

Towards the design of an RPL implementation model
for the South African insurance sector (part two)

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Abstract

The concept of RPL tantalises the South African economy with its inherent promise to allow working adults from all walks of life the means to acquire a formal qualification without returning to a traditional classroom. The promise is clear - RPL is a tool that can lead to the transformation of a society like South Africa because work experience can equal a qualification; and having a qualification will mean improved career prospects, better opportunities and ultimately greater earning potential. But the reality is far removed from the promise. RPL is not widely available to working adults, and vast amounts of money and time are spent each year to train working adults to gain qualifications in the very disciplines they have been working in for years. This paper summarises research which demonstrates that one of the main reasons for this widespread rejection of RPL in favour of traditional classroom training is simply that the RPL models available do not cater for the needs of the working adult in a typical working environment. This research proposes a logic model to guide RPL implementation in the insurance workplace.

Opsomming

Objectives of the study

The primary research aim of this research is to develop a logic model for RPL implementation in the insurance workplace. This model will be designed using the data collected during the programme evaluation of another workplace RPL implementation in the insurance sector. The following empirical research questions were formulated to guide this programme evaluation:

1. How was the decision to implement RPL made?
2. How was the RPL programme rolled out to participants?
3. What individual factors contributed to RPL success?
4. What contextual workplace and broader environmental factors contributed to RPL success?
5. What technical assistance was needed to complete the RPL process?
6. Was the RPL programme considered successful?
7. How should South African business manage RPL implementation?

From these conceptual questions the following broad research objectives were derived:

- **Objective 1:** To employ a qualitative methodology to establish and describe the experiences of RPL candidates during an RPL implementation process;
- **Objective 2:** To link the experiences of the RPL candidates to the literature that describes workplace learning and assessment practices so as to understand their experiences, both as part of this learning paradigm and as part of the RPL implementation process;
- **Objective 3:** To link these experiences to other workplace RPL case studies so as to identify trends and categories that add value and clarity to the experiences of the RPL candidates;
- **Objective 4:** To build a logic model for workplace RPL implementation that is based upon both an analysis of the experiences of the RPL candidates and an analysis of workplace learning theory and RPL theory;

- **Objective 5:** To apply the insights gained from both the RPL candidates and the scholarly articles on RPL and workplace learning in order to redefine and reconceptualise current RPL implementation approaches contemplated for the insurance sector (and possibly even in other similar workplace sectors, such as banking where academic compliance is also a factor for employability).

Research Design

Research approach

This study was executed using a qualitative research approach (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). Qualitative research is different from quantitative research because it seeks to understand what is going on from the position of a participant; rather than predict what will happen from the position of an outsider. As such the research design and techniques that qualitative researchers use are different from those used by quantitative researchers and there is less emphasis on the way that data is collected and measured and more emphasis on the subjective experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Given the overall aim and objectives of the research, the research design selected is a programme evaluation. The data will be analysed using grounded theory data analysis techniques. A decision was taken to use these techniques developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), because of the need for a strict, systematic coding method to analyse the data from the programme evaluation. In addition to this robust data analysis approach, the qualitative data is further validated by comparing it to data extracted from a secondary data analysis of 18 workplace case studies, as well as comparing it to the most influential research literature. The research design and research methodology utilised in this study are summarised and presented in Figure 1.

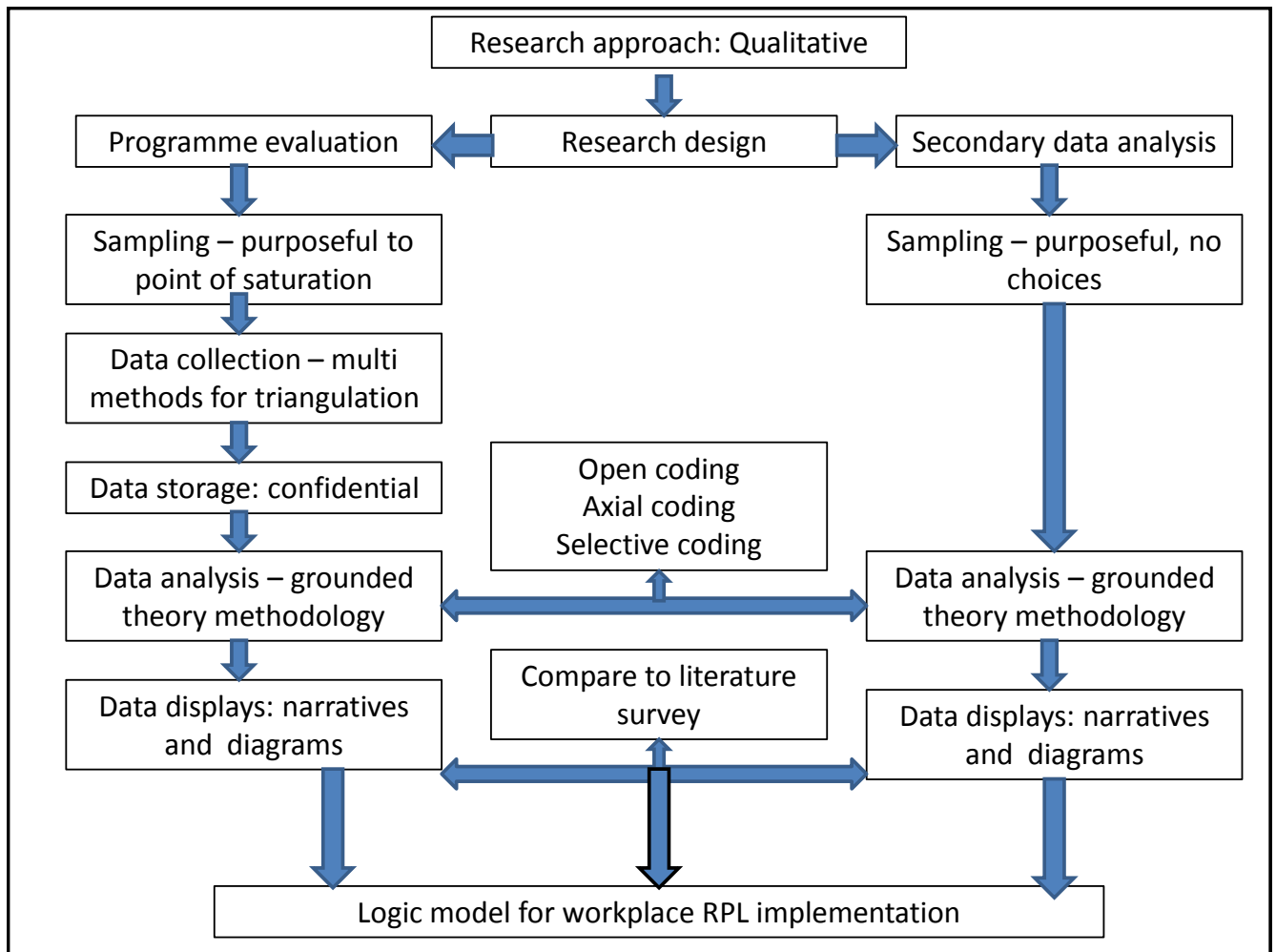


Figure 1: Summary of the research design and approach

Research methodology

The selection of programme evaluation as the research design provides an explicit plan of action and it informs the choice of the techniques that are employed in order to conduct the research. Potter (2002, p. 209) states that programme evaluation is ‘about establishing whether social programmes are needed, effective and likely to be used.’ Further, it is about programme improvement and the gathering of useful information so as to enhance programme delivery and accountability by the programme implementers.

