Co-producing a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Toolkit for Adult Educators: Reflections on the REAL Deal?

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Abstract

Adult education is a very diverse arena of practice internationally, operating across the public, private and non-profit sectors, with educators and learners coming from all walks of life. In many countries, there is no formal route to becoming a qualified adult educator as there is in relation to school teaching, or the training of Higher or Further education professionals. Many experienced, knowledgeable and competent adult educators have no formal teaching qualification which in varying situations is a matter of concern for policy-makers and organisational managers, as well as the practitioners themselves.

One way of addressing this lack of qualification is through processes of recognition of prior learning (RPL). This article reports on the work of the REAL Project which aimed to enable adult educators to formatively assess the possibility of making a claim for academic credit against adult education qualifications, through the creation of an RPL toolkit. The REAL Project approach was to co-develop the toolkit alongside adult educators, where significantly, co-production was undertaken as an educational activity. In this article, we examine some of the issues that emerge from adopting such an approach in this type of project. The article is in three sections. First, we outline some of the existing research on co-production in service development. Second, we provide an account of the co-production approach that was adopted

in the REAL project. Finally we reflect upon some of the issues raised in relation to the practices of co-production.

Introduction

As is well known, adult education is a very diverse arena of practice internationally, including literacy and numeracy, workplace training, community-based activities, continuing professional development 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 to becoming a qualified adult educator or requirement for specific qualifications in relation to practice, as there is in relation to school teaching or many other professions. Indeed the nature and levels of existing qualifications for adult educators are extremely diverse. In many cases, adult educators may have no formal qualification in adult education. When such qualifications are often seen as one of the markers of professionalism, the lack of qualification may have significant impact in relation to the status of the work and those undertaking it in the adult education community. Many experienced, knowledgeable and competent adult educators have no formal teaching qualification. For different reasons, and in varying situations, this becomes a matter of concern for policy-makers, organisational managers and practitioners themselves.

One way of addressing this lack of qualifications is through processes of recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is not a new area of adult educational practice, indeed it dates to the 1970s as 'prior learning assessment' with the aim of widening opportunities for access to higher education (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). Varying conceptions of RPL are orientated around the central principal that all prior learning can and should be recognised, regardless of the when and where it took place (Andersson, Fejes and

Sandberg, 2013). **This could take the form of providing evidence of previous accredited learning to gain access to or part credit towards a qualification e.g. accreditation of prior learning (APL). Related to this is the recognition of experience gained in the workplace or other areas of life e.g. APEL (Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning). O**ver the years, other acronyms have come into play within and across national contexts (Stenlund & Tova, 2010), with RPL proliferating as an area of practice and its purpose extending to include use as a professional development tool. For example, in the Scottish context, Social Services have developed processes for recognising the expertise of care workers, incorporating formal accreditation (SSSC 2010) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has also published advice and guidance enabling employers to develop RPL procedures (SCQF 2010).

RPL processes tend to rely on reflection as a way of identifying learning from experience and evidencing that learning (Fejes & Andersson, 2009, Harris, 2009) often through the construction of a portfolio. This approach has been developed to enable people to make claims for specific credit against particular qualifications and/or general credit within a range of programmes of study. However, despite the promise of RPL as an alternative route to qualifications other than studying in a more conventional sense, practice has not developed as extensively as might have been expected. In the context of the UK, RPL policies within universities have become much more common, but the actual uptake of such processes has failed to meet expectations. Portfolio production necessitates representing evidence of experiential learning in the form of knowledge acceptable to the academy, in other words, RPL processes tend to suit the needs of the educational institution rather than the prospective student (Hamer & Jen, 2013).

