THE INFLUENCE OF THE LEARNER PROFILE ON RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) ASSESSMENT

by

MARIA SNYMAN
(née WASSERMAN)

submitted in accordance with the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Education

In the subject

Curriculum Studies

at the

University of South Africa

Supervisor: Dr G van den Berg

June 2013
STATEMENT

Student number: 39233448

I declare that

The influence of the learner profile on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessment is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

15 June 2013

SIGNATURE

DATE
DEDICATION

In memory of my parents

Johan and Bettie Wasserman

"To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe."

- Anatole France -

How to make your dreams a reality

Making your dreams a reality takes planning and implementation. Learn how and start today...

Dedicated to my children

Leonardo, Naomi and Johan-Georg

For believing in me - and for the joy they bring to my life
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my appreciation and gratitude to:

- Dr G van den Berg for her professional guidance, mentoring and motivation and for being available to provide advice at any given time;

- Prof G Kamper for being prepared to act as independent co-coder, and for sharing his wisdom, knowledge and experience;

- Friends - Christelle, Susan, Theunie, Tania and Lisa for practical assistance and for motivation;

- My three children and my sister, Elna, for their constant motivation;

- My RPL students for their willingness to share their life stories, learning experiences and dreams with me;

AAN GOD AL DIE EER!
ABSTRACT

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an assessment process through which experience gained outside academic contexts is recognised. The purpose of the research was to determine the influence the learner profile has on RPL assessment. To realise the purpose, the learner profile was described and consequently learning outcomes formulated for a portfolio workshop. The method which the study followed was a qualitative interpretative approach. The research comprised a literature study about adult learning theories that served as a theoretical framework for the study, as well as an overview of RPL assessment, followed by an empirical study. The empirical research component followed a multiple data collection method. The personal life stories of the research participants were analysed in order to compile a learner profile. The role the workshop played was determined from a learner perspective by means of an open questionnaire for participants. It included a collection of workshop photographs. Finally, the reflection of a group of RPL learners about their personal learning experiences was analysed.

The research found that the learner profile included distinctive personal traits, such as motivation, task orientation, a sense of responsibility and an orientation towards the future. The nature of the learner profile as well as of informal learning gained within diverse learning contexts require directed preparation for assessment. The learners regarded the portfolio workshop as a sustainable learning process and as a transformational learning experience. The role the workshop played was multidimensional, as it served as preparation for compiling the portfolio. It also empowered and prepared the learner on a personal level for the context of tertiary education.

Based on the research findings, the recommendations for an RPL approach should include the following: Firstly, the learner’s voice should be afforded recognition. Secondly, preparation for assessment is essential. Thirdly, the preparation should follow an approach of assessment as a sustainable learning process. Finally, the learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop make a contribution to support the learners in bridging the learning contexts of informal learning and academic learning.

The research makes a valuable contribution, as the empirical research shows that the holistic learner profile guides the approach to assessment. The mission of RPL to bring about transformation will only become a reality if a learner-centred approach recognises and empowers the learner on a personal and academic level.
Key terms: Recognition of prior learning, assessment, learner profile, portfolio workshop, assessment as a sustainable learning process.
Die Erkenning van Vorige Leer (EVL) is ‘n assesseringsproses waardeur ervaring wat buite akademiese kontekte verwerf is, erken word. Die doel met die navorsing was om die invloed van die leerderprofiel op EVL-assessering te bepaal. Om die doel te bereik, is die leerderprofiel beskryf en voortvloeiend daaruit leeruitkomste vir ‘n portefeuiljewerkswinkel saamgestel. Die metode wat die studie gevolg het, was ‘n kwalitatiewe interpretiewe benadering. Die navorsing bestaans uit ‘n literatuurstudie oor volwasse leerteorieë wat as teoretiese raamwerk vir die studie gedien het, asook ‘n oorsig oor EVL-assessering, gevolg deur ‘n empiriese studie. Die empiriese navorsingskomponent het ‘n meervoudige dataversamelingsmetode gevolg. Die navorsingsdeelnemers se persoonlike lewensverhale is geanaliseer om sodoende ‘n leerderprofiel saam te stel. Die rol van die werkswinkel is vanuit ‘n leerdersperspektief bepaal deur middel van ‘n ope-vraelys aan deelnemers, wat ‘n versameling werkswinkel-foto’s ingesluit het. Laastens is die reflektering van ‘n groepie EVL-leerders oor hulle persoonlike leerervaringe ge-analiseer.

Die navorsing het bevind dat die leerderprofiel onderskeidende persoonlike kenmerke, soos motivering, taakgerigtheid, ‘n verantwoordelikhedsin en ‘n toekomsgerigtheid insluit. Die aard van die leerderprofiel, asook die aard van informele leer verwerf binne diverse leerkontekte vereis gerigte voorbereiding tot assessering. Die leerders het die portefeuiljewerkswinkel as ‘n volhoubare leerproses en as transformasionele leerervaring beskou. Die rol van die werkswinkel is meervoudig, aangesien dit dien as voorbereiding tot die saamstel van die portefeuilje, asook die leerder op persoonlike vlak bemagtig en voorberei vir die konteks van tersiêre onderrig.

Die aanbevelings tot ‘n EVL-benadering behoort, op grond van die navorsingsbevindinge, die volgende in te sluit. Eerstens moet erkenning aan die stem van die leerder gegee word, tweedens is voorbereiding tot assessering noodsaaklik en derdens behoort die voorbereiding ‘n benadering van assessering as ‘n volhoubare leerposes te volg. Laastens lewer die leeruitkomste vir die portefeuiljewerkswinkel ‘n praktykgerigte bydrae om die leerder te ondersteun om die leerkontekte van informele leer en akademiese leer te oorbrug. Die navorsing lewer ‘n waardevolle bydrae aangesien die empiriese navorsing toon dat die holistiese leerderprofiel die benadering tot assessering rig. Die missie van EVL om
transformasie te weeg te bring, sal slegs ‘n realiteit word indien ‘n leerdersentreerde benadering die leerder op persoonlike en op akademiese vlak erken en bemagtig.

Sleutel terme: Erkenning van Vorige Leer, assessering, leerderprofiel, portefeuille-werkswinkel, assessering as volhoubare leerproses.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................. 1
1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM ......................... 4
1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM ........................................... 8
1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES ......................... 10
1.5 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH .................................. 11
1.6 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY ................ 13
1.7 AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY ........................................... 14
1.7.1 Research design ............................................. 14
1.7.2 Research method ............................................. 16
1.7.2.1 Literature review ....................................... 16
1.7.2.2 Empirical research ..................................... 16
1.7.2.3 Data collection and analysis ......................... 16
1.7.2.4 Sampling ................................................. 17
1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ................................. 17
1.9 RESEARCH PROGRAMME ...................................... 19
1.10 SUMMARY ..................................................... 20

CHAPTER 2
THE CONTEXT OF THE LEARNER PROFILE: RPL AND ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

2.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................. 22
2.2 ADULT EDUCATION ............................................. 23
2.3 THE INTERRELATEDNESS BETWEEN ADULT LEARNING THEORIES AND RPL .................. 26
2.4 THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE CONTEXT OF ADULT LEARNING THEORIES .................. 28
2.4.1 The adult learner as a non-traditional learner ......... 28
2.4.2 The adult learner as a mature learner .................... 28
2.4.3 Personal attributes: an andragogical perspective .... 29
2.4.4 The adult learner: alternative perspectives ............ 31
2.4.5 Roles and responsibilities as a source of experience 32
2.4.6 The adult learner defined within RPL context ........ 33
2.5 ADULT LEARNING THEORIES: TOWARDS A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK .................. 34
2.5.1 Motivation for a framework .............................. 34
2.5.2 The theoretical framework .............................. 36
2.6 APPROACHES TOWARDS ADULT LEARNING THEORIES ........................................... 39
2.6.1 Learner-based approach 39
2.6.1.1 The adult learner as a motivated learner 43
2.6.1.2 Learner-based approach: summary 45

2.6.2 Context-based approach 46
2.6.2.1 Critical theory 47
2.6.2.2 Feminist pedagogy 49
2.6.2.3 Social learning theory 50
2.6.2.4 Situated learning 51
2.6.2.5 Communities of practice 51
2.6.2.6 Context-based approach: summary 56

2.6.3 Knowledge-based approach 56
2.6.3.1 The non-Western perspective of knowledge 57
2.6.3.2 Diverse forms of knowledge 57
2.6.3.3 Towards a holistic approach of knowledge 59
2.6.3.4 Knowledge-based approach: summary 61

2.6.4 Process-based approach 61
2.6.4.1 Constructivism 62
2.6.4.2 Transformative learning 64
2.6.4.3 Critical reflection as a process 66
2.6.4.4 Transformative learning: self-authoring 69
2.6.4.5 Narrative learning 70
2.6.4.6 Process-based approach: summary 70

2.7 SUMMARY 71

CHAPTER 3
RPL ASSESSMENT: AN OVERVIEW IN CONTEXT

3.1 INTRODUCTION 72
3.2 THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF RPL 73
3.2.1 Concepts of RPL: acronyms 73
3.2.2 Perspectives of RPL 76
3.2.3 RPL-related case studies 77

3.3 THE CONTEXT OF RPL IN SOUTH AFRICA 81
3.3.1 A background overview 81
3.3.2 The current context of RPL practices: challenges 84
3.3.3 RPL within a higher education context 87
3.3.3.1 A tool for transformation 87
3.3.3.2 Possibility and potential 88

3.4 THE DEVELOPMENT, SUPPORT AND PROMOTION OF RPL PRACTICES 91
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

5.1 INTRODUCTION 149
5.2 ANALYSIS OF PRIOR LEARNING PAPERS 151
5.2.1 Life journey as a central storyline 151
5.2.2 Discussion of themes 154
5.2.2.1 Theme 1: Personal attributes and characteristics 155
5.2.2.2 Theme 2: Multiple learning contexts 162
5.2.2.3 Theme 3: Developed and acquired knowledge and skills 164
5.2.2.4 Theme 4: Process of growth and development 168
5.2.3 Summary 169
5.3 FEEDBACK ON THE ELECTRONIC QUESTIONNAIRE 170
5.3.1 A general overview of the role of the portfolio workshop 170
5.3.2 Discussion of themes 175
5.3.2.1 Theme 1: Personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity 175
5.3.2.2 Theme 2: Cooperative learning context 178
5.3.2.3 Theme 3: Knowledge and skills gained 181
5.3.2.4 Theme 4: Transformational and developmental learning process 185
5.4 TRIANGULATION OF INTEGRATED FINDINGS 191
5.5 THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR 196
5.6 SUMMARY 197

CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION 199
6.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS 200
6.2.1 Theoretical component 200
6.2.1.1 Adult learning theories 200
6.2.1.2 RPL assessment 203
6.2.2 Empirical component 205
6.2.2.1 Findings on the description of the learner profile 205
6.2.2.2 Findings on the role of portfolio development workshop 207
6.3 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

6.3.1 What is the learner profile? 210
6.3.2 What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for assessment? 213
6.3.3 How does the learner profile influence learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop in RPL assessment? 215

6.3.3.1 Personal learner profile 216
6.3.3.2 Multiple learning contexts of adult learners 217
6.3.3.3 Knowledge and skills acquired through experience 218
6.3.3.4 Process of growth and development 219

6.3.4 The influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment 220

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS 223

6.4.1 RPL assessment within a national context 223

6.4.1.1 Listen to the voice of the learner 223
6.4.1.2 Develop a sustainable RPL assessment strategy 224
6.4.1.3 Barriers should be addressed during preparation for assessment 224

6.4.2 RPL assessment within an ODL context 224
6.4.3 RPL assessment at learner level 226

6.5 REFLECTIONS ON STUDY 227

6.5.1 Contribution 227
6.5.2 Limitation 228

6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH 228

6.6.1 RPL as sustainable assessment practice 228
6.6.2 Mentoring 229
6.6.3 Access to postgraduate studies 229
6.6.4 Success rate of RPL candidates 229

6.7 CONCLUSION 230

BIBLIOGRAPHY 231

LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>RPL acronyms</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>RPL assessment</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>An example of categories</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Summary of data referencing</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.2</td>
<td>The learner profile</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.3</td>
<td>Data B (role of the portfolio workshop)</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 6.1  The learner profile  211
Figure 6.2  The influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment  220

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  Examples of prior learning papers
APPENDIX B  The electronic questionnaire
APPENDIX C  A collage of workshop photographs
APPENDIX D  An electronic feedback form (Google Docs)
APPENDIX E  Written invitation to participants to participate in research
APPENDIX F  Completed participant reply form
APPENDIX G  Feedback from participant at national conference
APPENDIX H  Letter of permission for ethical clearance
APPENDIX I  Examples of analysed prior learning papers
APPENDIX J  Feedback on questionnaire: column 1
APPENDIX K  An example of analysed data: feedback on questionnaire
APPENDIX L  An example of analysed data: learner feedback at national conference
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND ORIENTATION

The pages are still blank
But there is a miraculous feeling
Of the words being there
Written in invisible ink
And clamouring to become visible
Vladimir Nabokov

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an assessment process recognising adult learners’ prior informal, non-formal and formal learning. It is based on the principle that not only do people learn inside formal education, but that valuable learning, worthy of recognition and credits, takes place outside formal structures.

Within the South African educational and training context, there is a commitment to the principles of RPL because the government perceives RPL as a cornerstone for transformation in the national education and training initiatives. The context of RPL in South Africa is promulgated in various national Acts, legislation and policy initiatives, which make the implementation of RPL a given, and not an option. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2010:V) confirms that “every piece of higher education policy since 1996 has set access as one of the most important goals for the higher education system in the democratic transition”. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008 states objectives of integration, access and redress, mobility and progression, and quality. RPL is considered key for both the achievement of these objectives and for the full development of lifelong learning. The national commitment to lifelong learning implies a responsibility to ensure personal growth of learners and their sustainable development as learners.

The implementation of RPL has different purposes, the main ones being RPL for access, for credits and for advancement (SAQA, 2013:6,7). The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has developed a generic RPL policy document
entitled “The recognition of prior learning in the context of the South African Qualifications Framework” as a guideline for the implementation and management of RPL (SAQA, 2002; 2013). The policy envisages that mature learners who could not previously access education and training will have the opportunity to access formal education and training through an RPL process. Frick, Leibowitz and Bitzer (2006:34-38) argue that based on a comprehensive overview of national RPL practices and research on RPL, it will only gain its rightful place if it leads to an increase in the number of learners that gain access to higher learning. As an enabling process it recognises learners’ individual knowledge, skills and potential, but a real concern is that RPL often does not consider the learner profile, pre-access context and post-access context of learners. If higher education institutions are committed to providing access to higher education, they need to ensure that students stand a reasonable of being successful (Prinsloo, 2010:5) in further studies. This commitment requires a responsibility to prepare students sufficiently for educational challenges both before and after access to degree studies.

