

## **The REAL Project: recognising what adult educators have learned**

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The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has gathered importance as a process for recognising the competency of those who have built up their professional reputations through work experience rather than academic qualifications. RPL processes allow adults to gain recognition of the learning they have gained through working rather than formal study, in some cases leading to summative assessment. For example, in Scotland, Social Services have developed processes for recognising the expertise of care workers, incorporating formal accreditation (SSSC, 2010). The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has also published advice and guidance enabling employers to develop RPL processes (SCQF, 2010), placing emphasis on the creation of reflective accounts as evidence of prior learning.

This paper will describe the work of the REAL Project, a pan-European research initiative, funded by the European Union's Lifelong Learning Program, which developed tools to enable the recognition of the prior learning of adult educators across Europe (Galloway, 2015c). European adult educators demonstrate a wide range of skills, knowledge and practices in their everyday activity (Wihak et al, 2014; Buiskool et al, 2009, 2010; Malcolm, 2014). Aside from teaching and assessment, activities such as coaching, mentoring, counselling and guidance, as well as programme development and the creation of educational materials, can feature as major aspects of their daily work (Buiskool et al, 2009). In addition, it is common for adult educators not to hold a teaching qualification, instead developing as successful practitioners through experiential learning (Milana, 2010). This creates challenges for adult educators who wish to have their experiential learning formally recognised, so that they might gain access to higher education or further their careers.

The REAL Project developed RPL processes in the European wide context, with partners in Ireland, Estonia, Romania and Scotland. However, this paper focuses on its work within the Scottish context. We describe the rationale behind the development of an RPL Toolkit designed to assist the formative assessment of adult educators in Scotland. In particular, the project assumed that RPL was an educational process for adult educators, so that the Toolkit content needed to incorporate adult educators' own understandings of best practice in adult education.

In Scotland, adult educators work across the public, private or third sectors and have job titles including tutor, workplace trainer, mentor, coach or development worker, amongst others. The

role of an adult educator might have some overlap with a lecturer in Further Education, or with Community Learning and Development (CLD). Both FE and CLD have their own professional standards (see <http://www.i-develop-cld.org.uk>; Morrison, 2012) and recognised routes to degree level qualifications that take RPL into account. The CLD Council has a continuous professional development tool (i-Develop). However, adult education does not have visibility as a distinct field or area of practice. Whilst there are some qualifications available, there are no recognised routes and no coherent set of professional standards. The purpose of the REAL project was to explore and start to build routes to recognition, through the creation of a professional standards framework for adult educators and a 'toolkit' that might support them through an RPL process. Because there are currently no consistent routes to qualification for adult educators in Scotland, the project could not reasonably aim to create an RPL process leading to summative assessment (i.e. a qualification in adult education). However, we could (and did) create a formative process, i.e. a process that assists and supports the learning of adult educators.

A stated aim of the REAL Project was to place adult educators at the centre of the development of a process that could recognise their prior learning. A range of adult educators, reflecting the diversity of practice, were involved in the project. There were two parts to the project development. Firstly, the creation of a competency framework for adult educators (Galloway, 2015a), which, for the first time, allows adult educators to assess their own professional learning against the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework at Levels 7 to 10 (university degree level). Secondly, a Toolkit (Galloway, 2015b) was created that might support adult educators through the self-assessment process, whilst simultaneously producing a portfolio that evidences experiential learning in ways that employers, universities and colleges can understand. As stated above, we endeavoured to place adult educators at the centre of the development of both the Competency Framework and the Toolkit and below we explain how we attempted to achieve this.

Development of the REAL Competency Framework for Adult Educators (Galloway, 2015a) necessitated identifying the competencies, (i.e. the values, skills and knowledge) of adult educators. In addition, once identified, the competencies had to be levelled against the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) so that adult educators could assess what they had learned. We aimed to undertake these tasks with adult educators influencing key decisions and judgements.

