

## Assessment Philosophy: A Critical Consideration for Ethical Skills Recognition

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### Introduction

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has long been acknowledged as a complex phenomenon involving far more than the summative evaluation of self-evident skills and knowledge. It has been described as an economic tool (Van Kleef, 2011), a social practice (Harris, 1999), a vehicle for personal transformation or empowerment (Whittaker, Whittaker, & Cleary, 2006; Cameron, 2004), a means of credentialing alternative knowledges (Breier, 2005) and as specialized pedagogy (Ralphs, 2012). It is also increasingly understood as an ontological engagement (Hamer, 2011, 2012, 2013a; Houlbrook, 2012; Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013). In the latter analysis, the assessor's validation may support, undermine or otherwise influence self-perceptions and claims to professional status and social value. This directly affects the learners' self-worth and "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991; Billett, 2010, p. 4) – their sense of place and significance in the world. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon assessors to be conscious of the effects of their practice on the evolving subjectivities of those they assess. This article discusses "assessment philosophy" as a critical consideration to guide RPL assessors in this complex work.

### Sofia<sup>1</sup>

Sofia applied for recognition of prior learning hoping to be awarded a diploma in youth work on the basis of her life and voluntary work experience. In the assessment, I asked her to tell me about a time she responded to a challenging situation in a manner that supported a young person to develop personal skills. With quiet composure she recounted stories of how she fled her country of birth, escaping persecution to live for years in the harsh environment of a refugee camp, where she physically and emotionally sustained many lost children. We translated her stories into three formal "units of competency" from the Australian Qualifications Framework<sup>2</sup>: "Support young people in crisis"; "Support young people to create opportunities in their lives"; and "Work effectively with forced migrants." This felt like a woefully inadequate reflection of the personal courage and complex skills she had just described. I also knew such carefully edited accounts were a mere grain of sand in the mountain of her experience. ... (adapted from Hamer 2013b, p. 3)

Like many of the candidates I have assessed for recognition of prior learning, Sofia had incredibly challenging life experience, a high degree of personal knowledge and inferred skills. She was forced to leave Cambodia fearing for her life, carrying no paperwork to show where she was born or to confirm her identity, let alone anything that would prove her claim to have studied successfully at university. As we sat together exploring evidence of her competence, all she had were her stories and me – my capacity to recognize her skills, my ability to translate them into Australian "competency standards" and my willingness to validate her right to social and professional status through qualifications.

Face to face in this "competency conversation" I felt overburdened by the power of interpretation and knowledge production concentrated in the assessor role and was suddenly doubtful of my own motivations

and assessment skills. How could I do justice to Sofia's knowledge and experience within the constraints of the assessment criteria? How could I adequately recognize and validate her worth and how should I ethically manage my own privilege? The chasm between my life experience and hers – my proximity to institutional power and her current remoteness from it – provoked in me an enormous sense of disquiet.

Discomfort surrounding the use of power within assessment practice can fuel professional uncertainty and paralysis of educational judgment. The potential effects of assessment, not only upon Sofia's educational status but also her sense of self-worth and place in the world, created ethical dilemmas that undermined my professional confidence. I wondered how this might create a barrier to successful completion of the assessment, based not on her abilities, but on my own hesitations.

In this article I offer some thoughts on how to address these hesitations through an understanding of assessment philosophy. I begin with the assumption that all RPL practitioners have an assessment philosophy. Drawing upon empirical research completed as part of an Australian doctoral study at the University of New South Wales (Hamer 2013b), I argue that this philosophy directly influences practice and thereby the effects and outcomes of assessment. I propose that a well-crafted and explicitly considered assessment philosophy will provide the necessary conceptual tools for assessors to work productively with such ethical dilemmas. I believe this is especially important with nontraditional learners, for whom RPL offers a means toward greater social inclusion.

