in the different contexts. Typically these pedagogies begin with an exploration of the narrative and oral literacies associated with work- or community-based knowledge and learning practices, and then progress in a scaffolded fashion into the generic and/or discipline-specific, academic literacies required for access to formal education (academic discourse). Pedagogic control and, to a limited extent epistemological authority, is usually shared between learners and facilitators (across fairly porous knowledge boundaries) at the start of these processes; but control and authority shift considerably in favour of the RPL practitioner as the process progresses towards the acquisition and evidencing of the academic literacies required to perform and succeed in more formal curriculum contexts.

In most cases, the implementation of a navigational model precedes entry into an undergraduate or a postgraduate programme. However, in others cases, such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practices (PDMP) and Disability Studies programmes, and to some extent the Workers’ College programmes, the navigational mode of RPL is embedded in the curriculum as an initial foundational module, or even as a module running parallel to the main curriculum. Institutional policies, regulations and resources also play a significant role in shaping the affordances and constraints of this mode of the practice.

The dialogical model

This configuration of RPL practice is characterised by a critical dialogue between academic and non-academic cultures of knowledge within a negotiated curriculum framework designed for this purpose. The assumption is that new knowledge production is not only the product and preserve of scholarly or scientific research, but also occurs in and through the specialised practices of other institutions, such as organs of government, industry and social movements. In other words, this configuration challenges the dominance of only one source of epistemological authority in the construction of qualifications and curriculum design. In this case, the pedagogic agency of the RPL institution, (for example the Workers’ College),
is recognised as a legitimate role player in the design of the curriculum (the field of recontextualisation) although authority (internal control) over the content, selection and evaluation rules is strongly influenced by the authority (external controls) and power of the other role players, (for example the union and the university), in the field.

The notion of a negotiated curriculum suggests porous boundaries that recognise different cultures and sources of epistemological authority. However, this might not always be the case, as significant differences in forms of knowledge, and contestation over what knowledge is to be privileged, may lead to stronger regulation (insulation) in the RPL curriculum. The purpose and direction of the RPL-enhanced curriculum and pedagogical discourse reflect an attempt to serve both the academic and non-academic objectives of major role players, and the synergies as well as the tensions that result are reflected in the dynamic nature of the enacted curriculum. Central to this enacted curriculum are the specialised methods (tools) used to mediate the dialogue between the different knowledge cultures and specialisations. This involves an iterative set of deductive and inductive strategies for recruiting applied, experiential knowledge and abstract, theoretical knowledge, and relating them to one another in a dialogical fashion.

Thus the essential dynamic and artistry of the pedagogy is a dialectical movement between two knowledge specialisations, in a process (cycles of recognition and recontextualisation), which enables learners to transcend their local context and contribute to the construction of a new, hybridised knowledge discourse for realising both the academic and societal/organisational objectives of the curriculum.

In the dialogical model, while the curriculum boundaries between (specialised) experiential and conceptual knowledge are kept open (weak classification), control (framing) of the learning activities is strong, although often masked by the facilitative style of the approach and the methods used (invisible pedagogy). On the one hand, the RPL practitioners take a firm hand in the selection of the content, and the sequencing and pacing of the programme (instructional discourse) and related norms and values (regulative discourse). On the other, pedagogic authority is dispersed and there is a strong emphasis on peer learning and egalitarian power relations between RPL practitioners and learners. Assessment rules and related practices are typically negotiated and as such reflect the dual purposes and directionality of the practices, as well as the ideologies and levels of contestation or collaboration among the major role players, (for example college, union and university).

Institutional policies, cultures and resources also play a significant role in shaping the affordances and constraints of this mode of the practice.
Conclusion: Specialised pedagogy and optimal inclusion

The goal of optimal inclusion in an education and training system is difficult to define and pin down, although perhaps less so in a system where previous state policies deliberately excluded the vast majority of the population from access to quality education and training. However, behind the obvious racial exclusions and impacts of the apartheid system, there are a number of more complex structures and hierarchies that make the project of optimal inclusion difficult to resolve, even with strong policy interventions by the democratic state. These include structurally embedded relationships of inclusion and exclusion based on class, gender, language, and demographic inequalities and, for the purposes of this book, the terrain of knowledge production, distribution and recognition in the global knowledge economy. The latter are not unrelated to the former; they play out, though, in ways that are quite specific to the field of education and, in this case, to the RPL project and its purpose of mediating the recognition of knowledge and learning achievements within and across boundaries – including knowledge and learning acquired outside of the conventional rules, practices and pathways of the mainstream education and training system.

