

Recognition of prior learning (RPL): can intersubjectivity and philosophy of recognition support better equity outcomes?

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The formal recognition of prior learning (RPL) has long been lauded and even, one might suggest, doggedly pursued as a tool of social justice and equity within education sectors across the world (Harris, 1999; Wheelahan, Miller & Newton, 2002; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Cleary et al., 2002). It can accredit skills and knowledges that have evolved from diverse, informal learning experiences and cultural locations and is thought to be ‘a powerful tool for bringing people into the learning system’ who have otherwise become disengaged (Hargreaves, 2006: 2). Many strategies have been identified to increase access to RPL in Australia, including targeted promotion, reduction of bureaucratic procedures, and creative evidence-gathering and assessment techniques. But the fruits of these efforts are not sufficiently realised in increased social inclusion. The data indicate that, while RPL is on the increase in some quarters, there is still limited uptake by traditionally marginalised learners, such that more RPL overall does not necessarily lead to better outcomes

for equity groups (Misko, Beddie & Smith, 2007). After more than a decade of focused attention, I believe this situation demands broader, less instrumental thinking, in favour of a more relational analysis of the meaning of recognition assessment and a different conceptualisation of RPL overall.

In this paper I draw on qualitative research in progress to explore the meaning of RPL to candidates and the significance of the candidate–assessor relationship as a site of negotiated meaning and identity construction (Hamer, 2010). Looking through the lens of a philosophy of recognition (Honneth, 1995) and postmodern understandings of the discursive production of the self (Chappell et al., 2003; Benhabib, 1992), I ask questions about the nature and effects of the assessment relationship. I invite considerations of this relationship as an intersubjective exchange within a wider, more fundamental ‘struggle for recognition’ as part of human self-actualisation (Honneth, 1995). I will use emerging data to illustrate the meaning and effects of RPL within this theoretical framework and propose a reconceptualisation of recognition assessment that aims to enhance our efforts towards access and equity goals.

RPL: The underachiever?

Towards the end of 2010, after more than a decade of attention, it is now frequently acknowledged that incentives and technical supports to increase and widen the reach of RPL to disenfranchised learners have not achieved our optimistic expectations (Hewson, 2008; Misko et al., 2007; Smith & Clayton, 2009; Smith, 2004; Bowman, 2004). A simple online search for ‘RPL materials’ or exploration of most education department, VET quality or industry skills council websites will return a multitude of RPL instruments, models and assessment guides that are designed to assist in making the process streamlined, accessible and educationally valid.

There have been efforts to address assessors' professional development needs (Mitchell et al., 2006); strategies to increase the confidence of assessors (Booth et al., 2002; Mitchell & Gronold, 2009) and more recently analyses of assessor attitudes and values concerning RPL (Hewson, 2008). In addition, the essential qualification for all VET assessors, the newly titled Certificate IV Training and Education (TAE 40110) has been significantly reviewed and upgraded to respond to concerns for increased rigour, consistency and quality of training and assessment practices in general. The National Quality Council now recommends a comprehensive, national effort bringing together a range of strategies to improve VET assessment (NQC, 2009a, 2009b). Yet still we find that within VET 'real progress for disadvantaged groups and systemic change to achieve universal access [including to RPL] have been slow and patchy ... implementation is failing to translate into real change' (NVEAC, 2010: 6).

What do we imagine to be the reasons for this underachievement of RPL? In a study of 100 VET teachers and educational leaders Hewson (2008) found that concerns regarding the quality of assessment and learning within RPL, and differing views about the fundamental purpose of skills recognition, hindered implementation. This led her to conclude that rather than mostly instrumental barriers there are in fact pedagogical reasons for assessors' avoidance of formal skills recognition. In other words it is confusions and concerns regarding the reliability and consistency of assessment judgements, the nature of evidence requirements and evidence collection methods, and the quality of the learning experience for the candidate that holds practitioners back from implementing more RPL. A concern that RPL does not allow time and space for formative assessment or a meaningful relationship with the learner in their educational journey compounds the misgivings of many assessors. Hewson proposes cultural change involving closer collaboration between assessors, RTOs and industry to address this lack of confidence in RPL.

