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Managing unrealistic expectations

- Audra Broughton



This is an example of a difficult experience for both myself as assessor and my client who was seeking recognition of prior learning (RPL). I learned a lot from this experience and since this episode, and have already done many things differently because of the experience.

Background

I am the RPL coordinator in a Tourism and Hospitality faculty in a TAFE institute. I am also a hospitality and event management teacher/assessor with 22 years of industry experience.

The applicant has worked in the hospitality industry for over 20 years. She has experience in cafes, country pubs, small casual BYO-style restaurants, and most recently running a small conference and wedding centre in a regional area.

She applied for RPL for a Diploma of Hospitality Management and my understanding was that this qualification would assist her career progression.

This applicant enrolled for the recognition of prior learning process in October 2007 after a detailed face to face interview. It was made clear at this interview that, based on the information given to the assessor regarding work history, currency, skills and experience, the applicant would potentially be eligible for RPL in 30 out of the required 42 units for the Diploma. She had eight credit transfer units once she completed her Certificate IV Training and Assessment. In this particular Training Package eight units can be used from any relevant nationally endorsed Training Package - hence the additional credits.

The four remaining units were agreed, by both parties, to be completed as in-class 'gap' training as the applicant could not demonstrate competence and actually requested to do the classes due to lack of knowledge. Three units were identified from the 'Finance' cluster and the other one was 'Update the legal knowledge required for business compliance'.

Challenges

Once I started the 'competency conversation' component of the RPL process, I realised the applicant had an unrealistic view of what was required to complete this Diploma. She thought that a chat and a reference or two from current and previous employers may suffice. After a lengthy, recorded conversation, I outlined specific details regarding examples of evidence that I required for each competency.

By the end of the meeting we had gained a very good rapport and I was confident that the applicant felt at ease with me. I was also sure that her expectation was that the process to achieve her Diploma was going to be a little more complicated than she had originally anticipated.

Following that meeting, I had not heard from the applicant for approximately three weeks so I made a courtesy telephone call and was advised that she was struggling to get organised with her RPL. She told me that she would post some evidence to me by the end of that week. I advised that she must not feel pressured as we had a fair amount of time to complete the qualification. Two weeks later I received a very small packet of evidence, of which only a small portion was relevant. It was very poorly organised and it appeared to have been 'thrown together'.

I was concerned at this point, mostly due to the fact that I was potentially issuing this applicant with a Diploma and students at this level should display better time-management and organisational skills. I sent her an email immediately advising which of the documents I was able to use and to ask if she needed further assistance.

When I still had received no further evidence after seven weeks, I called her - and backed the call up with an email - to remind her that in order to abide by the guidelines of the \$500 TAFE Queensland scholarship she had been granted, she must complete the RPL units within three months of enrolment. She asked to make another appointment as she needed guidance. I suggested this was a great idea as it was nearing the end of the year and she wanted to arrange a timetable for the in-class units for the following semester.

The next appointment was eight weeks after our initial competency conversation and at this stage I was unable to 'result' any units. The meeting was relaxed and friendly and I was extremely supportive in guiding her with suggestions about how to better manage this process. She was happy and made notes and promised to have all the evidence back to me within three weeks.

The second part of the meeting had a completely different vibe. She wanted me to arrange enrolment for her in-class gap and slot her into existing classes at the time they started the particular unit. The applicant announced that she was only available to attend classes on Tuesday mornings and all day Fridays due to work and family commitments. I knew immediately that this would be difficult as we generally only have high school groups on Fridays.

After an hour or so of deliberation and comparing different groups' timetables, it was impossible to slot her into classes that fitted her availability. I said I needed to look further into the possibilities and I would call her the next day.

When I called the next day I advised that the only option was to stretch out the length of study by completing the units over a much longer period - that is, over two semesters instead of one - and even then the finance cluster was conducted for eight hours per week and she would miss four hours of delivery each week. I explained that to ensure a successful result it would be her responsibility to liaise with the teacher in advance to ensure she would be able to keep up with class work at home due to missing so much of the weekly delivery. I felt that I was clear in explaining that subjects such as 'finance' were quite difficult for some students to manage without having a teacher close by, and it would be a waste of her money to pay, enrol and then not succeed due to lack of attendance. I felt it important to point out all the issues up front.

When it was apparent that we were getting nowhere and the applicant was frustrated that TAFE could not meet all her attendance requirements, I suggested that she try another RTO to complete the in-class units. She asked me if I could investigate RTO options and prices for her. I gave her some names of RTOs to try and explained that she had to look into this herself. She was not happy about that at all.

Responses

A few days later she wrote an email of complaint about me and the RPL process to my Education Manager. My manager dealt with the situation promptly by calling the applicant and explaining that I had done more than was required as an RPL coordinator already and she needed to make a decision regarding which class to attend by the end of that day. I was very pleased that my manager backed me up and she did not hesitate in doing so. It was clear she had confidence in my professionalism and what I had done for the applicant to this point.

As a gesture to the applicant, my manager extended her close of study date for the RPL units. As of today, I am still awaiting evidence.