This project and purpose is clearly easier said than done; as much as many would like RPL practitioners to ‘keep it simple’, there is no escaping the need to understand the complex structures and social relations that define different knowledge fields, knowledge forms and distributive rules within which RPL practices operate. This is where the critical artistry of the practice, of ‘knowing the borders and crossing the lines’ (Harris 2006), is most evident and, to some extent, unpredictable.

Our argument, reinforced in this chapter, is that RPL cannot be theorised as the conventional transmission and acquisition of knowledge from a single source of epistemological authority. It is distinctively a specialised process for mediating knowledge claims that originate from two or more sets of discursive practices, and this gives rise to particular configurations and enactments of RPL curricula, pedagogic practice and methods of assessment. We have identified three such configurations or applications of RPL as a specialised pedagogic practice, with each of them characterised by the purpose and nature of the mediation they enact, and the different tools and strategies they deploy for articulating and recognising the forms of knowledge and learning involved.

The affordances and constraints in terms of ‘optimal inclusion’ at this level of analysis are directly or indirectly related to the inner workings of the practice, not least to the pedagogic agency of the RPL practitioners and learners, and the institutional policies and practices in which they are located. It is our contention that the RPL practitioner who understands the complexities of RPL as a specialised pedagogy is much better placed to identify, diagnose and resolve the problems and disappointments that arise when RPL fails to meet expectations of optimal inclusion. It is analogous to the distinction between the driver of the car and the mechanic: when the engine fails, it
is the mechanic who knows what to do, not the driver. So, to extend the metaphor, we would hope that the set of conceptual tools that have emerged out of this research and which are documented in this book will prove fruitful to RPL practitioners and policy makers alike; fruitful in making their RPL practices more effective and more inclusive for those whose knowledge and skills deserve recognition and, where appropriate, certification. We also look forward to working with our peers in RPL research in putting these tools to the test, to sharpen and improve, and if necessary, to replace them with better ones!

Acknowledgements
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Notes
1 Advisedly, in the sense that the phrase ‘pedagogical practice’ is not commonly understood or used outside of formal education.
References


Appendices

Chapter 4 Appendix 1

Each of the five contact sessions of the course and the mentoring sessions are briefly described below.

The first session

The first session provides an overview of the purpose, principles, content and intended outcomes of the programme. It consists of nine different activities, including the tea break, aimed at establishing a new learning community and inducting participants into the theoretical foundations and practical requirements for the nine-week course, and the production of a learning portfolio. The session also initiates participants into the practice of journal writing and reflection, which is a feature of every session on the course. The curriculum focus is on learning in different contexts, more specifically the different purposes and modalities of formal and experiential learning. Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning is introduced as a form of action learning and theory making outside of the academy. The homework assignment provides an opportunity for participants to use the model to document a learning experience of their own and to collect data for a small survey (experiment) on motivations to study and possible barriers to success. Copies of the On Campus magazine is provided with an instruction to read it in preparation for a short test (15 minutes) in the following session.

The second session

The second session shifts the focus from different ways of learning onto different forms of knowledge and skill produced and acquired in academic and non-academic contexts. Participants are reseated in faculty groups at the beginning of this session and they remain in these groups until the end of the contact sessions. This session consists of eight different activities through which participants explore their own knowledge and skills profile, and a map of the knowledge fields and qualifications offered by the university. The session includes a short written test, a statistical coding and analysis of their survey data, a talk by an academic member of staff, and a guide to documenting their skills profile and extended Curriculum Vitae.
The third session

The focus of the third session is on the autobiographical narrative as a genre for contextualising the historical development of knowledge and skills, and presenting this in the form of a long essay. The session includes two particularly evocative activities: feedback on the first written test and homework assignment, and a visualisation/drawing activity called ‘Learning on the River of Life’. The latter serves as a mind-mapping exercise for the autobiographical learning history. The homework assignment from this session is to use guidelines provided in the course notes to write a first draft of the autobiographical learning history, and to make a summary of one of the prescribed readings in preparation for the following session.