Researching the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in a university setting in the UK, Peters (2005) used a more epistemological lens, looking at types of knowledge and how they are presented. She argued that recognition assessment can tend to focus more on the *form* in which the student presents their learning and experience rather than on the content and context of their knowledges. APEL is the point where the outside world and the academy intersect ‘discoursally’ (p. 277) and there appears to be limited flexibility from the establishment in adapting preferred ways of describing knowledge, in order to accommodate experiential learning. APEL assessors are thus interested in how well the learner can ‘match’ their experiential learning to that already articulated within the university and are perhaps not adequately equipped to consider the merit or equivalence of alternative knowledges. This view mirrors earlier research findings (Wheelahan et al., 2002; Cameron, 2005) that successful RPL candidates are those who can ‘translate their professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic’ (Wheelahan et al., 2002: 13) and underlines the potentially exclusionary effects of RPL for those who do not meet the prevailing normative criteria (Andersson & Fejes, 2005; Hamer, 2010). In Peter’s analysis, APEL assessors appear to the students to be more anxious about gatekeeping a formal qualification in order to preserve its quality and integrity than they are interested in recognising the validity of alternative skills and knowledge. The APEL candidates reported that they did not view the assessors as ‘having their best interests at heart’ and saw them ‘at best as people whose requirements they would have to adapt to and at worst as people who would *probably not understand them*’ (2005: 282, emphasis added). Of interest here is that the candidates expressed worry *not* that the assessors would not understand the information or the knowledge they presented, but that they would not understand ‘them’. This implied that they thought the assessors lacked interest in or acknowledgment of the students as situated and embodied actors in a world beyond the university and as a result could not perceive their skills.

Peters concluded from her study that a non-rigid and non-mechanistic assessment has to include *negotiation*, such that a dialogue regarding knowledges can occur and the candidate has some agency in securing understanding and validation:

If the assessment process is not to be mechanistic and rigid, thereby excluding a range of forms of knowledge and ways of expressing it, an element of negotiation needs to be brought into the equation, with candidates themselves as well as external experts being given the opportunity to argue their case. (Peters, 2005: 284)

In accord with Hewson, she recommended collaborative assessment whereby external stakeholders such as industry experts and non-university educators can participate in interpreting the experiential learning to 'bridge the gap' between the 'outside world' and academic discourses.

Identity, learning and assessment

A number of different and productive critiques of skills recognition can be discerned within this brief scan of examples from the literature. Instrumental critiques suggest there are inadequate tools, processes and promotional practices in place to engage learners or make RPL a sufficiently streamlined process for candidates and practitioners alike; pedagogical critiques contend there is an absence of diverse learning and assessment methodologies tailored to the specific needs of marginalised groups; and epistemological critiques question to what extent alternative knowledges can be embraced or negotiated through RPL. Each analysis sheds light on questions of why a significant number of practitioners tend not to embrace RPL fully and why it continues to be accessed mostly by individuals who are already successful within the formal learning system. One approach that responds on all three levels of critique is to draw upon theories of the self and identity. Using notions of individual and group identity, various authors have considered from different angles the

relationship between learning, assessment and identity construction (Falk & Balatti, 2003; Chappell et al., 2003; Guenther, 2005, 2008; Wallace, 2008).

In particular, Wallace (2008, 2009) addressed social inclusion and equity issues within VET from the perspective of learner identities. In her consideration of how to support effective engagement of non-traditional learners in formal processes of learning and assessment she focused on learners from social groups that are proportionally under-represented in adult education. Her research found that understanding and acknowledging learner identities was an important element of tailoring learning programs to meet the needs of marginalised students. She pointed out that there is often a 'discontinuity' for many students between, on the one hand, family and community identity and, on the other, school identity (2008: 6). In her view, schools may fail to take account of the meanings within and expectations of the student's life outside the classroom such that there may be 'conflict' between learner identity and community belonging. Wallace invoked both pedagogical and epistemological analyses—in the first case by indicating that what is needed is the development of 'pedagogies in partnership with community members' (2008: 13). In other words, collaboration and negotiation of teaching and assessment practices could include community experts in order to resolve this tension between identities by being able to 'recognise and integrate students' realities' (p. 7). And in the second (epistemological) case she recommended negotiating what knowledges are valid and relevant to community values, needs and contexts: 'This [proposed] approach reinforces rather than threatens or displaces student knowledge and identities ... Students are then offered opportunities to maintain their integrity while negotiating other forms of knowledge, literacy and identity on their terms' (2008: 14).