### **Questions of conscience and efficacy**

My experience with Sofia highlights ethical concerns surrounding the operations of power within RPL that are common to many practitioners and researchers who are interested in its social justice aims and effects (Harris, 2000; Barker, 2001; Anderson & Fejes, 2005; Peters, 2005; Cameron, 2006; Fenwick, 2006; Guo & Anderson, 2006; Hamer, 2010; Diedrich, 2013). It is clear that RPL processes can exclude, disempower or humiliate learners (Pokorny, 2013; Peters, 2005; Blom, Clayton, Bateman, Bedggood, & Hughes, 2004; Castle & Attwood, 2001) just as surely as they can build confidence, self-esteem and social inclusion (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010; Smith, 2004; Cleary et al., 2002). Ultimately, the potential efficacy of RPL is enacted at the nexus of the assessor-candidate relationship, where power operates to ascribe meaning and value to the learner's skills and experience. It is within this exchange that the assessor uses their pedagogic agency to mediate the translation of alternative knowledges and social value, which is why many commentators have called for more dialogic processes in order to support social inclusion (Pokorny, 2013; Peters, 2005; Michelson, 1996). Through whichever medium the assessment relationship is conducted, questions arise as to how the assessor can reflexively engage with and use power in the service of access, equity and social inclusion. As a matter of conscience therefore, it is important to attend to which aspects of practice generate which effects and how to ethically navigate this territory.

Dialogue and mutual exchange may indeed help to ameliorate power imbalance as part of an epistemological negotiation. They may also support RPL as an educational process. However, when Trowler (1996) warned that ambivalent judgments or inadequately explained processes of assessment could lead to individuals having "doubts about themselves as people" (p. 26), he drew attention to the entanglement of educational assessment with the social construction of individual subjectivities. In this sense, RPL is fundamentally also an *ontological* project, since many learners are significantly invested in it as a process of personal recognition and validation of their social worth (Hamer, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013; Houlbrook, 2012; Trowler, 1996). This invites a more conscious examination of the sometimes hidden assumptions and intentions underlying RPL practice.

Acknowledging and addressing the "ontological substance" of RPL (Hamer, 2013b, p. 170) can in part be

achieved through explicit consideration of the assessment philosophy. This involves reflection on the values and beliefs that drive not only the assessment model adopted by the institution, but also the “micro” practices of assessment judgments and behavior. Proactive, transparent engagement with these aspects of assessment can help practitioners engage reflexively with the complexities of their task.

### **Assessment Philosophy as Governing Framework**

Travers and Harris (2014) have highlighted how “philosophical underpinnings” have a significant effect on RPL practice and therefore the learner’s experience (p. 241). Drawing in particular from a large study of RPL programs in the United States and Canada (Hoffman, Travers, Evans, & Treadwell, 2009; Travers 2013), they explained that different assessment approaches emerge from the different beliefs and intentions of assessors, and these in turn reflect different disciplinary traditions and/or institutional contexts. Travers (2013) noted how an institution’s assumptions and beliefs about learning and accreditation become more visible within RPL, and this explicitly reveals the link between institutional philosophy and its translation into preferred models of assessment and levels of student support. Thus, “assessment philosophy” is constituted of key elements such as values, beliefs and intentions that together form a potent force, shaping the RPL experience.

My own, empirical research with nontraditional learners supports this assertion, finding assessment philosophy to be highly significant as one of three critical aspects of RPL (Hamer, 2013b). The study concluded that the learner’s personal motivations, the “climate” for RPL in their immediate environment and the assessment philosophy embodied in the assessor’s practice, all work powerfully together as “vectors” to guide the RPL process. The three aspects interact to influence the learner’s ongoing connection and disconnection to RPL and shape their interpretation of its overall meanings and effects (Hamer, 2013b, pp. 195-210).

The following sections outline select findings from this grounded, empirical study. I begin with a brief review of the institutional context and then describe six core elements of a shared philosophical approach that unfolds through in-depth interviews with the assessors. In accordance with Australian academic research requirements, approval for the doctoral study was provided by the Human Research Ethics Advisory (HREA) Panel. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

### **Institutional context and assessor reflections**

The research in question followed a small group of nontraditional learners through their RPL experience within the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector, between 2005 and 2013 (Hamer, 2013a, 2013b). The educational institution was the Australian Institute of Social Relations (AISR or the “Institute”), which is a combined vocational education and community support services provider, offering competency-based training and assessment (AISR, n.d.).

In the early 1990s, the Australian government mandated competency-based training and assessment (CBTA) for all national vocational qualifications. CBTA is an “industry-led” outcome-focused approach, designed to teach and assess the performance of actual workplace tasks, rather than transmit disciplinary knowledges. All VET qualifications in Australia describe the required outcomes of learning expressed as “units of competency,” broken down into elements and explicit performance criteria. Each unit of competency also specifies compulsory evidence and assessment methods. Assessment must measure applied skills and knowledge, demonstrated in a working context or as Gonczi (1994) said: “the capacity of the professional to integrate knowledge, values, attitudes and skills in the world of practice” (p. 28). This stands in contrast to curriculum-based approaches that generally test for the learner’s possession of attributes and knowledge that are assumed to infer competence (Hager, Gonczi, & Athanasou, 1994).