Further reflections

It is clear that the RPL process was more complicated for this applicant than she had originally anticipated. When I first met with her I had only been in my RPL role for four months and the whole faculty was still working out strategies to 'increase RPL'.

Now I am 'seasoned' in the role, I am used to different applicants with their different level of capabilities. Also, I am able to detect a lack of confidence in the applicant and put strategies in place to assist if possible. I also realise that sometimes it's just not possible to please all the applicants all the time.

I realised the applicant had an unrealistic view of what was required to complete this Diploma.

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Building a user friendly RPL tool with students - Francis Howes



From a student perspective, recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes can often be daunting and jargon-loaded. In order to remove some of these very real barriers, this exciting project turned the process around and approached RPL from the student's viewpoint.

Background

In 2007 a Sunshine Coast TAFE (SCT) team worked with 15 experienced board members and volunteers from five Indigenous community groups to develop an RPL tool for the Certificate IV in Business (Governance) BSB40901. The students assisted the assessors in progressively developing the tool as the assessment of their capabilities was simultaneously undertaken.

The basis of the RPL process was a series of professional conversations with the students where they were able to tell the stories of their extensive governance experience and provide back-up evidence and support through the use of a blog as a recording device. The result was an RPL tool that is user friendly and largely cleansed of jargon. The assessors then used the evidence collected to map back to the competencies to ensure compliance with AQTF before final assessments were recorded.

Challenges and responses

The students were quite daunted by the notion of undertaking a Certificate IV qualification and needed considerable reassurance that they already had many of the capabilities. The approach taken was student centred and driven by a genuine support model from the SCT assessors. We went to the students in their community setting, took Tim Tams, drank coffee and sat around the kitchen table in small groups to listen to their stories as this was the students' preferred way of communicating. As the students' awareness of their own skill base developed, they opened up and the wealth of their knowledge and skill became apparent.

To overcome the jargon-laden RPL language the students helped us develop a simple and authentic model that focussed on

Things I know	→	(knowledge)
Things I do	→	(skills)
Things I have	→	(evidence)

When approached in this way, RPL became readily understandable and the students quickly opened up and started to list all the things they could offer against each of these areas. They also supported the others in their group by comments such as "remember when you...", thereby adding to the evidence bank. The professional conversations were digitally recorded and stored on the student's blog. As the students' confidence grew, out came photos, documents, minutes of meetings, financial samples, examples of activities etc and these were all scanned and recorded. The richness of the evidence grew and grew.

The next challenge was to develop an RPL tool that retained the simplicity of a user friendly model and still met the accountability requirement of the qualification. At the same time we wanted to ensure that the students remained the owners of the process and were truly empowered.

Competency guides were developed for each competency that asked questions that were organised around

Things I know	→	(knowledge)
Things I do	→	(skills)
Things I have	→	(evidence)

These questions were then clustered and became the focus of the ongoing professional conversations with the students. This meant the daunting evidence requirements were distilled by the assessor and the students remained focussed on telling their stories and supporting them with back-up evidence. The students were active participants in the RPL process and directed their own assessment as adult learners. Each time we went back to the students we found more evidence appearing as the students developed a greater understanding of the qualification and became excited about the RPL possibilities. Many of these students had never achieved a qualification previously. They were motivated to achieve especially as they knew that they were role models for younger members of their communities who would be responsible for the future governance of their organisations.

A further challenge for the project was the level of information technology (IT) skills of the students. Most of the students had some computer skills and these were enhanced by training and mentoring in the use of new mediums such as blogs. Students were excited at the potential of these tools and in many cases have begun looking at other uses for them.

Benefits

All the students involved became actively engaged in their own RPL and learning process. They were the drivers of the process. They helped us develop a totally new attitude and related tools that made RPL an exciting and motivating process for all involved. Many of the students received RPL recognition for a significant proportion of the qualification. All of the students developed enhanced confidence in their own skills and abilities and their capacity to act as positive role models within their communities.

Further reflections

I have learned much from this project including the following:

- RPL can be a rich and dynamic learner driven process if assessors are willing to step back from being the 'experts' and acknowledge the wealth of experiences that the student brings to the process. Once learners are empowered they will drive the process themselves and the outcomes will be much more complete and realistic.
- RPL requires a complex set of communication skills from the assessor, particularly active listening, targeted and open questioning and reframing of jargon-laden components into user friendly language.
- Assessors need to meet the students within their context - for example, physically going to the workplace; changing the language; listening and understanding more about the work context prior to making professional judgments.

- The use of professional conversation is a powerful RPL tool. It does however require the investment of time to be effective. Encouraging students to 'tell their stories' and acknowledging their experience adds considerable value to the process.
- Professional development for staff in RPL and the use of professional conversations to achieve sound judgments is essential.
- Advanced RPL practitioners are
 - Responsive
 - Practical
 - Lateral
 - Reflective.

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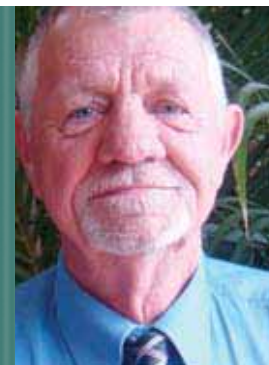
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Hearing the alarm bells ringing - *Bob Kelly*



My case study came to me out of the blue one quiet Friday afternoon.