A more detailed discussion of the research techniques employed in this current study follows, together with a discussion on data displays and explicit strategies employed to

enhance the quality of the study. This information will assist the reader to judge the quality and trustworthiness of this research and the logic model it proposes.

Sampling of the participants in the study: The sampling in this research took place on a number of different levels. Firstly, there was the question of which RPL programme to select. In the end, the choice was based on readiness of access and the fact that the company concerned granted permission to conduct the programme evaluation and write up the research. All candidates within this company were participants to the research in some way. The demographics of this group is provided in Figure 2. Secondly, there was the question of how to select RPL candidates to be interviewed. The sampling strategy employed was purposeful sampling, which is non-random sampling where the sample is selected for some extreme or deviant characteristics (Durrheim, 2002). All seven candidates ultimately selected to be interviewed were purposefully selected for their possible contribution to the research and the logic model. The candidates selected were either very positive or very negative about the process in their reflective statements or in the on-line chat room. Finally, purposeful sampling was again used to select stakeholders who would contribute to the broad positioning of this research. Stakeholders from SAQA, INSETA and the company were selected based on their knowledge of the process and their role as a possible user of the data. These are considered to be information rich cases which would be valuable in the design of the final RPL logic model (Durrheim, 1999, p. 45).

- One employer with 227 RPL candidates distributed as follows:
 - 38% Male vs. 62% Female;
 - Average age was 42 years old;
 - Average tenure was 9 years;
 - 45% had Afrikaans as their home language and 42% had English as their home language;
- One representative from SAQA;
- Two representatives from INSETA;
- One representative from the training and development department within the

employer;

- Five representatives from the company implementing the research.

Figure 2: Key features of the sample

Data sources: In this research, data was collected from a variety of sources, i.e.:

- All RPL candidates in the selected employer were sent an email requesting that they log on to the on-line chat room and comment on the RPL programme;
- All candidates' reflective statements were copied from their submitted portfolio of evidence. However, only 96 of these were finally used as the remainder were either too sparse, not authentic or incomplete;
- Extreme candidates (using the reflective statements as the determining factor) were purposefully selected to be interviewed;
- Extreme candidates from the various stakeholder groups were purposefully selected to be interviewed. Stakeholders included SAQA, INSETA, assessors, RPL advisers and in-company sponsors.

Data collection: The interview data was physically collected using a multitude of methods, as follows:

- All interviews were recorded using a webcam connected directly to a PC, which provided an electronic record of each interview;
- Each electronic recording was typed out in full using the precise words and phrases uttered by each interviewee. Pauses, laughter, hesitation and other non-verbal voice cues were captured. The use of visual footage allowed for the capture of body language responses to the questions and these were also captured in the typed version;
- Descriptive field notes were taken during each interview. These notes recorded the interviewer's observations during each interview rather than the actual content of what was discussed. Information was recorded about the apparent willingness (or not) of each interviewee, their openness or reticence, their use of terminology, and how comfortable they seemed to be about talking about their RPL experiences;

- After each interview, time was spent writing a reflection on what had taken place. This reflection was based on my field notes and my overall impressions of the interview. These reflections were analytical and conceptual (as opposed to descriptive) and were used to assist me in recording initial feelings about the concepts and categories that were emerging.

Data storage: All notes were stored electronically, in MSWORD, on a personal laptop. This computer is backed up daily to a central server, which is itself backed up onto a redundant off-site server each day. This storage and back-up system ensured that the data was safe during the research. To ensure candidate confidentiality I password protected my research folder. The transcribed notes were filed into a file and indexed. Candidates' names did not appear on the files - further protecting their confidences.

Data analysis: As already mentioned the data in this research was analysed using the grounded theory techniques first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This methodology can broadly be broken up into the following steps:

Step 1: Open coding – this involves the identification of concepts in the data, along with their properties and dimensions. This is done by 'opening up the texts and exposing the thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained therein' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). The data are examined and compared for similarities and differences. Elements of the data that are found to be somehow conceptually similar are then grouped together as a category, and the category is then defined in terms of its dimensions and properties.

Step 2: Axial coding – this is the process of relating categories to their subcategories at the level of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Step 3: Selective coding – this is the final step in the grounded theory data analysis process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 236), it involves 'the integration of concepts around a core category and the filling in of categories in need of further development and refinement.'

The techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) were used to analyse the interview data and the reflective statements and to extract the categories. The 18 workplace RPL case studies and academic literature was then analysed according to the categories that resulted from this grounded analysis. The purpose of this secondary content analysis was to validate the grounded theory analysis using independent data, such as the secondary case studies described by Dyson and Keating (2005).

The data analysis approach can be illustrated as follows in Figure 3. (Note that each of the three steps - open coding, axial coding and selective coding - is sequential).