The list of competencies required for each qualification and the performance criteria are non-negotiable. However, educational institutions have considerable autonomy in designing the actual structure and approach of their own learning and assessment systems. This means the RPL procedures and the expectations of the assessor role are strongly influenced at the local level. In particular, the education and assessment philosophy of the institution determines the conceptual framework that guides assessors' attitude toward the RPL candidate and their enactment of professional judgments in discerning the candidate's skills.

The Institute's educational philosophy rested explicitly upon a "social relations" ontology and constructivist epistemology, which informed a generally reflexive disposition (Hamer, 2013b, pp. 87-91). As a consequence, the skills recognition process was positioned as a "co-research project in the creation of knowledge" (Hamer, 2010, pp. 111) embodying both a dialogic and developmental approach. Further, it rejected the practice of separating personal support from formal assessment as a way to maintain the "objectivity" of judgments about a person's professional competencies. Instead, its assessors engaged in relationships of support and advice with RPL candidates, positioning themselves as mentors and guides throughout the process (Hamer, 2010).

The disciplinary traditions underpinning this practice drew from two distinct theoretical frameworks. Firstly, therapeutic purposes anchored the Institute in a broadly "person-centered" approach (Rogers, 1951) to training and assessment. This meant engaging with the individual as already knowledgeable and capable of learning from personal experience. The educator's role within this perspective was to provide "positive regard" and the necessary favorable conditions for learners' self-reflection. Secondly, its primary health care and community capacity-building sensibilities encouraged it toward a population focus and social justice aims, prioritizing the engagement of disenfranchised groups through the liberating force of education. In addition to the required "competency-based training and assessment" qualification, educators had tertiary qualifications in areas such as social work, teaching, counseling or nursing, and were interested in education as a personal development strategy and means to increase social justice. As such, staff members were supported to develop both therapeutic and community development capabilities alongside education and assessment skills, and the leadership engaged them in ongoing reflexive practice regarding racism and intercultural work.<sup>3</sup>

This educational philosophy determined the broad conceptual framework guiding the assessors' attitudes toward learners and their enactment of professional judgments in discerning RPL candidate's skills. Immersed in this institutional context, they became familiar with explicitly discussing the intentions and effects of their practice. In the research interviews they each reflected spontaneously in different ways, upon questions such as:

- What are the purposes of recognition assessment?
- What is the appropriate role of the assessor in enacting these purposes?
- What principles underlie RPL implementation?
- What attitude or disposition should an assessor bring to the task?
- How do we recognize and validate difference?
- What does my own world view prevent me from noticing?
- How do my assessment questions shape what it is possible to know?
- What are my effects in conducting assessment?

This thinking revealed a collective belief in formal assessment as far more than merely a technical skill. The assessors engaged with advanced practice issues in a manner not narrowly focused on evermore finely-tuned instrumental procedures, but clearly embracing the ethical challenges presented by RPL with transparent

reflexivity. The underpinning assessment philosophy that emerged in the research interviews is outlined below.

### **An Assessment Philosophy in Practice**

Detailed analysis of the qualitative interview data found six core elements of an assessment philosophy, constituting both an operational and ethical framework to guide the assessors' practice. When implemented, these elements affected the assessors' interest, attention and disposition toward each candidate, directing their conduct throughout the RPL process. The explicitly constructed assessment philosophy was thus an orienting and governing structure for the execution of their professional task. The six elements consisted of three firm convictions about how the assessors believe RPL "should" be implemented with nontraditional learners and three ethical dilemmas that challenged them in their work:

#### **Convictions about RPL**

##### ***1. Everyone already has skills***

The assessors begin with an assumption that RPL candidates already have significant skills and knowledge to be uncovered. The purpose of recognition assessment is to discern existing skills (which the candidates themselves may not yet have identified) and translate them into formal competencies. This foundation underpins the assessors' stated first task; that is, to gain a broad sense of the candidate and their abilities through an exploration of how they describe themselves and their work:

*"The assessment process needs to be coming from a place of genuine belief ... that there's a whole lot of knowledge and skill that hasn't ever been named or acknowledged, rather than trying to work out what the absences or deficits are ... the interviewer needs to have that genuine positive regard and belief in the person ... inviting people to describe themselves, with a sense of curiosity about them. ..."* (Assessor Dave)