Background

I was seated in my office trying to catch up on previous assessments when a man entered my office enquiring about the recognition of prior learning (RPL) process. After introductions were completed, I asked him exactly what he was pursuing.

Without any beating around the bush, the candidate explained that he wished to go through the RPL process to become a trade person. I began to explain to him what the RPL process was all about.

At this point I noticed that he showed no interest in my attempted explanation.

The candidate began by telling me how good he was and the amount of work he had done in this particular area over the past thirty years. The thought going through my head at the time was 'where have I heard this before'? I was concerned he didn't really understand what RPL involved so after another period of listening I had to interrupt the candidate and suggest we start at the beginning. I once again explained the process required and led the candidate from there.

What did I do and where did it go? Please read on.

First interview

I tried to defuse the situation by focussing on precise and accurate information.

My first step was to ask the candidate for his full name, address and contact details, which he gladly supplied. The second step was to obtain details about his date of birth and birth place, which was once again freely supplied.

The next step was to ask some key questions about his work history and this is where he became aggressive again. "I have been trying to tell you about the things I have done in the past, but like every public servant, you don't want to listen," he said.

I replied: "Please settle down so we can work out where this will lead and what can be done to help you with RPL."

I tried again to encourage him to talk about his work history.

The reply came back that "I have been doing boiler making work for the last thirty years and I know enough stuff to get me my papers". He then went on to list companies and work shops where he had carried out welding and fabrication duties.

On further questioning, I was able to gain more and more information from the candidate which began to build into a working background. On realising that the candidate was 53 years of age, I asked how come he had left it so long to do anything about gaining a trade. He responded that he had begun an apprenticeship in 1972 but the apprenticeship was terminated in 1974 thus there was no completion. On further questioning, he revealed that he had worked for different employers over a number of years but had not stuck with them for too long.

Alarm bells began ringing in my head as to the termination of the apprenticeship and the amount of time spent with each employer which I think from memory was six months as the longest period of employment. On further questioning, it was revealed that the candidate had not worked for the past five years owing to a knee complaint.

Type of qualification

The candidate was seeking a qualification in Certificate III in Engineering and Fabrication (Boilermaking trade).

Explanation of requirements

I began explaining to the candidate that a qualification gained through the RPL process was the same as a qualification gained during a full apprenticeship in as much that a certain amount of points had to be sought and gained to receive the qualification. He stated again that he had done some work towards his terminated apprenticeship and asked whether he could use these as credits for this qualification. Sadly, because of the time period elapsed, I answered "No". He showed disappointment at this answer.

I went on to explain how we could gather evidence and the type of evidence required (could be in the form of written, resume, references, photographic, work history or on the job demonstration or a mixture of all these). I also explained that a third party would be required to give evidence stating that he had seen the candidate performing the duties toward the competencies.

The candidate explained that this would be most difficult as he was not currently working, had either lost most of his documentation during moves interstate or had not bothered to obtain references or keep a resume as he had a reputation or carrying out good work.

On the completion of this first interview, the candidate stated that “this RPL stuff would be easy” and he would see me again in a couple of days. I began wondering what type of evidence I was going to be given.

Second interview

The second interview took place exactly one week later when the candidate turned up at my office with a whole lot of paper work towards his RPL. I quickly skimmed through it in the candidate's presence and informed him I would need more time to go through it – I would get back in him.

While there, the candidate informed me that he had found a third party to verify the type of work and jobs he had carried out in the past. I asked whether the third party was a work mate or supervisor who had witnessed his work and his reply was that this bloke has been his neighbour for over 20 years and had seen him do plenty of work in the past.

Alarm bells were ringing. The candidate had just finished telling me in the interview that he had worked interstate for a few years but the third party had been his neighbour for the past 20 years. I also began to wonder what the qualifications were of his neighbour. I began to go through the submitted paper work more closely.

Details of submitted evidence

The evidence submitted began with three courses the candidate had just completed during night classes at TAFE. The courses completed were intermediate welding courses under Certificate IV in Engineering, without pre-requisites. The application form submitted for the RPL process gave names of past interstate employers. These employers were contacted and gave no recognition that the candidate had ever worked for them. Alarm bells were still ringing.

Self appraisal form

The self appraisal form submitted was in question form for each competency in the training program for Certificate III in Engineering. The answers were inadequate they demonstrated only a very surface understanding of the work tasks.

For example:

Question: “Explain where the instructions came from to carry out the job and what those instructions were.

Answer: ‘I got the instructions from my landlord to do the job. To engineer steel framed fence, gate, shed in a couple of weeks’.

From the evidence supplied on the self appraisal form, not one answer gave specific and detailed information regarding the competency.

Third party verification

The third party verification consisted of a name and contact number. When I rang him the information was very confusing. The third party said he was not employed and that he and the RPL candidate were good friends and work mates for the past 30 years. The third party said he works closely with the candidate 10 hours a day and five days per week. He also stated that the candidate is competent on the job and a great bloke to work with.

