

Methodology of RPL

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Introduction

This paper originates in the work of the European Commission [EC] and of its Agency CEDEFOP since 2000 as well as a number of European Union development project teams. The author has had the privilege of working with a number of colleagues across Europe and in Canada and the value of this paper derives in no small measure from the interactions in European working groups, not least the group that drafted the Common European Principles on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (2004)¹ which is the formal starting point for this debate, and its parallel Community of Practice, the CEDEFOP Virtual Community on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning.

Origins of this study

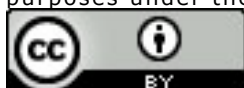
As documented in a range of policy papers and empirical studies, the human ability to learn is not solely derived from the formal system of teaching and learning. Our understanding of this situation has been significantly extended by the work of modern social psychologists that have rediscovered and extended the work of Russian psychologists from the Soviet Union. The principal scientific underpinning of this paper is that the Recognition of Prior Learning² is located in the process of Situated Learning in Communities of Practice. In this setting, competence is viewed as the successful transition from "legitimate peripheral participation" in a Community of Practice to being accepted as a full member of the Community.³

A community of practice involves, thus, much more than the technical knowledge or skill associated with undertaking some task. Members are involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98) and communities develop around things that matter to people (Wenger 1998). The fact that they are organizing around some particular area of knowledge and activity gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity. For a community of practice to function it needs to generate

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1

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and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. It also needs to develop various resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols that in some way carry the accumulated knowledge of the community. In other words, it involves practice (see [praxis](#)): ways of doing and approaching things that are shared to some significant extent among members. ... Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and... the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29)⁴

This approach is consistent with the concept of "mutual learning" that underpins the EU Education and Training 2010 Work Programme and has demonstrated since 2001 the important progress that can be achieved by groups of experts, practitioners and users working together in different cultural settings.⁵

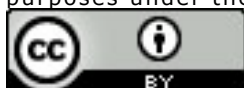
There are significant challenges in this process, not least of which is the problematic nature of the way knowledge is processed, managed and distributed through specific languages⁶ in the historical circumstances of our times where conventional chronology is not a necessary guide to such an analysis. It is, for example, too soon to tell whether the consequences of the "War on Terror" that was initiated by the attacks on the USA on 11th September 2001 and the economic and financial crisis of 2007 onwards represent a historical discontinuity.⁷

It is becoming increasingly clear that one of the necessary consequences of a systematic use of Lifelong Learning is that the formal process of Certification leading to Qualifications, including the award of Credit within National Qualifications Frameworks⁸ can no longer be the sole responsibility of institutions located within the formal education and training system. This is clearly exemplified by the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning carried out within national laws, regulations and practices in the context provided the European Guidelines on the

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2

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Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (2009). The RPLO project has informed and is working within the national Guidance on "Claiming Credit within the QCF" which describes a modified version of Route 2 to Certification for individuals seeking Certification outside the formal learning system.

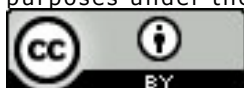
Even if the process of assessment is no longer dependant *where* the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies has taken place, it is still essential to apply the same standards to the assessment for Certification for both Routes if the transparency and currency of Qualifications are to be maintained.

In the United Kingdom, the Accreditation of Prior Learning [APL] was initially introduced as part of the reforms of the 1980s that included the development of National Vocational Qualifications [NVQs]. By the late 1990s, it had become clear that there were significant flaws in this system of Qualifications and after QCA commissioned a series of Sector-based projects on the Comparability of Assessment, Guidelines were agreed with the Awarding Bodies for Vocational Qualifications.

In UK Higher Education, APL developed in the early 1990s, principally as a route for those with low formal qualifications to gain *access* to Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training [VET] alongside the traditional routes based on the assessment of formal learning through National examinations. The policy goal was to improve *access*⁹ to programmes of post-compulsory education leading to formal qualifications.

"The recognition of prior learning for admission and exemption is a significant element of UK higher education's flexible approach towards admissions, and in 2004 QAA produced *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*.¹⁰ These Guidelines support higher education providers, as they develop and reflect upon their APL policies and procedures, while maintaining and enhancing their quality and standards.

The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as 'accreditation'.