This approach requires consideration of the person, before identifying a broad spectrum of their professional skills and knowledge and gradually working "back," as it were, toward the specific competency requirements of the qualification. It entails "curiosity" and "interest" beyond the performance criteria:

*"They're coming to the process with doubts about their ability ... so I recognize that's people's starting point and I'm not so much interested in the criteria as the person."* (Assessor Dianne)

"Good" assessment, as explained by these assessors, relies on "genuine curiosity" about the candidate, an ability to seek out the "story" of the work they do and even to "celebrate skills that ... may not be directly part of the stuff I'm looking for." They attend to who the candidates are, what they believe and how they view their work roles. This open inquiry about identity and self makes visible a broader context for vocational skills and abilities. In this manner, they attend to far more than the competency standards or learning outcomes, as they firstly invite broad descriptions of knowledge, experience, competence and professional purpose within which to begin locating specific skills that align to the assessment criteria.

Responding to more restricted questions about competence or theoretical knowledge is assumed to bring forward less comprehensive evidence of skills than that proffered in a wider discussion. Furthermore, if this broader exploration is omitted, the process of RPL risks becoming "less user-friendly" and potentially "discouraging" to the nontraditional learner:

*"Engaging in a conversation with her about her work and how she does it and what she thinks is important, gets that rich, kind of deep, story about the picture of how she's working rather than just ... the black and white question and answer thing. ... If we don't [do that] ... people lose the opportunity to get recognized for the work they do."* (Assessor Jane)

Assessor Dave's assertion that an assessor's interest must be based on "*genuine belief*" in the existence of unacknowledged skills is echoed by others, implying that non-genuine or perhaps disingenuous interest is possible and should be avoided. The frequent, collective expression of this perspective speaks to the importance for the assessors of generating a positive, felt connection through which the candidate senses they are "*understood*" and "*noticed*." This was regularly invoked as a core assessor skill, suggesting that recognition assessment is seen not merely as a measure of competence, but as an act of engagement and personal appreciation:

*"So to me, a lot of assessment is about that personal connection ... they trust you, and they see that you're genuinely interested in them as a person ... putting that personal element into the assessment ... as a human being ... it verifies their existence and whatever they are doing ... everybody wants you to 'know me, see who I am,' and that's the foundation of everything."* (Assessor Dianne)

Such an approach stands in contrast to others that require the assessor to begin with the formal units of competency and investigate only those aspects of the candidate's experience that align to it, with an eye for absences or gaps. For the assessors in this study, this latter perspective would be characterized as a somewhat narrow field of vision that is likely to overlook the candidate's capabilities, inviting discouragement and disconnection. The assumption of skills, "*genuine belief*," "*rich*" or "*deep*" descriptions and making a "*personal connection*," were all advanced by the group as distinguishing features of skilled RPL assessment with nontraditional learners. Without an explicitly ontological assessment philosophy, the suggestion is that the nontraditional learner's skills are less likely to be visible.

## **2. RPL assessment is a relationship**

The work of demonstrating evidence of competence is considered to be a shared project that emerges from a critically-engaged relationship between the assessor and their candidate. Moreover, especially with nontraditional learners, it is the assessor who holds the balance of responsibility within this relationship:

*"I think it's my job to ... enable that person to show they are competent ... to provide enough opportunities for people to demonstrate competence ... that's our role as educators and assessors."* (Assessor Dianne)

*"If people have got stuck ... it means I haven't articulated something to make it clear for them."* (Assessor Sabrina)

Here, building on a foundational belief in the candidates' abilities and "*genuine*" appreciation of them beyond the prescribed list of competencies, the assessors confront the challenge of finding appropriate ways for specific vocational skills derived from experience to become visible and appreciated within a formal education framework.

Within this, all of the assessors spoke clearly regarding the need for rigorous or "*sufficient*" assessment; that is, not "*just passing everybody*" without appropriate scrutiny. However, they are at pains to emphasize that this does not mean leaving the burden of proof with the candidate and abrogating responsibility for "*uncovering*" skills. If evidence of competence is not manifest, it is at least in the first instance the assessor who is potentially underperforming. It is the assessor who needs to rethink his or her strategy – to bring new questions and new eyes and ears to the assessment. In their own words, RPL is "*extremely individualized*" and they must actively take steps to "*adapt*" and "*customize*" it for each person in a uniquely responsive and interactive manner. Thus, an appreciation of and response to each candidate's individual circumstances is central to an assessor's approach. This is described by one of the assessors as part of the "*core values*" of RPL.