It is notable that assessment practices appeared to be an important element in whether the formal learning process was accepted by

study participants. Wallace observed that 'being tested by people who are not known, trusted or recognised as expert' was something that prevented people from completing study or participating fully in a learning program (2009: 42). However, including other, respected stakeholders in the teaching and assessment processes brought a different meaning to the learning for students and their communities, thereby resolving the identity conflicts. The participants emphasised the importance of *who* was assessing them, their status within the community and the meaning of their judgements in relation to the students.

The meaning of RPL

My own research-in-progress is a qualitative project to investigate the meaning of RPL for adults in the VET system. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine RPL candidates at various stages of their assessment process, namely prior to commencement, immediately after receiving their assessment result, and six to nine months following completion. I also included interviews with their assessors and workplace managers, to enable triangulation of the findings. The cohort consisted of a diverse range of candidates, all in current paid or volunteer employment, seeking a qualification through whole or part RPL assessment. Their ages spread from 18 to 58 at the beginning of the research. There were six women and three men: two Aboriginal Australians, five non-Indigenous Australians, one non-Indigenous South African and one non-Indigenous New Zealander.

Their previous highest formal qualifications ranged from no qualification at all, to one person with a Masters degree. A fuller description of the research participants and methodology will appear in a later publication. What is emerging from the data at this early stage of analysis is a kaleidoscope of issues and motivations. Through assembling a common set of key elements, the kaleidoscope rotates

into focus to create a unique configuration for each individual. The timing of assessment, life circumstances and personal values influenced the overall pattern of meaning to each person. Four consistent themes constituted the meaning of RPL to participants:

- 1. Healing past hurts, past mistakes and self-doubts about competence.** This entailed a perception that the RPL process and subsequent formal qualification resolved questions for participants about possible lack of ability or lack of intelligence. This overcame regrets about past decisions or opportunities missed and reassured them of their skills.
- 2. Occupying a place in society through professional identity and credibility.** The RPL candidates felt affirmed in their 'worthiness' and value to society either through a shift in how they could appreciate themselves or from the idea that others who did not know them could reliably 'see' their skills and trust in their professional abilities. They could also see themselves contributing more through gaining a formal qualification that conferred a professional title.
- 3. Safety for external validation within a meaningful assessment relationship.** The RPL process and assessor–candidate relationship constituted a safe context for assessment. Candidates could risk judgement and allow themselves to be measured in ways they had not previously been prepared to expose themselves to through anxieties, fear of failure or active refusal of the value of formal learning.
- 4. Enabling options for preferred futures.** RPL offered a pragmatic pathway for professional and career development.

All participants expressed one or more of the above themes as core to their RPL experience. What follows is a small 'taste' of the data to illustrate their significance:

'Julie'