Other problems have been raised by those who have engaged in the research of RPL processes (see Harris, 2009). For example, analysis from a socio-material perspective has revealed the failure of RPL processes to acknowledge the complex systems of learning of which the participants are a part, where RPL might even serve to disempower individuals by opening a gap between their personal experience and the social context where it was gained (Pokorny, 2013). Understandings of power reproduction in education have also been employed to reveal how educational institutions tend to privilege particular forms of accredited learning over that gained through experience where 'RPL dismisses the wisdom and competence brought to the process by non-traditional learners' (Pitman and Vidovich, 2013, p.482).

Here RPL might be seen as another example of the development of an educational service which does not actually engage or meet the requirements of the potential service users. It is a service developed by producers and offered to users. This is something that has formed a critique of much public sector provision in many countries and has resulted in the idea that services should be developed through a process of what is termed 'co-production' (Fenwick 2012), where service users actively participate in the development as well as the use of services.

When considering the development of an RPL process for adult educators, therefore, it would seem pertinent that it should be developed through a process of co-production, recognising that such an approach is itself an educational practice involving the development shared goals and professional understandings. Here the RPL process itself is considered as a process of learning, because it can be assumed to result in new learning (Fejes & Andersson, 2009). This article reports on such a project and explores some of the issues that arose from such a co-production approach. The REAL (Recognition of Experiential and Accredited Learning) Project engaged in a process of consultative co-production between providers of adult education qualifications

and practitioners themselves and involved partners in Scotland, Estonia, Ireland and Romania, though this writing focuses on activity relating to the Scottish context. The aim was to create a co-produced RPL toolkit for adult educators that could be modified and adapted for use in different contexts for a variety of purposes.

In Scotland there is currently no RPL process in place for adult educators seeking access to teaching qualifications provided by Higher Education institutions. Indeed there is no formally recognised Higher Education teaching qualification for adult educators in place. In this context, the aim of the project in Scotland was to create an RPL toolkit for adult educators that might assist with continuous professional development and offer ways of formative assessment that would meet the *possibility* of making a claim for academic credit against adult education qualifications, should those opportunities arise.

It was anticipated that scoping the project along these lines would offer benefits. Firstly, the project aims offered opportunities for allowing the diversity of adult education practices to be embraced and incorporated into the co-production process. Secondly, the absence of current linkage to the requirements of academic institutions was assistive in preventing the process being driven by the needs of universities rather than the needs of adult educators (see Hamer and Jen, 2013). Instead, the rationale was that future adult education programme development in Higher Education might be driven by the REAL project's RPL process, where the aim was to place the adult educator at the centre of the development.

In this sense, the project of producing an RPL toolkit for adult educators provides a small case study of consultative co-production in practice, where, significantly, co-production

was undertaken as an educational activity (Fejes & Andersson, 2009. Here there are implications for the employment of learning theory, which are discussed in this article, along with an examination of some of the issues that emerge from adopting such an approach in this type of project. The approach is also coherent with the rationale behind the design of 'Flexipath' (Strauch *et al*, 2008), a similar RPL toolkit for managers in the adult learning sector across Europe, which also considered the RPL process to be educational. Flexipath was part of a group of European projects which have made some contributions to investigating how notions of competence can be applied to adult education. This included the VINEPAC *project – Validation of informal and non-formal psycho-pedagogical competencies in adult educators* (2008) and the Q-Act *project – Qualifying adult learning in Europe (2008)* (see Bernhardsson and Lattke, 2008).

The article is in three sections. First, we outline some of the existing research on co-production in service development. Second, we provide an account of the ~~co-production~~ approach that was adopted in the REAL project, which includes the development of a professional competency framework for adult educators and accompanying resources. Finally we reflect upon some of the issues raised in relation to the practices of co-production.