Just as vocational skills emerge into view from the holistic, “*rich story*” that provides the context of the candidate’s abilities and experiences, so does the specific customization of the assessment process emerge from the nuanced environment of the assessor-candidate relationship. Many of the assessors articulated how their capacity to tailor the assessment to meet the nontraditional candidate’s needs and circumstances, and the candidate’s capacity to work with them in exploring their experience for evidence of skills, is enabled and guided by the quality of this relationship.

*“I see my role as having a relationship with the candidate and both of us working toward them achieving a qualification at some point. ... It’s a process that we’re doing together.”* (Assessor Diane)

*“It’s the connection ... it’s about that relationship-building ... it’s really important to have that connection and that care – for a person who’s doing recognition, to feel that the person who’s doing the assessing actually cares about them.”* (Assessor Sabrina)

The specific tailoring of the assessment approach is directed by the relationship, built through inviting trust, demonstrating interest and care and ultimately through paying close attention to the meanings, responses and needs of the candidate. Assessors respond in select ways to the perceived conditions of the candidates. They make choices to vary “traditional” assessment processes in the interests of sustaining the candidates’ engagement and enabling optimum circumstances for skills to be uncovered. For example, Assessor Dave visits one candidate in a remote Aboriginal community at his home for the assessment interview in order to avoid the alienating effects of what he describes as a more formal “*assessment ritual*,” within an intimidating institutional setting. Assessor Sabrina tells how she creates a monthly group for some of her candidates to work through the evidence requirements together, in a supportive, facilitated process; and Assessor Elizabeth adopts what she terms a “*mentoring*” approach to respond to a particular student’s fears:

*“I mean I’ve assuaged any of those fears that she might have of chucking it in ... because I can imagine you’d go ‘Oh it’s too hard.’ So I made sure I stayed connected with her in the process.”* (Assessor Elizabeth)

“Staying connected” reverberates as a theme throughout the study, such as when Assessor Sabrina emphasized the importance of “*being accessible, being there and them feeling like they actually matter.*” In these ways, the relationship is at the core of this type of assessment practice and is more significant than any process, system or tool. The capacity to support the candidate to engage in the assessment, present their knowledge meaningfully within the required framework and continue the process to completion relies upon how this relationship is embodied, driven by the assessor’s personal approach. In short, the assessors pay attention to establishing a relationship, and through this vehicle identify and implement the means to notice, make visible and understand the ways in which the candidate presents their knowledge. It is the assessors’ responsibility to engage the candidate effectively in this relationship and if successful, the relationship becomes a site of mutual effort where the parties work together through any obstacles that could inhibit the discovery of competencies, otherwise not academically discernible.

Conceptualizing assessment as a relationship in this way is a demonstration of the social relations framework explicitly embraced by the educational institution. The relationship is a means to gather intelligence on the candidate and to openly negotiate their skills and knowledge. This expressly counters instrumental and atomistic RPL practice in favor of an engaged, interpersonal approach, inviting a moral obligation to care and to successfully convey a sense that the candidate “*actually matters.*” Thus, these assessors respond to difference and unfathomable knowledge with curiosity about the individual and his or her interpretations of experience, suspending assessment judgments until a “*deeper,*” “*richer*” story of competence has been described.

### **3. RPL engages discursively with identity**

In the iterative process of genuine inquiry, rich description and a tailored response made possible through the assessment relationship that characterizes the institution's approach with nontraditional learners, the assessors are attentive to how they believe RPL conversations contribute to the construction of personal and professional identity. They present this not as a retrospective observation but as a conscious, proactive engagement with the candidate, *precisely* for the purposes of inviting change in their self-perception:

*"It's about discursive resources isn't it? Your ability to talk about the work and maybe value it a bit more. ... People don't understand what it is because they don't articulate it ... and it's their ability to articulate their skills ... that makes them [professional] – it's that identity thing."* (Assessor Elizabeth)

*"You're helping build that story and ... people performing that identity in the assessment. ... When you're providing that scaffold people sort of go beyond what they've realized they know. ..."* (Assessor Dave)

Reflection on experience and the conscious articulation of skills and knowledge in professional language that is brought forth by the RPL assessment relationship are thought to invite a shift in the candidates' sense of self.

