

Reality vs the myth - changing narrative into action

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There are multitudes of RPL and other projects currently being undertaken across the VET sector, many of which aim to build capability of the VET practitioner. A reliance on process rather than an engagement with process - the doing or busy work, rather than the emergent or future state in changing practice, means that projects can become an end product rather than a means to an end.

Organisational capability relies on the management of knowledge and embedding of new knowledge into organisations. Projects that seek to implement change rely on reinforcement and engagement to enable this embeddedness and integration into our work practices. The narrative within the projects can provide us with a rich source of data by which to generate new knowledge and new models for change, however this tacit knowledge must become explicit if it is to become an embedded capability.

Through the process of action research a group of 85 practitioners from across the VET sector who are undertaking projects as part of a professional development funded strategy will provide the data about process, practice and product through their participation in a RPL forum. The narrative will form the basis for identification of significant changes for project members and other industry and enterprise practitioners and seek to generate and inform new designs for RPL practice.

Introduction:

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) funding of projects from 2006-2009 to promote Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across the VET sector has supported a diverse range of projects such as Skills Express, networks and online. These projects generated a wealth of information and data which can inform future RPL practices. The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), Industry Skills Unit, as project managers realising the potential benefits of sharing knowledge and reinforcing

relationships by bringing project participants together sponsored a forum in December 2008, entitled “Making Connections” which brought together project teams, industry and stakeholders from across the VET sector.

There are some 60 projects being undertaken as part of this initiative and the Department of Education and Training, “Making Connections” forum not only provides a vehicle by which to showcase good practice, but also to acknowledge the work of teams undertaking projects and to value their contribution to changing practice. It also empowers project teams to build relationships and form networks and creating the opportunity to establish reinforcing processes that can sustain change and create a virtuous cycle of renewal (Senge,1999).

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The question may well be asked “how many final project reports are sitting on shelves, seemingly the job at hand being finished”. The myth that a focus on projects and their explicit outputs alone can produce the transformational change that is required in these ambiguous times can distract us from the reality of the true value of our “busy” work. This intervention sought to access the complex realities and realities that belong to the hidden part of the iceberg, the 90% under the surface and as such the opening up of dialogue with all stakeholders as being critical to moving forward (Gummesson, 2000).

As observed by one of the writers at the forum, these projects deepen and broaden our understanding of learning (Smith, 2008) and inform future practitioner methodology in relation to RPL with the primary objectives of improving RPL process, increasing practitioner capability and confidence and embedding and establishing the RPL product within different contexts.

Stace & Dunphy (2001) point out that the object of change intervention must be to ensure that change effectiveness is sustained. To support this sustainability the forum aimed to

provide a “space” for conversations and reflection to open up dialogue by participants in response to stories from project leaders of their experiences and observations as a result of their management of the projects. These stories sought to capture the “essence” of the project and highlight change and what it was that made the project of significance to them. Harrison (1965) suggests that attention to the level and depth of change intervention and particularly behavioural aspects of change can support a sustained rather than temporary approach.

The sharing of their stories aimed to stimulate conversations and generate new ideas and perspectives which may ultimately shape the design of new models of Recognition. As suggested by Carr (2008) “organisation’s collective wisdom depends on conversations talking place in the ‘market place’ of ideas and interpretations.

Design and Methodology for data collection:

The stories from project leader’s involvement in their RPL projects were seen as an essential element and the catalyst to stimulate dialogue by forum participants. The narrative from their concrete experience can provide us with the basis for action through making meaning of this experience (2nd Road, 2006). A model for capturing the significance of this experience was entitled “Significant Conversations” (Hewson, 2008) and was created to facilitate the day’s activities. Whereas, a “showcase” event would possibly provide only the “present state” and an abstract concept based on information rather than communication of real experience.

This methodology combined the ‘Most Significant Change’ Technique (Davies & Dart, 2005) and ‘strategic conversations (2nd Road, 2006). The “Significant Conversations” were designed to generate data by highlighting their significance to individuals from each layer of activity throughout the forum.

The generation of data through conversations attempts to reach shared understanding and ideas. This layering of data provided different levels of interpretation and new perspectives across a diversity of practitioners and stakeholders engaged in the RPL process. This data was not programmatic and not defined in terms of hard and fast methodology but was expanded upon by events and other sources of data emerging from the conversations Reason (2006).

To enable the capturing of this data, facilitators and participants were briefed prior and during the event to ensure data was gathered to inform future practice.

In particular it was important to brief project leader facilitators and group facilitators prior to the event. As the project leaders were the holders of the knowledge about the project it was important that they took on the role of the process facilitator rather than the content expert and to ensure that they were open and responsive to data that emerged from participants (Reason, 2006).

Project Leaders were asked to deliver their stories to groups of up to 40 participants against pre-arranged themes. Theme groupings were Skills Express, Networking, Flexible Delivery and Mentoring. They were asked to tell their stories in 5 minutes and be as succinct as possible by focusing on three aspects of their project and what were of most significance to them.

The three aspects and questions asked of the project leaders were:

- Process: What was it that you did?
- Practice: What changes has it made to how you work?
- Product: What will sustain and embed the change – If you left the project/organisation tomorrow what would happen?