Julie came from an Anglo-Australian, working-class background and explained that in her family there was no interest in educational achievement and a low expectation of career success. When she started her RPL process she was 55 years old and had worked for over 25 years as an unqualified youth worker, in mainly residential settings. She had a long pattern of engaging positively in formal learning, being motivated by good teachers, interesting people and relationships with inspiring colleagues and friends. However, she had not completed most of the accredited courses that she commenced. She remembers that she loved high school because of the people and friendships but she left before she finished Year 12. She 'always, always, always wanted to go to university' and was drawn to the idea of learning and challenging herself and being the first in her family to have a tertiary qualification. Yet when she eventually enrolled in a degree course as a mature student in her thirties and did well, she 'left in a terrible state' at the end of her second year, having struggled with perfectionism and a fear of failure that seemed to create a paralysing anxiety. She felt bad about not seeing through any of her studies and said her fears make her avoid completion. She explained that throughout her life she has been 'butting up against ... my own insecurities around failure and success'. Her motivations for doing the RPL were 'tied in with self-esteem' and to gain a stronger feeling that she has 'a place in society'. 'I think it's about proving that I am not stupid' and 'it's something about completion ... it's always scratching away at me'. At the time of the RPL process she had emerged from a stressful period of workplace bullying that had undermined her confidence and left her self-esteem 'in my boots'. 'Part of my going for recognition is I lost recognition of myself because of that bullying process and this is a very concrete way of regaining ... that'. Her RPL diploma required written portfolio evidence and telephone interviews to ascertain her level of skill and knowledge. The process took almost 18 months to complete, being delayed by workload pressures, the assessor's absence and her own 'procrastination demons'.

In the follow-up interview some eight months after receiving her diploma Julie viewed the RPL process from a broad perspective; it was part of a collection of events that were triggers for change in her life. She felt she was ready for and seeking this change but did not know how to make it happen. The methodical and ‘stepped out’ nature of the process used by the RTO helped make this change a reality for her. In following this clear process within a supportive assessment relationship she rediscovered her confidence. Instead of her work identity feeling ‘fragmented’ she believed she had successfully rebuilt her professional self. It had become ‘a tidying up’, a positive resolution of a long-lived self-doubt and unfinished business: ‘I really enjoyed the process ... it’s given me a taste of ... I guess my own capabilities again’.

She spoke of herself at this stage as ‘an equal player’ professionally, having repositioned herself in relation to others, in particular with her supervisor whom she greatly admires: ‘I always felt a bit “less than” with her and I no longer feel that ... I don’t feel like I am being taught by her anymore’.

[After the bullying] ... I had to rebuild my identity as a worker and I think that doing the diploma that way, through recognition of prior learning, was a great way to get to ... recognise in myself that I have a professional identity and that’s made up of those competencies.

The ‘internal battle’ she wages with herself about whether or not she is a good practitioner has been in some ways resolved by the process of self-reflection, the external validation of the formal assessment and the awarding of a qualification. She identifies for herself that recent changes such as her professional confidence, seeing a pathway forward and making things happen in her life are set within a long history of wanting to change and achieve successes academically. The changes cannot be attributed directly or solely to RPL since the variables in her life are multiple and overlapping. But she was clear

that it has been part of a package of things that enabled her to ‘tidy things up’ and, in her supervisor’s words, ‘claim the territory’ of professional competence. The timing, the process and the substance of the assessor–candidate relationship cohered to assist Julie in achieving some ‘steps forward’ in these longings to resolve her self-doubts.

In this sense RPL might be viewed as a trigger, or part of a chain of events and interactions. It is not positioned in a cause–effect relationship with these changes, but rather as an influential component of gradually accumulating and emerging realisations. Julie has gained a ‘taste of [her] capabilities’ that becomes stronger, clearer and embodied so she is finally putting to rest questions about failure, stupidity and fear. In the words of her assessor, ‘she hasn’t become anyone different; she’s just become more’. She reflected on how she had been struggling to ‘to re-invent myself’ for some time and how the RPL process helped make this possible: ‘It’s been a profound experience ... it was a healing process.’

In this small slice of the data there are echoes of the four key themes mentioned above. What is also apparent is the hope Julie has for confirmation of a worthy, socially valuable self. As someone who has hitherto remained outside of credentialed learning and often not managed to complete formal assessment processes for fear of failure, Julie (and indeed others in the study) have struggled with self-doubt. They have questions about their value in society: Who am I? What am I? Do I measure up? Do people take me seriously? Am I contributing well? If these are the uncertainties that some RPL candidates implicitly bring to the assessment process, how then are we responding as assessors? I am often left with a sense that we tend to skirt such concerns and place ourselves in danger of engaging on a largely instrumental plane. This carries the potential of objectifying individuals, positioning the assessor as an observer and leaving RPL candidates feeling disconnected and alienated.