*"That's got to be a supportive thing for someone to sit down and have all their skills and knowledge documented and for them to perform that by telling you stories about their competence and what they did and what they've achieved and where their knowledge is at. I believe that does have an effect on someone's experiences at work and then will flow on to them feeling more confident and capable."* (Assessor Dave)

The assessors believe this discursive effect is an important aspect of "good" assessment and they demonstrate active consideration of how to work in ways that will achieve this result. One of the explicit purposes of RPL with nontraditional learners at the Australian Institute of Social Relations is precisely to invite and enable such change, as Assessor Elizabeth explained:

*"I like to have some part in shifting people's perceptions of their inability to learn or their concerns about how good they are. ... That's a commitment I've got."* (Assessor Elizabeth)

The commitment to achieving this effect works in conjunction with critically attending to the assessment relationship as a vehicle for engaging and tailoring the RPL practice – all of which rests on a genuine interest and belief in the candidate and his or her professional skills. In other words, the assessors' awareness of the opportunity to support positive transformation through the individual assessment discourse in which they are a contributor, generates an impulse toward actively relational and tailored practice.

#### **Ethical dilemmas in the practice of RPL**

In addition to the above convictions, the assessors identify a number of significant challenges that also shape their practice. These are ethical dilemmas about what constitutes fair and skillful assessment in the interests of social justice for marginalized communities.

##### **1. Is "uniquely tailored" unfair?**

The tailoring of the RPL process to meet the needs of individual candidates is both a commitment to good practice and a source of anxiety for many of the assessors. As Assessor Sabrina pointed out: *"a tool is never finished"* meaning not only is the assessor required to adapt the process, but the written assessment guide itself can change in relation to each person. The expressed dilemma here is that in truly non-standardized and responsive RPL, different processes, questions and ultimately different assessment judgments from

different assessors are inevitable, since as she continued: *“We see different things; we interpret different things.”* Members of the assessor group worry at what point this unique adaptation and effectively “subjective” evaluation may result in an unfair, unequal process. What happens to consistency, validity and reliability when different assessors ask different questions of candidates for the same qualification and thus “see” and “interpret” different things? Many of the assessors experience an uncomfortable tension between enacting a strongly normative judgment embedded in dominant cultural values and standards, while simultaneously attempting to value and ethically engage with difference.

A particular exchange between three assessors raises this issue:

Assessor Sabrina: *“This is where the discrepancies for me begin to arise. Because I go: ‘Wait a minute – if the tool should, no matter who uses it, be able to tell you the same picture in terms of the skills, then [with raised eyebrows]’?”*

Assessor Dianne: *“Well they are developing a picture of competency but it might not be the same picture.”*

Assessor Jane: *“But what if you’re both using the same tool on the same person and depending on the questions that you ask and how you ask them – you might assess them as being competent, and you might assess them as not yet competent?”*

Assessor Dianne: *“That’s quite likely.”*

As one of the more experienced assessors, Assessor Dianne went on to assert that the uniqueness of the candidate-assessor interaction and ensuing competency judgment is not only inevitable, but in fact a critical element in just and equitable practice. This is because it is precisely this interaction that is the vehicle for the design and delivery of appropriately tailored processes, tools and questions that respond effectively to difference. She suggested that the *“picture of competency”* that one assessor will derive is already inescapably different to that derived by another, since each brings their own approach and contribution to the relationship. It is the capacity to understand this as precisely *a* picture of competency (rather than the only one) that supports “good” RPL. The essential work of recognition assessment therefore is to actively seek detailed understandings and interpretations of the unique picture that emerges in this interaction, via diverse and creative means. Through this effort, the assessor may come to perceive and appreciate the candidate’s skills.

In order to effectively achieve this end, Assessor Dianne draws on the conviction that the core of the assessor’s job is to *“create a relationship”* within which to explore the candidate’s meanings and skills and then work through a process with them of gradually making these discernible within a formal qualification framework. The expectation of this mutual work within an engaged relationship that centers the candidate’s needs and meanings is presented as a key component of an assessment philosophy that seeks socially just outcomes. The construction of a uniquely tailored process to achieve this is fundamental. Thus, relinquishing the expectation of rigid uniformity or sameness as an indicator of equal or “fair” treatment becomes critical to effective assessment practice with nontraditional learners.

## **2. *Conflicting accountabilities***

A range of apparently conflicting accountabilities also arise within this RPL approach. The assessors discussed how they must attend to at least five interwoven concerns. Namely: the candidate, the qualification, the institution, their own professional reputation and the candidates’ future community service clients. These multiple accountabilities exert pressure in different directions and thus complicate the assessors’ intentions to enable social justice.