Co-Production Of Services

Co-production is associated with a general concern that user voice and choice needs much greater representation in the development of goods and services. It is part of commercial discourse in Europe, Australia and the USA and is also fast becoming a prominent part of public policy discourse. In public sector services, such as health, policing and social care, co-production increasingly calls for active community participation whereby service users are centrally involved in designing and delivering services (Fenwick 2012). Boyle and Harris (2009, p.12) provide a rationale for co-production in all public services, arguing that it can go

well beyond the idea of 'citizen engagement' or 'service user involvement' to foster the principle of 'equal partnership'. Bovaird (2007) also argues that a shift to public service co-production, with its promises of greater democracy and active citizenship, will be 'transformative'. While these ideals of users' active participation in service design and delivery may already be familiar in some Nordic contexts, they pose considerable challenges for reform in countries such as the UK and Australia (Dunston *et al*. 2008).

Co-production is conceptualized in different ways (Needham 2006, 2007), but the discussion of it poses important questions about the changing nature and value of professional work, expertise and knowledge. While there is no doubting the good intentions of it as an overall approach for some, it is also possible to see it as a strategy through which to undermine the authority of service providers and professionals and/or to assert more consumer power into the provision of such services. It can also be seen as part of drives for more efficiency in public services.

However, the problem with much of the existing debate on co-production is that it has tended to be concentrated at the level of policy and prescription. Here visions of reform flourish in aspirational documents lauding the 'revolutionary' potential of co-production arrangements to build social cohesion, citizen empowerment, improved services, and of course, economic efficiency (e.g. Cahn 2001; Boyle and Harris 2009). What actually happens in the concrete practices of such arrangements is less well known. Indeed, there is limited research yet establishing that the co-production ideal is even possible. Dunston *et al*. (2009) call for studies that trace attempts to adopt co-production in different professional services and that show the difficulties as well as the particular benefits experienced. This points to a first major problem, not unfamiliar in policy for public service, where a particular prescription for reform precedes

evidence demonstrating its effectiveness, feasibility, and any undesirable consequences. A second problem is that, at least in UK discussions, the co-production discourse tends to promote universalised claims and ideals for all aspects of public service and hence the need for more research on co-production practices and impacts.

The Real Project Case Study: The Context

The REAL Project provides some further insight into some of the issues associated with co-production within the context of adult education. In the case study of the REAL Project, we therefore describe the concrete practices and rationales relating to an approach to co-production specific to adult education as an area of public service. **There** are existing traditions and ways of working associated with the practice of adult education, **as exemplified in professional standards set out for teachers in lifelong and non-compulsory education (e.g. EFT, 2014)** and some of these were incorporated into an approach to co-production as an educational activity. For example, the notion of reflective practice which typically underpins the rationale behind RPL (see Harris, 2014) is one that many adult educators would ascribe to. **In the UK, the link between reflective practice and continuous professional development has been incorporated into the professional standards for adult educators (e.g. LLUK, 2006; EFT, 2014; CLD, 2016; Morrison, 2012), along with an expectation that practitioners should engage with reflective learning in the assumption that this will impact continuous professional development.**

With regard to RPL processes, Kolb's notion of reflective practice has held particular influence in this regard (see Harris, 2009). The Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) Partnership, which oversees the integrity of Scottish qualifications,

including compliance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), cites Kolb directly in its recommendations on RPL to employers and accrediting organisations (SCQF, 2010). It is also worth noting here that much of the research and writing that informs the practice of adult education is broadly coherent with the idea that learning is and should be linked to reflective practices (see Käpplinger, 2015), for example, that adult education might be transformational for learners (e.g. Mezirow, 1991) or take dialogical forms (e.g. Freire, 1970). Concern has been expressed that 'Kolbinism' (Andersson et al, 2013, p. 408) offers RPL researchers a 'closed intellectual world' (Harris, 2014, p.45) and research around the discursive practices of student teachers in post-compulsory education has also placed doubt upon the practicalities of professional learning via reflective processes (Canning, 2011). However, alternative theoretical approaches have tended to be employed in the analysis of RPL processes as enacted by institutions, rather than in developing alternatives to particular notions of reflective practice (see Harris, 2014; Pitman and Vidovich, 2013; Pokorny, 2013; Hamer & Jen, 2013, Stenlund & Tova, 2010). Given the coherence of Kolb with adult education practices and the aforementioned recommendations of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Frameworks, the REAL Project departed from Kolb only marginally, by acknowledging that learning from experience is a complex social dynamic (Moon, 2000; Bolton, 2010) rather than a straightforward, individualised and predictable process as perhaps is suggested by Kolb's circular representation of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, p.42).