The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used in the *Guidelines* to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. Such learning may have been recognised previously by an education provider and is described as 'prior certificated learning', or it may have been achieved by reflecting upon experiences outside the formal education and training systems and is described as 'prior experiential learning'.

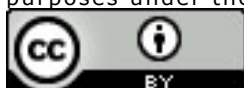
Decisions regarding APL are a matter of academic judgement by autonomous higher education providers who are responsible for the development of their own policies and procedures. This includes any limits that may be imposed on the proportion of learning that can be recognised.¹¹ Arrangements may be different for Foundation Degrees.¹²

Learning Outcomes as scaffolding

The definition of learning outcomes used in the European Qualifications Framework [EQF] is increasingly used to provide a common point of departure in considering the results of Lifelong Learning. In this context, learning outcomes are "statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do as a result of a learning process."¹³ The question of how learning outcomes are used to shape the delivery of learning to individuals in Higher Education and in VET, is one that is under theorised in the sense that it is not clear how the adoption of outcome-based approaches affects the nature of what is learned and especially how learning can be used in the workplace and other real locations.

RPL and the individual learner

The starting point for the Common European Principles for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning is the decision of an individual to consider the possibility of claiming Credit through a voluntary process, which remains their own property. This aspect is fundamental to the success of this route to enter, or re-enter, Lifelong Learning.¹⁴ RPL if carried out successfully, will lead to improved self-confidence and self-esteem as the



achievements of daily life gain Credit within the formal system of learning.

In Higher Education, Credit is based on the concept that qualifications are awarded for the demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes and attainment, rather than the length or content of study. It provides the basis for a shared understanding, for higher education and its key stakeholders, of the link between standards and qualification levels. It aims to support a consistency of approach to, and transparency about the expectations for students and employers by providing a series of general qualification descriptors, which summarise the levels of knowledge and understanding and the types of abilities that holders of different qualifications are likely to have.¹⁵

Specific tools and procedures

1. Europass tools

- Europass CV
- Europass Language Passport
- Europass Certificate Supplement
- Europass Diploma Supplement including ECTS Credits and Subject Benchmarks
- Europass Mobilipass

2. Specific national policies and practices

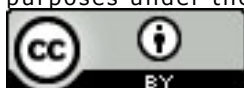
These will vary according to the country and the situation in each Partner country. The most important aspect of these relate to Quality Assurance where European Frameworks or Guidelines may be relevant.

3. Issues for further research

Ensuring reliability and validity of assessment

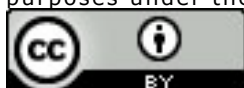
Compliance with Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions as part of academic autonomy

Compliance with sector requirements or with the requirements of Professional Bodies



Choices for individual learners ¹⁶

Stage of validation	Choice to be made	Notes
Access and motivation	Whether or not to begin the process of reflection on prior learning in the light of potential benefits and the availability of suitable opportunities.	Although this decision is located at the individual level, peer, family, community and workplace can also be important factors.
Initiation	To identify in outline the knowledge, skills and competencies that have been learned	The starting point for identification is the Standards, Qualifications and Unit requirements
Pre-documentation	Identifying the range of methods and support available	Information, Advice and Guidance is of vital importance in deciding whether to proceed with claiming Credit. A user-friendly approach to self-assessment against the requirements of Units identified for possible claim for Credit.
Documentation	Identifying the most appropriate methods of gathering evidence. Deciding when the evidence is of sufficient quality and quantity.	If RPLO is to be learner-friendly, the quality of the documentation, its clarity and transparency is a critical success factor. Continuing access to supportive advice and the reinforcement provided by successful assessment is also important.
Supplementary learning	Identifying appropriate learning opportunities and gaining access.	This may involve different work experience, for example taking temporary greater responsibility. Supported self-study may also be relevant.
Certification	Selection of appropriate assessment centre and completing the necessary documentation	A successful outcome will be award of Credit. The individual should be given clear and constructive feedback on their claim.



Specific methodologies of RPL

1. Portfolios

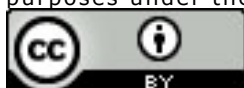
Portfolio preparation, though highly rewarding when successfully supported, may be difficult, tedious, time-consuming and frequently resource-intensive.