The management and the process of the assessment and recognition of prior learning requires a holistic model (SAQA, 2002:12; 2004) that aims to ensure a developmental and learner-centred approach. It allocates a high priority to assessment as a credible process that acknowledges the need for learner support in both the pre-assessment and post-assessment phases. Core to RPL is the assessment strategy and process (Stenlund, 2010:784; Geyser, 2001:31). Assessment can be defined as a structured process for gathering evidence and making judgements about a candidate’s performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications (SAQA, 2004:54). RPL candidates as prospective learners or students need to prove through a rigorous assessment process that they have acquired the relevant knowledge, skills and competencies as claimed. The challenge in the RPL process is to support the candidates to match their unique profile with the academic opportunities and the assessment options available at an institution. RPL assessment as a holistic approach is therefore more than the “act of assessment” (SAQA, 2004:69): it values human development and acknowledges the learners’ need for support. Integrated in the assessment approach is to take into consideration different barriers to learning and assessment,
the rich diversity of knowledge, individual learning styles and the rights of learners (SAQA, 2002:12).

The learner profile, the context and the situation of the typical candidate applying for RPL are unique, since every candidate is unique and brings his or her life and work experience, a unique context and specific needs to the process. As a result, an RPL candidate requires much more guidance, direction, support and continual mentoring than the average traditional student at a higher education institution. Considering the context of prior learning assessment in higher education, Motaung (2009:78) mentions that barriers such as fear of failure and negative experiences in previous learning settings demand a commitment to the assessment process. In an RPL for access process candidates apply for an alternative access route into a programme of learning (SAQA, 2013:8) based on training, relevant life and work experience and skills that have been acquired outside a formal academic learning programme. However, workplace learning is often tacit or implicit and learners may be unaware of the extent of their own learning. Moore and Van Rooyen (2002:293, 294) draw attention to the reality that many adults “acquired a great deal of knowledge and experience” through non-formal training, but were excluded from further education because the learning was not recognised. The authors state that this knowledge and these abilities are equal and often “superior” to those acquired by students who followed the traditional routes. However, experience is not sufficient to ensure success at university level, as experience by itself does not promote learning. Van Kleef (2006:70) confirms that experience does not necessarily produce the relevant learning required of an RPL assessment process since the prior learning often exists “below the surface” (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Howell, Howorth, Lamarre & Van Kleef, 1999:10). RPL assessment requires a process to make prior knowledge, experience and skills visible in a format ready for assessment.

The current RPL context indicates a need to put policy into practice at learner level, where practice should go beyond policy and legislation and benefit the learner. The reason is that RPL practice is in essence a pedagogical process providing possibilities for the learner (Harris, 2000:35; Harris, 2006:7, 9; Ralphs, 2011). This learner-centred approach towards RPL implementation is supported by Samuels (2011), who states that RPL is pivotal in the transformation agenda within education,
since the hopes and dreams of many people are associated with the opportunities of RPL. However, the general absence of learner-centredness (Van Rooy, 2002) still poses a big challenge for education and training. There is also a feeling that RPL should be made available more widely (Osman, 2003). This concern is echoed by a remark from a student in a portfolio workshop that “RPL is the best kept secret”.

This current research is based on my personal involvement as an RPL academic coordinator at an open distance learning (ODL) institution for higher education. RPL candidates have the opportunity to gain access to higher education through an RPL mature learner assessment programme. My involvement in the RPL for access programme made me aware of both the need to be sensitive to the learners’ needs and expectations, and of the multipurpose role of a portfolio development workshop in the RPL assessment process.

The introduction stated the current context of RPL in this country and the need to prepare candidates for the assessment. The learner-centred approach towards RPL assessment as a developmental and holistic approach informs the background to the problem.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Non-traditional learners applying for access to higher education experience a variety of barriers, one being the RPL assessment. The target group of this study was required, as part of the assessment, to compile a portfolio of evidence according to rigorous academic guidelines. The extent of this challenge can be supported by the fact that even for academic staff members, compiling a portfolio is not as easy as it seems. The demands of the challenge to compile a portfolio are highlighted by Tisani (2008:553), who mentions that in a programme for new lecturers she experienced that the production of a portfolio for assessment could be a “major hurdle”. For non-traditional learners who are required to compile a portfolio based on evidence from non-formal and informal learning and who are not accustomed to the academic environment, portfolio assessment holds an even bigger challenge. Joossten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel and Jochems (2008:63) found that RPL candidates are not automatically able to evaluate their own experiences for
presentation in a portfolio. To be able to cope with the “difficult process of self-evaluation of non-formal and informal prior learning experiences and composing a portfolio” (Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:58) certain qualities are required of the learners, such as self-knowledge, confidence about the process of learning, the ability to reflect and to do self-assessment of their own learning.

Kizito (2006:134) raises a concern about the mismatch between what learners as RPL candidates know and can do and the prescribed academic requirements. The assessment demands a responsibility of RPL candidates to provide relevant and sufficient evidence even though they are often not familiar with academic demands. To link their experience to formal learning outcomes, these students “confront more” than traditional students (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004:140, 144). Prior learning assessment is imbedded in a specific context and is associated with a definite purpose, such as RPL for access. The different contexts of knowledge imply a gap where candidates need support and assisted guidance to be able to make the transition from using knowledge and skills in a pre-assessment context, such as a workplace, to using knowledge and skills in the assessment and post-assessment context of higher education after access. Different authors refer to the role of RPL as a process of building bridges between different cultures and contexts of knowledge (Geyser, 2001:30; Cameron, 2006:130;131; Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003:79). In the context of preparation the portfolio development process is considered as providing the “reflective bridge” (Michelson, Mandell & Contributors, 2004:2). As cornerstone to this research, I argue this gap can be bridged with a learner-centred portfolio development workshop as preparation for assessment. Peters, Pokorny and Johnson (2004:168) refer to the preparation for assessment process as “cracking the code” to enable learners to articulate prior learning in terms of academic learning outcomes. In this regard Michelson et al. (2004:27) mention the array of strengths and limitations of learners that influence the role of portfolio development as a learning experience that assists in creating an academic orientation towards the new learning context.

The RPL candidate may be uncertain about what the RPL assessment process entails. For a variety of reasons mature learners within this diverse target group have had little or no contact with formal or tertiary education for many years, if at all.
Aarts et al. (2003:7) confirm that research literature clearly indicates that RPL candidates’ past experiences with post-secondary education are limited. Cantwell and Scevak (2004:144) put forward a case for preparation for RPL to ensure that students’ learning matches the “expectations of university-level study”. A need for preparation for assessment is supported by the result of a study by Joossten-ten Brinke et al. (2008:63) indicating that learners are not automatically able to evaluate their life experiences and to present them in a portfolio. The preparation for RPL assessment is associated with pivotal skills such as reflection, self-assessment and self-evaluation of evidence (Houston, Hoover & Beer, 1997:184; Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:53). There are different opinions as to whether RPL candidates have already acquired these skills. Houston et al. (1997:191) mention that “students may be relatively unskilled in this area”, and Van Kleef (2007:12) remarks that adult learners tend to be more “reflective and dialectic in their thinking”. Since assessment context and purposes differ, the learner profile is a determining factor in preparation for assessment. McClean (2007) supports this viewpoint to base decisions on a learner profile, when he mentions that the learner profile should direct the assessment tool, “otherwise we are not serving the NQF”.

The motivation for preparation lies in the nature of RPL assessment which involves a mediation process from one type of knowledge and context to another. To ensure their success as RPL candidates, learners need to be equipped and empowered by the required “mediation tools required for successful transition” (Bolton, 2011a:6). Ralp hs (2013:37) emphasises that RPL candidates need to be equipped with social, cognitive and linguistic tools to articulate prior learning in relation to the specifications of the academic context. The portfolio development workshop is mostly associated with the preparation for portfolio assessment. Consequently Michelson et al. (2004:21) and Joossten-ten Brinke et al. (2008) refer to the role of a preparatory workshop as part of the accreditation process. A benefit of a portfolio development workshop is that it helps candidates to prepare for assessment, and learners have “control of the assessment process” (Simosko & Cook, 1996:94) as a “key partner”.

In my role as an RPL facilitator, I facilitated a portfolio workshop as part of RPL assessment. In RPL candidates’ feedback after attending the three-day workshop,
the following remarks were made on the evaluation forms, which workshop participants could answer anonymously. The following remarks were selected randomly:

“to **understand myself** and to look back and face the **future with confidence**”

“I learned a **lot** of things about my life”

“I met **different people** and shared ideas.”

“There is great **value**”

“It has been an **eye opener**…”

The use of terminology such as *confidence, a lot, different people, value, eye opener* and *future* are not usually associated with assessment. The feedback from participants suggests that the key role of the portfolio workshop proved to be more than just preparation for assessment, but that it benefited the participants at both an educational and personal level. They saw it also as preparation for “**future confidence**”, implying the lasting effect of the workshop. A unique characteristic of these workshops is that the attendees were extremely diverse in terms of race, age, life experience, background and career, with only one thing in common, namely that they wanted to gain access to university. An RPL experience is often associated with personal benefits. Moore and Van Rooyen (2002:294) maintain that RPL “focuses upon each individual and builds self-confidence and self-esteem”. In empirical research studies on learners’ experiences of RPL, Aarts et al. (2003:8), Lamoreaux (2005), Pasupathi, Mansour and Brubaker (2007), (Pearson, 2000) and Brown (2001; 2002), among others, report on the multiple benefits for adult learners by being involved in RPL in general. They identify benefits to the learners such as improved self-awareness, motivation, more goal-directed and having more effective study habits and attitudes. However, the role of the portfolio workshop in achieving these additional benefits, as well as the profile of learners who indeed benefit from such an experience need to be determined.

Little research has been done on the learner profile of RPL candidates. As RPL practitioners and facilitators, we tend to make assumptions about the candidate profile, based on knowledge of adult learning theories. For example, a motivated adult learner is expected to be able to work independently and would not really need
to be part of a group or a class. Because of these assumptions, I realised that it would be relevant to do in-depth research on this learner profile, supported by the warning of Flint and Associates (1999) against categorising adults into one group. This assumption is confirmed by Gravett (2001) when she argues that the existence of a generic adult learner is a myth. The uniqueness of the learner profile is confirmed by Castle, Munro and Osman (2006:6), who state that mature adult learners do not form a homogeneous group.

To give real meaning to the opportunity to RPL candidates as mature learners to prove their competence through an assessment process, it is necessary to ensure RPL as a sustainable strategy (SAQA, 2002) that considers both the learner and the demands of the assessment. Herein lies the significance of this study – the demands of the assessment tool are a given, but an awareness of the influence of the learner profile on a preparation approach, such as a portfolio workshop, will contribute to sustainable assessment with lasting educational and personal benefits. At the “core of learner-centredness” (Frick et al., 2006:34) lies the learner's experience as prior learning and personal attributes. The learner-centredness requires a responsibility of the assessing institution to ensure sufficient support to contribute to success in the assessment process.

The research problem is stated against the background of the demands of portfolio assessment for the specific target group. The portfolio workshop is the preferred option as preparation for assessment, but the learner profile should be considered in determining the role of the workshop to ensure successful assessment. The background to the problem leads to the determination of the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

At the centre of the research problem are the RPL candidate as adult learner, the demands of RPL assessment and the portfolio development workshop as preparation.
Frick, Bitzer and Leibowitz (2007b:132) refer to the management of the assessment of prior learning in a learner-centred manner, which sets certain expectations of an RPL assessment approach in that the learner profile could influence RPL assessment. The need for a learner-centred assessment approach is supported by Osman and Castle (2006:518), who recommend that the institution consider the students’ needs and recognise the social world and the workplace outside the world of academics. The relevance of the learner profile is argued as being the “point of departure in RPL” (Van Rooy, 2002:75). Within the context of RPL in higher education, Smith (2003b:182) touches on the RPL candidate profile when she refers to the view of academic assessors that RPL candidates have a specific profile and they require different guidance and support than traditional learners. The RPL policy of the higher education institution where this study was conducted takes a learner-centred approach, which makes the RPL candidate a “stakeholder” in the RPL process (Unisa, 2005b:2) with certain rights and responsibilities. Therefore it is essential to know who this learner is, what their needs are and what barriers to assessment and higher education this candidate may experience. Assessment is no longer viewed as something that is being done to learners, but it is a “dynamic learning process” (Simosko & Cook, 1996:vi, 21) where the learner as an active partner is required to take considerable responsibility. This research considers Osman’s statement (2003:5) that, based on involvement in a national research programme, she realised the lack of focus on matters such as “who the adult learner was, what needs this adult learner had, in terms of both personal and career plans”.

In an RPL assessment process the challenges are that a learner-centred RPL assessment approach should:

- consider the learner profile in the assessment approach
- include a portfolio development workshop as learner-centred preparation for portfolio assessment
- ensure that the portfolio workshop as a learner-centred RPL assessment approach bridges the gap between the RPL candidate’s prior learning context and the adult learner prepared for the demands of both assessment and higher education
The research problem is stated as follows:
How does the learner profile influence RPL assessment?
The main research question is supported by the following three subquestions:

1. What is the learner profile?
2. What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for RPL assessment?
3. How does the learner profile influence learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop in RPL assessment?

Against the background of the research problem, the research aim and objectives are stated.

1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research was to investigate and explain the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. To be able to achieve the aim of the research, the research objectives were to:

- compile and describe the learner profile of RPL candidates
- determine the role of the portfolio workshop for this learner profile as preparation for RPL assessment
- compile guidelines towards learning outcomes for a portfolio development workshop

To be able to achieve the main research aim and the objectives, a literature study on the adult learning theories and on RPL assessment was done. Since I argue that RPL assessment should follow a learner-centred approach, empirical research was done to include learners’ own perceptions and authentic experiences. The theoretical framework constitutes relevant and appropriate theories as theoretical framework for an empirical study (Delport & Fouche, 2009:262). The influence of the learner profile on assessment is described considering both the learner profile and the role of the portfolio workshop as preparation for assessment.
1.5 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

The motivation for this research must be seen against the national background of RPL as a tool for transformation committed to lifelong learning and access. One of the focal points of RPL is that it is “an instrument for facilitating access to higher education for mature learners who do not have the requisite entrance requirements” (Castle, 2003:30). The CHE report (2000:66) confirms the responsibility of RPL to increase the intake of adult learners, but the process should make provision for the specific needs of these learners. This study addresses this need, to ensure that RPL for access will indeed “open opportunities in higher education” (Castle & Attwood, 2001:72) and provide opportunities to informally qualified, mature, working adults and people “who’s academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked” (Kistan, 2002:169). However, Kizito (2006:128) warns that although RPL has the potential to open access, her concern is that there is “very little literature on RPL in the distance higher education context”. The study will contribute to a better understanding of the learner profile and of preparation for RPL assessment within an ODL context.

Frick et al. (2006:74) refer to the support from the Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education: Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997) and SAQA (2004) to use RPL to admit “non-traditional learners into higher education” and to “develop access and admission policies” that will draw these learners into the centre of the higher education system. This goal will only be achieved if RPL is supported by considerable research and when it provides access to higher education for a greater number of learners (Frick et al., 2006:38). In this regard Lloyd (2012:52) recommends that the Minister could require institutions to revisit access opportunities to include RPL assessment for furthering lifelong opportunities for adults; however, empirical research is required in this field.