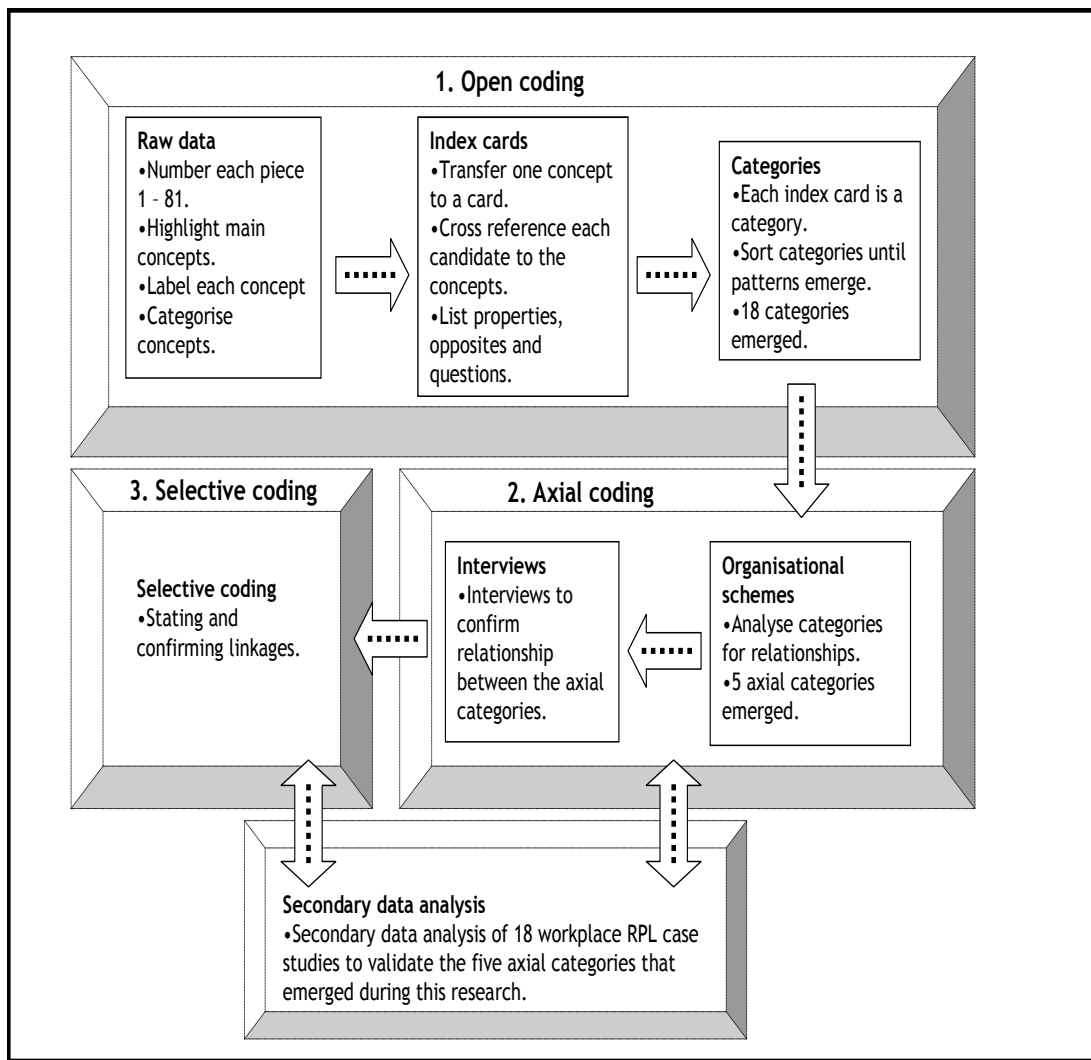


Figure 3 The grounded theory data analysis process implemented in this research

Data displays: It is important to use data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in qualitative analysis to summarise the research progress and gain analytical distance from the data. Data displays allow researchers to reduce the data to such a point that patterns begin to emerge. There are various forms of diagrammatical data displays that can be used for this purpose, including flow charts, typologies, and matrices. All of these were used at various stages throughout the study.

Results

Owing to lack of space, the actual data and categories that resulted after the coding process are not presented here (these can be inspected in detail in Deller, 2007). During data coding the data was grouped firstly into 18 open coding categories and ultimately into five axial categories that were inter-related. The diagrammatic relationships between the five categories are shown in Figure 4 below. Each bold heading links the axial category to both its predecessor and antecedent using the grounded theory language of circumstances – action/reaction – consequence already discussed above. The axial categories fit broadly with the basic components of a paradigm as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

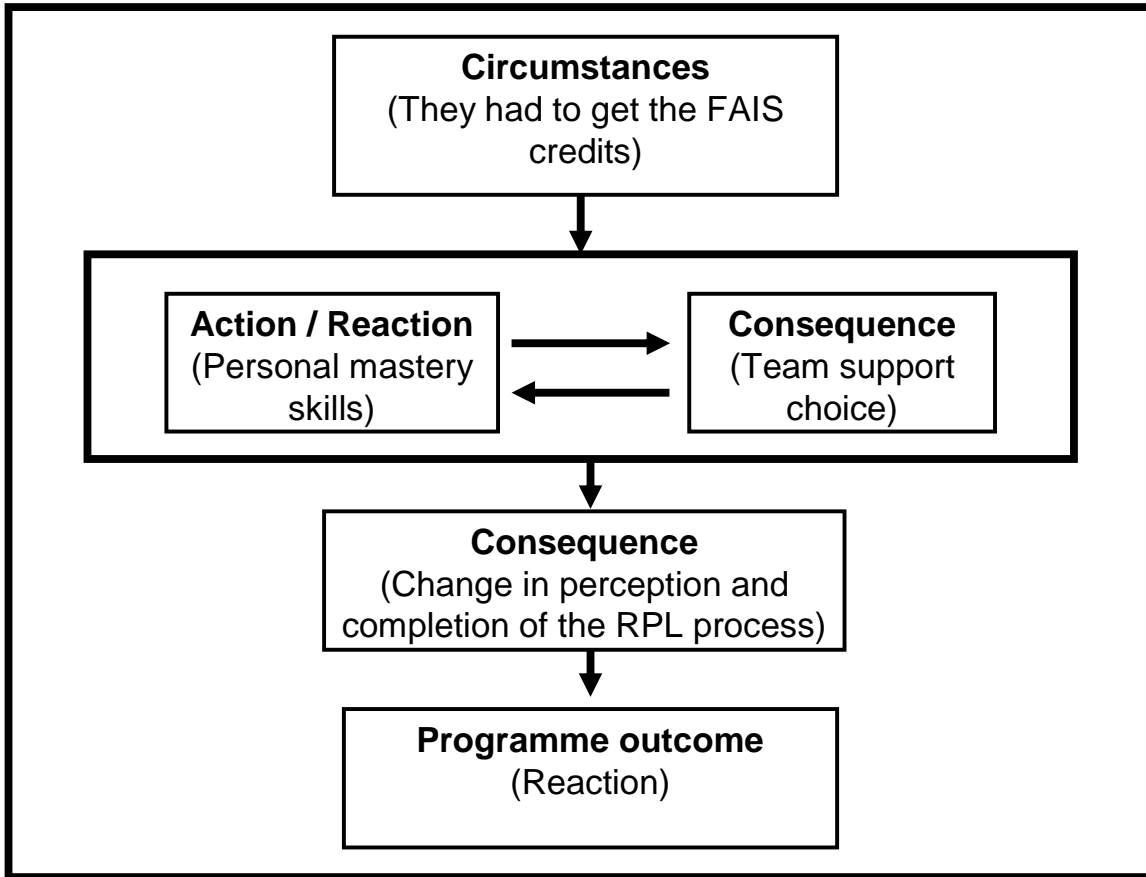


Figure 0 Summary of circumstance – action/reaction – consequence – outcome process flow in the research data

Each of these categories is presented briefly below (note that the reference to category numbers reflects the original 18 open coding categories, which can be reviewed in Deller, 2007):

Circumstances leading to the RPL process and initial reactions

The first axial category identified by the coding process was the ‘catalyst or reason for doing RPL’. In grounded theory terminology this would be the ‘circumstances’. Every candidate mentioned the fact that they felt forced into doing RPL. This was not technically true, as they could have attended training and written examinations, instead of being RPL-ed, but the overriding feeling appeared to be one of being forced to earn

academic credits for FAIS¹ compliance. The candidates felt trapped and powerless as they risked losing their livelihood if they did not comply. Every candidate in this programme had to earn the academic FAIS credits, but it appeared that what made the difference between those who turned this into an opportunity and those who were unhappy about it was the candidates' overall feelings about the need to be FAIS compliant and their perception about the outcome of the RPL. Where the candidate reported understanding the need for FAIS and appreciated the value of having a qualification, then they were more likely to succeed at the RPL process. The converse also seemed to be true – candidates who did not understand the reasons for FAIS compliance and who did not value having a qualification did not fare well on the RPL programme. This led to the hypothesis that to run a successful workplace RPL programme, the implementer must give the candidates sufficient information to enable them to make an informed choice and they must work with the candidates to assist them to see value in the ultimate outcome (for example a qualification). This was seen to be important because in workplace RPL situations it is often the employer that dictates RPL as a solution because they are paying for it. The implementer needs to be aware that this could cause resentment and lower the success rate of the RPL programme. This situation is not likely to occur in non-workplace RPL because the decision to embark upon RPL is made by the individual, presumably because they want the qualification. Thus, RPL models designed for non-workplace RPL will not consider strategies to accommodate the circumstances leading up to the RPL programme.