The REAL Competency Framework was initially put together from existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for workers in the lifelong learning sector, which belong to the public. NOSs describe what a person needs to do, know and understand in order to carry out

their role in a consistent and competent way and are intended to inform 'best practice' in a given professional area. The core of the REAL Competency Framework was informed by NOSs set out by Lifelong Learning UK (2006) and also the *Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers in Education and Training* (EFT, 2014), which in turn were created following a range of consultations with upwards of nine hundred and fifty education professionals (ibid). Because these existing National Occupational Standards were developed following large scale consultations, we had confidence that the resulting Competency Framework reflected adult educators' values, knowledge and skills and would be both understandable and recognisable to adult educators across their diverse fields of practice. What's more, because the NOSs belong to the public and are publically available, there is a high degree of traceability and transparency for any adult educator intent upon investigating the origin of the Competency Framework.

As mentioned above, adult education in Scotland, though not a distinct educational field, does have overlaps with college lecturing and community work. For example, literacy tutors in Scotland are funded by and work as part of Community Learning and Development programmes. Similarly, prison education which might involve teaching life skills or developing theatre projects, is largely contracted to Colleges of Further Education. To ensure consistency, the emerging REAL Competency Framework was mapped against the standards for Community Learning and Development (<http://www.i-develop-cld.org.uk>) as well as those for Lecturers in Scotland's colleges (Morrison, 2012). Some of the language associated with these two professional areas was incorporated into the Framework, in order to make the overlaps visible.

The result was fifteen competencies, set out as values, knowledge and skills associated with the practice of adult educators. The Framework was then levelled against the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) at levels corresponding to a university degree. The levelling process is transparent in the sense that it was informed entirely by publicly available SCQF documentation (SCQF, 2010; 2012; 2013) written with the purpose of supporting this type of activity. The SCQF Partnership were actively involved in consultation during the levelling process, ensuring that the levelling was consistent and maintained the integrity of the credit and qualifications framework in Scotland. The next stage was for the levelled REAL Framework to be scrutinised and amended by adult educators, alongside the accompanying REAL Toolkit (Galloway, 2015b), designed to support an RPL process for adult educators.

Importantly, the REAL Competency Framework was used to inform the design of the Toolkit and so we discuss some of its features below. The values integral to the REAL Competency Framework are crucial because they inform all of the other competencies, be they skills or knowledge based. These are:

### **‘V1 LEARNER NEEDS AND GOALS**

Make judgements and decisions that demonstrate commitment to the goals and aspirations of all learners and the experiences they bring to their education, ensuring that learners’ voices are heard and influence educational provision

### **V2 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

Make judgements and decisions that demonstrate commitment to the need for equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to learners, the workforce, and the community

### **V3 DEVELOPING YOUR OWN VALUES**

Demonstrate commitment to critiquing, reflecting on, evaluating and challenging your practice, judgements, values and beliefs as an adult educator, with the aim of furthering the potential for education to transform lives

### **V4 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Demonstrate commitment to taking up opportunities for professional development as an educator and as an expert in own subject specialist area and its teaching

### **V5 RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION**

Make judgements that demonstrate commitment to building constructive educational relationships with learners and positive relationships with colleagues in the interests of learners’ progress and development

### **V6 INSPIRATION AND ENTHUSIASM**

Demonstrate how learners might be inspired, motivated and have their aspirations raised through your enthusiasm and knowledge’

(Galloway, 2015a, p2)

A question worth asking is how do these values differ from those set out in the professional standards for other roles in education? Inclusion, equality and diversity are integral to standards right across the post-compulsory education sector, including those for teaching in Higher Education (HEA, 2011) as well as community and further education. However, a central difference is the duty placed on adult educators to take ownership of developing their own values and practice (see V 3, ‘Developing your own values’ above). Perhaps this reflects the diversity of the field in which adult educators operate, where educational activity could

incorporate an array of values, ranging from those found in the armed services or prisons, the ethics of a charitable foundation or work place core principles. Or it could be a consequence of an on-going situation where the lack of formal routes to qualification has compelled adult educators to take responsibility for their own 'on the job' learning and accompanying beliefs (Malina, 2008).