Portfolios involve a validated record of existing knowledge, skills and competencies, supported by a development strategy including, where relevant, a learning pathway. Learners should be encouraged to reduce volume by being selective in their choice of evidence and to cross-reference evidence to more than one learning outcome or competence so that the process of compiling a portfolio becomes a more manageable exercise.

2. Other methods

The European Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning describe a broader approach, which might well inform UK practice. The elements of this broader approach include:

- *Debate* offers an individual the opportunity to demonstrate depth and breadth of knowledge as well as communicative competencies.
- *Declarative statements* that enable an individual to share experiences, take perspectives, provide reflections and record their competencies; these statements are normally witnessed by a competent third party (whose qualifications and competencies should be stated) would normally verify or confirm this self-assessment.
- *Interviews* can be used by advisors or assessors in order to support an individual by enabling clarification of the issues raised in oral, video or documentary evidence; interviews may also help to clarify the breadth and depth of learning.
- *Observation* can be used to demonstrate an individual's competence whilst they are carrying out everyday tasks in the real situation of the workplace.
- *Presentation* of information using formal or informal means to meet the needs of differing audiences.



- *Simulation or exercise* may be a useful although limited source of evidence where real performance is not feasible.
- *Tests and examinations* may well be a useful source of evidence, especially where knowledge of theory is an importance requirement for certification.

3. Reflection

In all the above approaches, an individual's claim to Credit is likely to be strengthened by the outcomes of a systematic approach to *reflection* that will provide authentic and relevant evidence of their current knowledge, skills and competencies against the relevant Unit criteria.

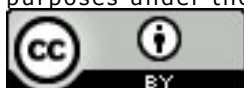
For an overview of the debate on reflective learning, see the summary by James Atherton.¹⁷

Adult learners are individuals who have deliberately and voluntarily engaged in learning that starts from where they feel confident, and to construct meanings based on conscious reflection. This involves the development of stories that start from their current issues to more generic levels of knowledge. Key steps in the process include asking such questions as:

- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- How can I build on my strengths and diminish my weaknesses?
- What achievable learning outcomes can I aspire to?
- Which of my existing knowledge, skills and competencies will be relevant to these outcomes?
- How can I present my achievements, including necessary supplementary learning, so as to meet the requirements of a successful claim for credit?

This approach could be developed through other stages involving:

- *Selection* of rich and varied experiences that can anchor the learning stories that they are creating. This provides *scaffolding* to build their stories of learning.
- *Connection* of the selected elements of learning into a "learning cycle"¹⁸ that involves:
 - Participation in experiences and activities;



- Making sense of experience by giving it meaning or value, using such cognitive processes as pattern recognition;
- Making choices by applying meaning and values to such processes as decision-making and problem solving;
- Implementing action plans;
- Receiving feedback from self-observation and from others;

Situated cognition theory provides an integrated explanation of connecting experience to meaning.¹⁹

- *Projection of an individual's learning* by providing evidence of their learning in forms and formats acceptable to those who will assess claims to credit. This includes such aspects as:
 - Using sources and constructing documents accurately;
 - Understanding own learning style and adapting it to the requirements of the situation.

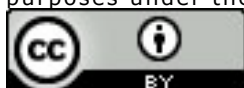
This text-based approach could be articulated and developed to take account of the non-portfolio approaches referred to above. Further, the use of an e-portfolio approach would provide a potential opening to a range of users.

This approach centres on the debate about the nature of the control over the ways in which knowledge is defined. In essence, the key issue is how can those who are not initiated into formal learning gain recognition of their ability to *apply* knowledge and understanding to the use of skills and competencies? It could be argued that teachers or trainers who have a controlling stake in the process of assessment leading to the award of Credit may feel personally and professionally challenged by adult learners submitting RPLO claims. The constructivist approach to learning developed by Lave and Wenger quoted earlier in this paper *justifies* the decisions of learners as to the starting point of their claim for recognition. In this context, a planned approach to Recognition involves a *learning journey* based on all the surprises and difficulties involved. In this metaphor of Recognition based on a

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9

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journey, an important approach involves a number of cognitive stages. The issues involved in this *process* are part of a wider debate.²⁰

¹ Council of the European Union (2004), *Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*. (EDUC 118 SOC 253, 18th May) URL

² The Recognition of (Prior) Learning Outcomes is defined as:

a) *Formal recognition* – the process of granting official status to knowledge, skills and competencies through either

- the award of qualifications (certificates, diplomas, degrees or titles: or
- the grant of equivalence, or credit.

b) *Social recognition* – the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competencies by economic and social stakeholders.