Personal mastery – actions and reactions to the circumstance that required the candidates to do RPL

The term 'personal mastery' has been borrowed from Peter Senge (1990; 2006). In this research, personal mastery was linked to four categories that evolved during open coding. They are:

- Category 9: Ability to cope;
- Category 6: Personal values;

¹ FAIS compliance is required by the Financial Advisory and Intermediary Act of 2002 and could be achieved by earning academic credits through RPL or through formal training and assessment

- Category 5: Self-confidence about their ability to do their job and the RPL;
- Category 12: Understanding of academic approaches and assessment principles;

It was postulated that each of these four categories could be thought of along a continuum that ranges from total presence of the characteristic to total absence of it. It was noted that RPL candidates who placed themselves at the higher end of these four continuums appeared to have the sense of purpose, vision and discipline to pursue personal growth and succeed at the RPL process. In contrast, those who placed themselves at the lower end of each continuum did not and were only able to achieve limited success on the RPL process (for example only a few credits as opposed to the full qualification). This cluster of categories seemed to provide the answer to the fourth question posed during the conceptualisation of this entire research project (see introduction for the full list of questions). The question is '*What individual factors contributed to RPL success?*' It was assumed that this cluster of categories around the axial of personal mastery held the key to answering this question. It was hypothesised that workplace RPL candidates did not always enter the RPL programme with sufficient coping mechanisms, personal values, self-confidence and understanding of the academic assessment requirements and that the success of an RPL implementation could be enhanced if these were evaluated and developed prior to embarking upon a workplace RPL programme.

Choice of team learning and support, a consequence of personal mastery

The concept of 'team learning' is also borrowed from Peter Senge (1999; 2006). In this study there appeared to be five open coding categories that related to this axial concept, namely:

- Category 11: 'Me' and 'I' vs 'We' and 'Us';
- Category 10: Need for confirmation from others;
- Category 17: Perception of feedback;
- Category 8: Role of support systems in controlling anxiety and stress;

- Category 14: Personalisation of the RPL process.

Each of these categories highlights the role of the team in the individual's RPL experience. Individual candidates either spoke about needing more support/more confirmation or they thanked their support network/confirmers. They generally spoke using the plural pronoun and it was hypothesised that this was because they saw the process as a group learning process. The personalisation of RPL added to this perception because it gave them a common and shared language, one that non-RPL candidates did not share in. Personalising RPL gave the RPL candidates an identity.

It was hypothesised that implementers of workplace RPL need to understand the impact that the work team can have on the success of workplace RPL. Where the team is not supportive, workplace RPL has a likelihood of not succeeding so it would make sense to spend time and resources assessing the team learning culture and support structures prior to embarking upon RPL. If these are found to be non-supportive then the implementer would be advised not to embark upon the RPL implementation in that environment.

Change in perception – a consequence of personal mastery and team support

All candidates in this RPL programme attended a one-day preparatory session. The implementers' objectives for this session were to introduce RPL and to help people understand the process so that they could get started. Most candidates reported that it seemed easy during this session, but once they got started they realised they needed additional assistance. This could either be acquired from the RPL implementer or it could be acquired from their peers. Where candidates selected to approach their peers, they either chose peers who were negative or peers that were positive about the process. From the data collected and the subsequent analysis, it appeared that if the RPL candidates sought assistance from people who were positive, then their own personal mastery had a chance of developing; but if their team mates were negative, then personal mastery would be stunted. Some individuals did not seek out group support, presumably preferring to work alone. It was assumed that those with a

moderate to high level of personal mastery would be more comfortable working alone, while low to moderate personal mastery candidates would be more likely to seek out team support – which could be positive or negative and this would impact on their perception of the project and the development of their personal mastery. The ultimate hypothesis was that an increasing sense of personal mastery and state of positive team support came about with a change in perception about the RPL process. For workplace RPL implementers this seemed to suggest that (in addition to assisting candidates to value the outcomes of the RPL) if there was some way of building up the candidate’s personal mastery skills prior to the RPL programme then they would have a greater chance of success. This could be done upfront during the preparation stage.

Outcome of the RPL process – reaction of the candidates

The final axial category identified was open coding category 18 on its own. The hypothesis was that as the candidates finished the process so they finally appreciated what it had given them in terms of personal mastery, team learning or simply a qualification that would now open doors for them. It was assumed that this category held personal meaning and somehow provided input back into the circumstances or conditions surrounding RPL. It was felt that if these candidates were ever assessed again using a portfolio of evidence that they would be more in control and more prepared for it.

Overall, the picture that emerged from the data analysis highlighted some key differences between RPL in this workplace and those that are assumed to exist when RPL takes place in a formal academic setting. These are summarised in Table 2:

Table 2: Summary of assumed difference between RPL in workplace and formal academic contexts

	RPL in this workplace context	RPL in formal academic context (assumed)
Circumstances surrounding RPL	Circumstances dictated need for RPL	Individual researches RPL and chooses to do it

	No perception of choice	
Level of personal mastery	Can't assume individual has sufficient coping mechanisms in place. Can't assume individual is confident, knows academic conventions, etc.	
Level of team support	Can't assume peer support will exist. Work environment must be prepared to support learning and RPL.	RPL occurs at learning institution. Positive support is available but RPL process is more individualistic than group oriented.
Change in perception about the RPL process	Once candidates see value in outcome they will make the effort to be successful, which will include developing the personal mastery skills they require to be successful.	Individual chooses to do RPL so they must value the outcome. Personal mastery skills may need developing though – but the path to this is shorter due to freedom of choice.
Reaction of the candidate at the end of the process	Success breeds success. Through reflection the candidates are able to see the value of the RPL process at the end.	Success also breeds success but because the value was perceived upfront the reaction to RPL at the end is probably not as overwhelming as it is with the workplace candidates.

The secondary data analysis

Secondary data analysis is an empirical research approach that aims to reanalyse existing data in order to test an emerging hypothesis or to validate an emerging model (Mouton, 2001, p. 164). The secondary data analysed in this study was originally produced by Dyson and Keating (2005) on behalf of the International Labour Organisation. It is a report summarising workplace RPL cases in five countries. The case studies are presented in narrative form, along with a summary of the prevailing

national qualifications system. These case studies have been selected for an analysis because they represent the only summary of workplace RPL that was available at the time of conducting this study. The intention of this secondary data analysis is to identify factors that can inform the workplace RPL model evolving from this research. With this intention in mind, the five axial categories emerging from the grounded theory data analysis process described above were the focus of each analysis.

Discussion

The discussion of the findings will be presented under the following headings:

- Implication of the workplace and traditional learning theories and practice for this research's emerging logic model of workplace RPL practice;
- The presentation of a logic model to guide workplace RPL implementation in the insurance workplace;
- A summary of the contributions of this study.

Implication of the workplace and traditional learning theories and practice for this research's emerging logic model of workplace RPL practice

The intention of this discussion is to demonstrate theoretical and practical support for the proposed axial categories and their proposed interconnecting relationships (see Figure 4). To make the discussion more meaningful, this section is structured according to the five axial categories that emerged during this research, i.e.:

- Circumstances leading to the RPL process and candidates' initial reactions to it;
- Personal mastery;
- Choice of team support;
- Evolving perception of the RPL process;

- Meaning of the outcome of the RPL process upon completion.