I argue that in a process of RPL for access, consideration of the learner profile is key in the assessment strategy. Therefore empirical research on a learner profile and the role of a portfolio workshop in the assessment process may influence a new awareness of the role of RPL for access. If the research problem concerning a learner-centred assessment approach is not addressed at learner level, the sound
implementation of RPL for access within a larger context, i.e. national level, cannot take place.

Although RPL implies a learner-centred approach, with the purpose to empower the mature learner, the current focus of RPL in South Africa is on policy and procedures. The implementation of RPL in South Africa has a distinct political agenda (Geyser, 2001; Van Rooy, 2002), and as a researcher and RPL practitioner I acknowledge the initial political strategy of RPL, namely redress. However, there is a need to focus on the specific needs of the candidates who should benefit from the policy and process, taking it back to one of the original purposes where, as a union-linked approach (Harris in Andersson & Harris, 2006), it should benefit the experienced worker as the learner. As learner-centred practice it should see adults as “autonomous, holistic beings” (Cretchley & Castle, 2001:487-501) whose prior learning experiences provide a foundation for further learning. Despite the awareness of a learner-centred approach to RPL, there is still a concern that adult learners are seemingly not a priority (Buchler, 1999:34), although in the South African context their skills are needed and they have a critical role to play based on their accumulated knowledge and experience.

RPL should be committed to serve the needs of mature learners with experience, before a situation similar to that in Australia happens. There, RPL has failed to fulfil its promise to benefit the “traditionally under-presented and disadvantaged groups to access formal education” (Cameron, 2006:119). However, within the South African context there is a need to know more about the learner profile because “little is known about mature students’ prior learning from experience, the barriers they experience in accessing higher education, or the ways in which RPL may assist them” (Castle, 2003:29).

An uncertainty about what the learner profile constitutes is even reflected in the often interchanging use of terminology, such as non-traditional, mature learner and adult learner. Non-traditional learners are defined in terms of their prior learning, maturity and special attributes not yet realised by their traditional counterparts (Wyatt, 2011:13). As mature students or adult learners, a distinctive characteristic of non-traditional learners is the fact that they most often delay enrolment at a post-
secondary institution, or would not normally qualify for entry into mainstream programmes (Ntsoe, 2010:40). RPL candidates are often associated with being non-traditional learners, despite objections to this term. Maehl (2004:5) refers to Kasworm’s argument (1993) that the term “non-traditional” marginalises adult learners as outsiders and unequal participants in higher education rather than respecting their worth and dignity. Even if a tertiary institution manages to facilitate access through alternative routes for mature students who have “an abundance of experience” (Beekman, 2001:19), non-traditional learners may feel like outsiders if their worth as mature learners is not valued. The awareness of a learner profile will contribute to creating an approach similar to the international landscape in higher education where the “non-traditional adult student has become traditional” (Fiddler, Marienau & Whittaker, 2006:v11).

This need for national research on RPL is not only limited to RPL for access to higher education. Deller (2007:10), Breier and Burness (2003) and Harris (2006:26) refer to the lack of qualitative RPL research and suitable RPL case studies. At national discussion forums, concerns are raised about the need for national context-sensitive RPL procedures for the sound implementation of RPL in South Africa (Smith, 2007; Blom, 2007; Sutherland, 2007). One of the aims of the RPL policy is to demonstrably change the lives of RPL candidates by enabling candidates to attain recognition of the appropriate skills and knowledge required for personal development and the employment market (SAQA, 2002; 2013:4). Whittaker, Whittaker and Clearly (2006:316) argue that RPL can only achieve the transformative goal and contribute to widening access strategies if an RPL model explicitly supports the learner identity. This study intends to make a contribution to this aim by creating an awareness of the influence of the learner profile on the assessment process.

1.6 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is not to provide a complete model of a learner-centred RPL assessment approach, but to determine the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. The term “RPL assessment” includes both the pre-assessment and post-assessment phase.
This RPL study is contextualised within an ODL higher education institution that subscribes to the principles of learner-centredness, removal of barriers to access, the provision of relevant learner support and the recognition of prior learning. The context of the target group is adult learners older than 23 years, who are required to have at least three years’ relevant experience in a specific field. They have not obtained the required school-leaving certificates needed for university entrance, but they have acquired skills and competencies through life and work experience. They feel that their prior life learning stands them in good stead to prove through an assessment process that they deserve a second opportunity to gain entry to formal studies at a higher education institution.

The influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment considers the learner profile of only the target group pertaining to the study and the role of portfolio workshops only for RPL for access to undergraduate studies. An overview of the research design and methodology is given and further details appear in chapter 4.

1.7 AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.7.1 Research design

A research enquiry can be placed within different paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:170-173) categorise the paradigms as positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism and participatory. The usefulness of a constructivist paradigm is that it acknowledges participants’ voices and that it aims at an understanding of participants’ reality and life; therefore the researcher in a qualitative study holds the position of facilitator being able to report on the authentic reality of people’s life contexts and experiences. Different epistemological approaches are associated with a qualitative inquiry, being interpretivism, hermeneutics and social constructivism (Schwandt, 2000:189). An interpretivist approach aims to find meaning in the participants’ lives and experiences, making it the suitable theoretical perspective for the inquiry.
As a research design the qualitative interpretive approach as constructivist paradigm was used, since it focuses on meaning in context and was sensitive to the facilitator’s interpretation of the students’ experiences (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1994:145). A qualitative case study research approach (Stake, 1995) based on a constructivist paradigm allowed the researcher to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009:4), such as adult learners’ life stories and a workshop experience. A benefit of a qualitative research approach is that it involves a set of “interpretive material practices that makes the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). In this study the interpretative approach was useful because it is able to capture participants’ experiences of the RPL assessment process rather than focus on the outcome. Osman (2003:19) further supports the use of a qualitative framework to truly document the “experiences of participants in the RPL courses”, supporting the aim of the research to provide a learner-centred perspective on RPL assessment.

Krefting (1991:214) refers to Kirk and Miller’s working definition of qualitative research, which holds relevance for the research paradigm as it includes interacting with participants in “their own language, and own terms”. As an inductive research approach it has the potential to result in a richly descriptive research product.

A qualitative research approach makes certain demands of the researcher. The researcher as the primary research instrument takes responsibility for data collection and analysis. As a researcher and facilitator, I subscribe to a qualitative approach that calls for learning about participants’ views and reporting their stories situated within a context. My role as researcher and facilitator is fully disclosed in chapter 4, section 4.4. The research comprised two main methods: a literature review of adult learning theories and RPL assessment, and an empirical study. To further contextualise the problem, a few introductory remarks are made, as the literature overview is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.
1.7.2 Research method

1.7.2.1 Literature review

The role of the literature review is to provide a theoretical overview of adult learning theories and RPL assessment to guide the research process (Fouche & Delport, 2009:83, 84). It assists in describing the underlying assumptions of the research question and leads to the development of a theoretical framework to allow for the interpretation of the empirical research. The theoretical framework supports the credibility of a description of the learner profile and the learning outcomes for a portfolio workshop.

1.7.2.2 Empirical research

Although chapter 4 provides a comprehensive motivation for the need to include an empirical research component, a few introductory sentences give background to the nature of the study. The reason for the inclusion of empirical research was to capture the authentic experiences, descriptions and personal reflections of RPL candidates as research participants. Since the literature about RPL is considered to be mainly descriptive (Joossten-Ten Brinke et al., 2008:63), an empirical component provides the learners’ perspectives and experiences of RPL assessment. A case study as empirical enquiry (Yin, 2009:18) allows for investigation within a “real-life context”.

Qualitative research encompasses a variety of empirical material and the researcher deploys a “wide range of interconnected interpretative practices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). Since it was relevant to this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the RPL candidate, a commitment to more than one interpretive practice was required.

1.7.2.3 Data collection and analysis

For the purpose of this case study, prior learning papers as research documentation, learners’ feedback at a national SAQA-RPL conference and open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data. In the data collection, I as the researcher
adhered to the following three principles of data collection (Yin, 1989:95): using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database and maintaining a chain of evidence. These principles ensure the validity and reliability of a case study and will be discussed in detail in the chapter on the research methodology.

These data collection methods within a qualitative paradigm allowed research participants to voice their own perceptions, feelings, needs and experiences to allow for a better understanding of the influence of the learner profile on the preparation for assessment.

1.7.2.4 Sampling

When deciding on a sample size, say Marshall and Rossman (1995), there are three broad approaches, namely convenience, judgement and theoretical sampling. The sample size should answer the research questions; therefore qualitative sampling usually requires a flexible, pragmatic approach. This means that the study required a flexible research design and as Marshall (1996) states, a cyclic approach to sampling, data collection and interpretation. According to Neuman (2003:211), qualitative researchers tend to use non-probability or a non-random sample, which means that they rarely determine the sample size in advance. I selected the documents, in this case the prior learning papers, gradually. This is purposive sampling (Neuman, 2003:213), which gave me as the researcher the right to select cases with a specific purpose in mind, namely to get information on the learner profile. I selected cases that were especially informative.

The criteria for the inclusion and the exclusion of participants will be fully disclosed in chapter 4.

1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics is important in a qualitative study, since the researcher interacts with people and, according to Mouton (2001:239), ethical issues arise from our interaction with other people. Although the research benefits a certain target group, it was not at the expense of the “interviewee’s right to privacy” (Mouton, 2001:239).
To ensure the objectivity and integrity of the research, I undertook to:

- adhere to the highest possible technical and academic standard required of qualitative research
- report the findings fully and not misrepresent them in any way or change or fabricate data
- keep and manage the recorded data in an acceptable format
- acknowledge all resources

Since this research took a learner-centred approach, and will ultimately benefit the learner, the rights of the learners or research participants could not be infringed, namely the right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, the right to participate voluntarily in this study and the right to full disclosure about the research. Therefore the researcher took the following steps in obtaining the students’ consent to participate in the study:

- Communicated the purpose of the research
- Stated the benefit of the research to them and to possible future mature learners who are going to gain access to higher education
- Confirmed that there was no financial benefit or any further academic benefit in it for them by participating voluntarily in the research
- Thanked the participants
- Offered them the opportunity to see the results of the study

As the researcher, I adhered to the general guidelines for ethical research as stated in the Unisa policy on research ethics (Unisa, 2007). Babbie (2007:26) mentions two basic ethical issues, namely voluntary participation and no harm to subjects. The information that RPL candidates share in the prior learning paper is often of an extremely personal nature. To ensure the confidentiality of the information, the researcher did not mention any particular student’s name and personal details, but rather used a numerical reference, e.g. prior learning paper 3.
To ensure that students participated voluntarily, a general letter of invitation was sent to those who had completed the RPL assessment to invite them to participate in the research. The letter explained the details of the research project and included the consent form. They had to respond by providing an e-mail address and confirming their willingness to participate in the research and to respond to the electronic questionnaire. The electronic questionnaire was then sent to research participants.

1.9 RESEARCH PROGRAMME

This research report comprises the following chapters, which also indicate the research programme that was followed:

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and background to the study. The research problem is stated and framed against the background of the need for a learner-centred RPL approach.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical overview of adult learning theories. The learner profile can be contextualised within four approaches to adult learning theories. These four are the learner-based, context-based, knowledge-based and process-based approaches. The four approaches describe the learner profile from different theoretical approaches. It critically evaluates the contribution of different theories to an understanding of the learner profile and to the RPL assessment approach. The discussion includes a description and definitions of the adult learner and of learning. It explains the differences and correlations between adult learning and adult education, as both share commonalities with RPL. The framework on adult learning theories supports the description of a learner profile and learning outcomes for a portfolio development workshop.

In chapter 3, RPL assessment is described within the different contexts of RPL: international, national and within higher education. The different contexts draw attention to the role of the learner at the centre of the assessment. Within the higher education context RPL for access is a priority, hence the need to describe and understand the learner who is involved. Against the background of RPL assessment that entails more than just assessment, RPL assessment models and possibilities of
a sustainable RPL assessment approach are investigated and discussed. The discussion gives an overview of the available body of knowledge on RPL and aims to give an overview of the current state.

Chapter 4 describes the empirical research design. The qualitative case study research approach is explained. The data collection methods and data analysis approach and steps are disclosed.

An analysis of the empirical research results is presented and discussed in chapter 5. The interrelatedness of themes as research results is discussed as this forms the basis of the research recommendations.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion to this study and recommendations are provided. This chapter aims to answer the main and the supportive research questions. The implications of the theoretical and empirical research are summarised. As a result of the theoretical and empirical research, the learner profile is described and guidelines towards learning outcomes for the portfolio development workshop are given. To address the main research question, the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment is described. The limitations of the study are stated and recommendations for further research are made.

1.10 SUMMARY

The introduction and background to the research were explained. Against national legislation and policies RPL for access is a given; however, there is a need to put policy into practice at learner level.

The research problem is that prospective RPL candidates need to be prepared for RPL assessment; an intervention is needed to bridge the gap between being a prospective candidate and an adult learner prepared for the demands of portfolio assessment and for the context after access. This transformation must be facilitated by a learner-centred RPL assessment approach that considers the influence of the learner profile on assessment. The portfolio development workshop is proposed as a suitable intervention or mediation tool to prepare RPL candidates for the demands
of portfolio assessment. To fully benefit the learner, an in-depth analysis of the RPL candidate profile is required. The learner profile guides the RPL assessment process, and therefore the role of the portfolio workshop needs to be specified.

The learner profile and the learning outcomes for a portfolio workshop need to be based on a theoretical framework. Chapter 2 contains a discussion of adult learning theories. The adult learner is defined and described within the context of both adult education and adult learning theories. Reference is made to the implications of adult learning theories for RPL assessment.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONTEXT OF THE LEARNER PROFILE: RPL AND ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

No man’s knowledge can go beyond experience.
John Locke

Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.
Albert Einstein

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The problem statement in chapter 1 established the necessity to prepare the adult learner for RPL assessment. The need for this preparation is based on the unique profile of mature learners in the RPL process, who need an intervention to bridge the gap between being a mature learner with experience and a learner ready for assessment. This intervention implies change, motivation, reflection on experience and development, concepts firmly grounded in adult learning theories.