Findings of presented evidence

I believed that the lack of evidence - in the form of written resume, references, photographs, work history or on the job demonstration - meant that I must question the authenticity of the information provided by the third party and the candidate. Hence, I was reluctant to grant any competencies regarding this qualification at this point in time. However, I informed the candidate that if he was willing to ‘challenge test’ for the given competencies, I would be only too pleased to assist the candidate in any way. He did not want to participate in challenge testing.

Further reflections

As stated earlier, I had grave doubts about this candidate from the initial interview. The type of evidence supplied by both him and the third party was insufficient to satisfy the requirements of the qualification and I couldn't possibly see this candidate gaining any competencies towards this qualification.

I have a moral duty towards industry and the candidate himself in not granting him the qualification, as it is my professional opinion that the candidate could not demonstrate the competencies required by industry. So I had the unpleasant duty of informing the candidate that his application for the qualification of Certificate III in Engineering Fabrication was unsuccessful. He was not interested in participating in any training options.

I believed that the lack of evidence... meant that I must question the authenticity of the information provided by the third party participant and the candidate.

7 Raising a colleague's confidence - Marie Morgan



The subject of this case study is a teacher with a number of years' experience in the vocational education and training sector.

Background

She operates in an environment which has a very structured maths-based framework. Specific figures are placed in a specific order and there is a predictable answer. In other words it is a safe, comfortable environment with predictable outcomes.

This teacher's previous experiences with recognition of prior learning (RPL) had proved unsettling. The need for ultimate flexibility in making professional judgements in the RPL environment does not sit well with her normal decision-making processes of using maths-based approaches.

One particular unhappy experience with RPL that she had as an assessor resulted in subsequent RPL applications to the section being directed towards another team member. This is a band-aid response to a difficult situation and doesn't really address the major cause of the problem, nor does it help my colleague to improve her ability to make professional judgements.

A fairly serious result of the whole situation has been a noticeable carry-over into my colleague's unwillingness to make what could be thought of as everyday decisions. There is no doubt that she has the ability and experience to make those everyday decisions, but she seems to be unwilling to actually do it without checking with someone else first. In fact, a negative experience as an assessor with RPL has resulted in her marked lack of confidence in the whole decision-making process.

Challenges

My major challenge is to create an environment in which this teacher can take on the RPL role once again and, in the process, regain confidence in making not only procedural, everyday decisions, but professional judgements in assessment.

One major strategy that I wanted to explore with my colleague was linking classroom-based assessment points to expectations in the workplace. In the classroom a teacher knows the response he or she is looking for when marking assessments because he or she has been responsible for designing not only the learning process, but also the assessment instrument. So how can that information, contained in both learning guides and assessments, be linked to actual activities in the workplace? If you are teaching someone a skill, how is that skill used in the workplace? What standard of performance would need to be demonstrated in the workplace?

I put it to her that once that link is established it can be used to demonstrate that professional judgement is used when marking assessments and can also be used for recognition of prior learning.

Conducting the initial interview with my colleague

This began with an informal chat about assessment in general with me questioning my colleague about her background knowledge of the RPL process. She revealed that she had a fairly extensive knowledge of the process in general. In fact, it became apparent as the conversation continued that one of her problems could well be information overload.

When I asked my colleague about the negative episode with RPL, I discovered that she had been particularly anxious about the process and so had sought information and assistance from a number of people prior to the interview with the external RPL candidate.

Each person she consulted had spent a good deal of time going through the process, sometimes taking one or two hours. Inevitably, I believe so much advice was given and there was so much emphasis on 'getting it right' that when it came to her interview with the RPL candidate, she tried to put all of the advice into practice at once. The resultant experience was traumatic for both the teacher and the RPL candidate because so much evidence and information was requested.

It became apparent that the first step she needed to take in future was to demystify the whole RPL process, taking the information that existed and putting it into perspective with determining recognition of prior learning. We discussed ways of doing this and agreed that we would start with a familiar decision-making process, marking assessments, and compare that with making professional judgements as part of the RPL process.

We decided that at our second meeting we would look at specific competencies and my colleague would talk me through what would be accepted as correct answers to the assessment questions. I would be provided with solutions and checklists prior to our meeting so that I would have a chance to familiarise myself with the content.

Preparation for the second interview

For the second interview with my colleague, I teased out the jumble of information that this teacher currently had about RPL by linking it to a process which feels familiar - classroom assessment. We linked each assessment question to a workplace situation to determine how an employee would demonstrate their knowledge in that particular area. My intention was to integrate the assessment process with the RPL process so that the uncertainties about RPL became less of a problem.

Further reflections

One strategy for dealing with this type of situation where a colleague loses confidence with RPL is to try to make RPL an everyday occurrence. Another strategy is to provide a number of opportunities for all staff to network with other business teams within the Institute and in the process raise confidence levels across the team.

While my major aim is to continue to work on a one-to-one basis with each teacher, I also plan to raise the awareness of RPL with the whole team. I intend to arrange some team-based RPL discussions so that team members have the opportunity to clarify their current knowledge, while at the same time increasing their confidence in conducting the process in the future.