Circumstances leading to the RPL process and candidates' initial reactions to it

The circumstances surrounding workplace RPL implementation are frequently linked to corporate competitiveness (Van Rooyen, 2000; Nyatanga, Forman & Fox, 1998), which places workplace RPL within a technical-market RPL paradigm. In this paradigm, experience is only valued to the extent that it matches skills and knowledge which have been prescribed according to national economic needs (Fuller, Munro & Rainbird, 2004). Supported by human capital theory, education (and assessment) in this tradition becomes increasingly instrumental, utilitarian and pragmatic and valued in terms of its usefulness to the labour market and the economy as return on investment in human capital. This is no surprise, as it is the orientation which has traditionally underpinned most established forms of vocational education and training internationally. The result is that education (and assessment) is now treated as a commodity that enhances individuals' chances in a competitive labour market and that can be bought and sold as personal property (Wagner & Childs, 2000). This view links with a behaviourist view of knowledge as a commodity (Atkins, 1993) and it reminds us that learning and assessment are simply conducted in support of the organisation's goal to produce goods and services (Rainbird, 2000b). However, in addition to the strong behaviourist slant that can be seen in the economic view of knowledge and its acquisition, pure workplace learning (as opposed to classroom learning for vocational purposes) is primarily situated learning (conforming to situated learning principles). Here there is an emphasis on contextual application, situated performance and authentic, context-relevant assessment.

Workplace learning theorists such as Keep and Mayhew (1999); Hoskin and Anderson-Gough (2004); Bosworth, Davies and Wilson (2001); Eraut, Alderton, Cole and Senker (2000) and Rainbird, Munro and Holly (2004) point out that workplace learning is impacted by many workplace factors. These factors rarely play a role in traditional classroom learning but their importance cannot be discounted if workplace learning (and by implication workplace RPL) is to be a success. Reading these theorists together, the

following list of factors impacting on workplace learning (and, by implication, workplace assessment) can be drawn:

- Power relationships (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Rainbird et al., 2004; Hoskin & Anderson-Gough, 2004);
- Social relationships (Rainbird et al., 2004);
- Distribution of, and access to, expertise (Lave & Wenger, 1991);
- Design and structure of the work tasks (Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Bosworth et al., 2001);
- Design and structure of the workplace (Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Bosworth et al., 2001);
- Team processing (Evans, Kersh & Sakamoto, 2004);
- Economic and legal requirements on the employer (Ashton, 2004);
- The structure of the employment relationship (Bosworth et al., 2001);
- The link between the qualification and practical job requirements – which determines how easy it is for candidates to transfer learning from the workplace context to the qualification requirements (Eraut et al., 1998).

While these factors are critical for workplace RPL, they are not dealt with in any generic RPL model (Osman, 2001; Harris, 2002). This is probably due to the philosophical location of RPL within the humanistic paradigm – where adults are seen as autonomous and self-directed learners reflecting on their prior experience to make sense of it as they learn from it (Saddington, 1992). In fact, the entire field of workplace learning, in which individuals learn because the workplace provides them with opportunities to cooperate in activities, contrasts sharply with behaviourist and cognitive learning theories which focus on individual learning (usually in a formal educational institution). Workplace learning sees learning as a socially constructed process (Fuller & Unwin, 2004).

In this study, the candidates were all required to become FAIS compliant for economic and legal corporate reasons. Thus the circumstances surrounding the RPL were clear: 'the company needs you to match your prior learning to the requirements of the qualification so that you can be awarded the qualification so that we can remain in business and remain competitive'. The candidates felt pressure (Bosworth et al., 2001), there was not an equitable balance of power (Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Rainbird et al., 2004; Hoskin & Anderson-Gough, 2004) and there were no clear links between the qualification and practical job requirements, which determines how easy it is for candidates to transfer learning from the workplace context to the qualification requirements (Eraut et al., 1998) because the candidates are involved largely in highly structured workplace tasks that are deliberately fragmented to prevent fraud (i.e. context bound and situational).

Seen against this backdrop, along with the prevailing belief inherent in the structure of their RPL implementation that they were self-directed adult learners (constructivist thought) who could make their own choices (but they could not because the company held more power in determining what to RPL and when to do it), it is not surprising that the candidates reported feeling pressurised and forced into the RPL situation. In the presentation of the data analysis section above, the conclusion reached (after reviewing the evidence) was that what made the difference between those candidates who turned the RPL into an opportunity and those who were unhappy about it was the candidates' perception about the need to be FAIS compliant and their perception about RPL in general. This conclusion is supported by various workplace learning theorists, including:

- Rainbird et al. (2004) who argue that management determines the training strategy according to their own needs because they have the power to do so. Individuals choose whether or not they participate in the training (and assessment) because they have the power to do so. In the current research it could be argued that if the employees perceived value in the RPL process as a means to achieving a FAIS-compliant qualification, and if they wanted to be FAIS compliant because they agreed with management that this was an ideal situation,

then they were more likely to expend the effort regardless of the circumstances. Similarly, the converse would be implied - if they did not see the RPL solution as the correct solution and if they saw no value in the FAIS compliance they would resist management's attempt to force them (through the exercise of their power) to expend the effort to reach the outcome.

- Hoddinott (2004, p. 89) who investigated the unequal power relationship between labour and employer and showed how each party has different perceptions of the value of workplace training and assessment. She showed how this can result in worker suspicion and resistance to workplace training and assessment simply because the workers do not perceive the same need for it as do the employers.
- Billett and Boud (2001) wrote that individual's elect how they will engage with workplace learning and that this choice is largely determined by how the workplace presents the opportunity to the individual.

The key insight for this study is that individuals *choose* to participate in workplace learning regardless of the power relationships at play because they perceive it as either being of value to themselves or not. If their perception is favourable then they engage and if it is not they remain on the periphery. Linking this back to the current research Billett's views also seem to add support to the conclusion that what made the difference between those who turned the RPL into an opportunity and those who were unhappy about it was their perception about the value of the workplace (and themselves) becoming FAIS compliant and the affordance of RPL as a solution. The implications for the RPL model emerging from this research include:

- Need to assess prevailing learning environment prior to implementation;
- Need to identify and align goals of workers and management prior to implementation;
- Need to communicate to workers until they are able to make an informed choice about their participation;
- Need to manage power relationships in the workplace to create a safe assessment environment.