Strydom (2002:17) states that within the context of RPL assessment a client focus is central for access to higher education. The learner is at the centre of the RPL assessment process and a high priority is allocated to learner-centredness, “the rich diversity of knowledge and learning styles and human development” (SAQA, 2002:12). In discussing a learner profile care should be taken not to stereotype the mature adult learner based on experience with this target group, own experiences as a student and assumptions. No assumptions can do justice to a learner profile, and practices cannot be based on assumptions or generalisations about the adult learner. Gravett’s contention (2001:7) that the adult learner is a myth motivates the need to contextualise the adult learner within adult learning theories. Therefore the inclusion of a discussion on adult learning theories will avoid practice based on assumptions and generalisations (Merriam, 2001b). Both the facilitator and adult learner may enter the learning context with different agendas, ambitions and missions; hence the need to structure this dynamic interaction.
Authors agree that adult learning theories provide a better understanding of the distinct and unique characteristics of adult learners. A South African study (Sibiya & Van Rooyen, 2005:482) on motivation in adult learners indicates that adult educators are not “adequately prepared to understand and act on adults’ needs in ‘the real world’”, implying the need for a better understanding of the adult learner. Educators need to consider factors such as adult lifestyles, anxieties, pressures and motivation, all relevant aspects of both adult education and the RPL context. From an RPL perspective within higher education Flint et al. (1999:111) support the notion that learning experiences should make use of current research and theory about how adults learn. A theoretical framework on adult learning theories will ensure that the learning outcomes of a portfolio workshop in an RPL assessment approach include “varied and focused pedagogical approaches” (Hsu & Hamilton, n.d.:487) for ensuring successful assessment for adult learners.

The framework of adult learning theories (Kang, 2007:206) will help to “shape images of adult learners and learning” by providing a lens (Kang, 2007:205; Merriam, 2001b) through which to describe the learner profile and to make recommendations towards learning outcomes for a portfolio workshop.

Since both adult learning theories and RPL reside within the field of adult education, a background overview of adult education follows.

2.2 ADULT EDUCATION

Adult education in South Africa draws on international perspectives, since little research has been done into adult learners in higher education in South Africa (Buchler, Castle, Osman & Walters, 2006:2). Since the RPL literature comes mainly from the field of adult education (Breier, 2008:18) whose main concern is the adult learners, it is necessary to briefly discuss adult education from a prior learning assessment perspective. The focus of RPL, adult education and adult learning theories shows similarities (Castle & Attwood, 2001:64). The relevance of adult education for this study is that it provides a point of reference for RPL since there are similarities and differences between the two concepts. Both acknowledge the fact that learning can take place within different contexts, such as the personal life.
context, work and community. Due to experience adults have developed useful personal attributes such as motivation, self-knowledge, self-discipline and focus which can contribute to personal, professional and academic development. Van Rooy (2001:61) defines adult education as learning activities engaged in by adults in either a formal or non-formal setting for the purpose of effecting personal change and growth. Adult education is further concerned with learning from experience and with the significance of experiential learning (Miller, 2000:71) in practice, capturing the main purpose of assessment of prior learning. Similar to RPL assessment, informal and incidental learning are at the heart of adult education (Marsick & Watkins, 2001:25).

A few main themes well established within the field of adult education also inform a learner-centred RPL process. These are themes such as the notion of dialogue (Rule, 2004:319), motivation (Ahl, 2006), reflection (Breier, 2008:30; Castle & Attwood, 2001: 64), experience and assessment as learning (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker, 2006:1x, x1). One of the roles of adult education is concerned with the empowerment of people and creating opportunities necessary for sustainable development (Indabawa & Mpofu, 2006:81). The relevance of considering adult education goals for RPL assessment is captured by Indabawa and Mpofu (2006:92) when they caution that since assessment is perceived as a “delicate issue” for adults, the inappropriate assessment approach can derail the envisaged empowerment.

Writers on adult learning theories define adult education from different perspectives, as it can have a certain purpose within a certain context. The term “adult education” is defined by Merriam and Brockett (1997:8) as referring to those activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning amongst those whose age, social roles or self-perception define them as adults. Key concepts in this definition are adults, learning and activities, which means that in essence adult education can be seen as a planned activity with adult learning as an integral part. Similar to adult education, RPL assessment and adult learning theories are concerned with learning.
Learning is considered as a foundational concept in adult education (Yorks & Kasl, 2002:179). The different theories may have different perspectives and views of learning, but they contribute to a better understanding of this complex phenomenon. Although learning “defies easy definition and simple theorizing” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:248), there are a few common concepts such as behavioural change, process and experience. Learning within the context of learning in adulthood is defined by Merriam and Caffarella (1999:38) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. The definition is complimented by Rogers’s definition (2002:85) of learning in terms of the interaction of the learner, the context, the learning task and processes involved. Both definitions capture central aspects of the adult learner, namely the learner, context, knowledge, the process, experience and transformation.

The RPL assessment process shows similarities to some of the key concepts in adult education. Two examples are the process of critical reflection and the premise that adult learners enter the RPL assessment context with tacit knowledge, learning, values and assumptions. In this regard Mezirow et al. (2000:26) regard adult education as the organised effort to assist learners, who are responsible adults, in understanding experience through a process of critical reflection. This perspective is further complemented by the key concept of Merriam and Caffarella (1999:206) of understanding adult education in terms of adults entering the learning situation with knowledge, learning, assumptions and values that they have gained through informal and formal situations.

Adult education is also defined in terms of a political character. Brookfield (2002:109) perceives the task of adult education to be breaking the “chains of illusion” to assist people in developing from an individualised view of life to having the capacity for reason. He draws attention to the contribution of critical theory to a better understanding of adult education (Brookfield, 2002:96), which is defined as a force for resistance that will make people aware of ideological manipulation and educate them for participatory democracy. The political agenda is voiced by Humphries and Martin (2000:279), who argue that education is not only about transmission of knowledge, but should allow for reflection on oppression and giving the marginalised a voice, through the concept of dialogical education (Freire, 1972). Within the
national context, Frick and Albertyn (2011:146) draw on Freire’s critical pedagogy (1972) to state a case for RPL as a pedagogy of hope in South African higher education. The political character of RPL as equity, access and redress draws attention to facilitate opportunities and empowerment at learner level. Adult education as political discourse reminds one of the initial political role of RPL, as described in chapter 3 of this study. A concern in projecting a skewed image of the political character of RPL is that it can be perceived as an ideological process and not as an empowering pedagogical process imbedded in adult learning theories.

Regarding the relationship between adult education and adult learning theories, Yang (2004a:142) summarises it as a matter of adult learning theory emerging from the field of adult education.

2.3 THE INTERRELATEDNESS BETWEEN ADULT LEARNING THEORIES AND RPL

The basic beliefs underpinning RPL are aligned with adult learning perspectives (Van Kleef, 2007:18). Besides informing the RPL context, an RPL assessment process should also be aligned with expectations set by adult learning theories. RPL assessment as a learner-centred practice is committed to meet expected standards; Van Rooy (2002:75) states the condition that RPL practice “must do justice to sound adult learning principles and practice”. The dynamic interaction between a discussion on the learner profile within the context of adult learning theories and RPL is justified by Flint et al. (1999:39), who indicate that the characteristics of the adult learner will continually shape the underlying assumptions that support the educational model. Kiely, Sandmann and Truluck (2004:17) maintain that adult learners “thrive” on degree studies built on adult learning theories, and the adult learning theories challenge adult education practices to adapt teaching to accommodate characteristics of adult learners (Simmons, 2007:42). RPL assessment will be enriched if methods and tools that are aligned with theoretical perspectives are used that enhance adult learners’ opportunities to demonstrate prior learning (Van Kleef, 2007:16).
The interrelatedness between assessment and adult learning lies in the nature of assessment. Assessment integrated in learning does not stand apart and the principles of assessment and adult learning show similarities (Fiddler et al., 2006:10). The commitment to include adult learning theories in an RPL assessment approach is confirmed by different authors. With the focus of RPL being to put “a value on all learning” (Moore & Van Rooyen, 2002:294) acquired formally, non-formally and informally, adult learning theories should guide an RPL assessment process. When considering the influence of the learner profile on assessment, RPL assessment should “embrace” the adult learners’ experiences (Hegarty, 2011:149); therefore inclusion of “commonly accepted adult learning principles” (Harris & Saddington, 1995:3) will do justice to the distinctive profile and experiences of the RPL candidates. Both RPL and adult learning theories are built upon the “respect for adult's learning” (Fiddler et al., 2006:12) and for the learner.

Examples of practical application of adult learning theories are the standards for the quality assessment of prior learning and the different perspectives of an RPL assessment approach, as discussed in chapter 3, section 3.2.2. Both the international standards for RPL assessment (Fiddler et al., 2006:xi) and the three models of RPL, namely the credit exchange model, developmental model and transformational model (Osman & Castle, 2002; Frick & Albertyn, 2011:149, Osman, 2003: 54-72), are integrated in adult learning theories. A practical illustration of this interrelatedness between adult learning theories and RPL is a case study that integrates adult learning theories to provide guidelines for an adult learning programme. A benchmark study (Flint et al., 1999) of top-rated adult learning institutions in the United States of America confirms the need to customise practice to meet the needs of learners. The main findings were that it is not possible to separate the characteristics of adult learners from practice, since the characteristics have direct implications for practice, and are often intertwined. It is necessary to refer to this benchmark study again in the discussion on RPL assessment in chapter 3 as this study affirms the value of RPL to the learner.

A critical evaluation and consideration of adult learning theories necessitates the definition and description of the adult learner.
2.4 THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE CONTEXT OF ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

2.4.1 The adult learner as a non-traditional learner

The adult learner is at the centre of an RPL assessment process; hence the need to understand the learner within the context of adult education and adult learning theories. Within the context of RPL in higher education in South Africa, reference is made to “mature adults” and “non-traditional learners” (Buchler et al., 2006). As mentioned in the rationale for the study (cf chapter 1, section 1.5), the term “non-traditional learner” is used in relation to mature learners and minorities who prefer experiential learning for personal development. Another connotation of non-traditional learner is mature students who are part-time students and enter university after a few years of work. They are “non-traditional” as they often are the first generation in the family to study in higher education; their parents did not study at university (Walters & Koetsier, 2006:100; Lephalala & Pienaar, 2007:4). The term “mature adult learner” (Osman & Castle, 2001; 2002) is a useful term to describe the RPL candidate, since it provides the nuance of not only an adult learner as described in the traditional sense, but also mature in terms of experience and personal attributes. Mature adults or mature learners are defined as adult learners who have left education and gained life and work experience prior to entering education again. The term “RPL candidate” is used to describe an adult learner who applies for the RPL process, but may not yet be involved in the assessment as a learner.

2.4.2 The adult learner as a mature learner

For the purpose of this study the term “adult learner” will be used in discussions on adult learning theories. The term “student” relates to a learner who is registered at a tertiary institution. The concept of adult learner is best defined and described within the context of adult learning. A useful point of departure is Kasworm’s concept (2003:3) of the adult student as “one who represents the status of age, maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, and the status of responsibility and often-competing sets of adult roles”. The definition reflects the complexity of the adult learner and the different aspects to consider, namely the
perception of culture on maturity and status, and the different roles and the individual. Castle et al. (2006) mention that mature adult learners do not form a homogeneous group, and that in discussions on mature learners in higher education the status of these learners is “frequently blurred”.

2.4.3 Personal attributes: an andragogical perspective

The adult learner is often described from an andragogical perspective. The term “andragogy” originated from the Greek word for “man”, namely aner, and the concept of andragogy is connected to Knowles (1980:38), who pioneered the field of adult learning and created an awareness of the special needs of the adult learner. It is concerned with the unique characteristics of adult learners and is involved in the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1990:54). Knowles (1990:53, 54) regarded the role of andragogy as being a unifying theory that aims to explain the role of experience and the unique characteristics of adult learners. The adult learner is further defined in terms of multiple roles such as parent, spouse and employee.

The value of andragogy (Knowles, 1990:54-65) for this study is that it contributes to defining the adult learner and forms a point of departure for further definitions. The andragogical model is based on several assumptions (Knowles, 1990:57-63). They are the adult’s need to know, the self-concept of being responsible and the role of experience in the adult’s life. As self-directed and internally motivated learners, they display certain orientations towards learning. They show a readiness to learn in order to cope with “real-life situations” and therefore have a problem-based orientation to learning where they want to apply learning to real-life situations. Adults as self-directed learners have the ability to plan and manage their own learning, are goal and activity oriented and the readiness of the learner is related to social roles. These assumptions certainly define the perfect adult learner, and do not consider negative influences such as a demotivating context, a disruptive learning history or barriers to learning. Furthermore, they do not allow for the unique characteristics of adult learners. Some of Knowles’s assumptions dovetail with similar adult learner characteristics in other learning theories, such as the motivated learner and the role of experience. As an example, Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as a process where the adult learner’s interpretation of experience is central to learning.
Knowles’s approach (1980:37, 46, 48, 50) includes the facilitator as a change agent, a supportive learning climate, active learner involvement and experience as a rich source of learning. A debatable aspect of his assumptions on adult learners is that they tend to be less open-minded, as the empirical research of this study proved the opposite. Of further value for an assessment preparation process is the adult learner’s ability to learn from experience as an “unfreezing experience” (Knowles, 1980:51). A workshop context proves to be beneficial where adults benefit from a problem-centred approach where they engage in learning, since they need immediacy of application (Knowles, 1980:53). Knowles’s definition of motivation (1980:53) to study as a response of pressure from current life situation and a need for improvement can be associated with RPL candidates.

The model is criticised for being an approach rather than a learning theory. Tennant (2006:9) provides a critical overview of Knowles’s assumptions and refers to several commentators on the andragogical approach. The lack of acknowledgement of the context of learning and experience, such as the political and cultural context and the learner as an individual, isolated from communities of learning, are justified points of critique. Clardy (2005:13, 21) asserts that andragogy does not reflect the full range of learning and educational experiences that adult learners are involved in, and does not sufficiently explain the learning process.

The purpose of this overview is not to give details of the debate, but to add to a better understanding of the complex learner profile and a need to define and describe a learner profile based on empirical findings and not on theoretical claims and assumptions. The reactions to Knowles’s assumptions and the model led to further thinking about the complex nature of the adult learner, thus inspiring debate and an interest in the adult learner. Despite criticism against the andragogical model, it has created an awareness of the adult learner as a motivated and self-directed learner who benefits from a process of reflection to structure their experiences. Merriam (2001a:3) regards the contribution of andragogy and self-directed learning as a pillar of adult learning theory.

Considering the critique against the theory, and the research focus to provide an in-depth understanding of the learner profile, it is necessary to consider other
dimensions as well. The different approaches to defining adult learners make a description rather than a narrow definition of the adult learner a more viable option.

2.4.4 The adult learner: alternative perspectives

Definitions of the adult learner are imbedded in the approach to adult learning theories and perceptions and assumptions of adult education in a certain culture and context.

From a humanist perspective (Jackson, 2009:21; Jackson, n.d.) the adult learner is defined as, among other things, a learner who has the potential and the desire to grow and for whom interpersonal relationships within the learning environment are key. Adult learners bring certain expectations to the learning context and have a purpose, focus and intention in mind (Rogers, 2002:60). Their characteristics impact on their learning process. As active participants they are actively involved in their own learning (Kim, J., 2005:30). The characteristics of being proactive, their experience and willingness to be actively involved in their own learning development, make adult learners receptive to an experiential learning event (Ekpenyong, 1999:463).