The Toolkit to accompany the competency framework was designed to assist adult educators in identifying what they had learned and to evidence this in ways that employers, colleges and universities might recognise. Following the rationale that influenced the design of 'Flexipath' (Godding et al, 2008), a similar toolkit designed for use by managers in the area of adult education, we considered the REAL Toolkit as an educational pack for adult educators. Following this logic, the design of the Toolkit needed to incorporate and therefore rate highly against the values, skills and knowledge outlined in the REAL Competency Framework. This rationale informed our initial judgements about what needed to be in the Toolkit to support adult educators as learners, as well as the style in which it was written. This included the decision to incorporate activities and exercises inviting adult educators to develop their own values and to critically reflect upon their practice (Moon, 2000; Bolton, 2010; Brookfield, 1995).

Adult educators trialed the initial draft of the Toolkit in tandem with the Competency Framework. These pilots were organised as adult education workshops rather than focus groups so that participation contributed to the educators own continuous professional development, whilst the issues and problems that they raised informed the design of the final version of the Toolkit.

Participants from twelve organisations were involved in the pilots, contacted via Learning Link Scotland, including representation from the public, private and voluntary sectors. None of the participants (bar one) had an adult education or teaching qualification. Aside from raising comments and suggestions for changes to the Toolkit and Framework, views were expressed about the potential for the REAL Toolkit beyond supporting RPL. Though designed to assist RPL, participants felt that the toolkit would be a helpful tool for CPD processes within their organisations; there was a perceived lack of CPD opportunities for adult educators which the REAL Toolkit could fill. The potential for the toolkit to be used to assist in writing effective on job applications was also raised and one participant successfully used an initial draft of the Toolkit for this purpose.

The adult educators felt that RPL processes should be engaged with socially because reflection on one's professional practice was difficult to achieve as a lone exercise. This made sense given that adult educators might endorse the idea that education is by definition a social activity and RPL can be considered as an educational process. Participants also expressed how much

they welcomed the rare opportunity to meet other adult educators and discuss their practice, particularly those who were the sole educator within their organisation. We were also aware that some participants needed support with the written reflective exercises, in particular those who educated adults in non-writing activities such as gardening or joinery. Social networking was suggested as a possibility for facilitating social engagement with RPL, with the prospect of finding mentors or critical friends to work with. In the context of reflective activity, the participants were particularly enthusiastic about the exercises relating to identifying and taking ownership of values. The 'values exercises' were especially welcomed and encouraged wide ranging and spontaneous discussions which allowed adult educators to consider 'where they are at' and the directions that they might want to take.

Regardless of whether the Toolkit was engaged with by lone educators or through workshop activity, there were indications that it could encourage partnership working on projects developing educational opportunities for adult learners. The higher levels in the REAL Competency Framework demand co-production, partnership working and engagement with professional networks as ways to achieving excellence as an adult educator. Interestingly, this was demonstrated during the workshops themselves, when educators, without prompting, conversed about the possibility of future joint projects and exchanged contact details.

In general, adult educators tended to under-assess themselves against the Competency Framework. Those who had become adult educators as a result of sideways moves (e.g. ex-army personnel) or through hobbies (e.g. dog training) had a particular tendency to under-score themselves. There was also an assumption that higher levels could only be achieved by managers. In response, the Competency Framework was revised to ensure that all the highest levels included illustrative examples of activities that any adult educator could work towards, providing their employer organisation encouraged CPD activity.

Adult educators wanted clear guidance about goal setting for the future and made explicit their desire for an RPL process with the potential for summative assessment. This has subsequently been reiterated during workshops utilising the REAL Toolkit and Competency Framework with adult educators in the Edinburgh Council area, in March 2015. This has encouraged our belief that the issue of recognition for adult educators is a pertinent one. The visibility of adult education as a distinct sector, with its own values and practices, is of importance, particularly in the context of the current funding crisis. The REAL Toolkit and Scottish Competency Framework are publically available for adult educators to customise and use as they see fit, via the project website where queries and comments are welcome (see Galloway, 2015c).

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