Personal mastery skills displayed by candidates

As a term, personal mastery is not used explicitly in any of the Dyson and Keating (2004) cases, but reference is made to 'lack of confidence' regarding academic skills, 'motivation levels', 'anxiety', 'fear', 'commitment', 'academic language skills', 'willingness to try', 'need for incentives', and so forth. All of these terms fit within Senge's view of personal mastery as described in his 'five disciplines blueprint' for the development of a learning organisation (Senge, 1999; 2006). The relevant workplace learning theory that lends support to this category include:

- Evans et al. (2004) recognise the competence related to attitudes and values as a tacit skill which, if developed and recognised, would improve self confidence and desire to continue with the learning. Furthermore, their research showed that learners who have their tacit² skills recognised by others (peers, facilitators, mentors) were more encouraged to continue with their learning and gained greater self-confidence in the learning process and their ability to succeed. Fuller and Unwin. (2004, p. 14) state 'the development of self confidence may be as important as formal learning outcomes such as results or certificates.' Self confidence encourages learners to return to learning and continue developing their skills.
- Engeström, Engeström and Karkkainen (1995) theorise that personal values (along with ways of being and reasoning that arise from economic and social realities) shape individual cognitive processes that individuals use to reconstruct the relationship they have with the context they find themselves in. This could explain why some individuals immediately embraced the RPL in this research and why others rejected it. As their values changed, so did their cognitive processes and the way they perceived their relationship with the RPL opportunity they were presented with. Meghnagi (2004, p. 57) has taken this thought and proposes that we cannot expect learning to be acquired until we have considered

² Evans, Kersh and Sakamoto (2004) categorise the tacit skills as competencies related to attitudes and values; learning competence; social co-operative competence; content related and practical competence; methodological competence and strategic competence (p. 227).

the cognitive patterns affecting the behaviour, knowledge and values of each individual.

- Billett (2004, p. 120) points out that learning embarked upon because the individual 'appropriates it' (voluntarily) is better than learning that is forced upon the individual. Learners who choose to appropriate learning opportunities are more likely to have the confidence that they can succeed and do not see the learning as threatening to themselves or their workplace standing. Billett (2004) goes on to point out that the identities and subjectivities of workplace learners are different from those participating in higher education institutions. Those in higher education institutions have as their main purpose the acquisition of knowledge, while those in workplaces do not have this as their key purpose. Billett argues that something needs to change in their personal experiences before workplace learners embrace an identity associated with workplace learning. Evans et al. (2004) recognise learning competence (which would incorporate academic skills) as a tacit skill which if developed and recognised, would improve self-confidence and desire to continue with the learning.

The implications for the RPL model emerging from this research include:

- Need to assess the personal mastery skills of each candidate prior to implementation;
- Need to assist candidates to see the value in earning a qualification that is separate from simply the company's needs.

Role of team support and/or group processes throughout the RPL

The third axial category emerging from this research is the role of team support or some other support process in assisting the individual to conclude their RPL successfully or not. Support is a big component of the workplace RPL case studies that made up the secondary data analysis and it ranged in intensity from formal coaches and RPL advisers to peer networks and in-house champions. The workplace learning theory supports this category as follows:

- Fuller and Unwin (2004) propose a conceptual tool for evaluating the quality of learning environments. This is based upon various workplace features which they have classified as either restrictive or expansive. Restrictive environments are more likely to create barriers to workplace learning, while expansive environments are more likely to increase the quantity and range of opportunities for employee participation in workplace learning.
- Lave and Wenger (1991) coined 'learning as participation' as part of their situated learning model. According to them, the focus in 'learning as acquisition' is on learning codified knowledge from an expert and this lends itself to assessment via written examinations. On the other hand, assessment of knowledge gained through 'learning as participation' is more difficult to measure because of its diverse nature. This led Lave and Wenger (1991) to coin the term *community of practice* (as opposed to the individual) within which learning occurs and within which assessment should occur. These views stress the collective and social nature of workplace learning and, by implication, workplace assessment.
- Engeström (2004, p. 149) points out that while Lave and Wegner (1991) do recognise the role of diverse communities of practice in the formulation of learning, they do not address the possibility that learning may be located and distributed in even broader, multiple and cross-disciplinary communities of practice. He contends that as work is becoming more complex it is more likely that solutions to problems are no longer located within a single discipline and to learn them will require participation in multiple sites and communities of practice. His term 'knotworking' defines this new collaborative and transformative development of knowledge.
- One of the five disciplines of workplace learning proposed by Senge (1999, 2006) is 'team learning'. He postulates that teams are made up of individuals who are working together openly to achieve a new level of knowledge and capability. Where individuals have achieved self mastery there is greater commonality of purpose and shared vision, so everyone moves towards the

learning with a common purpose and 'alignment'. This requires individuals to lower their personal barriers and motivate others to learn and achieve.

According to Senge (1999), it is not simply a given that a group of talented individuals will take on workplace learning opportunities and succeed, because team learning is a skill that must be learnt before they can be fully successful workplace learners.

- Brown, Rhodes and Carter (2004, p. 179) conclude their own research by stating '(t)here is little doubt that a reduced level of learning support would result in far fewer employees being committed learners.'

The implications for the RPL model emerging from this research include:

- Need to assess prevailing learning environment prior to implementation and ensure it will support and sustain the RP;
- Need to allocate candidates to peer networks to enhance learning;
- Need to consider group assessments as valid since workplace activity is largely group-focused and rarely individualistic;

Evolving perception of the RPL process

Little discussion in the secondary data analysis case studies deal with any evolution in perception towards RPL, however, assumptions can be made using completion rates and re-enrolment rates as guidelines. It seems reasonable to expect that if the perception of the RPL process was favourable more candidates would strive to complete it and more would enrol. Evidence on this dimension was mixed – with some projects increasing in numbers while other projects had large non-completion rates.

Evans et al. (2004, p. 231) note that adult learners in a restrictive learning environment frequently perceive tasks as 'boring, non-challenging, repetitive or monotonous'. This frequently leads learners to seek alternative work if they can. On the contrary, they note

that an expansive environment is usually associated with tasks that are perceived as 'challenging, interesting, stimulating or motivational'. They go on to state that learners may go further than simply experiencing their workplaces as restrictive or expansive because their research suggests that individuals can influence their workplace to become more expansive if they have the confidence and the interest to do so (what Billett, 2004 might refer to as exercising the individual's agency to create a workplace affordance).

It could be that during the research the impetus of the RPL started to challenge some of the traditional learning culture elements and replace them with ones that were more expansive. Alternatively, it may simply be a matter of perception - as initially the learners perceived their jobs as boring and monotonous because they were so fragmented but the need to research and submit evidence that was broader and more encompassing made them view their jobs in a different and more challenging light.

The implications of this for the current study include:

- Assessing the workplace to ensure that it is supportive to learning (expansive);
- Communicating with candidates to assist them to see the value of the RPL from the onset, thus establishing a positive perception of RPL before they even start. This way the positive benefits can be enjoyed earlier on in the RPL process.

Meaning of the outcome of the RPL process upon completion

The secondary data analysis suggests a number of intentional outcomes of the RPL - including formal certification, legal compliance and professionalism. The cases make no mention of less tangible outcomes, such as those identified during this current research, where there is a strong sense that candidates acquired some personal value out of completing the RPL process other than simply the expected FAIS compliance.

The achievements of some of the less tangible and more personal outcomes from workplace learning (and assessment) are discussed in the formal workplace learning literature. Evans et al. (2004, p. 239) conclude their research by stating that 'unlocking the hidden abilities of people and making them visible to their holders allows them to break through glass ceilings.' Hager (2004) sees the overall outcome of learning not just as a change in the properties of the learner, but also as changes in the environment and interrelation of stakeholders because learners are part of the environment. This was confirmed in this study by the manager of the researched company who stated simply that 'the outcomes were far greater and wider than anticipated – individuals grew, learnt how to use email and do research and as a company we learnt about RPL, outcomes-based education, unit standards and how to work in teams to discuss learning and our jobs.'