A gap in adult learning theories is that the adult is often perceived from a Western perspective, ignoring the richness of the non-Western perspective (Fasokun, Katahoire & Oduaran, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007). The identified gap impacts on defining the adult learner as it does not include the richness of alternative perspectives, and is reminiscent of Tennant’s point of criticism (2006:17) that Knowles’s theory has a white male-centred assumption. The perceptions about the learner within the African context are valuable for this study, as they create awareness of the wealth of indigenous knowledge and the needs of non-Western learners. The differences between cultures based on individualism and collectivism can influence a definition of the adult learner as maturity and adulthood can also be defined by the cultural context.

A useful way of defining the adult learner is to identify characteristics of adulthood. The characteristics that both Merriam and Caffarella (1999:393) and Rogers
identify are defined by a certain culture and context, e.g. the different roles adults take on, the level of responsibility and level of development. Different criteria, such as culture, psychological and social roles, define who is considered to be an adult. Merriam and Brockett (1997:4) explain that the definition of the adult learner is placed within a certain sociocultural context, depending on how adulthood is defined by a culture and within a social context. This can be illustrated by an example in the African culture where an adult is perceived as a person who is knowledgeable (Fasokun et al., 2005:14) and has certain obligations and certain sociocultural roles to perform, for example they need to perform rituals to become adults. The authors draw awareness to the need to include cultural context in defining the adult learner, as the word “adult” has different meanings in different situations and contexts; therefore different criteria are used for categorising an adult person within the African context. The acknowledgement of context and culture adds another dimension to defining the adult learner in terms of factors such as culture, traditions, life experiences, motivation, environment, gender, ethnic group and language. Culture adds an alternative perspective in terms of roles and responsibilities.

2.4.5 Roles and responsibilities as a source of experience

The adult learner can be defined in terms of roles and responsibilities. Within a constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning, Mezirow et al. (2000:24) define an adult learner as a person old enough to be held responsible for their acts and as a learner with more than one role, the dominant role often not that of a learner. Kegan (2000:45) refers to these different roles and experience as the “hidden curriculum” of the adult learner, where the adult learner is able to learn from different life experiences and situations, e.g. being a parent. Transformative learning theory created awareness that the adult learner is characterised by change, growth and development (Mezirow, 1997b, Mezirow et al., 2000:25, Mandell & Michelsen, 1990:22; Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989:185, Tennant, 2006:35) where this development is regarded as a learning process. Furthermore, intellectual and cognitive growth occur as a result of life experience, as adult learners have to deal with solving concrete life problems (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) often as a result of their different roles.
The claim that adult learners can be defined functionally in terms of their roles (Flint et al., 1999:1x) holds potential for an RPL assessment process, as these roles add to experience that can be assessed. What is significant about adult learners is that they fulfil multiple roles; these may include that of employer, employee, parent, spouse, community member and child of an older parent. Their principal identities have moved past the role of those of traditional or full-time students; they operate independently in society and have a variety of roles and major life responsibilities and commitments such as work, family and community involvement. These roles may impact on emotions experienced in the learning environment, since adult learners experience emotions relating to their multiple roles within both their professional and personal lives (Le Roux, 2010:77). However, acknowledging the “affective dimension of learning” (Merriam, 2008:96) in combination with intellect leads to significant learning.

Adult learning theories agree that the adult’s experience is a rich source for learning, due to adults’ constant involvement in learning in different contexts (Merriam, 2004a:199; Zemke & Zemke, 1995:32). The adult learner’s intelligence and learning may be grounded in the fact that they have life experience and wisdom and that their cognition is related to real-life tasks and experiences (Gravett, 2001:5). Learning as an active learner-centred process in which learners construct new ideas and knowledge based upon their current and past knowledge, through transformation experience (Bodner, 1986:873), means that learning implies change (Harris, 2000:3). In this regard prior knowledge and experience (Biggs, 1989:18) are considered as vital for learning and effective problem-solving strategies.

2.4.6 The adult learner defined within RPL context

Rogers (2002:34) remarks that there is still confusion despite the plethora of definitions of the concepts of the adult learner. This study will contribute to a better understanding of mature learners in the RPL process, as no South African literature appears to deal with prior educational paths of mature adult learners and their experience of RPL (Castle, 2003:32). To conclude, the following definition seems the most appropriate for this study as it relates to the principle of RPL that recognises experience. The definition encompasses key aspects of a personal
learner profile, such as distinct personal details, roles and responsibilities, development through experience and diverse knowledge context. Hsu and Hamilton (n.d.:486) quote the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) definition of adult learners: they are “generally older, may have working experience, and may have family and other non-work related responsibilities. Because of their age, knowledge, and experience, adult learners have different orientations and emphases than students who have just completed high school” and are therefore considered as mature non-traditional learners.

What is central to defining the adult learner is that every adult learner is unique with a distinctive set of experiences, cultural perspectives, learning styles and motivations (Jackson, n.d.; Jackson, 2009). The definitions and descriptions of the concepts of adult learner, learning and adult education raise questions about the identity of the adult learner, or who the learner is. The adult learner forms part of a social and cultural context, therefore the context impacts on learning, and on what is considered relevant knowledge within a learning process.

2.5 ADULT LEARNING THEORIES: TOWARDS A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

2.5.1 Motivation for a framework

The need to consider different frameworks for the discussion should be motivated. Adult learning theory is viewed by Yang (2004a:142) as a “collection of concepts, models, frameworks and theories” that allows for a comprehensive literature overview. This entails describing general concepts and notions to ensure a mutual theoretical understanding, as the theories aim at providing insights and a better understanding of learning in adulthood. Since there does not seem to be a single theory or model to explain participation in adult education due to the myriad of psychological and sociological variables (Merriam, 2008; 2001b; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:45), a framework will structure analysis and interpretation of the empirical research.

In the literature it seems as if concepts such as characteristics of adult learners, adult learning and adult education overlap and boundaries between them are
blurred. Different authors (Merriam, 2001a:3; Yang, 2004b:845; Kang, 2007:212) confirm the fragmented image, diversity and complex nature of adult learning theories. The perception of Jarvis (2006) is that since there are no clear boundaries and a lack of a unifying theory, it is not possible to produce a comprehensive theory of adult learning. However, these perceptions of complexity reflect the inherent richness and challenges of an empirical study of a learner profile.

It is necessary to acknowledge the different statements on the complexity of the theories, but the inclusion of a discussion on adult learning theories aims to contribute to the purpose of this research. In this regard, Kiely et al. (2004:18) warn that an overview of adult learning theories can become “extremely frustrating” and that the boundaries are not clear; hence the need to structure a discussion on adult learning theories according to a guiding framework. A critical evaluation of relevant learning theories provides a conceptual framework for this study, and the literature review on adult learning theories will provide a lens to analyse the data collection. ‘Critical’ implies evaluating the learning theories to contextualise the learner profile of RPL candidates who need to be prepared for assessment. Adult learning theories frame the discussion on RPL assessment to determine the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment and assessment as learning, since each theory helps us to get a better understanding of the learning process (Jarvis, 2006:197).

The plethora of adult learning theories within adult education can impact on the decision on which theories to consider. Despite Wiessner and Mezirow’s view (2000:356) about the need for a comprehensive adult learning theory framework across disciplines, theories and paradigms to build a comprehensive theory as a guide in adult education, this does not seem possible due to the dynamic nature of the adult learner and adult learning theories. The vast variety of literature on adult learning theory does not seem to contribute to a particular system as there is little agreement on the number of learning theories (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:250). The nature of learning theories is perceived as a territory that is extremely diverse, dynamic and complex without clear boundaries; a maze, an ever-changing mosaic (Merriam, 2001a; Kiely et al., 2004:17). Rogers (2002:115) argues that all learning theories are valuable for consideration and there is no “overarching theory”, and all adult learning theories can certainly contribute to a better understanding of the adult
learner. The dialectic relation between the learner profile and theories is confirmed
by Rowntree (1987:12), who states that the learner profile will impact on deciding on
an approach to teaching and support, for example whether a constructivist and
collaborative approach will be considered.

The approach to the inclusion of relevant adult learning theories in this study is
guided by my experience as the portfolio workshop facilitator of the target group and
as a reflective practitioner to gain a better understanding of the adult learner profile.
Due to the diverse nature of the RPL candidates for this study, it is necessary to
draw on a comprehensive and recognised guide to adult learning theory. Kiely et al.
(2004:17) confirm in a critical overview of Merriam and Caffarella’s work in 1999 that
it offers “the most extensive map to date” and (Yang, 2004b:842) considers it one of
the “major texts in the field”. This serves as justification for references to this text as
it provides a reliable source of reference to ensure the inclusion of relevant theories
to the theoretical framework. The value of including different theoretical perspectives
is that it will contribute to an in-depth description of the adult learner profile from a
multiple perspective. For example, a characteristic of the acknowledgement of the
adult learner’s wealth of experience is a central theme to adult learning theories, as
interpreted from different approaches (Brown, 2002:229). Learner experience can
therefore be described in terms of learning process and context.

There are different possibilities to structure adult learning theories to provide a
conceptual framework for working with adult learners (Yang, 2004a; 2004b;
Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989:193). To answer the research questions of this study, a
framework based on the four-lens model of Kiely et al. (2004) is adapted and
combined with the learning equation of Rogers (2002).

2.5.2 The theoretical framework

Based on prominent research done on adult learning and adult education, the work
by Merriam provides useful categories (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989:193) as
structure. The three categories are firstly the adult characteristics based on
andragogy, as found in the work of Knowles. The second category is adult life
situations, which imply context and culture, and the third one is changes and
development. This provides perspectives on the learner and the context. Changes and development can refer to both the learner and a process; however, notions of knowledge and learning are not specified.

Kiely et al. (2004:17) expand on this and describe a four-lens model for understanding adult learning theories, built on Merriam and Caffarella’s model. The four lenses are the learner, the process, the educator and the context. The educator as a category is added since the educator approaches the adult education system based on a certain philosophy. Each of the lenses considers key concepts and dimensions of different adult learning theories. The learner lens is concerned with the characteristics of learners, motivation and andragogy. The process lens is focused on how adults learn with key concepts of reflection, dialogue, transformational and experiential learning. The context acknowledges adult learning theories which explain situated cognition, feminism, critical pedagogy and learning communities. A concern about the inclusion of the educator as a “lens” is that the educator (Kiely et al., 2004:19) may impose assumptions and philosophical orientations on learners, whereas in RPL assessment the role of the educator is that of providing support and guidance as a facilitator, mentor and advisor. These four lenses reflect elements of a behavioural, humanistic and radical approach and overlap with the three approaches already mentioned.

Despite the support of the four-lens model for a holistic understanding of adult learning, reference to the content of learning or knowledge is lacking. Laher’s three approaches to be included in adult teaching correspond with the above-mentioned, namely andragogy, which locates the individual learner, transformational learning as process and situated cognition as context (Laher, 2007:384). From an RPL assessment context different types of knowledge and learning are fundamental concepts. A useful approach is Yang’s holistic approach (2003; 2004a; 2004 b) as it forms a basis to evaluate contemporary learning theories. The holistic approach includes the three facets and layers of knowledge: intrinsic, extrinsic and emancipatory knowledge, which cannot be seen in isolation but in dynamic interaction. The holistic approach to learning gives a better understanding of the tacit and unstructured nature of the RPL candidate’s knowledge. In reflecting on both the previous models, there is a need to include knowledge-based theories to the
framework. Knowledge is regarded as a key element in an RPL process because there are questions about the inclusion of types of knowledge and the RPL candidates need support in transferring knowledge from the work and informal context to the formal context of higher education.

The educator as a separate lens can be questioned since the educator's philosophical approach is determined by how they perceive their role in relation to the learner, the context, the learning process and the knowledge or learning content. An educator also has a certain political and cultural background and may have ideological biases that influence the other lenses, for example the preferred RPL assessment process. An educator may use a lens based on assumptions and stereotyping of the adult learner rooted in their “own epistemological preferences” (Osman, 2003:233). The educator may have a certain perception of the learner profile, learner needs and motivation and the context of experience and learning that may not be congruent with that of the learner. Sibiya and Van Rooyen (2005:482) refer to the gap between the expectations of the educator and those of the learner, which raises the concern of having the educator as a separate lens. The lens of the educator, or within the context of this study, the facilitator, should be integrated in the personal learner profile, the context, the process and the knowledge. This framework will contribute to the educator’s personal approach to practice being embedded in a “multidisciplinary base” (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989:194).

According to Flint et al. (1999:1x), adult learning can be defined based on the work of theorists in this field and by adult learning practices. Marquardt and Waddill (2004:187) refer to the five major adult learning schools as an orientation towards structuring the theories, namely behaviourist, cognitivist, humanist, social learning and constructivist. These orientations to learning will be included in the overview of learning theories according to the proposed framework.

Yang (2004a:140) summarises the purpose of adult learning as providing an explanation of what, how and why working adults learn. Since the focus is the working adult, the question “who” can be added. These guiding questions relate to the learning equation of Rogers (2002:87) as the interaction between the learner, the learning process, the context and the task or the learning content, which is similar to
the four key elements of learning of Jarvis (2006:198). Adult learning theories are discussed from a theoretical framework, including learner-based, context-based, knowledge-based and process-based perspectives on the learner. This framework will ensure that in the analysis of empirical research all aspects of a holistic learner profile are included. The first dimension of the profile is imbedded in learner-based approaches to adult learning theories.

2.6 APPROACHES TOWARDS ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

2.6.1 Learner-based approach

The approach in a learner-based theory addresses the question of who the learner is and who is involved in the learning. Learner-based approaches aim to describe the personal profile and attributes, such as Knowles’s andragogical approach (section 2.4). Although it is not possible to categorise learning theories, behaviourist, cognitivist and humanistic approaches aim to describe the learner as an individual (Rogers, 2002:101). The behaviourist approach regards the growth of a learner according to the growth and developmental model. Behaviourism is educator-centred and task-orientated; the learning process is perceived as changed behaviour where the environment and reinforcement play a role (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004:187). The influence of behaviourism is still apparent in adult education practices such as the setting of behavioural objectives, feedback and reinforcement. In the South African context the manifestation of behaviourism can be found in the standardised systems of the NQF (Deller, 2007:114). The outcomes-based assessment provides learners with the opportunity to repeat behaviour until they are successful, a notion based on the behaviourist concept of positive reinforcement. However, the main concern in a behaviourist approach is achieving observable outcomes, and not considering the learners’ context to enable them to make sense of their worlds.

Despite the current change in adult education and training away from educator-centred training, a possible contribution of behaviourism lies in the use of reinforcement that can contribute to confidence and motivation in adult learners (Kelly, 2006:47). This should, however, be used with discretion, as adult learners still
need to get opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and become self-directed learners who do not depend on external reinforcement. Behaviourist theory has implications for adult learning (Fasokun et al., 2005:52, 53) because adult learning can be promoted if a system of rewards is introduced to practically expand on adult education programmes, such as community-driven self-help projects. However, adult learners and community leaders may not be exposed to the development of problem-solving skills with such an external reward system. Konrad (2010:3) regards the contribution of behaviourism as adding value to learning experiences of non-traditional learners since rewarding learning may encourage learners who have been out of the system for some time and who are considered as “alienated” to return to learning. In this case motivation may only be external; therefore the learning context needs to ensure enhancement of inner motivation.