Integrating one-on-one mentoring with group mentoring will have a number of benefits. Sometimes one-on-one mentoring makes the person being mentored feel targeted, which can hinder any real progress being made. By turning the process into a work team activity, RPL becomes a familiar exercise and not one which currently seems to be avoided at all costs by a number of experienced teachers. This core of experience is a vital resource that needs to be incorporated into a successful RPL activity.

Drawing on this existing pool of experience can only benefit the operation of the business team in meeting our intended objective, which is to provide support and recognition of the skills and experience that many workers already have and assist them to receive their deserved recognition of a qualification.

By turning the process into a work team activity, RPL becomes a familiar exercise and not one which currently seems to be avoided at all costs by a number of experienced teachers.

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Enabling colleagues to upgrade - Gwen Moroney



Registered training organisations (RTO) need to manage the expertise of their trainers and assessors including the qualifications that they hold and their currency within the relevant vocational industry.

Background

RTOs need to employ industry-rich trainers and assessors and also need to foster opportunities for existing staff to upgrade their industry qualifications and currency.

First Impressions Resources offers employees the opportunity to access the qualifications within its scope of registration using the same Learn-and-Assess and Assessment-Only pathways that are offered to external students. This is part of the organisation's organisational structure where assessors are employed and can progress within the business from working-under-supervision to a higher pay and higher organisation position as they obtain and progress their vocational and assessor qualifications and expertise.

To facilitate this progression, new assessors can access learning and assessment where they have no formal vocational qualification, and existing assessors are able to obtain further qualifications. Because the employees already have a range of relevant knowledge and skills, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is often selected as the preferred assessment pathway.

Each RPL process is different depending on the staff-candidate's specific background, level of expertise and geographical location. In the example showcased in this article, the candidate was using the assessment-only pathway to obtain the Diploma of Retail Management.

Challenges

The challenges relating to this and other staff-candidate RPL pathways are addressed below in terms of the challenges for the organisation, staff-candidate and assessor.

In relation to this particular RPL process, there were three specific organisational challenges. Initially, the candidate's regional Queensland location placed her well away from Head Office in Brisbane. This presented a geographical challenge as there was extremely limited face-to-face contact between the staff-candidate and the

assessor. The tyranny of distance exacerbated the challenge as the staff-candidate was a new employee who had not yet built rapport and trust with others in the RTO including the Assessment Coordinator who was managing the RPL process. Finally, the candidate had a strong retail management background but she had not worked as a retailer in the past four years. This provided a challenge in uncovering relevant evidence of currency in order to comply with the Rules of Evidence.

A general challenge for the RTO is to manage assessments for staff-candidates using a robust and transparent process without over-assessing in comparison to external candidates. Professional judgment must be based clearly on the need for appropriate evidence while resisting the temptation to treat staff-candidates unfairly by requiring more or different evidence than is required from external candidates.

The challenges for the candidate revolved around appreciating the relevance of her recent non-retail work as well as considering her previous retail background. Consideration of her non-retail evidence was essential as it enabled her to identify examples of current business management evidence that also aligned to the retail competencies.

The challenges for the assessor involved facilitating the assessment process via a distance model while developing an appropriate level of trust and rapport. This was essential for prompting the candidate to draw on her range of occupations in the past four years to identify and present relevant evidence of currency. The assessor's challenge also involved professional judgment when aligning non-retail evidence to the retail qualification. Accepting the validity of this evidence had to be based on a clear understanding of the unit competencies and the transferability of generic management skills.

Responses

To manage this assessment, the initial process was explained face-to-face while the candidate was at Head Office for her employee induction program. It was very important during this time to portray the assessment as an on-going process and not as a defined evidence-gathering event.

At her employee induction, examples of appropriate evidence were shown and explained to her, to provide a guide to the types and level of evidence required for a Diploma qualification. Initial discussion was also held in relation to the other business management activities that the candidate had performed in recent years. This discussion was designed to prompt her to think about relevant activities that would equate to some of the generic competencies in the desired qualification.

Some underpinning knowledge and skill evidence was gathered at the employee's induction and the evidence-gathering was completed via phone, email and written correspondence. Further evidence of skill was provided in relevant documentation related to the candidate's organisation and running of a large community festival, her role as a consultant to small businesses and her work as the owner/manager of a newspaper. These roles provided a wealth of evidence in related fields where the generic competencies of strategic management, staff recruitment and information and financial management apply. Third party verification came from a range of sources including the owner of the retail outlet to whom the candidate sold her retail business.

Benefits for the staff-candidate

There are a number of benefits to be obtained from allowing staff access to assessment processes as internal students - for the staff-candidate and for the provider organisation.

Personally undertaking an RPL process allows assessors to develop a better understanding of assessment. This occurs on a number of levels including:

- As with any candidate, it gives recognition for existing abilities.
- The process may also identify ability gaps which can then be improved to provide a greater knowledge and skills base for the staff member.
- Personally obtaining competencies using RPL enhances the assessor's enthusiasm for RPL as an appropriate assessment pathway for other candidates.