We do not suggest that the learning theory associated with adult education traditions should be rolled out in the form of co-productive activity to create RPL process relating to other areas of public serves, though the notion of co-production as educational activity is worthy of consideration. Instead, we suggest that approaches to co-production should be meaningful for

~~the~~in the context of the existing understandings and practices shared by the professionals involved, which was the REAL Project approach.

European adult educators demonstrate a wide range of skills, knowledge and practices in their everyday activity (Buiskool *et al*., 2009, 2010; Malcolm, 2014; Wihak *et al*., 2014). Aside from teaching and assessment, activities such as coaching, mentoring, counselling and guidance, programme development and the creation of educational materials, can feature as major aspects of their daily work. In addition, it is common for adult educators not to hold a teaching qualification, instead developing successful practice through experiential learning (Milana 2010). This creates challenges for adult educators who wish to have their experiential learning formally recognised, in order that they might gain access to higher education or further their careers.

The REAL project was conducted over the course of 2013-2015. Fundamental to the design of the project was the involvement of adult educators in the four partner countries in the development of an RPL toolkit. We describe the rationale behind the development of an RPL toolkit designed to assist in the formative assessment of adult educators in Scotland in the creation of a portfolio evidencing their professional learning, skills and knowledge. In particular, the project assumed that RPL is an educational process for adult educators and that the toolkit content needed to incorporate their own understandings of good practices in adult education. A stated aim of the REAL project was to place adult educators at the centre of toolkit production, an ideal which informed an approach to co-production enacted as a form of educational activity.

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 has some overlaps with that of lecturers in Further Education (FE) colleges, which focuses upon vocational training, through the organisation of prison education and community outreach work. There are also confluences across the separate sector of Community Learning and Development (CLD), orientated towards youth work, community capacity building and adult literacies learning. However, many adult educators work in the voluntary sector, perhaps involved in the training of volunteers, public health education, or as education outreach workers. Both FE and CLD have their own professional standards (see CLD, 2016; Morrison, 2012) and recognised routes to degree level qualifications through which RPL can be taken into account. The CLD Council has a continuous professional development tool (i-Develop) for the workforce incorporating their standards.

However, despite an honourable and recognised history (see Cooke, 2006; Fieldhouse, 1998), adult education does not have visibility as a distinct field or area of practice in Scotland. Whilst there are some qualifications available, they have varying content and are offered at different academic levels, with no recognised routes to gaining qualified teacher status. Until the completion of the REAL project, there was no coherent set of professional standards specific to the Scottish context. The purpose of the REAL project was to explore and start to build routes to recognition, through the creation of an RPL Toolkit incorporating a Professional Standards framework for adult educators and a series of activities to support the formative assessment of an adult educator's competency. The aim of the project was to develop this toolkit, as far as possible, around the needs of adult educators.

There were two parts to the initial Toolkit development, which was co-ordinated by the University of Stirling in partnership with Learning Link Scotland and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership, alongside the adult educators recruited to the project. Firstly, there was the creation of the REAL Competency Framework for adult

educators (Galloway 2015a), which, for the first time, allows adult educators to assess their own professional learning against the SCQF at Levels 7 to 10 and European Qualifications Framework at Levels 5 and 6, which is equivalent to university degree level. Secondly, an RPL toolkit (Galloway, 2015b) was created that could 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. To support the co-production process, a range of adult educators were recruited to both use and evaluate potential toolkit materials. The recruitment processes and co-production processes are described below, but first we provide more detail about the prototype toolkit development.