In contrast to behaviourism the humanistic approaches (Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1992a) focus on the learner and on creating a supportive and conducive learning environment to ensure personal growth. The learning process is viewed as a personal act to fulfil potential, as the whole person is considered. The humanist approach considers the whole person and acknowledges both cognitive and affective aspects of the learner. In a South African study on Unisa lecturers’ experiences as adult learners, Le Roux (2010:66, 70) found that emotions are directly related to learning experiences, and that certain feelings accompany the learning experience. Emotions in adult learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001:63) play a powerful role that can impede or motivate learning. Yorks and Kasl (2002:189) argue for the inclusion of emotions because the affective component allows for a practice that is conducive to whole-person learning.

The humanist perspective is associated with respect for the learner’s individuality and self-actualisation as the learner gets the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. Humanist theories stress the role of learner agency and active learner engagement within an interpersonal and an extra-personal context (Rogers, 2002:93). The social context supports the inner motivation, therefore Fasokun et al. (2005:54) regard the contribution of the humanist in terms of the relevance of relationships for the learners. The adult’s inner motivation serves further as a strong desire for achieving potential and for self-actualisation. Rogers (1996:51, 60)
believes that the adult learner is in a continuing process of growth, therefore they are actively involved in a dynamic process of learning and development. Inevitably is the need for support in a humanistic approach, therefore a contribution of the humanist approach is the development of the facilitation theory, which proposes that the responsibility of the facilitator is to establish a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning without any barriers. Brookfield (1989:204) criticises both behaviourism and the humanist approach to facilitation as that of a “consumerist” approach to please the learner, whereas the learners may not get opportunities to develop critical skills. However, different learning theories add more perspectives and expectations to the role of the facilitator, such as the expectation of the facilitator as a “change agent” (Meyer, Mabaso, Lancaster & Nenungwi, 2004:142) within the transformative learning approach.

Adult learners have diverse and heterogeneous life experiences, and an adult can be defined in terms of their experience. From a humanist perspective learning is grounded in experience. The learner-centred approach of Knowles’s assumptions creates an awareness of the wealth and value of the adult learner’s life experience. RPL candidates as adult learners have specific characteristics (Hsu & Hamilton, n.d.:486, 487) due to factors such as their considerable life and work experience and multiple responsibilities and roles. In this regard Knowles acknowledges the adult learner’s characteristics as personal attributes. Due to personal characteristics such as their life and work experience, motivation and being task-orientated, they display a readiness to learn (Knowles, 1990:57-63).

Brookfield (2002:98) further argues that humanism lacks the political and social context, where the political context can prevent a learner from developing to their full potential. It is evident that different aspects of experience and motivation can be added as characteristics of a learner profile of the mature learner. Social and historical events can influence the nature of the development, for example adult learners who were denied certain education opportunities during the apartheid era. A humanistic approach only provides a narrow description of the learner profile; hence the inclusion of different perspectives.
Although both the behaviourist and cognitive approaches are learner-centred, the cognitive approach criticises behaviourism for being too particularistic. Cognitive theories (Rogers, 2002: 90) regard learning as an internal process within the learner and the active engagement of the mind in processing data. It is therefore concerned with the thinking and mental processes of learning. As a theory of learning, it builds on the previous experience of the adult learner as the learner is able to find meaning in the newly acquired learning, based on making connections with prior learning (Jackson, 2009:21). Although this entails an active learner involvement process, it is mainly a process controlled by the structure of the knowledge, with the focus on the result of the learning, rather than on the learning process. In a preparation to RPL assessment process it is vital to include the tacit knowledge associated with prior learning and not only cognitively acquired knowledge. The belief in cognitivism is that the thinking person gives meaning to the events, can solve concrete life problems and handle real-life challenges with the implication that an adult’s cognitive ability can grow as a result of life experience. The value of inclusion of a cognitive approach is that learning is seen as a developmental process based on prior experience (Bezuidenhout, van der Westhuizen & de Beer, 2005: 6).

A learner-centred approach acknowledges the role of experiential learning, since adults’ identity often lies in their experiences. Experiential learning theory is closely associated with RPL theorisation, with reference to Kolb’s experiential cycle (1984). Experiential learning emphasises the central role that experience plays in the learning process (Kolb, 1984:20) with learning as a continuous process grounded in experience. Experiential learning is considered to be equivalent to personal growth and change (Rogers, 1969:157-64; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). In contrast to cognitive learning as pure academic learning, Rogers regards experiential learning as significant learning. Experiential learning entails personal active involvement and is self-initiated.

Learner characteristics such as the adult’s rich and diverse experience, the need for self-actualisation, the need for active participation and self-concept culminate in the motivation to “fulfil one’s potential” (Rogers, 2002:93). Motivation as a key characteristic of the learner profile justifies the comprehensive description.
2.6.1.1 The adult learner as a motivated learner

What motivates adult learners to study is one of the most widely researched topics in adult education (Scanlon, 2008:21) and has received the most attention in adult education research (Merriam, 2001a; 2001b). Researchers even argue that learning and motivation within adult education are so interrelated that learning can only be fully understood in considering motivation (Mulenga & Liang, 2008:290). Different aspects of motivation need to be considered; Fasokun et al. (2005:85) mention that human motivation is at the centre of the design and implementation of adult learning programmes.

A distinctive characteristic of adult learners is the “world of adult motivation” that they bring into a formal learning context (Castle et al., 2006:7). The adult learners’ motivation matters in their persistence to achieve. Pearson (2000: 9) argues that prior learning assessment contributes to adult learners’ persistence, since it leads to greater commitment and to a new self-perception. Motivation in adult learning is a complex matter since it relates to personal attributes such as cognition and emotions, but also to aspects of context and culture. Therefore adults participate in education for complex reasons (Scanlon, 2008:22). Knowles’s andragogical model (1990:57) regards motivation as a general characteristic of the adult learner. Their motivation to study (Knowles, 1980:53) is often as a response to pressure from their current life situation and a need for improvement. In comparison to younger students, mature students are more motivated to enter university studies for personal fulfilment (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004:134). A challenge in adult education is that each adult enrols with a complex set of beliefs, diverse life experiences, motivation and needs (Kasworm, 2003:5). This results in multiple goals (Ng, 2008:439, 433) within a diverse group. Ng further argues that different goal profiles are typical of adult distance learners whose goals, such as personal developmental goal, work-related and social enhancement goals, are important motivational factors. The implications of the multiple goals for the learning context are that they impact on learning patterns. However, motivation contributes to achieving goals.

There are different perceptions of what motivates adult learning. Rogers (2002:95) states that all adult learners are motivated, and differentiates between intrinsic and
extrinsic motivation. However, Knowles (1975) emphasises the inner motivation of adults, as a response to a life event. Maslow’s contribution (1970) lies in the hierarchy of needs, the awareness of the wide variety of needs and self-actualisation as the ultimate goal of learning. Since learning is unique to each learner, the adult learner will take from the learning situation according to their needs. From an adult learning perspective, Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs shows shortcomings, as it does not explain the adult learner’s need for social relationships and self-esteem (Rogers, 2002:97). Maslow’s claim that motivation and self-actualisation will follow naturally when the lower level needs are satisfied can also be questioned.

According to the findings of Sibiya and Van Rooyen’s study (2005) on the motivation of illiterate adult learners in South Africa, there is no difference in the higher-order needs of self-development of the poorest and the wealthiest in the group – both have a desire for self-development. On motivation in adult learners, Zemke and Zemke (1995) remark that the more life-changing events an adult encounters, the more they seek learning opportunities.

A different perspective is added when Goleman (1996; 1998) argues that emotional intelligence is the major determiner of success, since the characteristics of an emotionally intelligent adult add to motivation. Emotional intelligence entails self-awareness, self-motivation, ability to handle relationships and awareness of own emotions and the emotions of others. Mezirow et al. (2000:1) also support the relevance of emotional intelligence in their constructivist approach to learning when they propose that the requirement for effective discourse in transformative learning is emotional maturity. Not only emotional intelligence should be considered. Le Roux (2010:70) draws attention to the importance of emotions as they can restrict or motivate learning. The “feelings accompanying the learning experiences of adult learners” can contribute to the motivation of adult learners in a learning context, and therefore the affective component of the learner is considered.

It is evident that different perspectives of motivation contribute to a better understanding of it as a characteristic of the adult learner. Fasokun et al. (2005:82) capture the essence of motivation in explaining that despite the fact that motivation influences behaviour, the causes are difficult to identify since human beings are complex beings. Despite the many motivation theories with a learner-centred
approach that regard adults as being naturally motivated, Ahl (2006:385) argues that motivation should be seen as a relational concept and criticises motivation theories as a body of knowledge that privileges a Western and individualistic society. The concern is that motivation theories do not include the context, communities and women, and should therefore be contextualised and have “power implications” (Ahl, 2006:402) for the adult learner. Ignoring the contexts may cause unforeseen barriers to learning, since adults may experience a variety of barriers that impact on their motivation to learn. SAQA (2002:12) refers to the emotional, educational and cultural factors that may constitute barriers to effective learning and assessment methods. These barriers need to be identified as they may influence both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Why adults want to study at higher education level is more complex than merely a differentiation between internal and external motivation. Empirical research by Donoghue, Pelletier, Adams and Duffield (2002:61) confirms that the characteristic of being highly motivated was influential in the success rate of mature nurses who gained access through an RPL process. Due to the relevance of motivation, it should be included in adult learner support, as reinforced by the “strengths approach” (Simpson 2008:163) where enhancing learner motivation by realising the value of self-esteem and focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses is a key factor. Simpson (2008:160) considers motivation as central to a learner’s success and to effective learner support, because it considers all aspects of a holistic learner profile.

2.6.1.2 Learner-based approach: summary

Learner-based approaches consider the central need of the adult from a behaviouristic, cognitive and humanistic approach. The humanistic approach recognises the characteristics of the adult learner as a whole person. Knowles’s andragogical principles are anchored in adult learner characteristics. These characteristics include learner attributes such as a self-directed learner, the need for actualisation, the role of motivation and the adult learner’s experience. There is an awareness of the need to respect the adult learner as a responsible and self-actualised person who is an active participant in their own learning. As a learner-
centred approach to adult learning, it has drawn attention to the supportive role of the facilitator.

A concern is that the facilitator and assessor represent the academic context, which has implications for an RPL assessment approach, as the RPL candidate represents the world of work. The context-based approach creates an awareness of the importance of the context in terms of both the learner and of the learning situation. Within the context of this study, context may refer to the context in which the prior learning was gained, but also to the learning context as integrated in the assessment context.

2.6.2 Context-based approach

Sandlin, Wright and Clark (2011:7) assert in re-examining theories on adult learning and development that what is missing in theories is the consideration of cultures in which adults live and interact. The context-based approach to adult learning theories acknowledges context since learning does not take place in isolation but in relationship to the social context and the culture in which it takes place (Rogers, 2002; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:6; Merriam, 2008:94). Fasokun et al. (2005:9) make a relevant contribution to an understanding of context, namely the tendency to use one’s own culture to interpret observed behaviour in another culture. The need to develop African perspectives of adult learning theories is confirmed by Indabawa and Mpofu (2006), who describe the influence of the social context of adult learning in South Africa, where there is an integration of the collectivist and individualist contexts of Western and non-Western learning.

Rogers (2002:102) classifies human communications, social learning, situated learning, critical theory and total environment within the context-based perspective. These approaches are interested in the learning process within a certain learning context, for example human communications theory defines learning as the process of change as a result of communication within a society of which the learner is a part. Social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1962) as a context-based approach perceives learning and change through social interaction as an essential component to develop cognitive abilities. Social learning theory claims that learning with and from others is
important, and that interaction with the social environment and the context contributes to learning.

In contrast to social learning, critical theory challenges the power relationships in learning contexts (Rogers, 2002:104) by creating awareness of the interaction between the developing person and the social environment as a dialectic process of learner empowerment (Tennant, 2006:5).

2.6.2.1 Critical theory

Brookfield (2001:7, 2005) regards critical theory as having the most significant impact on contemporary adult education theory. Critical theory is concerned with the empowerment of groups previously excluded from educational opportunities, a theory that informs the critical or radical perspective on RPL (chapter 3, section 3.5.3). This perspective allows for a process of recognising informal learning and giving a voice to the traditionally marginalised voices (Michelson, 1996) as a social perspective. Brookfield (2001:12) regards the vision of critical theory for individual identity to be socially and culturally formed. This relates to Freire’s approach (1972) that political and social factors may limit or enhance a learner’s development.

In discussing critical pedagogy the work of Bakhtin, who is known mainly for writing on language and linguistic theory, should be recognised. His scholarship should be included in a discourse on education (Matusov, 2007:215). A relevant contribution to inform education is that the development of a strong, powerful voice and authorship is rooted in a discursive community (Matusov, 2007:218, Bakhtin, 2003). Bakhtin (Holquist, 1981) considers life as a dialogic process, and from his linguistic approach to dialogue, it can be seen that he regards it as a dynamic process inherent in language, and dialogue as an enriching process in learning.

The practice of authentic dialogue is also a key contribution of Freire’s approach (1998:499) to critical pedagogy. In the dialogic approach, communication as a social process creates awareness of the active role of the learner that recognises “human beings as active agents who transform their world”. Freire regards dialogical education as a powerful practice of freedom that can facilitate learning, by giving a
voice to the oppressed within a space for authentic thinking where teachers do not impose their thoughts on students (Freire, 1972:50). A dialogic approach implies a context, social interaction, relationships and development of a process. An example of dialogic learning is where the teacher acts as the facilitator and creates opportunities for learners to reflect on their real-life problems: a context where they “reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (Rule, 2004:323). A practical application of dialogue as a powerful process is an emancipatory adult education project (Rule, 2004:319, 325) that is designed as a dynamic dialogic space for open dialogue. However, the context and process of dialogue should involve a safe context that allows for conflict and growth as learning opportunities (Rule, 2004:326). This study as a dialogic learning environment benefited a diverse target group that could relate to one another and was empowered by getting the opportunity to express themselves freely. Another example is J Kim’s study (2005: 23) where dialogue between adult learners contributed to the understanding of different cultural values, social contexts and experiences. The benefit of the multicultural group is that a sense of community develops as learners share social and cultural contexts. (Kim, 2005: 22). A practical application of critical pedagogy (Humphries & Martin, 2000:286) is to provide an atmosphere of safety and nurturing to allow the adult to develop their own voice as learner.

