VTE VOCATION, TECHNOLOGY & EDUCATION

Degree apprenticeships in England and the recognition of prior learning from work

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Degree Apprenticeships in England. These programs provide development opportunities to learners in work. They uniquely integrate the development of knowledge, skills and behaviors required by a Standard for Occupational Competence across work and an undergraduate/postgraduate program. All degree apprenticeships have a core requirement for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) including learning gained through experience in the workplace, to shorten programs and fast track experienced apprentices. The accreditation of prior experience, also known in England as accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) has long been a marginal activity in Higher Education. This paper reports on a research study into the learners' experience of APEL resulting in the development of the RPL translation and transfer (RPLTT) model. It illustrates how this has been successfully applied in the case of a Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship.

Key words: accreditation of prior experiential learning, recognition of prior learning, degree apprenticeships

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Degree Apprenticeships is a national policy initiative that is of benefit to mature learners in England. These programs predominantly recruit learners over the age of 25 (Department for Education, 2025). Degree Apprenticeships are designed to meet specific Occupational Standards set out as Knowledge, Skills and Behaviors (KSBs). They include a level 6 undergraduate or a level 7 postgraduate degree and an Apprenticeship Award. Apprentices are employees who spend 20% of their employment in off-the-job learning, mainly studying for their degree and 80% in on-the-job learning. Funding is through an employer levy (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016). Funding rules require apprentices to undergo a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process. This identifies relevant education, training, or competence gained from work experience. Where appropriate, apprenticeships must be shortened (Department for Education, 2019).

In England, the RPL from experience for the purposes of awarding academic credit is often referred to as the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and this is the acronym used in this paper. It was introduced from the United States in the 1990s (Pokorny, 2011) and is ubiquitous across university policies. However, it is often viewed as complicated, burdensome on students, difficult to mark, not academically robust and is largely avoided by academics. Nevertheless, Bravenboer (2019) has suggested that the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships might motivate universities to engage with RPL. Bravenboer has suggested: "One incentive that is at least on the horizon is that as more universities deliver degree apprenticeships … perhaps the incentive of meeting the [education and skills funding agency] ESFA apprenticeship funding rules will encourage universities

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to ensure that the entitlement to RPL is placed more center stage".

Internationally, the award of academic credit for learning from experience is known by different acronyms. These include RPL in South Africa, prior learning assessment (PLA) in the USA, and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in Canada. Other terms, more common in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, include the French validation des acquis de l'experience (VAE), the Canadian recognition of acquired competencies (RAC), and within the European union the term validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is often used.

Across these definitions, there is a visible shift in wording from the recognition of learning in higher education (HE) contexts to the recognition of competence in VET contexts. This is an important feature of degree apprenticeships, which straddle higher education learning and occupational competence. The translation and transfer of learning and competence across work and academic contexts is the challenge addressed in this paper. The author was tasked with designing an APEL route into the Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) which would fast track experienced managers through their undergraduate studies by awarding a minimum of 50% of academic credits through APEL. The process also had to address concerns about APEL portfolio building being a burdensome, isolating, complicated and difficult process for learners and tutors. The theoretical underpinning for the design of the CMDA APEL process was the RPL translation and transfer (RPLTT) model (Pokorny, 2023). The model was the outcome of research into HE learners' experience of APEL portfolio building. This paper will set out the research methodology and findings that inform the RPLTT model. It will demonstrate how this model underpins the APEL route on a CMDA.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Some KSBs In Degree Apprenticeships may be more tacit and less materially visible than in apprenticeships in the VET sector. Professional practice encompasses implicit judgments, analysis, and problem solving. The APEL process needs to make visible this type of learning. As Gardner suggested "it can be extremely difficult for [APEL] assessment to cross contexts" in degree apprenticeships and new approaches are needed (Gardner, 2022). The RPLTT model is one such approach that resulted from the analysis of semi-structured interviews with learners who gained credits on a postgraduate course in learning and teaching through APEL (Pokorny, 2023). These learners completed a portfolio of evidence with a narrative linked

to module learning outcomes. Their experiences and approaches to APEL varied notwithstanding that all were working with the same guidance and tutor. These learners conceptualized the APEL process differently and this determined the way in which they undertook their portfolio building. The research sought to understand these differences, consequent actions and the impact on the learner's experience of their interpretation of the process.
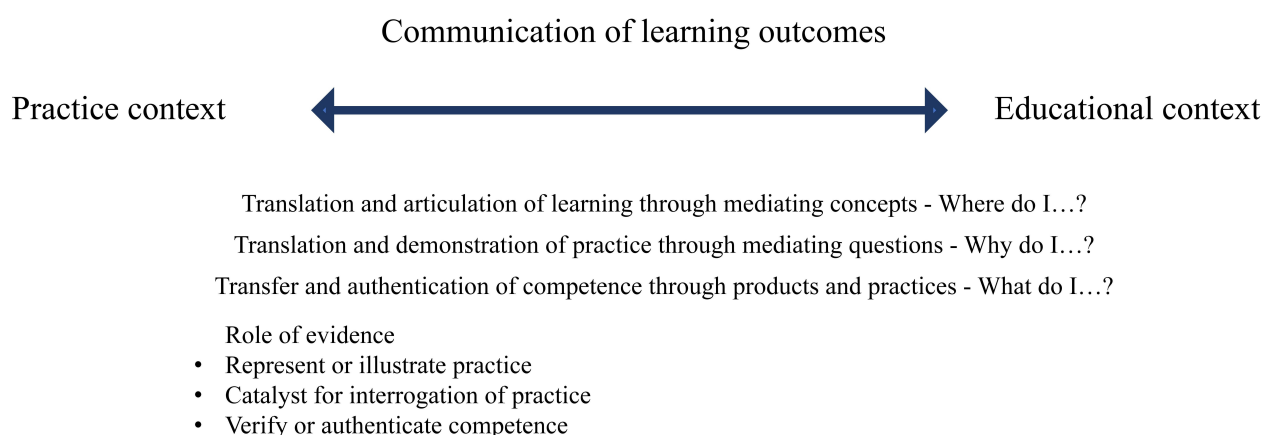
The research questions were: (1) How do participants build their APEL portfolios? (2) What role does evidence play in the process of compiling a work-based portfolio? (3) What is the impact of the APEL process on the individual's identity?