Developing A Prototype Toolkit

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. Once identified, the competencies had to be levelled against the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) so that adult educators could formatively self-assess the academic level that corresponded with their experiential learning.

The REAL Competency Framework was initially put together from existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for workers in the lifelong learning sector in the UK. 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 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). Both of these sets of standards were created following large scale consultations with hundreds of adult education and lifelong learning professionals.

As these existing National Occupational Standards were developed through large scale co-productive activities, we had confidence that the resulting Competency Framework reflected adult educators' values, knowledge and skills and would be both understandable and recognisable across the diverse fields of practice that we have already described above. To ensure consistency, the emerging REAL Competency Framework was mapped against the standards for Community Learning and Development in Scotland 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 more 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) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to reflect different standards of practice and possible organisational roles. The levelling process is transparent in the sense that it was informed entirely by publicly available SCQF Partnership documentation (SCQF, 2010; 2012; 2013) set out 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~~ it was consistent and maintained the integrity of the credit and qualifications framework in Scotland and Europe.

We acknowledge that the creation of a Competency Framework for adult educators, is not unproblematic. **There could be unintended consequences following the pinning down of complex practices into a series of 'values', 'skills' and 'knowledge'. In Scotland adult education does not have a distinct identity, which could be viewed as a signifier of the weakness of an important sector of education. However, perhaps this perceived 'weakness' serves to strengthen the undefinable 'virtues' that inform the judgements and**

wisdom of educators (Biesta, 2014). Could commencing a process where adult educators gain formal recognition of their competency ultimately encourage the disempowerment of adult educators and adult education, by encouraging instrumental processes that privilege particular discourses and forms of knowledge (Harris, 2009)?

The rationale that informed the development of the REAL Competency Framework, as described above, might also be disputed. Nonetheless, this is the strategy that we adopted and what's important here is that we have made this transparent within the resulting Competency Framework documentation (Galloway, 2015a), as well as the description provided here.

The next stage was to create the accompanying REAL Toolkit (Galloway, 2015b), designed to support an RPL process for adult educators and to review the Competency Framework as part of this co-productive activity. This required the engagement of adult educators described below which we describe below. The values integral to the REAL Competency Framework were crucial to the Toolkit design because they inform all of the other competencies, be they skills or knowledge based. The Values also informed the approach to co-production undertaken in the Toolkit Development and are summarised below:

> **'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)

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 in the UK (HEA, 2011) as well as the aforementioned standards for Community Learning Development (CLD, 2016) and lecturers in further education (Morrison, 2012). Similarly, the idea that learners' voices must be heard and must steer programme development and teaching is also evident across all the aforementioned national occupational standards. Arguably, these values can be understood as reflective of an approach or tradition heavily associated with adult

education that have come to exert an influence elsewhere in both universities and colleges (Fieldhouse, 1998).

The central difference in the REAL Competency Framework for Adult Educators is the heavy emphasis 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 workplace 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). A challenge for successful co-productive activity in adult education contexts was for this diversity of values and the associated diversity of contexts and practices in which adult education takes place to be reflected in the outcomes of consultative co-production, which in this case was the REAL RPL Toolkit.

Co-productive activity within educational workshops

As already outlined above, the REAL Project approached co-production in the form of educational workshops incorporating RPL activities, rather than, for example/standard evaluation exercises via focus groups. Co-production took the form of continuous professional development (CPD) activity for the adult educators who took part. Significantly, at the same time, the participants reviewed the materials, raising issues and problems that informed the design of the final version of the Toolkit.

Both the contents of the REAL RPL Toolkit and the co-productive activities harnessed to trial and review it were informed by the Values described in the Competency Framework.

