

Co-producing an RPL Toolkit

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Adult education is a very diverse arena of practice, including workplace training, community-based activities, and leisure pursuits. It operates across the public, private and non-profit sectors, with educators and learners coming from all walks of life, with a variety of experiences and qualifications. In many countries, there is no formal route into becoming an adult educator as there is in relation to school teaching. Many experienced, knowledgeable and competent adult educators have no formal teaching qualification. For different reasons, in the European Union, this has become a matter of concern for policy-makers, organisational managers and practitioners.

One way of addressing this is through processes of recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is not a new area of educational practice. Over the years, it has proliferated as an area of practice and is used for a variety of purposes, for instance, as a means of access to qualifications, as the basis for a claim for credit against qualifications, and as a professional development tool. RPL processes tend to rely on critical reflections, the identification of learning from experience and the capacity to evidence that learning, often through a portfolio.

Despite the promise of RPL as an alternative route to qualification other than studying in a more conventional sense, practice has not developed as extensively as might have been expected. For many people, the RPL process may seem more laborious than taking a programme of study, as evidencing job competence is often not as straight-forward as might be imagined.

To address this issue for adult educators seeking to make RPL claims, the REAL (Recognition of Experiential and Accredited Learning) project engaged in a process of co-production between providers of professional qualifications and practitioners themselves. The project was funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (527723-LLP-1-2012-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GMP) and involved partners in Scotland, Estonia, Ireland and Romania. The aim has been to produce a co-produced RPL Toolkit for Adult Educators that can be modified and adapted for use in different contexts for a variety of purposes, but that matches claims for credit against the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Over the course of the last two years, the project has engaged in a range of workshops, prototyping and piloting of materials and practices across the four nations to try and establish more clearly the challenges faced by and aspirations of adult educators when seeking to make a claim for RPL and develop appropriate responses. The end point of this activity is the [REAL Toolkit](#), which was launched at the end of March 2015, and is available as an open access resource for adult educators and providers of adult education qualifications.

Co-production is much promoted as an approach to developing more effective, efficient and inclusive services in the current policy context; it is a highly normative concept. There is no doubting the value of it as an overall approach and as the approach adopted within the REAL project. However, we also need to reflect on some of its limitations. Two stand out.

First, in engaging practitioners one is always working with a relatively small and not necessarily representative sample of the relevant community. In such a large and diverse field

as adult education, this is almost inevitable. The co-production therefore can therefore only be partial. This is not to deny its value, but it is a qualified value.

Second, practitioners seeking an RPL process have certain aspirations, but these tend to reflect their contextual understanding of what they do and its value in relation to those with whom they work. How well this articulates to the institutional and system demands of qualifications and the extent to which this is understood is not always as clear. The REAL Toolkit has been produced with adult educators, for adult educators. However, co-production has also involved the providers of adult education qualifications as well, so systemic tensions within the RPL process remain.