In critical theory learning is described as the process of critically reflecting on and challenging what we know; it regards knowledge as socially constructed and recognises the context of learning (Kilgore, 2001:53, 55). One of the contributions of the critical orientation lies in that fact that “people become empowered by validating their own experience” (Fenwick, 2001:52, 5) in terms of context since the individual’s identity is socially and culturally informed. Despite criticism that the pedagogy of dialogue is not scientific enough and does not provide for measurable assessment (Gadotti, 1996:x11), it creates an awareness of the value of the dynamic of dialogue as power in adult learning. Critical theory as a pedagogy of hope (Brookfield, 2000b: 48) is responsive to the learners’ lives and voices, which lie “at the heart of adult education”.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory associated with critical pedagogy (Humphries & Martin, 2000:282) acknowledges the relevance of context in the
transformative learning process, since the context of the adult learner is the justification of what the adult learner knows and believes. The adult learner’s values and feelings depend on the biographical, historical and cultural context, and an understanding of the context provides a better understanding of the learning experience. Adult learning is seen as being more than a cognitive process; it takes place in different contexts and critical reflection and dialogue are required to enable learning to take place as a social process of making sense of a new and revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience. The experience serves as a guide to action where the learning process recognises the critical role of context.

Critical theory supports practices such as participatory learning groups. The contribution of participatory learning is that within the learning groups learners get the opportunity to help others learn, and the learning of the peers’ impact on their own individual development (Brookfield, 2002:109).

2.6.2.2 Feminist pedagogy

The feminist pedagogy is a follow-on from the critical thinking movement with the main premise that reality and meaning are socially constructed through a process of group inquiry and discussion. As a transformational process it draws strongly on narratives with the belief that our understanding of our world as context is expressed as narratives (Brooks, 2000:169, 168). Narrative writing from a feminist critical perspective is a way to “reinvent” themselves (Chapman, 2004:95), thus holding potential for an RPL candidate that needs to make sense of the past.

Feminist pedagogy is a reaction against the traditional viewpoint of knowledge and content, where only experience of the white, Western male is considered (Maher, 1987:5) and is influenced by Freire’s liberation model (1972) of pedagogy of the oppressed and silent groups. His influence shows in feminist pedagogy as an approach that encourages learners to analyse everyday experiences and to give meaning to those experiences, within the context and the process of collaboration (Cranton, 1994) which values participatory and subjective learning (Maher, 1987:2).
Besides creating an awareness of the woman’s voice and perspectives (Maher, 1987:15), the contribution of feminist pedagogy lies in giving marginalised students a voice and giving students’ experiences “validity and visibility”. Feminist pedagogy acknowledges the socially constructed and natural roles of women as caregiver and nurturer, since relationships are of significance (Hays, 2001:37). Therefore learning is considered to be a nurturing dialogue between learners, educator and group members where feelings and viewpoints are shared. Feminist pedagogy draws attention to the key role of relationships in learning and in acquiring experience, and the role of creating safe spaces within which participating, critical self-reflection, personal sharing and the awareness of experiential learning can take place.

Feminism further draws attention to non-traditional learners’ motivation (Vacarro & Lovell, 2010:161, 169, 174). Motivational factors relate to family and children as sources of inspiration, motivation and commitment to study, for study is perceived as self-investment, and as setting an example to children. From a feminist perspective the prospect of being the first one in the family to graduate serves as strong source of motivation for women to study (Vacarro & Lovell, 2010:168). Although there are many varieties of feminists (English, 2008:115), the core values are that they subscribe to accommodating the experiences of the non-traditional learner as learners realise that they can become the “creator of their own lives” (Maher, 1987:3). A concern with this approach is that the personal experience can be overemphasised, and that the role of the facilitator may rely too strongly on the nurturing and caring role, thus stereotyping women (English, 2008:121).

Since adults are social beings, different social contexts constitute sources of learning.

2.6.2.3 Social learning theory

Social learning theory considers learning in any social environment and in contexts of social interaction with others. The principle of social learning is derived from the social need to communicate and to cooperate (Vygotsky in Rogers, 2002:103). It recognises that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition since full cognitive development requires social interaction. Social learning
theory views the learning process as interaction with others and also observation in the social contexts (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:265).

Learning is regarded as a social act and the focus is on the interaction between learners, their social context and about “how identities are influenced by these contexts” (Whittaker et al., 2006:302). The focus moves from a learner-centred approach to a holistic view where the learner is perceived as part of social communities. Social context or the context for learning may be perceived in two different ways. It could be the context in which the learner’s learning experience took place, for example in a rural area in South Africa. It can also refer to the creation of a social support group within the learning situation. Merriam (2001a; 2001b) argues that the social context shapes the individual and the learning, and that the theories of social learning support the role of the social context in learning.

2.6.2.4 Situated learning theory

Situated learning also has at its core the concept of learning that is inherently social in nature (Hansman, 2001:450). Learning is regarded as a function of the activity, context and the culture in which it occurs or is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1993; Marquardt & Waddill, 2004:191). The situated learning model advocates the role of interaction between participants and the creating of learning opportunities within an authentic context. For Lave and Wenger (1993) situated learning is concerned with how the learner engages with the experience; therefore learning is perceived as integrated in the social context of reality. The learner identity develops within the community of practice, because the learning involves communities of practice and discourse as a social and cultural practice.

2.6.2.5 Communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991:98) define community of practice in terms of relationships. Communities of practice are built on a shared sense of values, beliefs, commitment and goals. Educational community of practice involves the whole person and implies “becoming a full participant” (Lave & Wenger, 1991:53) in a community of learning where members feel empowered by a sense of belonging. A condition is that
learners need to trust both the process and the context. The concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 2002:73) is based on the premise that mutual engagement in a social practice constitutes informal communities of practice that build on factors such as a shared goal, shared knowledge and engagement as a social activity. Implications of communities of practice are that learning draws on people’s willingness to participate, to share experiences and to interact as a whole person in a member of a learning community. Central to the concept of communities of practice is that learning always has an “overarching holistic purpose” (Parker & Harley, 2012:191).

Wenger (2002:7) argues that the practicality of communities of practice is that they are an integral part of our daily lives and work experiences. As a social learning theory the learning is concerned with engagement in real-life settings supported by dynamic relationships and a sense of membership in belonging to a community. The dynamic interplay between individual and community lies in the individual finding identity in relationships, where learning cannot be designed but relies on the community of practice. Communities of practice are self-organised (Lave & Wenger, 1991) but Wenger (2002:229) cautions that the learning cannot be designed deliberately, but is facilitated through providing resources, emotional support, context and opportunities for engagement.

Tennant (2006:74) emphasises the necessity to understand the nature of learning in the communities of practice. He cautions against Lave and Wenger’s (1991) extreme acceptance of learning within the communities of practice, as there is also a role for teaching outside the community of practice. By overemphasising the concept of learning within a social context, for example, the rich life stories that individuals bring to the learning context may be ignored. However, the value of the social context and communities of practice for adult learners should be recognised because they may support the actual structuring of life stories based on reflection and discussion. Of relevance is that different contexts and sites of learning should be acknowledged.
2.6.2.6 Culture as a learning context

If culture is not included in a discussion of context, it can represent a superficial and narrow perspective of knowledge since knowledge is imbedded in context, and context includes culture. Despite recognition of the impact of context on learning, Fasokun et al. (2005), Indabawa and Mpofu (2006) and Merriam et al. (2007) argue that most of the adult learning theories are based on a Western perspective, and are often regarded as non-traditional perspectives of learning. Merriam et al. (2007:1) are of the opinion that we know very little about “other epistemological systems as we are immersed” in Western orientation to learning.

Our perspective of adult learning has been shaped by our Western perspective and what we regard as knowledge within this perspective. What we perceive as a sound foundation for adult learning practices is often a foreign concept within non-Western learning experiences that value community and “ubuntu”. A concern about Fasokun et al.’s use of the term “African culture” is that it can lead to a narrow description, since there are more similarities than differences between the cultures. A more useful approach to non-Western cultures would be to distinguish between the collective and individualistic cultures (Van Staden, Marx & Erasmus-Kritzinger, 2002:50; Dadoo, Ghyoot, Lephoko & Lubbe, 1997:14). In the collective culture a concept such as ubuntu and the social group and communities are valued, in contrast to the individualistic culture where the interest, development and self-realisation of the individual are priorities. The differences between cultures based on individualism and collectivism can cause barriers to learning for an adult learner, because factors such as culture, social environment and traditions impact on perception of knowledge.

The profile of the adult learner is shaped by culture and cultural experiences. In the African culture the individual gains meaning through relationships with the other, as substantiated by the collectivist belief system (Fasokun et al., 2005:10). The collectivist nature of the African culture of working together, sharing and the strong family systems influences their characteristics as learners. Consequently, many women have to postpone formal studies until their children are grown, or they have to manage the different roles. Adults have certain roles in the culture, and this can
impact on their learning approach. An example is that in many African and Asian cultures a male has a certain social role as the head of the household, whereas women in many households have strict domestic responsibilities and only gain access to educational opportunities at a later stage in their lives (Fasokun et al., 2005; Merriam et al., 2007).

Fasokun et al. (2005:11, 23) point out that culture plays an important part in motivation because it shapes the adult learner. They explain that some aspects of characteristics of adult learners are typical of African learners, since the African adult learner gains significance as an individual through relationships, social contexts and roles. Learning can be affected by a role within a society, e.g. the role of the Tswana bride and the impact of the in-laws on her choices. Especially in a collective culture, learning is grounded in relationships, social context and role within the community and family.

Social and cultural factors may cause barriers to learning, hampering discourse (Mezirow, 1996:170). In order to ensure discourse (Mezirow et al., 2000:197; Cranton, 1994), a sense of individualism should be encouraged within the collective context, and therefore a sense of self-awareness should be separated from the social collective. In some cultures the development and empowerment of some groups, e.g. married women, are not appreciated, and the student’s own cultural perceptions may act as a barrier to learning. Previous educational experiences may be a barrier or a benefit, for example in a school environment where rote learning was the norm or where the educational system did not promote the development of confidence and the learners were passive recipients of knowledge (Gravett, 2001:8). On the other hand, Fasokun et al. (2005) refer to Africans’ memory which is highly developed as a result of rote learning and that “an African adult learner is like a library” where they memorise and save knowledge for later use. African learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds may have a negative learning attitude as a result of exposure to rote learning approaches and curricula that did not acknowledge the African context. Another possible concern, as Zeelen (2002:11) observes, is that the adult learner within the African context often experiences tension between traditional values and the more individualistic Western approach.
Culture can impact on the adult learner’s attitude towards counselling. An example of this is within the African culture where traditionally guidance is sought from the more senior people in the community. In the case where academic guidance and advice are given by a young counsellor, the adult learner may not trust the counsellor’s advice. In taking decisions that have to do with the learner, the family and often the extended family should be consulted. The decisions on education and training are in many instances taken within the community environment.

By showing respect for cultural diversity and for the African perspective (Fasokun et al., 2005) the learner’s experience of a person with value is enhanced. This has practical implications for a learning context. Boud and Walker (1998: 204) refer to the uniqueness of every learner, their prior experience and learning context and history, all of which need to be respected. Context and cultural backgrounds affect adult learning; therefore it challenges the facilitator to create approaches to engage learners in authentic and real-life learning situations and contexts (Kiely et al., 2004:25). In this regard Le Roux (2004:92, 93, 94) discusses the value of integration of indigenous knowledge systems to ensure effective learning experiences by including adult learners’ life worlds in the learning event. Therefore, a facilitator can utilise adult learners’ cultural background knowledge within authentic learning contexts where they share life stories, context and cultural knowledge. This socio-constructivist approach acknowledges learner characteristics and offers learners the opportunity to construct their own reality.

The practical value of including context-based approaches is that context holds a challenge for promoting reflection in learning (Boud & Walker, 1998:191). As one of the central aspects in adult learning and in RPL assessment, the establishment of a safe and supportive climate is conducive to reflection. The context should also allow for affective dimensions as “emotions are central to learning” (Boud & Walker, 1998:194). The uniqueness of every learning context needs to consider factors such as cultural diversity, communities of practice, situated and social learning.
2.6.2.7 Context-based approach: summary

Any person is shaped by culture, historical, social, family and social learning contexts. The past learning contexts influence current characteristics, motivation and competencies. Context can be perceived as an ambiguous term that refers to both the context in which the learning was acquired, the formal, non-formal and informal learning, but also the creation of a social context and learning environment for new learning. Adult learners thrive on a learning context that includes social relationships and an authentic learning context. The context-based theories are concerned with social interaction and relationships, situated learning and the value of communities of practice. This approach to adult learning theories creates an awareness of the value of participatory learning, collaborative learning and dialogue in the learning context. Critical pedagogy draws attention to the role of dialogue, problem posing and the development of an adult learner’s voice.

Besides providing a certain context to the adult’s learning experiences, culture can also impact on the perception of knowledge, as knowledge is integrated in context and culture. The concept of culture and the awareness of the context of non-Western learning experiences bring the knowledge aspect of learning to the fore.

2.6.3 Knowledge-based approach

Our perception of knowledge influences pedagogical beliefs, learning and assessment strategies (Prinsloo, 2010:3) and what is considered as knowledge. To add to the complexity of what knowledge constitutes, learners also have certain assumptions and beliefs about knowledge. Jarvis (2006:90, 91) defines knowledge in terms of something objective and personal or internal. Knowledge entails a process of both knowing and asking, with experience as a base of knowledge. This is challenged to an even greater extent in an assessment of prior learning where an adult learner has a wealth of informal learning experience, tacit knowledge and diverse life experiences. Tacit knowledge is considered as the knowledge that we take for granted (Wenger, 2002:47). Processes are therefore employed to making tacit learning visible.
2.6.3.1 The non-Western perspective of knowledge

Within the South African context it is argued that alternative frameworks of knowledge should be included to “rehabilitate the indigenous knowledge systems” (Pityana, 2007:6). Zeelen (2002:10) argues that traditional knowledge is being “over romanticised”, and mentions the tension and contradictions between traditional and cultural values and the Western individualistic-oriented view. This notion can impact on a mature learner with an African background where knowledge was gained within the African culture, and thus conflicts with the Western knowledge of the workplace. Zeelen (2002:12) remarks that this has led to negative self-image in the learning context, lack of self-confidence and a passive learning attitude. In the preparation for assessment the context within which knowledge was acquired may add another barrier for the adult learner from an African context, since culture as context can impact on the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, Merriam et al. (2007:184) mention that learning occurs in many non-Western traditions through story-telling. Learners need to be empowered to extract the learning from the experience. Concepts that are associated with adult learning are often embedded in African culture, for example wisdom and the concept of mentoring.

The inclusion of a non-Western perspective with the purpose of putting Western knowledge in perspective (Merriam et al., 2007) creates a greater awareness of different approaches towards knowledge.

2.6.3.2 Diverse forms of knowledge

The concept of knowledge is integrated in the RPL assessment process that encourages the recognition of “diverse forms of knowledge” (SAQA, 2002:12), especially in the non-traditional routes for entry to higher education. An RPL candidate enters the RPL process with a certain perspective of what knowledge entails. This perception may be based on experience, individual perceptions, workplace learning experiences or experiential learning, cultural and social background and prior experiences with formal learning programmes. Based on an extensive literature review on local research on RPL, Frick et al. (2006:32) confirm
the contrast between knowledge acquired non-formally, experientially and academically.