Using Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 1999) as a framework for analyzing the data it was possible to identify different realities experienced across groups of learners. Actor-network-theory (ANT) provides a lens from the sociomaterial paradigm. It traces networking activities and actors. Consistent with constructivism ANT posits that the reality we live in is one which is performed into existence and views the social and material as inseparable and mutually influential. This implies a broadening out of analysis beyond social practice to include material processes, known in ANT as symmetry; and a movement away from the concept of a single reality experienced differently by individuals to a concept of multiple individual realities. The analysis in this research used sensitizing concepts from ANT such as (1) immutable mobiles, that is the taken for granted actor-networks that form the reality of the process for the individual; (2) boundary objects which have different meanings but are common enough to make them recognizable in more than one world; (3) obligatory passage points which provide a focus for actions; and (4) mediators which are actors that can transform, modify or distort meaning without changing it (Pokorny, 2023).

RESULTS

The findings showed that the participants experienced APEL as either (1) a positive experience of articulating their professional learning; (2) a positive experience of demonstrating professional practice; or (3) a negative experience of authenticating professional competence.

Articulating, demonstrating and authenticating were the obligatory passage points that determined how participants viewed the reality of the APEL task and informed what they did. The latter group of participants interpreted the process as building portfolios in which material evidence transferred their learning and demonstrated their teaching competence. Their experience was negative as they struggled to find

Communication of learning outcomes

Practice context ◄─────────────────────────────────► Educational context

Translation and articulation of learning through mediating concepts - Where do I…?

Translation and demonstration of practice through mediating questions - Why do I…?

Transfer and authentication of competence through products and practices - What do I…?

Role of evidence
- Represent or illustrate practice
- Catalyst for interrogation of practice
- Verify or authenticate competence

Figure 1. Recognition of prior learning translation and transfer.

appropriate evidence. The other two groups of participants were trying, in their narratives, to translate their workplace learning into academic learning by using shared concepts that were familiar in the workplace (albeit not named in the same way) and academia; or by interrogating their practice with focused questions in order to explain it. This analysis resulted in the RPLTT model (Pokorny, 2023). RPLTT recognizes that tacit professional learning is not always visible in material evidence that transfers directly across contexts. Instead, it may require a translation process through some form of mediation as shown in Figure 1.

This model highlights the role of concepts and questions as boundary objects. These enable tacit learning to be translated through articulation or demonstration and communicated across work and academic contexts. These concepts and questions may "have different meanings in different social worlds, but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizably, a means of translation" (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Products and practices work as boundary objects only where it is possible to transfer learning through material evidence or visible practices. Thus, the RPLTT model provides a frame of reference for designing RPL routes. It recognizes that some learning and competence may transfer across contexts whilst others require mediation and translation.

In designing APEL for the CMDA the KSBs and level descriptors (SEEC, 2021) were used to frame the APEL portfolio assessments. The KSBs mapped to the APEL portfolio were those that an experienced manager could reasonably be expected to have achieved. The remaining KSBs were mapped to the module learning outcomes to be studied. The APEL process started with an assessed professional dialogue and written career profile which provided an opportunity for a conversation around key

concepts and questions. This was followed by three one-day workshops in which learners discussed key concepts and debated the application of these to their practice. These sessions supported the translation of learning from work into academic credit. The portfolio had three question-focused pieces of written work mapped to the CMDA KSBs and reflected in the program level learning outcomes for the degree. Each piece of work was supported by a maximum of three pieces of evidence to represent or illustrate practice.

A strong sense of inclusion, belonging and collaboration was developed through the workshops whereby cohorts of learners were able to explore images of "otherness of what being a student means (me/not like me) and images of what knowledge is- and where it comes from" (Pokorny et al., 2017). This is important in supporting a successful transition into the degree program. Across multiple cohorts, very few learners withdrew from the APEL process and all who completed were successful in progressing to the taught modules. They all achieved good degrees (first or upper second class) and merits or distinctions in their Apprenticeship Award.

CONCLUSION

The RPLTT model applied to the CMDA provided a heuristic for the design of an APEL route in a degree apprenticeship that successfully translated the apprentices' learning into an academic context. It also provided "a way to see and be seen—to construct assessment relationships where the candidate is acknowledged and valued whilst the assessor and assessment process are in return valued and found to be credible" (Hamer, 2012). It promoted self-confidence and facilitated an identity as a knowing person through interactions with others. Learners valued the APEL process and its outcomes, as well as its preparation for

degree study. This contrasts with the representation of APEL as a burdensome and isolating process for learners. The next step is for future research to use the model on degree apprenticeships in other disciplines and institutions.

DECLARATIONS

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Pokorny H: Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethical approval
The study protocol was approved by the University of Westminster as part of a doctoral study.

Informed consent
Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication. The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they are also allowed to stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they can refuse to respond to any question asked during the review.

Conflict of interest
The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement
No additional data.

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