Another participant, Lilly, illustrates something of this concern. Lilly experienced her combined RPL and learning process as ‘fragmented’ and ‘confusing’. She felt that no-one had time to care about how she was progressing or show interest in her skills. ‘I have no sense of any of my past working life ... being relevant or valued ... it doesn’t make me feel good’. Although in the research interview her assessor clearly expressed admiration for her abilities, expecting her to gain the qualification easily, Lilly had no awareness of this. She said: ‘I’ve lost a bit of confidence I suppose’ and the process had ‘reinforced my feeling of being out of step’. Fortunately academic success earlier in her life and her current level of professional self-confidence appeared to absorb the potentially negative effects of this. She reflected: ‘if I was young ... I would have felt insecure ... I would have felt uncared for.’

These examples reveal, to my mind, not so much issues of knowledge claims, pedagogy or competence: rather than a desire for ‘ontological security’ (Billet, 2010: 4). In other words they demonstrate how some RPL candidates bring questions about the meaning of ‘being’ in the world (after Heidegger, 1962) and the meaning of ‘self’ in relation to others. This requires an analysis that is arguably more grounded in notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity than is generally canvassed in the literature.

A philosophy of recognition

To shed some light on this potential within RPL, I have explored philosophical theories that examine subjectivity and meaning. Theories of recognition have their roots in the nineteenth-century Hegelian philosophical tradition. One of Hegel’s significant propositions was that the self is formed within a relationship of acknowledgement by the other; that is, individual autonomy remains abstract unless enacted through mutual recognition (Hegel, 2007). Further, ‘struggles for recognition’ underpin individual and social

conflict, ultimately giving rise to social progress (Hegel, 1977). Van den Brink and Owen (2007) noted that the concept of recognition has since been elaborated in multiple ways and the rise of identity politics in the second half of the twentieth century has given new impetus to critical theories that look further than the distribution of material resources as a source of conflict and means of social justice. Hierarchies of class, income and occupation may thus no longer be seen as the sole, defining features of social conflicts but, within recognition theory in particular, it is the social sanctioning and validation of individuals' and groups' identities that contribute to notions of justice and subjectivation (Thompson, 2006).

Axel Honneth is a prominent recognition theorist who has built upon Hegel's intersubjective theory of the self, extending it in particular through reference to Mead (1934) and Winnicott (1965). He has articulated a theory of recognition that supports progress towards an ideal state of 'mutual recognition' and thereby social justice (Honneth, 1995). In Honneth's terms, a 'just' society is one in which every person achieves the recognition they deserve in order that they can fully and freely self-actualise, thus becoming ethical agents, capable of 'moral' action: 'The justice or wellbeing of a society is measured according to the degree of its ability to secure conditions of mutual recognition in which personal identity formation, and hence individual self-realization, can proceed sufficiently well' (Honneth, 2004: 354).

Honneth suggested that humans need one another in order to form a self that is more than 'instrumental' and 'atomistic'. That is, he had a view of human agency that was driven by more than isolated self-interest or seeking to improve individual material circumstances. Further, it is only through the recognition of others that we develop self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem and these are essential for self-actualisation (Honneth, 1995). Self-actualisation is, in turn, crucial to successful practices of social inclusion and social justice:

‘What social equality should be about is enabling the formation of personal identity for all members of society ... it is the enablement of individual self-realization that comprises the actual goal of equal treatment of all subjects in our societies’ (Honneth, 2004: 356).

Particular ‘patterns of recognition’ support the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. These patterns are love, rights and social esteem. Love underpins the development of self-confidence through practices of emotional support, friendship, concern and so on that affirm the independence of the other and provide reassurance of ongoing care. Rights support the development of self-respect through the individual knowing they have equal legal rights and responsibilities with others by virtue of their personhood and by recourse to the law to affirm those rights. Social esteem (or solidarity) supports the development of self-esteem through shared community values that enable regard for an individual because of their unique abilities. Society acknowledges an individual’s contribution to collective goals and valued practices.