The fourth session

The fourth session marks a decisive move in the direction of academic literacy and is led by a specialist in this field. The session is conducted in lecture format but is laced with questions and short activities to demonstrate a range of strategies for reading and writing academic text, and comparing these to reading more popular genres such as newspaper and magazines. The core text for this session is a chapter by bell hooks entitled Crossing Class Boundaries, extracts of which have been pasted into power point slides for use as examples. The strategies for reading academic text include the ‘SQ3R’ (survey, question, read, recall and review) and for writing, various ideas such as brainstorming, mind mapping, free-writing and the use of cohesive markers. Two different forms of academic writing are briefly engaged, namely the long essay and the article review as required for the learning portfolio. At the end of the session, each participant is given a set of notes on academic literacy and two short articles to review for their homework assignment.

The fifth session

The fifth session signals the last of the contact sessions and four more weeks to the submission of the learning portfolio. This necessarily turns the focus onto the assessment dimensions of the practice, and with it, the completion of the learning portfolio and preparation for an interview with a panel of academic staff. It is a busy session with 12 different activities, including a vibrant discussion of the article review done for homework, guidelines on how to conduct a literature search for a special project, and a role play on the purpose, meaning and practice of assessment in different learning contexts. The session also contains a few activities signalling the transition from the course-based learning community to the individualised mentoring activities that follow.

Each participant is offered a minimum of two mentoring sessions during the four weeks after the contact sessions. The purpose of these sessions is to provide advice, support and feedback to the participants in the completion of their learning portfolio.
and in deciding whether to apply for admission to the University of the Western Cape (UWC) or follow another path.

Notes
1  Produced by the Writing Centre and available online to students at the University
Chapter 4 Appendix 2

Summarised profiles for the RPL learner agency study

Brian was 26 years old when he took part in the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) and was admitted to study for a B.Com degree. He was 30 years old at the time of this interview and in his third year of part-time study for the degree. Brian’s parents were divorced at a young age and he grew up with his mother and grandmother in a family where money and resources were scarce. Brian did well in primary school but was ‘left to my own devices’ without any encouragement or support. He dropped out of high school in Standard 7 to go and work in a factory where he remained for 10 years before deciding to start his own business and pursue further education.

Thembi was 31 when she enrolled for the PDC in 2010. Thembi grew up and went to school in a rural community in the Eastern Cape. She recalls her struggle with English in primary school and the impact it had on learning other subjects. Her parents were both at school when she was born and never got married, and Thembi identifies this as a significant factor in her learning history. Thembi matriculated in 1998 with a senior certificate including four higher grade subjects, and after four different jobs in the retail industry, she joined a key tourist company in the Cape and became a team leader in the retail department. She is currently 34 and in her 3rd year of full time study towards a BA degree majoring in Philosophy and History.

Nadeen’s profile reflects an interesting journey through home and primary school and then into Islamic Studies and the study of the Qur’an. She commenced teaching at an Islamic school from the age of 17, and continued in this practice intermittently until the age of 30, during which time she also married, had two children, did an Islamic calligraphy course and set up a small confectionary baking business. Nadeen’s learning identity over this time transitioned from daughter and child and student to teacher, wife, mother and baker. Her first application to study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) via the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programme was unsuccessful after she failed the standardised tests, but she returned two years later, aged 32, and completed the Portfolio Development Course in 2012. She was admitted to study for an LLB degree (foundation) in 2013.

Ruaan left school in 1979 with a Grade 10 Certificate and commenced a technical apprenticeship in the Post Office, which lasted for 4 years. His career at Telkom included numerous in-house training courses and a Management Development Programme at Stellenbosch University. In 2002 he decided to make a career change, to hone his ‘people skills’ and to specialise in adult education and community development facilitation skills. To this end, he completed numerous short courses with local and international development organisations, and redefined his identity as a training consultant in the Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) and public
sectors. Ruaan is distinguished from the others in this study in that he was admitted to the university after successfully writing a set of standardised tests for admission to the B.Admin programme in 2007. He was 45 at the time and had an impressive track record of employment at TELKOM SA where he had progressed to the level of an Operations Manager before leaving in 2002. Ruaan studied part-time for his degree from 2007–2010 and completed an honours degree in Public Administration in 2012. At the time of this interview, he was employed on an extended contract as a training consultant for the Department of Health.