The educational workshops were organised to incorporate the needs of learners (i.e. the adult educators engaged in the co-production activity) as **described by *V1 Learner Needs and Goals*. This meant workshop activities allowing opportunity for participants to utilise the materials under development, as well as evaluate them, including the availability of extended periods of time for discussion. There were two workshop leaders (one of the authors and the lead officer of Learning Link Scotland), who both took the dual role as adult educator and researcher. This meant enacting a complex role that hinged upon an ambitious endeavour to maintain an inclusive environment where the adult educators might feel comfortable to participate. The challenge was to encourage the participants to share experiences and contribute verbally, inviting the participants to reflect upon their professional competency as well as critiquing the RPL materials. In practical terms, the workshops were facilitated using the RPL materials as a stimulus for dialogue and ultimately the success of this approach was dependent upon the competency of the workshop leaders as adult educators. In this sense, the co-production activity corresponded with *V2 Equality and Diversity.***

Recruitment took place through Learning Link Scotland (LLS), a key partner in the project. LLS is a Scottish Government and European Commission funded networking community which promotes and supports adult learning opportunities delivered by the third (ie.e the voluntary) sector in Scotland. Learning Link Scotland works with these organisations to deliver services and projects relating to the policy and practice of adult education, aiming to influence Scottish policy so that it might reflect the needs of adult learners and the providers of adult learning.

Though orientated towards the voluntary sector, many publically funded community learning groups make up the membership, which includes roughly two hundred

organisations. LLS sent an invitation to take part in the project to its membership with adult educators invited to take part in an educational workshop where they would have opportunities to reflect both on their own professional learning as well as the usefulness of the learning materials. The invitation was specifically directed at participants who did not hold qualifications either in teaching or any other discipline at university degree level. Two workshops were planned and the resulting response was selected on the basis of ability to attend on the preselected workshop days, alongside the aforementioned qualifications criteria.

Twenty adult educators were actively engaged, representing twelve organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors in Scotland. A remarkably wide diversity of educational practice was represented, including:

- IT in the workplace

- Dog training

- Gardening

- Joinery

- Volunteer trainers for national charities

- Literacy tutors

- Creative writing

- Scots Language

- Prison education

- Educators of adults with learning disabilities

- Employability skills for young people

The workshops lasted for five hours, excluding breaks, and the activity was organised so that the participants had extended periods to engage in discussion whilst the workshop leaders observed. Time was also built in for plenaries so that all the participants could exchange ideas alongside the workshop leaders. Whilst the adult educators were engaged in independent discussion, the workshop leaders also engaged in dialogue around how the workshop was progressing and made judgements about next steps to take within the learning environment.

The rationale behind the reviewing of the RPL toolkit materials was that it should, wherever possible, not disrupt the flow of the educational environment. Sound recording or filming were not employed, as these are not representative of the typical or recommended activity of educators engaged in the development of learning materials. Data was gathered in a variety of forms, partly through participant observations of the workshop activity itself. The comments and observations of the adult educators were gathered by a variety of means, including collecting the writing produced by the adult educators resulting from their work on reflective exercises. Most of the data was gathered informally with workshop leaders and adult educators (as learners) recording comments on 'post-it' notes which were made visible to all of the participants. Evaluation sheets were also provided at the end of the workshop, as is customary practice in adult education in the UK. These were not found to be a significant source, in that most of insights informing the toolkit development arose from the dialogue within the educational environment. However, the feedback sheets did serve to capture something of the 'learner voice' and we include some typical examples below.

Specific workshop activities included participation in three different types of exercise (the finalised versions are all freely available (see Galloway, 2015c). Firstly, there were exercises

inviting the adult educators to set out their career histories on a visual time line, which served to stimulate dialogue around prior learning experience as it related to professional practice. Secondly, there were exercises supporting adult educators in identifying their own values in the context of their experience of teaching and learning, informed by *V3 Developing your own values.* This activity aimed to encourage reflexivity (as defined by Bolton, 2010), for example, by inviting adult educators to consider how their learners perceived the values of their teachers, which was assistive in stimulating dialogue around the participants' professional development goals and aspirations. Thirdly, educators engaged with exercises encouraging critical reflection upon their own practice, encapsulated by *V4 Professional Development* which included engagement with the prototype REAL Competency Framework. The adult educators, as learners, therefore had the opportunity to engage with activities that assisted them in identifying what they had learned through their professional experience. However, they also had the opportunity to critique the materials and it was this consultative co-production activity that fed directly into the REAL Toolkit development.