These groups of 40 then split into smaller “conversational” groupings which were then facilitated by the project leaders to identify their interpretation of the stories and what significance they had to them. This feedback was taken down and then shared across the whole group by the lead facilitator at the end of the session.

In addition, two writers were employed to observe the activities throughout the day and they provided an account of their perspectives and again the significance to them.

Participant data collection:

Data was gathered across layers of experience at the forum. These layers were the Project Leaders and teams, the audience participation and observers as writers. The data reflects ideas and understandings made by participants as outlined in Design and Methodology above. Data was then synthesised and articulated into themes.

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT AND WORKPLACE CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the use of simple and workplace language and not “VET speak”.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> utilising candidate and practitioner learning and data that was already available and familiar through accessing compatible workplace systems to support the RPL process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> better integration of RPL and identification of gap training within normal work practices and drawing on existing assessment practices such as recruitment and job performance assessment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> work context, specifically addressing aspects of supervision, training and documentation that can be accessed for assessment purposes. This was particularly the case in a Skills Express model.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> detailed processes and tools mapped against work experience to competencies and qualifications.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> incorporation of explicit risk management strategies, which is as much in the employers/industries interests as the educators. (See data below)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> partnerships with industry as sustaining ongoing activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all relevant aspects of the HR system are capable of providing quality information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> development of special assessment briefings for workplace supervisors to explain process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> training supervisors to provide quality evidence or become industry assessors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Industry ‘buy-in’ “what’s in it for them” by identifying drivers for employers and candidates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> linkage with organisations ‘buy-in’ through staff retention and ‘KPI’s’.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> not limiting the RPL process to one AQF level – customising the process to meet individual/employer needs and promoting pathways
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> more focus on employers/enterprises – enterprises having relationships with RTOs important
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unless employers value RPL learners will not benefit, marketing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RTO’s to do the work for small business

NETWORKS/COLLABORATION/SHARING KNOWLEDGE
• online learning (scheduled into electronic calendars) – EDNA groups – Moodle (store resources) - re-play tutorials
• collaborate / partnerships / closer industry linkages – consistency
• networks are building assessor confidence and are important
• build collaboration between learner, assessor, industry and others
• sustainability means to keep staff involved and ability to meet legislative requirements, best practice, etc – professional conversations
• safety in sharing and collaborating confidence
• networks to lobby

ASSESSOR CONFIDENCE/PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT
• won't take risks with RPL – confidence in assessor judgement
• assessors need to be given the confidence to move/make decision – risk assess
• loosen up – assessors need to consider all evidence and new situations
• assessors can be too precious – want more information for RPL – lack confidence
• communication skills / relationship building important for assessors
• increase assessor support/knowledge/links to the workplace

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT PROCESSES
• don't limit process to one AQF level – customise process to meet individual/employer needs – promotes pathway
• RPL processes – is “group recognition” really new?
• gather evidence right from start – enrolment process (previous experience/ qualifications)
• be kept informed of “existing worker” RPL/training
• continuous conversations (with each other and industry?)
• mentoring as two-way process
• focus on skills not training package competencies in the first instance
• flexibility required – one size does not fit all

INDUSTRY/ENTERPRISE MODELS EXTRACTED FROM OBSERVATIONS OF PARTICIPANT CONVERSATIONS Macindoe (2008)

RPL in enterprises - learning from good models

- make a business case for recognition
- develop partnerships between industry/enterprise and RTO
- use the normal language of the workplace, not 'VET speak'
- gather evidence from normal workplace practice, such as performance evaluation, and worker stories
- use collaborative and low-stress strategies for gathering evidence, such as group assessment, interviews/work stories that are recorded or scribed, observation of work practice
- map work practices to competencies behind the scene
- support RPL assessors through networks and other opportunities for collaboration and validation of assessment practice
- build the pool of assessors by training appropriate workplace supervisors
- use risk assessment to guide the 'sufficiency of evidence'

EXTRACTED FROM OBSERVATIONS OF PARTICIPANT CONVERSATIONS Macindoe (2008)

RPL Assessor Networks – learning from good models

- include an industry/enterprise perspective – e.g. invite speaker from ERTOA
- maintain and extend your network by participating in RON
- become proficient in use of Skills Recognition (Competency Navigator)
- develop a common understanding of 'sufficiency of evidence' which incorporates risk management
- encourage professional conversation using case studies provided by participants
- invite presenters who have trialed innovative approaches
- use ICVET e-Zine to identify relevant projects from other Institutes. Don't overlook good ideas from other discipline areas.
- in developing and sharing resources, avoid 'VET speak'

A MODEL FOR RISK ASSESSMENT DEVELOPED BETWEEN RTO'S, MAJOR CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES, INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS AND UNIONS

- 100 points system
- Third parties' checks
- Change of assessment questions on a regular basis
- Validation of assessment strategies
- Sighting originals and checking certified copies
- Contact with issuing institutions
- Random audit of documentation
- Procedures to prevent improper changes to the data

Key findings and discussion:

Reason (2006) suggests that quality of data may rest not so much on getting it right but on stimulating open discussion. The data gathered appears to indicate that change is indeed happening in RPL and that the VET sector is moving on and working through some of the earlier reticence. There appears to be a willingness to explore and generate new ideas and the projects can perhaps be seen as pockets of R&D. The bringing together of ideas across the VET sector will encourage new knowledge acquisition. We must however have the ability to exploit that new knowledge and integrate into our operations.