Evans et al. (2004) highlight the tacit skills of time management, prioritising, planning and organising, self-motivation, self-reflection and perseverance as flowing from a successful learning encounter. As mentioned above, the learning encounter is more likely to be perceived as successful where there is good tutoring and team support. The implications of this simply could be achieved through communication between RPL candidates and the RPL implementers – to help the candidates perceive the benefits earlier so that they can motivate completion.

The preceding section summarises the linkages between the theory and the five axial categories that emerged during this study. By presenting each axial category and supporting theory from the most influential learning theorists (both traditional and workplace) and the secondary data analysis it is shown that the data from this study is consistent with data from other sources. This discussion is the foundation for the emerging logic model for workplace RPL implementation in the South African insurance sector.

The presentation of a logic model to guide workplace RPL implementation in the insurance workplace

Patton (2002) defines a logic model (also termed a theory of action) as a logical and graphical representation showing the connections between programme inputs, outputs and processes that is used to guide and predict practical implementation. Simply put, a logic model provides a step-by-step view of a process that can be followed when implementing whatever it is representing.

Using this research and the literature, an activities-approach logic model for RPL implementation within the insurance sector would look as follows (Figure 5):

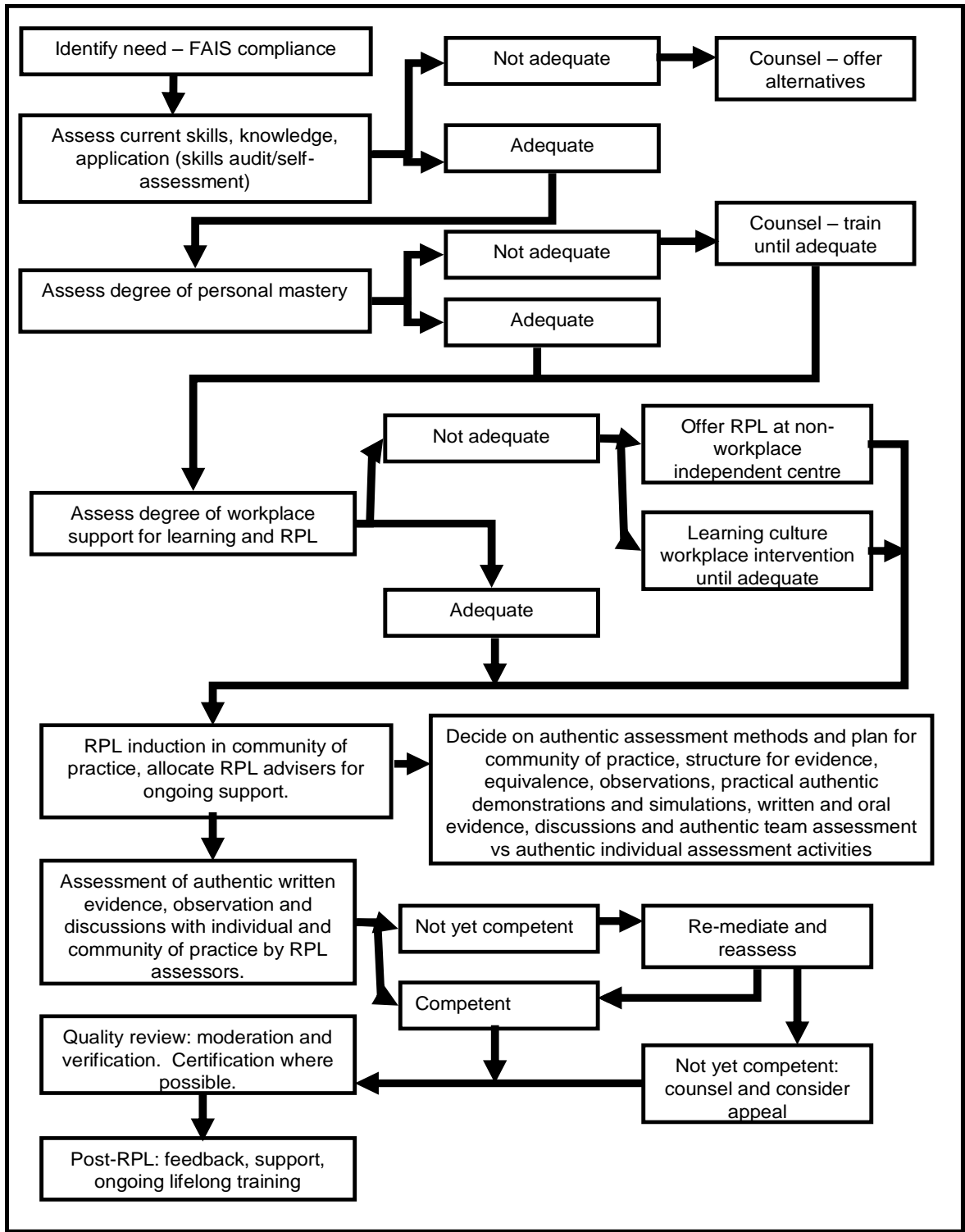


Figure 5: Activities-approach logic model designed from the data collected in this research and presented towards the design of a logic model for insurance-sector RPL implementation

Starting at the top left hand corner of the logic model presented in Figure 5 above, the RPL implementer would start off by identifying the need for RPL within the sector or company or individual. In this study, the overall need is FAIS compliance. The implementer then assists the candidates to perform an initial self-assessment on their existing level of relevant skills, knowledge and ability to apply these at work. Moving to the right, the implementer judges whether the individual has achieved sufficiently in the self-assessment in order to continue with RPL. If the individual is unable to prove the existence of sufficient skills he/she will be counselled accordingly and offered alternatives which will most likely involve training to achieve the skills.

Candidates who are able to prove an adequate level of skill to embark upon RPL undergo an assessment to gauge their level of personal mastery. Those who do not have the required level of personal mastery skill will be trained and reassessed until they are judged ready to continue with the RPL process. It is critical that RPL candidates have the required level of personal mastery because, as this study has shown, those who do have a far greater chance of succeeding while those without it have little or no chance of succeeding at the RPL process.

After assessing the individual learners for personal mastery, the RPL implementer assesses the sponsoring workplace to ascertain its readiness for RPL (termed 'degree of workplace support' on the logic model in the fourth block down on the left hand side). Organisations must be able to support RPL candidates in the workplace with motivation, information, resources, feedback, and so forth and, as shown by this study, organisations that are unable to provide this support will have lower success rates with their RPL implementation. Where the organisation is assessed as not having sufficient workplace support, the RPL implementer either refers the candidates to an independent RPL assessment centre outside of the workplace or works with the organisation so that they can develop the infrastructure to support RPL implementation.

Once the candidate and the workplace (or independent assessment centre) is ready for RPL, the implementer commences with RPL induction of the candidate. This takes place within a community of practice and the candidates are allocated trained advisers to assist them to collect, process and present sufficient evidence of prior learning. Part of this induction will involve assisting the candidate to see the value in obtaining a qualification and helping them to anticipate the tacit benefits that will accrue to them once they have successfully completed the RPL process. Within this community of practice (moving to the right on the logic model) the implementer helps the candidate select the most suitable assessment activities and an assessment plan is created to guide the assessment process, with milestones and deadlines to assist the candidate with time management.