Portia did the PDC in 2012 but was not accepted for admission to the Social Work programme for which she applied. She was initially very disappointed at this result but came to accept it and shifted her focus onto education which, at the time of this interview, was where she felt her mission and purpose could best be realised. Portia’s learning journey reflects the evolution of a courageous and resilient personality, shaped by a number of health and relationship struggles that she encountered as a child and as a married woman with two daughters. Portia was 38 at the time of her interview and was working as a volunteer teacher’s assistant at a local primary school.

Eleanor was, at the time of the interview, in her first year of study for a BA degree in Social Work but this didn’t come easy. Evelyn left school with a Grade 7 (Standard 5) certificate and not withstanding her love for reading, which she acquired from her aunt who was a teacher, the next 30 years provided very little in the way of formal education. This is not to suggest that she stopped learning for, as her narrative account of these times indicates, she had a quite remarkable ability to learn what she needed to survive and most notably from the wise and tough other women in her life: her grandmother, her aunt – a ‘lady that was sort of like a biological mother to me’ who raised 10 children of her own – and her brother’s mother-in-law who ‘taught me to make an attractive meal from the basic stuff I had in the cupboard’. Eleanor’s learning journey bears all the marks of a survivor who has come through a particularly harsh and difficult life: from her years as a child in foster care, her time as a young woman on the streets of a violent and poverty-stricken neighbourhood, her struggle as a single parent to raise her seven children and find decent work, her year in hospital with TB, the rape of her daughters by a paedophile, the tragedy of her son’s violent death, and her own struggle to avoid serious alcohol addiction as an escape from the harshness of her life circumstances.
Chapter 6 Appendix 1

Table 6.5 below shows two unit standards with their existing specific outcomes, and how these outcomes were ‘disaggregated’ into the three post-QCTO (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations) components.¹

**Table 6.5 How two unit standards were ‘disaggregated’ into the three post-QCTO (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations) components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The unit standard name and number</th>
<th>The specific outcomes</th>
<th>How we categorised it in the QCTO components</th>
<th>How we RPL-ed it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13999 Demonstrate an understanding of basic accounting practices</td>
<td>Explain the cycle of recording transactions and relevant terminology</td>
<td>Knowledge component</td>
<td>Knowledge test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain and demonstrate an understanding of source documents</td>
<td>Knowledge component</td>
<td>Knowledge test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain the purpose of each subsidiary journal</td>
<td>Knowledge component</td>
<td>Knowledge test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare subsidiary journals</td>
<td>Practical component</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post subsidiary journals to the general ledger</td>
<td>Practical component</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare the final statements</td>
<td>Workplace component</td>
<td>Observation in workplace using logbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>243189 Manage personal finances</td>
<td>Understand personal finance.</td>
<td>Knowledge component</td>
<td>Knowledge test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plan and prepare a personal budget</td>
<td>Practical component</td>
<td>Assignment to draw up a budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operate a personal bank account</td>
<td>Practical component</td>
<td>Proof of bank account with activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