Throughout the workshops, the adult educators as learners engaged in dialogue about the Toolkit itself, offering suggestions and comments for its development. In this way, possibilities were raised for capturing the diversity of adult educators' experiences, values and practices within the Toolkit design, including its style of writing, the content of activities and smaller details such as the ~~the~~ wording of explanations and instructions.

Workshop activity and toolkit development

Aside from raising comments and suggestions for technical aspects of the Toolkit and Framework, views were expressed about the potential for the REAL Toolkit beyond supporting Recognition of Prior Learning. Though designed to assist RPL, participants felt that the Toolkit would be a helpful tool for CPD processes within their organisations where there was a

perceived lack of professional development opportunities for adult educators. 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 through interaction with others 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. It was also consistent with the learning theory which underpins the notion of RPL (see Andersson *et al*, 2013; Harris, 2014). We were also aware that some participants needed support with the written reflective exercises, particularly those who educated adults in subject areas that did not involve writing, which was taken into account when the Toolkit was finalised. Social networking was suggested as a possibility for facilitating engagement with RPL, with the prospect of finding mentors or critical friends with whom to work. The 'values exercises' were especially welcomed and encouraged wide ranging and spontaneous discussions which encouraged adult educators to consider 'where they are at' and the directions that they might want to take.

There were indications that engagement with the Toolkit in a group setting could encourage partnership working on future adult education projects. The higher levels in the REAL Competency Framework, equivalent to a university degree, demand co-production, partnership working and engagement with professional networks as ways to achieving excellence as an adult educator. Interestingly, during the workshops, adult educators conversed about the possibility of future collaborative activity and exchanged contact details, with no prompting from the workshop leaders.

In general, the adult educators tended to under-assess themselves against the Competency Framework. Those who had become adult educators as a result of sideways career moves (e.g. ex-army personnel) or through hobbies (e.g. dog training) had a particular tendency to under-self-assess their competency. Discussion revealed that this was in part a consequence of unfamiliarity with the educational language employed in the prototype Competency Framework, which was consequently amended. There was also concern that the prototype Framework implied that higher levels of proficiency could only be achieved by people in management roles. In response, the Competency Framework was revised to ensure that all the highest levels included illustrative examples of activities that any adult educator in a non-management position could work towards, providing their employer organisation encouraged CPD activity.

There was discussion around the discourse found within the Toolkit, which raised questions about the role of adult education, its purpose and how it should be conducted. For example, whether adult educators should be identified as 'tutors', 'teachers' or 'facilitators' which implies varying understandings of the responsibilities of adult educators and how they relate with students. Here the discussion orientated around a perceived need to demarcate adult learning from compulsory education, particularly as many of their learners reported negative experiences of formal schooling. Similarly, debate focussed on the nuanced meanings of 'learner' and 'student', with 'learner' strongly preferred by most participants.

Whilst the workshop evaluations sheets were not a significant source of data regarding the specifics of toolkit development, they did capture more generalised opinions about the potential benefits of a formative RPL process:

'At first I was reluctant to get on board. However by the end of the day I can see that this would be a great programme [sic] for people like myself who don't see the value in what or how they perform at work, and be able to show that value in a physical format'.

(Jenny, teacher of joinery to adults with learning disabilities)

'I feel it is a helpful tool for developing my team/colleagues as well as myself, examining our values as well as our competencies is vital to the impact we have on adult learners'

Ann, vocational qualification assessor.

'For me this toolkit has really made me think about and recognised what I have learned during my working life – much more than I had appreciated. My organisation trains tutors and there are existing tutors who may well want to gain some recognition of their experience. If at some point in the future, it was possible to gain formal recognition of this learning and the skills gained it would be even more valuable.'