Returning to the left hand side of the logic model, once the candidate submits evidence of prior learning this is assessed by the assessors. The evidence includes individual evidence as well as assessment within the community of practice within which the candidate works. The assessor decides whether the candidate has submitted sufficient evidence for a competent decision or whether evidence is lacking. This feedback is given to the candidate, who is given an opportunity to submit remedial evidence as agreed. Part of this feedback will be a reinforcement of the benefits of being successful to ensure that candidates remain motivated to complete their RPL. If the candidate is unable to submit remedial evidence they are counselled on alternatives to the RPL, which may include traditional training.

The entire process undergoes regular quality review, i.e. moderation and verification (the penultimate block on the left hand side). Certificates are issued where credits have been achieved. Successful candidates are counselled as to the opportunities they then have for additional study or additional RPL. This feedback also includes feedback on the candidates' progress during the RPL, along with lessons for any future such activities. The candidates are asked for their input into the RPL process so that it can be improved iteratively as it moves into a more sustainable logic model for

implementation. In addition, the workplace is given feedback to assist it to offer better support and enjoy better RPL results the next time it embarks upon such an endeavour.

As can be deduced from the above discussion, logic models have a great deal of applicability and value for implementers of programmes. However, as the following reveals, they are not without limitations. Programme implementers need to be aware of these limitations so that they do not accept their designs blindly and without question.

Some limitations of logic models have been summarised by List (2006) as follows:

- No account is taken of unintended consequences and side-effects;
- Programme logic focuses on single issues - as intended by the programme implementers;
- It combines goal hierarchy and time sequence, and thus lacks a way of showing the effects of feedback;
- It does not address issues of power, control, and participation. Its model is that experts 'intervene' to do something to a passive and unintelligent 'target group';
- Programme logic does not cope with conflict because it addresses only the programme implementer's needs;
- There can be doubtful generalisability, or the 'black box problem' - an unclear connection between outputs, outcomes, and impacts;
- There is an assumption of omnipotence that 'because we have a plan, we must succeed in implementing it'.

'Despite these limitations, program logic modeling is a very powerful method for evaluating the success of any complex activity. Most of the limitations can be overcome by involving a wide range of stakeholders in building the models, and by having multiple models with branching' (List, 2006).

A summary of the contributions of this study

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), research contributions can be described in a number of domains:

Significance for practice :

The data analysis revealed that many RPL candidates were ill-equipped with personal mastery skills to tackle the RPL process and that they needed support and feedback that was not always forthcoming in the workplace. The issue of workplace readiness is not considered in any RPL model located. By incorporating both a personal mastery assessment and a workplace support assessment prior to the implementation of RPL it is anticipated that this proposed RPL process will yield better success rates and more satisfied RPL candidates at the end. Another significant practical contribution of this study is the step-by-step logic model that can be followed to guide workplace implementation within the insurance sector. Practically, this adds to the current body of literature because the perspective and orientation is different to what is usually described by RPL theorists who are drawn from a more academic perspective where particular factors (like workplace power relationships) are not considered significant.

Significance for policy :

The South African Quality Authority (SAQA) has clearly articulated its strategic intention regarding RPL. Commencing with the SAQA Act itself, and evident throughout various other policy documents, RPL is seen as a tool for social transformation (SAQA, 1995; 2002; 2003). Yet RPL practitioners frequently cite the lack of a clear, national RPL implementation policy and procedure (that differentiates amongst the various contexts) as one of the most significant constraints to RPL implementation in South Africa (Smith, 2007; Blom, 2007; Sutherland, 2007). This lack of a clear national policy, coupled with the lack of clear leadership and practical implementation case studies (in the field of workplace RPL in particular) has led to RPL being downplayed in the workplace (Deller, 2007). One of the major contributions of this research is that it showcases a national, sustainable workplace RPL programme that was successful in many ways. Large numbers of candidates successfully completed the full qualification within the prescribed time and these results were all externally verified by the workplace ETQA (INSETQA).

This research can be used by policy makers to understand the factors that workplace RPL candidates are confronted with, thereby allowing these policy makers to conceptualise RPL in the workplace as distinct from non-workplace RPL. This will contribute to the development of a fit-for-purpose workplace RPL policy, approaches and assessment methodologies.

Significance for theory :

RPL theory has evolved from within formal, mainstream education (Harris, 2002), and as such it is underpinned by the epistemological standpoint of formal education. This includes a particular view of what constitutes knowledge, what constitutes learning and what constitutes fair and valid assessment of that learning. Within this epistemological standpoint, learning has currency once it is assessed and matched to the requirements of a qualification that already exists. Prior learning that does not conform to that found within the formal education system is not valued, and theoretical and written forms of knowledge are privileged over practical and oral forms of knowledge (Smith, 2007). The theoretical contribution of this research is that it presents an alternative epistemological perspective, one that values practical knowledge being assessed using methods other than solely written portfolios. This research also indicates the need to reconceptualise and re-theorise RPL for different contexts, especially the workplace context. This review process of workplace RPL will ensure that workplace RPL candidates are not discriminated against by being forced to embark upon an RPL process that does not serve their needs as well as it serves the needs of RPL candidates who are already equipped with the skills necessary to do well at traditional forms of written, individualistic assessment. Hopefully this reconceptualisation and re-theorisation of workplace RPL will permit collectivist and team assessments to play a role in prior learning assessment and allow other narrative forms to be used to determine what learners know. In doing so it will broaden the epistemological framework of RPL.

Conclusions

The underpinning assumption in this research is that recognition of prior learning is intrinsic to lifelong learning policies in mass post-compulsory education and training systems, and mechanisms to increase its implementation need to be streamlined, particularly in the workplace where uptake has been slow. This would allow RPL to become the tool for social transformation envisaged by SAQA, because it will have wide potential to enable skills development and the ongoing acquisition of qualifications in the workplace. One of the key conclusions of this research is that RPL practices will need to be developed, at least in the first instance, on a contextually-specific basis, rather than looking for generalisability from the outset. It should be remembered that learning can occur by re-contextualising, re-prioritising or refining the parts. For example, many 'misconceptions' are correct elements of knowledge which have been over-generalised. By specifying a narrower range of situations, the concepts become 'correct'. Theories of prior knowledge tend to have an individualistic and psychological bias, partially reflected in the selection of 'concepts' as a focus of study. On every occasion of concept use, however, a learner is in a social and physical situation; and these situations inevitably affect learning (Roschelle, 2003). Therefore, it will be necessary to find an RPL model that closely matches situational contexts and circumstances. This study presents such a model for the insurance sector and challenges RPL implementers from other sectors to implement it and formally research and report on its applicability in their own sector.

Keeping in mind the many requirements for assessment and lessons learnt for an RPL model to be relevant (discussed above), it is the ultimate conclusion of this research that the concept of RPL is, in actual fact, too broad to allow a definitive theoretical model that will be of practical use within all contexts, especially for application outside the academic world. It appears to be more sensible to apply the logic modelling approach to plan each RPL implementation within the various contexts and within the confines of the different workplaces. It is suggested, therefore, that referring to and designing an 'RPL strategy' or 'RPL logic model' will be more appropriate than simply designing a universal RPL meta-model. This will ensure that consideration is taken of the assumptions, results, activities and resources necessary to achieve agreed success within each context. A contextual logic model will maximise the value of each RPL

implementation, and ensure a wider application of RPL within South Africa. This will lead us closer to true social transformation.

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