- The process can be a vehicle for the staff member to develop rapport with other staff within the business as they progress through the assessment process.
- The provision of a positive and facilitative assessor allows the staff-candidate to use this experience as a model for their own behaviour when they are conducting assessments with students.
- It allows staff-candidates to see the process from a candidate's point-of-view. This provides them with the opportunity to develop deeper insights into the candidate's perspective and to consequently develop an appropriate level of empathy for candidates whom they will assess in the future.
- It prompts staff-candidates to analyse units of competency and assessment tool requirements in an assessment process that they will then use with their own candidates. This means that they become familiar and more comfortable with the tools and processes which enhances their ability to make appropriate professional judgments.

Benefits for the RTO

Providing staff-candidates with opportunities to access assessment pathways provides a number of advantages for the business, as follows:

- It provides a vehicle for new assessors to interact and build rapport with other personnel within the business, as they undergo their own assessment process.

- It results in assessors who have developed and improved their own assessor expertise while participating in an action-learning model where they undertake their own assessment.
- It allows the organisation to access industry-rich employees and to assist them to manage their own learning and assessment in order to obtain relevant abilities and qualifications as they become vocational assessors.
- It allows the organisation to assist existing staff to upgrade their abilities and qualifications which can be linked to relevant work activities within the business, industry currency and performance evaluation.

Further reflections

This particular recognition process was challenging in respect to managing the geographical distance and the currency of evidence. Progress was quite straight forward due mainly to the self-directed nature of the staff-candidate who was willing to undertake the recognition journey and who remained focused on providing evidence examples.

The alignment of the generic evidence examples as proof of currency was a challenge. It took application and analysis skills not usually required when the candidate is currently employed in the industry on which the RPL evidence is based. This was more testing for the assessor who had to revisit the evidence requirements on a number of occasions.

When using RPL for staff-candidates, modelling is an important aspect of the process. The assessment process and judgments provide a model which will influence the way that the staff-members later conduct their own assessments and make their own professional judgments. This adds another dimension to internal assessments which needs to be considered so that the process perpetuates appropriate behaviours.

In conclusion, offering internal learning and assessment opportunities to staff members is a positive and useful experience. Every case has individual challenges in relation to evidence collection and professional judgment, as staff-candidates can come from a wide range of backgrounds with a variety of abilities to be considered for compliance with the unit requirements and the Rules of Evidence. This provides an opportunity for the RTO to assist staff to obtain relevant qualifications by incorporating action learning in relation to the assessment process and by modelling appropriate assessor behaviours.

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Ensuring RPL is not nerve-wracking

- Karen Prestidge



This story began when I received an RPL application from a candidate living in a regional area.

Background

The candidate was applying for a Certificate IV qualification, and I found that her job role and range of work duties indicated she might be eligible for a higher qualification.

I mentioned this in a phone call prior to arranging a date for a videoconference, and suggested that perhaps she was more at a Diploma level and that this qualification may be more suitable. The candidate's current role was as a coordinator of an Emergency Relief/Accommodation service and her responsibilities included supervising the work load of five workers.

Challenges

Her initial reaction was one of hesitancy and she seemed reluctant to consider this as an option.

We then arranged a session to commence the RPL. Recognizing that videoconferencing can be somewhat daunting for first timers, I planned to take my time and allowed for an informal introduction. I could tell the candidate was feeling awkward and seemed somewhat withdrawn. I took time to explain the RPL process and what it would involve, and generally tried to demystify the process. The more I spoke of RPL, the higher the level of anxiety she seemed to experience.

Responses

So I changed tack and embarked on a general discussion of work in the community services sector. We talked about the difference the sector faced working in regional and urban areas. The candidate was engaged in conducting workshops in remote areas and spoke at length about the need for training in different areas covering a range of topics.

We discussed the range of work roles she had performed in her fifteen years work experience, changes in the industry and the natural progression she had made from volunteer work, to paid casual work, through to her current role. Examples were given of creative alternatives to often complex work issues. I acknowledged her commitment to the industry and where appropriate I made positive comments on her skills and abilities, identifying particularly challenges she had overcome.

The passion she felt for the community services sector was clearly evident, so we discussed what had led her to work in this field and how she had developed knowledge and skills of the industry and coped with the emotionally draining aspect of working with Emergency Relief and Accommodation.

Through this lengthy discussion I learned much about this person. For example, throughout her life she had focused on self development and had developed a strong ethical framework from which she was operating. The time spent allowing her to 'tell her story' was invaluable as it provided me with some great information that I knew would be useful when covering particular units of competency once we started the RPL.

The first units I chose 'to RPL' were units common to both the Certificate IV and Diploma qualification. I explained that I did this so that after our first session together if she wanted to change her mind she could with no other arrangements necessary. As we proceeded with the RPL, I took time to contextualize the units of competency to her work environment and the knowledge I have of the industry. This seemed to work well for her and she was able to comment easily on work processes, duties etc., often providing additional information over and above what I required, without any prompting. The client commented on how she had read the units prior to our meeting but had failed to understand what they were asking for. To her it seemed like it was in another language. I joked that it was a comment I had heard often and that I saw it as my job to 'interpret'.

At the next appointment I broached the subject of changing qualifications and asked how she felt about this, especially after experiencing first-hand the RPL process. Although still somewhat cautious the candidate had given it thought and was now quite excited to change to the Diploma.