As previously described, *“supporting the person”* to achieve their goals and to positively *“shift their sense of self”* as a learner is a commitment many of the assessors hold, and this represents a chosen obligation in the

light of the institution's social relations approach. In addition to this however, they are mindful of their responsibilities as gatekeepers of standards within nationally recognized qualifications. The expressed rationale is that for qualifications to be respected and retain professional value, assessors must protect the required standard of competency through rigorous assessment and not *"just give someone a certificate"* without *"sufficient"* evidence of skill. A lack of critical scrutiny against the competency standards has implications not only for the qualification's standing, but also for the reputation of the individual assessor, and by association, their colleagues and the institution:

*"We are going to be answerable to somebody as to why we have given this person this qualification ... it's not only that I believe it's necessary for our auditing procedures, but for me it's ... necessary, respectful practice to my colleagues as well. ... We need to be accountable to that."* (Assessor Sabrina)

A more distant but no less important accountability is to the future clients of the RPL candidates, who will be recipients of their professional support:

*"We have a responsibility for the kind of workers we send out there ... which is a responsibility to community or clients."* (Assessor Jane)

Assessor Jane struggles with this potential conflict between the effect of the RPL judgment on the candidates' lives and what might be called the *"second order"* effect on the lives of their future clients, many of whom could also be described as disadvantaged or nontraditional. She explained that for her, this dilemma is between being *"generous"* and being *"responsible,"* which requires careful management:

*"A dilemma for me is around wanting to give someone that qualification even though they're not meeting the competencies ... particularly if you've spent a lot of time with them and you know that they're really passionate and really great at a whole lot of stuff, it does take some kind of strength to be able to sit in front of someone and say 'you are not yet competent' ... I find that tricky. ... The skill is how you convey that to the person, so they don't have a complete meltdown and go into that language of failure or pass."* (Assessor Jane)

From Assessor Jane's perspective, the commitment to create a relationship that enables an appreciation of the person and thereby an ability to jointly identify skills across different interpretations of practice, brings with it accountability to the candidate's well-being. She must consider that a negative assessment decision could work counter to the positive personal transformation that is sought. By the same token, she is aware that the qualification and future clients are not well served by formally sanctioning an unskilled practitioner. Responding to these sometimes competing claims can be *"tricky."*

Complicating this further, Assessor Dave suggested that a positive assessment result without due process may in any case be ineffective in enabling personal transformation. A perfunctory or inadequate assessment creates risks, not only for the qualification's status, the institution's reputation or well-being of future clients, but can also have negative consequences for the candidates themselves:

*"... It's really undermining ... if you're just given something and you know you actually haven't really earned it. I don't think that helps you as a learner or as a person, you know it feels really hollow. ..."* (Assessor Dave)

One candidate's experience underscores this hollowness and the frustration she experienced with not being assessed stringently enough. Even though she knows she has been judged as competent, the lack of rigor she perceived in her RPL process led to feelings of being disrespected and ultimately she did not value the qualification, all of which she found *"demoralizing."* Furthermore, there is a risk in the candidate being led to

believe they are more skilled in certain areas than perhaps they actually are, and thus facing difficulties with later expectations:

*“It’s about ensuring that the piece of paper that I sign does say what it says ... that you do have the skills that this paper says you have. There’s no point in setting up people to fail.”* (Assessor Sabrina)

In these ways, differing accountabilities are discussed as important obligations that exist simultaneously and sometimes in tension. However, the data shows that in practice, the dilemmas emerging from these apparently conflicting responsibilities diminish as the effort to address each separate accountability ultimately contributes to the fulfillment of others.

Attending to all five concerns in a dynamic relationship is therefore important to the achievement of the RPL’s overall social justice aims. Upholding the required standard of the qualification through rigorous and testing assessment not only maintains the candidate’s belief in the qualification and thereby enhances his or her sense of achievement when completed, but also substantiates the assessor’s credibility and contributes to reassurances about the quality of the candidate’s future practice. Likewise, sustaining a relationship with the candidate in order to center his or her meanings and recognize alternative skills and knowledge through uniquely tailored assessment supports the formal acknowledgement of difference, and reflects non-dominant perspectives within the broader professional education system, while also helping to sustain the candidate through the process.

Thus, a hierarchy or taxonomy of responsibilities is not proposed, since there is no fixed sequence or priority that can be applied to all candidates under all circumstances to produce equitable results. The accountabilities interlock, each influencing the other according to how the assessor manages the RPL. Understanding this as a critical interdependency, rather than addressing each as a separate liability, can support the overall attainment of the assessors’ social justice goals.