³ A good introduction to this aspect of learning theory can be found at “Communities of Practice”
http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm
(Accessed: 21 December 2009)

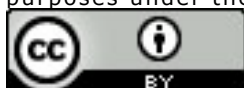
⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Making this (modernisation) happen will mean a fundamental transformation of education and training throughout Europe. This process of change will be carried out in each country according to national contexts and traditions and will be driven forward by cooperation between Member States at European level, through the sharing of experiences, working towards common goals and learning from what works best elsewhere.” Education and Training 2010: Diverse Systems, Shared Goals
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html
(Accessed: 21 December 2009)

⁶ This concept includes variations in single languages – for example to the outsider the French language spoken and written in different parts of the Francophone world [the communities where French language is used] may appear identical. However, the legal concept of the official language in the French Republic represents a different view of the world to the language used in the French Community of Belgium or the Canadian Province of Québec.

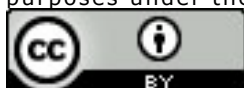
⁷ This argument applies also to the assumptions underpinning the process of mutual learning involved in the Open Method of Coordination with the European Union.

⁸ National Qualification Frameworks (define) are increasingly connected by Common European Tools, notably the European Qualification Framework [EQF], the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training [ECVET] and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework [EQARF]. The operation



of these approaches are according to National laws and practice and owe their existence to intergovernmental agreement under the "Third Pillar" of the Treaty of (European) Union and specifically to Articles 149 and 150 which define the respective competences of National Governments and European Institutions.

- ⁹ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2009), *Verification of the compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*, page 10. "A major purpose of the (Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in the UK) FHEQ is to assist in the identification of progression routes. The FHEQ, therefore, similarly acknowledges that the successful completion of a qualification at one level provides access to a next level programme. It is important to stress that in the FHEQ and (the Framework of Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area) FQ-EHEA. access is not the same as admission. Following the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the term 'access' implies the assessment of applicants' qualifications, with a view to determining whether they meet the **minimum** requirements for pursuing studies in a given higher education programme. Access is distinct from admission, which concerns individuals' actual acceptance on to the higher education programme concerned."
- <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/selfcertification09/FHEQSelfCert.pdf> (Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- ¹⁰ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004), *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/APL.pdf>
(Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- ¹¹ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2009), *Op. Cit.*, Page 11.
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/selfcertification09/FHEQSelfCert.pdf> (Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- ¹² For example, from the University of Portsmouth, "University regulations limit the amount of prior learning credit you can count toward a Foundation degree to 180 of the 240 credits required. (75%) When considering a claim, the University will ensure that the amount awarded does not infringe the requirement that 30 of the 120 credits awarded for each level of study is for learning that has come from work."
http://fd.port.ac.uk/apl/apel/apel1_FAQ.html (Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- ¹³ Cedefop (2009), *The shift to learning outcomes: Conceptual, political and practical developments in Europe* page 15
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/494/4079_en.pdf (Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- ¹⁴ Lifelong Learning is a problematic and contested concept. Whether as an individual or a societal goal, the last decade has



-
- seen a growth in research and policy papers. For an overview of these debates see <http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/b-life.htm>
- 15 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2008), *The frameworks for higher education qualifications and credit: how they relate to academic standards*, August
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/FHEQCreditStatement.asp> (Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- 16 European Commission and CEDEFOP (2009), *European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, February, Section 5.2, pages 52 - 54
- 17 Atherton J S (2009) Learning and Teaching; Reflection and Reflective Practice [On-line] UK: Available:
<http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/reflecti.htm>
(Accessed: 21 December 2009)
- 18 See Kolb D A (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. This seminal work has had a profound effect on the theory and practice of adult learning.
- 19 Brown J S et al. (1989), "Situated Cognition and the culture of Learning, *Educational Researcher*, 18(1), 32-42.
- 20 Smith, M. K. (1999) 'Learning theory', the encyclopaedia of informal education, <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-learn.htm>
(Accessed: 21 December 2009)