Geraldine, tutor trainer

This final comment from Geraldine articulates a clear request for a route to recognition for adult educators, which was expressed similarly by the majority of the workshop participants.

Limitations Of Co-Production in the REAL Case Study

In the REAL project, co-productive activity was organised around an idea common amongst adult educators, which is that critical reflection is a form of educational activity that allows

experiences to be identified and learned from so that plans might be made for desirable future change. This could include the identification of learning goals for an individual, or the planning of public services for society. ~~The~~ As discussed above, ~~th~~is approach holds currency amongst adult educators, indeed reference to critical reflection is made directly in the REAL Competency Framework, particularly in area of professional development. What's more, critical reflection as a notion is closely allied to the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning itself, particularly through the ideas of Kolb (1984).

~~There is a large body of educational research that seeks to critique understandings of learning as critical reflection, with implications for practice, but very little to date in the context of the Recognition of Prior Learning (Andersson *et al*, 2013). This means that U~~understanding the limitations of co-production as an experiential learning activity, as described in this article, would mean developing a critique of critical reflection as an approach to individual and group learning. **This would require employing educational theory to further develop notions of reflective practice, as well the critique of those processes. From our experience with and alongside adult educators, in the context of the REAL Project, Hamer and Jen's (2013) consideration of RPL how processes that support learners' self-worth might be helpful. Nonetheless, the REAL Project's approach to co-production was not to develop learning theory. Rather, it was to try and incorporate the service users' own understandings of successful professional practices into the undertaking of co-productive activity, which might in itself be a helpful strategy for co-production.**

Whilst this small project cannot offer generalisable conclusions and recommendations regarding how adult education, RPL and co-production might be configured, we can reflect make inferences about the limitations of the co-production process described above. 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. Learning Link Scotland, as a networking community for learning providers was crucial to the recruitment of adult educators to the REAL project, emphasising the strategic importance of maintaining publically financed networks during the current funding crisis, if the democratic planning of public services is to be reasonably attempted. None the less, co-production can only be partial. This is not to deny its value, but it is a qualified value. To assert the inherent democratic nature of co-production is therefore misplaced.

Second, practitioners seeking a formative or summative 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 aim of the REAL project was to produce an RPL~~REAL~~ Toolkit ~~has been produced~~ with adult educators, for adult educators. However, co-production also involves the providers of adult education qualifications as well, who are themselves bounded by systems of accountability and audit.

The co-production relationship therefore is not simply embraced by service providers and users, but is itself situated within a broader more complex set of relationships. These relationships are themselves reflective of national contexts, as the experience of the REAL project across the different partner countries clearly demonstrated.

The aspirations of co-production aim to transform the relationships between providers and users in the development and delivery of services. The REAL case study demonstrates that such aspirations may remain simply that, and that perhaps we need to recognise the importance

of the more mundane practices of consultation and workshop learning rather than engage in the rhetorical hyperbole of co-production and transformation.

The participation of adult educators in the co-production and development of the REAL Toolkit was intended to enhance its possible uptake and impact. One outcome of the project in Scotland is that for the first time there is a published Competency Framework for Adult Educators that corresponds with the European Qualification Framework (Galloway, 2015a). Without exception, all of the adult educators we worked with felt strongly that this was a positive step for adult learning as a sector of post-compulsory education in Scotland. It is too early to judge the success of the Toolkit, but there have been some helpful developments. For example, the Scottish Government's ongoing consultation around the future of Adult Learning (see Education Scotland, 2014) has relied upon REAL Toolkit resources to structure a productive dialogue around the current professional development needs of adult educators. The REAL Toolkit and Scottish Competency Framework are publically available for adult educators to customise and use as they see fit, via the REAL Project website where queries and comments are welcome (see Galloway, 2015c).

3. We appreciate the helpful and detailed comments from the reviewers which were most valuable.

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