### **3. Power and justice**

Related to the accountabilities mentioned earlier and forming a backdrop to the assessors’ ongoing reflections is a conscious concern for the operations of institutional power vested in the assessor role. Alongside this, there is an awareness of how their own relationship to power might influence the possibilities for enhancing social justice through RPL. While power is rarely referred to explicitly, it is clear that the assessors apply themselves to a consideration of power and how their relationships to it might affect both the candidates and themselves. Specifically, they are alert to holding a privileged position within the accreditation system in terms of their socially-sanctioned authority to make formal competency judgments. The candidates’ career expectations and hopes are thereby potentially reliant on their decisions and they take this aspect of their work very seriously:

*“You’re being responsible for someone’s life or future or something.”* (Assessor Jane)

*“It’s about the social position of power really, when you think about it and it’s about always being reflective about what it is that you’re doing and how you’re doing it.”* (Assessor Sabrina)

The assessors explained how their purposes within RPL involve increasing access to the social, psychological and financial rewards available from professional qualifications, and through this to positively transform and empower previously disenfranchised individuals. External validation provided through RPL can work to confer or deny social status, and with this in mind, assessors are alert to fulfilling their role as the appointed arbiters of the candidates’ competence, with due care and responsibility. In the light of the disadvantages and barriers experienced by nontraditional learners, they speak of having a “duty” or “obligation,” not only to

assist with access to the RPL process but to ultimately “enable success.” This involves a commitment to the individuals who seek recognition; determination to “put the effort in” to identify skills; and a resolve to “be reflective” in order to monitor the effects of their own practice.

### **A critical symbiosis of convictions and dilemmas**

The assessors’ convictions and dilemmas overlap and interrelate in a landscape of influence that is the backdrop to the circumstances of each assessment interaction. While the convictions provide a clear direction and interpretation of the purpose of RPL and the assessors’ role, the ethical dilemmas trouble them. This prompts a reflexive approach and heightened awareness of the importance of working through difference. In particular, the dilemmas generate hesitations and a range of careful practices, such as when Assessor Jane seeks her supervisor’s support to communicate a “not yet competent” result while still validating the candidate’s worth and confirming her capacity to progress; or when Assessor Dave works to find the most effective balance of a testing, while not intimidating assessment ritual. In this manner, the dilemmas restrain assessors from settling on a final, perfect or fully resolved practice, and so support them to maintain a responsive and continuously adaptive approach. This symbiotic relationship between convictions and dilemmas offers at once a clear boundary for the assessors’ approach, as well as conceptual tools to work around challenges.

### **Conclusion**

Professional self-doubt and concerns about adequately recognizing nontraditional learners’ skills and experiences while maintaining the integrity of an educational standard can be a hindrance to effective RPL. Hesitations related to the potential ontological effects of RPL may also invite professional uncertainty and undermine positive outcomes, perhaps especially for nontraditional learners. How assessors and their educational institutions choose to respond to these challenges will depend upon their assessment philosophy and the articulation of detailed practices that embody this approach. All RPL practice is informed by an underpinning philosophy and this can potentially be brought into the service of ethical, justice-seeking RPL.

The particular assessment philosophy and its individual embodiments described in this article offer an example of this potential at work. While an assessment philosophy is always present, how institutions and assessors actively claim and engage with it will vary. The explicit articulation of an underpinning philosophy makes values and intentions visible and therefore open to critical reflection. It is through naming and discussing their purposes and dilemmas that the assessors in the study appear to navigate their hesitations and create a basis for demonstrably nuanced, advanced practice. Thus, taking the time to ask questions and construct a conscious philosophical base for RPL can provide a powerful tool for enhancing ethical and effective practice with nontraditional learners.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, Sofia is not the student’s real name.
- <sup>2</sup> More information on the Australian Qualifications Framework can be found at <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, at the time of the research they were sharing conversations about “whiteness” (Moreton-Robinson, 2004) and an examination of the effects of their own cultural

assumptions on their practice and working relationships. Drawing upon a range of concepts such as “culture-centered” interventions and “dominant culture” thinking (such as Pedersen, 1997; McIntosh, 2004; Trudgen, 2000) they were engaged in embracing difference and different world views, cultivating appreciative inquiry techniques (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) noticing the operations of power and being open to alternative values, knowledges and practices.

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