Benefits and reflective comments

We continued to meet over the next few months and at the completion of the RPL I asked her what she had thought of the process. She confided that all her life she had struggled with formal education. During her teens she had been diagnosed with dyslexia and her upbringing had been emotionally abusive. This had undermined her confidence and robbed her of any sense of ability to achieve. Yet here was a person to me that had achieved so much and the letters of support from her staff spoke of a cohesive team that worked well together due to her leadership. Her passion for people and desire to provide a service to meet client needs in an empathetic, caring way was impressive.

RPL for this candidate had been a nerve-racking venture. From the outset she had told herself that if the RPL process all proved too hard then she would just forget it, that it wasn't really so important. When she had read through the units prior to the meeting she felt as though she knew nothing and the first day of the videoconference she had given herself permission to exit if the assessor had been someone she found confronting.

The opportunity to 'just talk' at the initial interview had provided her with the opportunity to discuss very informally a job she loved and get to know a little bit about this person who was going to 'assess' her for a qualification. On reflection she said this had relaxed her considerably and she had thought to herself at the time 'this isn't too bad'.

The candidate spoke of the process being a time of confirmation, that there had been nothing raised that she did not have knowledge of or could not provide an example for from her working life, and despite not understanding the 'language' she had recognised that she knew more than she had previously realised.

The candidate spoke of how a year ago her Director had inquired whether or not she would be available to replace him whilst he took holidays. Totally taken aback by such a proposition, she replied that she really didn't think that she could do that. Upon completion of the Diploma she identified two things that had happened: the first was the sense of pride in achieving the qualification and the second was the confidence that she had gained through the process. It had taught her that she 'did know her stuff' and that she had some very clever original approaches to workplace issues. She now intended to inform the Director of her availability should he need a replacement for the coming year.

Further reflections

On reflection there are a number of strategies I could have implemented to further support the client in the RPL process. Coming from a counselling background, it is important for me to join with the client and build rapport to establish a trusting relationship.

Personally I find RPL an enjoyable experience, candidates are interesting and there is some exceptional RPL work being undertaken by workers in the community services sector. My counselling background is a strength I feel I bring to the RPL process, but I need also to consider practical considerations that can assist the candidate.

A helpful strategy could be to provide sample questions prior to the professional conversation and a sample of a completed RPL proforma listing the evidence provided. The candidate would then have the opportunity to familiarise him or herself with the types of questions that may be asked and see the range of evidence required. In future, this strategy could serve to allay any fears of the candidate about the 'unknowns' of the RPL process.

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Helping others achieve their dreams

- Cheryl Reid



A recognition of prior learning (RPL) case which comes to mind involves a student who had recently migrated to Australia.

Background

I have a background of 15 years of employment at residential aged care facilities, including in homes in Cairns, Dalby and Hervey Bay as an aged care worker or endorsed enrolled nurse. During 2001 - 2002 my job also entailed co-ordinating in-service education for staff of the facility.

In 2003 I commenced working for a regional TAFE institute as a teacher in the Community Studies team and for three years my sole responsibility was delivering CHC30102 Certificate III Aged Care four days per week for internal students.

For the last two years I have been Co-ordinator of Aged Care for the institute, which entails all planning and administrative duties as well as delivery of the course. This was where I was introduced to RPL, writing the tools, and conducting the process with students.

An RPL case which comes to mind involves a student who had recently migrated to Australia. 'John' had an extensive background in Aged Care and brought with him numerous documents validating this experience, but without an Australian qualification was finding it very difficult to find employment. He had been offered a trial employment period for a local Home and Community Organisation on the proviso that he gain a qualification in the near future. John wanted to make a positive impression on the potential employer and his request when he phoned me was "How fast can I do this study?"

We spoke on the phone for probably 20 minutes with John pouring out his frustrations and elations and pledging that he could study a unit a week, if that's what it took. Internal instincts took over and instead of mailing him an enrolment form, I set an appointment for a face-to-face interview. For this interview I requested he bring any documentation he may have on past employment and study.

Challenge

My initial task was to investigate the transferability of his qualification, which involved a number of phone calls and emails to members of my vocational training area (VTA), auditors and almost anyone else that they suggested. This also included a phone call with a nurse colleague of mine; she had moved from England in her early thirties, 15 years previously; and I felt it was important to get a first hand account of this. We

talked about her work conditions, the scope of practice of Aged Care Workers, skills required and the legislation surrounding the Industry. While it had been a number of years since she had worked in England, the information she shared enabled me to gain a fuller understanding of the situation. She was also able to share with me the experiences she had in trying to have her qualification and experiences recognised in Australia.

I thought the United Kingdom could possibly have legislation and standards similar to ours, but I found that Australian governing bodies did not view that study completed towards a UK Aged Care qualification was directly transferable to the Australian qualification. Coming to realise this had left seeds of doubt within the candidate, and he felt that the study that he'd done in the last year and his prior ten years experience in the field was a waste, and that he'd given up so much of himself in migrating to Australia. I determined that offering RPL in this situation would solve more than just his financial problem: I decided to delve deeper into validating the student and affirming his decision to migrate.