Honneth (2004) proposed a ‘plural theory of justice’ in which these three forms of recognition constitute normative principles of justice, namely affective care, legal equality and social esteem. When fulfilled, these principles provide the conditions for a just society. Where such forms of recognition are withheld or where misrecognition occurs (such as disrespect or humiliation) the development of self-actualisation and subsequent ethical agency are interrupted, leaving individuals or groups feeling excluded and unjustly treated. Misrecognition can be perpetuated by power relations within society. If power operates to exclude some individuals from exercising agency or control over their role and status, this can lead to an internalised sense of ‘inferiority’ or powerlessness, maintaining these individuals in an ‘appropriate place in the margins’ (Van den Brink & Owen, 2007: 2). The antidote to this misrecognition is the practice of ‘positive’ patterns of recognition. Upholding dignity and avoiding

humiliation are concrete practices of social justice, shifting away from the redistribution of material resources as the core element of a just society. The struggle for recognition thus drives social change, being a vehicle for identity claims and claims to social status that gradually affirm individual value and reconfigure social relations.

It appears that Honneth has an optimistic view of this struggle, seeing it as inexorably improving conditions of equality and justice towards an ideal end state. Whilst he has indicated that there are social and historical factors influencing modes of implementation of recognition (Honneth, 2003) he is criticised for claiming a fundamentally universalist perspective on the development of the human subject and the inevitability of social relations emerging from individual psychology, without an adequate analysis of power (Fraser, 2000; McNay, 2008; Bader, 2007).

Complex philosophical debates surround contemporary articulations of recognition theory and my own project does not attempt to engage fully with these (note for example Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Thompson, 2006; Honneth, 2008; McNay, 2008). Although it is not my intention to apply Honneth's theory comprehensively to RPL, or to address his explanation of the progress of human societies, I do believe discussions of the politics of recognition in the twenty-first century offer a useful conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics and effects of RPL assessment. Honneth's high profile work provides an effective starting point for this and invites us to examine our practice from a fresh angle.

Recognition theory and assessor skills

Some key tenets of Honneth's recognition theory that have bearing on skills recognition can be summarised as follows:

1. Mutual recognition is an essential underpinning of self-actualisation, enacted through the experiences of care, social esteem and access to legal rights.
2. Fully realised self-actualisation for all members of society is the antecedent to social justice.
3. Recognition is intersubjective and reciprocal in that *both* parties to recognition are affected and the nature of the relationship between the two parties is significant in the development of each.
4. Recognition is a dynamic, relational process, entailing an ongoing sequence of acts rather than a one-off, one-way acknowledgement.
5. Recognition can be through institutional as well as personal relations.

This framework can be used to examine the qualities and conditions of the assessor–candidate relationship. A formal skills recognition process presents opportunities to embody acts of mutual recognition, or indeed acts of misrecognition through disengaged or perhaps overly instrumental practice. My contention is that if we are effectively to connect with and ‘draw in’ disenfranchised learners, a mode of RPL that incorporates recognition of the *person* in a manner that supports ontological security is required. Previously I have argued for assessors to learn basic therapeutic and cross-cultural communication skills and supported the notion of appreciative inquiry to encourage this approach (Hamer, 2010). These techniques may not be critical for all RPL candidates; however, for someone who has not seen formal educational pathways as a suitable or effective means to achieve desired social and economic outcomes, or for whom the process is culturally alien, the prospect of being assessed against unfamiliar norms through perceived exclusionary processes is not attractive. The data from my own research-in-progress points to the need for intersubjective engagement that attends to the ‘who’

of both the candidate and the assessor. Understanding that there is an ontological purpose to skills recognition and applying skills to demonstrate care, respect for individual rights and social esteem shifts us from a one-way act of normative judgement that risks constructing inadequate selves or further alienation from the formal education system, towards a fundamental acknowledgment of human value. This is a way to 'see and be seen'—to construct assessment relationships where the candidate is acknowledged and valued whilst the assessor and assessment process is, in return, valued and found to be credible. In this manner increased confidence in RPL assessment can evolve from both the candidate and assessor perspectives and wider implementation across currently marginalised populations may ensue.

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About the author

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