The ideas generated by participants at the forum don't appear to support the notion that the VET sector is maintaining a "classroom" centric or a "training approach" to RPL. In fact it emerged that Enterprise RTO's facing the same problems as classroom based RPL assessors, where RPL was seen as a costly exercise to that of simply providing the training, are also working on new models and seeking alternative ways to increase RPL. By sharing and disseminating information and collaborating across the VET sector in forums such as "Making Connections" new understandings are developing and reshaping the future of RPL.

Of significance was the change in models of RPL from the atomistic approaches of earlier processes and practice and a focus on filling out forms, to that of a more holistic assessment, with a distinct emphasis on the work role and industry liaison. Macindoe (2008) a writer and observer at the forum cited that RPL was a natural fit within workplace learning and assessment and that one of the most interesting messages emerging was that the "business case" for a more embedded form of RPL is being acknowledged and explored and that the business case depends on a better integration of RPL and gap training approaches in the workplace context. She describes an aspect of this as "translating the language of the workplace into the terminology of competencies".

There was an emphasis by participants on collaboration with industry and partnerships and the need to sell a business approach. That there should be an increase in the knowledge of RPL to industry and greater promotion and those employers should be made aware of the drivers for RPL and convinced of the benefits. The question was raised as to how RPL could be sustained in industry once funding was not available and the need to track partnerships that will continue to involve peak bodies to find other funding avenues.

This data supports a shift in thinking to business model innovation by reframing the established value proposition to that of the customer as well as product innovation by taking an established product to the next level (Moore, 2004).

It was acknowledged by participants that collaboration across assessors, RTO staff and industry associations is being seen as an essential element in building confidence and safety in decision making in RPL from the perspective of all stakeholders. A more systemic view is taking place where partnerships have developed between RTO's, major construction companies, industry associations and unions which have produced strategies that draw on explicit risk management strategies. These strategies are as much in the employers and industry's best interests as the educators and not least the learners. The findings seem to indicate that the tacit knowledge within industry and organisations is being made explicit and more accessible through the RPL process by utilising established business processes and the job role as key elements in evidence gathering.

Assessor confidence was however still on the minds of participants and the need for continuing development and engagement. Macindoe (2008) noted that the Recognition Online Network (RON) COAG project was one such mechanism for building assessor confidence "by taking web-based support for RPL and assessment beyond the concept of a 'repository' for resources and acknowledging the key role of building assessor confidence through networking". Whilst the notion of networks is not new, the networks present at the forum were able to demonstrate the benefits of their platforms through the socialisation of their tacit knowledge and its externalisation for transfer and organisational learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The importance of explicitness was further demonstrated by Macindoe (2008) in her observation of the risk management strategies now being used by stakeholders across industry and RTO's in relation to RPL and occupational licensing. This strategic intervention was as a result of bringing together all stakeholders in the process and reaching agreement through a partnership arrangement as well as using the results of a pilot project and its outcomes. (see Risk Assessment model)

Sell, sell, sell, Hambrick & Cannella, (1989) suggest that the implementation of change requires communication upwards, downwards and across all channels to gain necessary support – the word “convince” was used by many participants in relation to learners, industry, RTO's, Assessors and community. They called for drivers to be identified to support user friendliness and be service driven. This even went as far as needing to identify exactly what RPL actually is and what it means to the community and that this was a major barrier to the take up of RPL.

Conclusion:

Leonard & Swap (1999) suggest that “we may not be able to produce that ‘eureka’ moment on demand but that there are things we can do to make it happen. The forum attempted to create a climate of psychological safety where innovation is fostered rather than stifled (Edmondson, 1988) and where idea creation is the outcome. This was achieved by allowing all participants to be heard and share their experiences and work through their significance to them. The element of risk in projects was acknowledged and fostered by opening up possibilities of where these experiences could take us.

Projects can be seen as artefacts and influential in changing culture by being visible and useful. They create feedback loops for learning about what works and what doesn't work and can be the basis of formulation of emergent strategy (Garvin, 1993). These projects can also be seen as the leverage to base future actions on learning by taking the time to

work through experience rather than acting without learning and repeating mistakes or maintaining out of date practices.

The importance of learning through participation and engagement cannot be underestimated. Welch 1996 reinforces this when he states that “our ability to continuously learn from any source – and to rapidly convert this learning into action – is the ultimate competitive advantage”. Through engagement across the diversity of experiences, forum participants are able to develop new knowledge. This embedded capability of creating and sharing new knowledge whilst not reflected on the balance sheet may ultimately be the organisation’s most valuable asset (Turner & Crawford, 1998). The challenge now is in the absorptive capacity of the individual organisations and enterprises represented to internalise this knowledge so that further cycles of knowledge creation and distribution throughout the organisation continue (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).

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