¹ Only the knowledge, practical and workplace components are shown here because the fundamental unit standards will be assessed in their entirety by the Independent Examination Board.
### Table 7.1 Summary of comparative analysis of four case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines of enquiry and conceptual tools</th>
<th>Postgraduate access</th>
<th>Undergraduate access</th>
<th>Workers’ College</th>
<th>Private FETC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose (object)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access to postgraduate study, professional development and knowledge specialisation</td>
<td>• Epistemological access to higher education</td>
<td>• Recognition of subordinate knowledge</td>
<td>• Gain a qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some transformative intent (Disability Studies)</td>
<td>• Personal development</td>
<td>• Acquisition of theoretical discourse to enhance activism</td>
<td>• Career progression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognition</td>
<td>• Co-construction of knowledge to some extent</td>
<td>• Challenging dominant discourses</td>
<td>• Provide access</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Access</td>
<td>• Personal development</td>
<td>• Personal development</td>
<td>• Credit exchange model but with developmental dimensions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognition</td>
<td>• Access</td>
<td>• Access</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution (activity system/s)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Three levels of activity system: Institution; discipline; faculty/department</td>
<td>• Multiple stakeholders: DLL, university, JMB and faculties</td>
<td>• Multiple stakeholders</td>
<td>• Multiple stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All shape affordances and constraints</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shares collectivist values with civil society organisations</td>
<td></td>
<td>employers, PLC and QCTO – sometimes result in competing demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>However somewhat in tension with university discourse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic Authority and Directionality</td>
<td>• Discipline/knowledge structure affects inclusion</td>
<td>• Knowledge generically defined</td>
<td>• Experiential knowledge strongly valued, but social theory also a resource to enhance activism</td>
<td>• Recruits three forms of knowledge: Experiential; vocational; and ‘textbook’ knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Easier organic connection between ‘4th generation’ professions and experiential knowledge</td>
<td>• Two key categories: Narrative vs academic ways of knowing</td>
<td>• Pedagogic authority dispersed</td>
<td>• Directionality towards formal qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dual directionality in two cases</td>
<td>• Epistemological authority shared between DLL, JMB and faculties/departments</td>
<td>• Cyclical pattern of recruitment, but ultimately direction is towards practice</td>
<td>• Pedagogy authority lies with recontextualising agents in occupational field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines of enquiry and conceptual tools</td>
<td>Postgraduate access</td>
<td>Undergraduate access</td>
<td>Workers’ College</td>
<td>Private FETC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification</strong></td>
<td>• Strength varies according to whether curriculum has conceptual or contextual logic; and specialisation of discourse – but also depends on pedagogic agency</td>
<td>• PDC: Initially more porous then boundary strengthens as learners are introduced to the generic specialisation of academic discourse</td>
<td>• Very porous boundaries, strong emphasis on dialogue in both directions</td>
<td>• From more porous to stronger boundaries: Moves learners into more specialised discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• TAPs: strong from the outset</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Framing</strong></td>
<td>• Strong framing – expressed through evaluative criteria</td>
<td>• Artistry of practice – ability to make creative judgments re: strength of framing</td>
<td>• Strong, ideological framing, but moderated by egalitarian relations between facilitators and learners</td>
<td>• Strong framing to support access to rules of occupational qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competence/ performance</strong></td>
<td>• Combination of both competence to performance</td>
<td>• Moves from competence to performance</td>
<td>• Moves from competence towards performance in more ‘advanced’ diplomas</td>
<td>• Mainly performance pedagogy (with elements of competence pedagogy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tools of mediation – boundary objects:</strong> Artefacts, reifications, relationship of tools to learning histories, cultural capital</td>
<td>• Academic text predominates</td>
<td>• Dialogical</td>
<td>• Workbooks – specialised academic discourse, but classroom pedagogy uses range of dialogical tools of mediation</td>
<td>• ‘Look both ways’:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Life history narratives – portfolios</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Changing forms of text – act as scaffolding into new ways of reading/writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Workplace observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Formal assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency</strong></td>
<td>• Lecturer or academics’ agency can have as great an influence as epistemic affordances or constraints</td>
<td>• PDC underpinned by its own pedagogic discourse – expresses strong pedagogic agency</td>
<td>• Collective pedagogic agency mediates between organisations, Workers’ College, and university</td>
<td>• Advisor or trainer acts as a boundary worker to mediate between stakeholders and between three discourses based on the workplace, the textbook and the unit standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the authors

Dr Linda Cooper is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where she teaches on the Adult Education programme. She has acted as an education advisor to the trade union movement, and is a member of International Advisory Board of Researching Work and Learning Conference. Her research and publications have centred around the Recognition of Prior Learning, widening access to adult learners in higher education, workers’ education as a form of radical pedagogy, and the nature of, and relationship between, different forms of knowledge.

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