A number of times during the initial phone conversation and the face-to-face interview the candidate requested to 'just study' the units. However, John had kept a copy of the transcripts from his assessments and brought them to the interview. The transcripts include completed assessments, Statutory Declarations from the assessor listing in minute detail observations of practical skills, and copies of Third Party Reports. I requested that he give me just a week, a week to go through more than 100 pages, and that we would meet again to set up a training plan.

Responses

As previously mentioned this evidence was extensive, varied and detailed. The Statutory Declarations appeared to be written by the assessor of an RTO in UK who had spent some time observing John at work. There was precise detail about how he knocked on the door seeking permission to enter, how he introduced himself, sought permission for someone else to be present with him and explained why he was there. There was a two-page account of a shower, listing step by step the entire procedure. There were assessment questions, though not directly under a heading familiar to CHC30102, for example, Orientation to Aged Care. Some questions were in case

scenario format where the student was to say what he would do if placed in this situation, for example, noticed suspicious behaviour by a co-worker with a client. The responses were in the candidate's hand writing.

This was 'quality' related evidence. But unfortunately, the majority of it I could not verify and given that recently I had been through an RPL Audit and it was stressed that 'I am the Assessor', and questioned how I could ensure authenticity - how could I 'feel comfortable with the qualifications and position of the person who has done the reports', I wasn't quite sure what to do next.

Late on a Saturday afternoon I picked up the evidence again, going back to his answers to the UK assessment questions and it clicked. I mapped each assessment question to an element or performance criteria of a unit of competency. Eventually I had 12 matrixes which identified questions they had already addressed and identified those that still needed to be done. Eleven of the thirteen units had most of the elements satisfactorily met I could deal with the rest in my next interview with John.

From this stage I never looked back I had so much evidence. As to what could be done with the statutory declarations or how could I verify their validity, I didn't have to - it was great to read them and I gave them back to the student.

I took the following notes to the next interview with John:

1. *CHCAC3C - Orientation to Aged Care, CHCOHS302A - Participate in Safety Procedures for direct care work and CHCINF8B - Comply with information requirements of the aged care and community care sectors* - were highlighted as high risk units because they contained legislation specific to Aged Care in Australia. I felt that these units required

assessing through both questions and a practical, in order to be successfully completed and recorded as 'requiring bridging'. While there was evidence that the student was aware of Cross Contamination and Standard Precautions, we had to ensure that his knowledge was in compliance with Australian Standards.

2. *CHCAC15A - Provide services which are responsive to the specific nature of dementia* was a unit that had not been addressed in the assessment questions supplied and would be considered a unit that he needed to study.
3. A current First Aid Certificate needed to be obtained
4. The remainder of the units could be completed via RPL using a combination of conversation, verification that it was the student's hand writing in the answers and conducting a practical assessment in a local Residential Facility.

I assured the candidate that all of this was achievable in his three month probation period. He was given an enrolment form for CHCAC15A and the bridging assessment to begin work on and informed that I would be contacting him as soon as I could organise a facility to do the assessment. The practical assessment was completed four weeks later, and during this time he had completed both the Dementia unit and the bridging tool. The only thing left was a First Aid Certificate.

Benefits

During the final interview for the RPL units the candidate was amazed at how much we had achieved in such a short period. It took him an additional three weeks to obtain the First Aid Certificate and then he was able to provide the employer with a Certificate III in Aged Care during the end of probation interview.

The employer phoned me soon after to discuss the process that I'd used with this student. "How had I managed to get him qualified so fast? Was the student/employee really worthy of this qualification?" After I'd described the process that I'd undertaken, the evidence and knowledge that the student had already possessed and how I'd been able to assess that in a residential setting, the employer confided that she had also received feedback from other workers and clients on John's interactions and skills and as a result offered him full time work.

The process of conducting RPL for John not only supplied him with a qualification that made him attractive to his employer, it instilled in him a belief in the skills and knowledge that he possesses that enables him to do his job and settled his doubts about relocating his family to Australia.

It also strengthened the ties between TAFE and a local residential facility by us all working in partnership to aid like-minded people join our industry.

Lastly, it assisted in developing a working relationship and building of reputation between TAFE and local home and community groups in the region. Word of mouth is the best form of recommendation in small towns. This particular organisation has given feedback recently that during the interview process for new employees, preference will be given to those who have studied through our institute.

Further reflections

Knowledge about the process of conducting RPL was the back-bone for this case study. Intertwined with this was an in-depth knowledge of the Training Package, including how to unpack it, and of AQTF requirements. With this knowledge I was able to mould an assessment tool that was suitable for the individual's needs.

Utilising the support systems around me, seeking professional input and legislative clarification and obtaining input from a colleague working in the industry were crucial in developing my understanding of the candidate.

Key components of the process were my passion for the industry and my drive to help others achieve their dreams of joining the Aged Care field. The evidence he provided especially his responses during our conversations supported my instincts that this person's situation was genuine and that his inability to have his skills acknowledged in his new country was becoming not only a financial burden but also an emotional one.

Utilising the support systems around me, seeking professional input and legislative clarification and obtaining input from a colleague working in the industry were crucial in developing my understanding of the candidate.