It is a contested matter of what constitutes valid and reliable knowledge. RPL acknowledges the contexts where knowledge was acquired as “situated knowledge” (Michelson, 2006:141) and RPL as the process that recognises diverse forms of knowledge based on people’s diverse experiences. However, the academic context of higher education is concerned with both “rigorous theory and relevant practical knowledge” (Yang, 2004b:847). The two contexts of knowledge have implications for assessment as candidates need a focused intervention to convert experience into explicit knowledge and learning (Fiddler et al., 2006). This is not a simple process because different knowledge contexts can create barriers.

A concept of what constitutes knowledge is not simple; Fenwick (2001) mentions that we have preconceived ideas about what counts as valuable knowledge. Adult learners have a certain concept of what counts as knowledge, as they bring certain expectations and experiences to the learning context and have a certain purpose in mind to develop knowledge. Rogers (1986:159) refers to this as “emotional investment in knowledge” as these learners believe in the integrity of their knowledge, and may perceive new learning as a threat. Prior learning or “pre-existing knowledge” may therefore cause a barrier to learning, for example negative past learning experiences.

Identity is often imbedded in knowledge, for example people value themselves in terms of workplace knowledge gained that gives a sense of belonging to a certain group. In a new learning context, this may result in recognising limitations in work identities and therefore also recognising the possibilities of “new identities”, for example as adult learners in a new learning context (Fenwick, 2008:22). In this regard Cantwell and Scevak (2004:140) report in their research that gaps that RPL students experience are a less developed understanding of complex knowledge structures and the capacity to structure information. However, their strengths are a deep approach to learning and an understanding of the processes of acquiring knowledge through cognitive strategies.
A characteristic of an RPL candidate as a mature learner with experience is that their knowledge is based on experiences acquired in different contexts, and that they have wisdom, as wisdom is associated with mature learners (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:167). Wisdom, or phronesis, is defined as “the type of knowledge that is experienced with life” (Breier & Ralphs, 2009:491). Wisdom can be viewed from different perspectives and is probably based on context and culture. There is agreement that wisdom is based on experience-based knowledge, is practical and is characterised by the ability to be reflective and to make judgements that relate to everyday reality. The contribution of an RPL assessment process is that it not only benefits the learner, but creates an awareness of the value of including indigenous knowledge systems at higher education level (Pityana, 2007:6). Michelson (1999:99) maintains that the role of RPL assessment is therefore to “recognise and celebrate” the knowledge created by ordinary people throughout their career and lives.

A holistic theory of knowledge that encompasses all aspects of knowledge and learning is consequently needed.

2.6.3.3 Towards a holistic approach of knowledge

Different theoretical perspectives have different perspectives of knowledge. For example, critical and postmodern theorists believe that knowledge is socially constructed (Kilgore, 2001:53, 57, 59) and that true knowledge as being multifaceted and rational can free an individual from power. However, according to Yang (2003:127), “existing paradigms have limited perspectives about knowledge”, and knowledge should not be classified within different paradigms but against a holistic view.

The holistic theory is based on the three facets and layers of knowledge that are interrelated and present in all adult learning processes (Yang, 2003:110). It includes the explicit, implicit and emancipatory knowledge, which exists in dynamic interaction. Implicit or tacit knowledge as personal knowledge is context-specific, emancipatory knowledge comprises affective knowledge and explicit knowledge entails theoretical and formal knowledge. Implicit knowledge is strongly associated
with the tacit knowledge that mature learners have gained through life experiences within different contexts (SAQA, 2002; Blom, 2007). Tacit knowledge includes unstructured knowledge and tacit skills and can be categorised as competencies related to attitudes and values and social cooperative and practical competence (Evans, Kersh & Sakamoto, 2004:227). By making the tacit knowledge gained through experience explicit, “expert” knowledge is developed (Tang, 2010:667).

Emancipatory knowledge includes motivation, attitude and emotional intelligence and acknowledges the role of emotions in acquiring knowledge. Evans et al.’s study (2004:227) showed that learners are more motivated to study and have greater self-confidence in the learning process when the tacit knowledge and skills are recognised by others – their peers, the facilitator and mentors. This suggests a relationship between attitude and different forms of knowledge and learning. This has implications for an RPL process because candidates have practical experience, but often lack formal academic knowledge. Adult learning occurs in the dynamic interaction as a critical-reflective process to show the significance of the relationship between cognition, experiential and practical knowledge. These dynamic interaction processes between different facets include processes such as conceptualisation, contextualisation, interpretation and transformation both at an individual and a social level. Conceptualisation entails the process of articulating implicit or tacit knowledge into explicit or formal concepts, whereas transformation entails converting old meaning structures into another form. Although these processes are concerned with knowledge, they are in essence processes to make “sense of previous experiences” (Yang, 2003:119).

Knowledge exists, therefore, in a dynamic dialectic interaction between the three facets (Yang, 2004b:844) and learners with rich experience backgrounds need support to “articulate implicit knowledge to explicit or emancipatory knowledge” (Yang, 2004b:845). Learning as knowledge construction depends on transformative processes within socio-cultural contexts such as critical reflection, communities of practice, social interaction and brainstorming (Tang, 2010; Yang, 2003, 2004a). Since knowledge is socially constructed and learners are actively involved in the process to construct and create it (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008), knowledge creation benefits from a supportive and active learning context.
2.6.3.4 Knowledge-based approach: summary

The holistic approach to learning supports a better understanding of the tacit and unstructured nature of the RPL candidate’s knowledge in relation to other knowledge facets. A contribution of holistic theory is that in contrast to the limited perspectives of other adult learning paradigms, it acknowledges the interaction and dynamic relationships between different knowledge facets. Furthermore, the knowledge-based perspectives acknowledge the practical wisdom of adult learners and the need to include non-Western perspectives of knowledge.

2.6.4 Process-based approach

It is evident from the above discussion that different approaches to adult learning theories do not exist in isolation, but that the different theoretical perspectives add to a holistic description of the whole person. The humanistic approaches describe the individual learner as a motivated and self-directed person. Context-based theories add the perspective of adult identity within multiple learning contexts. Learning is therefore perceived as development and growth building on past learning experiences. Dewey’s principle that the human being is borne with unlimited potential and growth, relating to the whole life (Jarvis, 1995:148), captures the essence of process-based approaches to adult learning.

Rogers (2002:115) highlights critical reflection, the learning cycle, the role of experience and learning styles as key elements of adult learning based on process-based theories, framed within a constructivist theoretical approach. The inclusion of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory adds the perspective of learning as a transformative process. The relevance of Mezirow’s theoretical perspectives is confirmed by Brookfield’s statement (2001:7) that Mezirow’s work inspired numerous commentaries and empirical studies that gave contemporary adult education the theoretical dimension that it lacked. Taylor (in Mezirow et al., 2000) states that in the last 20 years transformative learning has received more attention than any other learning theory and that Mezirow’s study is “the largest qualitative study on transformative learning”.

61
As a point of departure the constructivist learning theories were a response to cognitivism, recognising not only the role of the learner, but also the process involved in learning: a process of how people make sense of their experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:261; Rogers, 2002).

2.6.4.1 Constructivism

The concept of constructivism can be perceived as indefinable (Null, 2004:180) due to the various forms of constructivism and also being regarded as a complex process (Phillips, 1995:6). However, constructivism principles have implications for the practice of adult learners. Bruner’s theory (1966) provides a useful perspective of constructivism as an active process in which learners construct new ideas and perspectives based on past and current knowledge and experiences. The constructivist theory is interested in the individual making meaning of experience and of learning (Jackson, 2009:22) and is built on the principle that knowledge is personally constructed and not attained. Knowledge creation from a constructivist perspective entails the re-examining of knowledge and learning through critical questioning (Venter, 2001:91). From a cognitive perspective constructivism believes that knowledge is constructed in the mind of the learners.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky are associated with constructivism, with Piaget considered to be the foundational figure (Gergen, 1999:236; Phillips, 1995:6). Differences between their approaches are that Piaget’s concept of constructivism is associated with individual knowledge construction and that knowledge is constructed in “the mind of the learner” (Bodner, 1986:873), whereas Vygotsky considers social interaction for learning a key factor. Vygotsky’s influence on the role of social interaction in a community of learners includes shared discourse and dialogue interaction based on common knowledge (Brown, Metz & Campione, 1996:159). Of value to mature learners with experience is the enabling environment for recognition of individual expertise. Piaget’s influence (Brown et al., 1996:145) lies in the individual understanding within the community of learners. Piaget (1972) creates an awareness of the role of cognition and individual knowledge construction in learning, whereas Vygotsky (1978) considers the social context, social interaction and cultural
influences of learning. Of value to a constructivist learning process is that the concept of the active learner contributes to the constructivist’s perspective of “knowledge acquisition” (Terwel, 1999:196) because active involvement ensures learning as a transformational process. Constructivism’s inclusion of the learner as an active participant and the social nature of learning (Phillips, 1995:11) both contribute to a better understanding of knowledge construction on existing knowledge and experience (Powell & Kalina, 2009:244, 248, 249) as an individual and social process.

Although from an RPL perspective Piaget’s theory to constructivism is more associated with pedagogy rather than with andragogy (Harris, 2006:7), the constructivist approach (Ausubel, 1986; Mezirow, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:261) acknowledges the learner’s existing knowledge framework and the process of making sense of experiences. Constructivism in general provides a useful framework for a learner-centred assessment approach that is supported by the trend in ODL delivery towards student-centredness within a more constructivist approach (Mitchell & Le Roux, 2010:3). Practical applications of a constructivist approach in higher education allow for adult learners from diverse backgrounds to be involved in critical thinking, reflective practice and self-assessment and gives them an opportunity to identify their own strengths, opportunities and weaknesses as self-reflection (Du Plooy, 2007:24, 35). Reflective practice involves a constructivist approach involving critical thinking and self-assessment with the learners actively involved in their own knowledge construction. Constructivist teaching employs a cooperative learning strategy where learners are encouraged to respect and use other people’s ideas” (Kim, J.S, 2005: 10) through reflection. In this regard Fenwick (2000) argues that the concept of experiential learning comes from a constructivist perspective with reflection being central.

Huang (2002:34) draws attention to the similarity between constructivism and andragogy – both approaches regard the learners’ ownership of learning, experiential learning and problem-solving. Although this is a learner-centred approach, meaning and knowledge are constructed when learners work together to negotiate meaning (Woolfolk, 2007:481; Bruning, Schraw, Norby & Ronning, 2004:194, 195). Social constructivism gives new expression to classical theories
such as transformation theory, cognitive theory and social learning theory (Merriam & Caffarella, 1998, in Brown, 2011:2) with social context and interaction being key elements (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Bruner, 1966). The practical value of including a social constructivist approach is that the interaction and dialogue play a critical role in the development of higher cognitive thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978, in Gillies, 2011:86). Learning is connected to the social environment. Social constructivism further adds a holistic approach to learning as it considers alternative perceptions of knowledge and the inclusion of tacit knowledge to be considered an RPL assessment approach (Brown, 2011:3, 5).

The assumption that adults have already gained a body of knowledge forms the point of departure for transformative learning.

2.6.4.2 Transformative learning

The terms “transformative learning” and “transformational learning” are used interchangeably in the literature (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgarten, 2007: 130). For the sake of consistency the terms “transformative learning” and “transformative theory” (Mezirow, 1996:158) are used in this study, except in direct quotations from writers where they use the term “transformational.” Transformative or “transformational learning” (Merriam et al. 2007: 130-133) is about dramatic and fundamental change in self-perception, life experience, beliefs and attitudes and frame of reference. As a critical theory of adult learning and education (Mezirow, 1981; Mezirow, 1996:164, Brookfield, 2001:7) transformative theory perceives learning in adulthood as a process of development and growth. Mezirow is recognised as the founder of transformative learning under the influence of prominent figures such as Gould and Habermas and the critical theory of the German philosophers on the development of the transformative learning theory (Mezirow et al., 2000:x111; Broomfield, 2001:8). Since the introduction of the concept of transformative learning theory, scholars and practitioners have joined in discussions on this theory by reviewing its core principles and sharing examples from their own experiences as educators. This has led to a critical discourse on key matters regarding the theory (Mezirow et al., 2000).
The processes of development and change are at the heart of transformative learning (Merriam, 2004b:60). Therefore Mezirow (1991; 2000:5) regards transformative learning to be the most significant type of learning in adulthood, since it provides the opportunity for a deep learning experience, resulting in a paradigm shift or change. It involves significant growth in learner identity in becoming a constructive problem-solver and active participant. Mezirow’s transformative learning states that learning in adulthood is a continuing process of reconstructing and transforming meaning through handling challenges. Mezirow et al. (2000:299) further argue that change can act as a trigger for transformative learning. Learning is regarded as the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience. The outcome of transformative learning is expected to be growth and development, and taking action. Core principles of transformative theory (Mezirow, 1991; 2000; 1996:162-164) as an evolving theory of adult learning are summarised by key propositions within the context of an emancipatory paradigm. Yang (2004b:848) evaluates transformative learning against the holistic theory of knowledge, and confirms the essence of change; he argues that “transformational learning” only takes place if emancipatory knowledge changes.

The propositions involve the learner, the facilitator and the process, and entail in brief the following aspects. The dynamics of the process of learning is useful to action-oriented educators or facilitators who are willing to act as collaborative learners, share learning experiences and consider the role of the learner’s existing meaning structures in learning. The learning process draws on prior interpretations and experiences and allows for the development and growth of the adult learner and what they understand of their own personal, cultural and socio-historical background. Core aspects in the meaning-making process are critical reflection and discourse. Discourse serves as a forum to find their own voice and to facilitate full participation in group discussion. Therefore transformative learning requires an active dialogue context for collaborative learning, acknowledging the key role of supportive relationships. It is, however, a functional discourse process (Mezirow, 1996:164, 165) that leads to gaining new perspectives of their own learning and experiences. The learning process requires some communicative competence as the ability to negotiate meaning rather than to simply accept other perceptions. Transformative
learning (Mezirow et al., 2000:5, 15) entails active participation in constructive discourse by using experience of others to assess and justify personal assumptions.

Both Mezirow and Brookfield add a “social dimension” (Tennant, 2006:127) to Knowles’s concept of the self-directed learner, by adding the concept of critical awareness, thus illustrating the interrelatedness of learning theories. In the transformational learning situation, the learning and experiences are reflected on from the learner’s perspective, which makes it an appropriate learning event in the preparation for assessment where learners should reflect on their life experiences. A central aspect of Mezirow’s (1997a; 1997b) theory is the concept that meaning structures are understood and developed through reflection and discourse to obtain a better understanding of the self and of own learning.

If critical reflection is considered as only a rational and cognitive process, without changes of aspects such as motivation, values, ethics, attitudes and learning needs, then critical reflection does not necessarily lead to transformational learning. With reference to RPL assessment, reflection is considered to be a core element to transform experience into learning (Brown, 2011).

2.6.4.3 Critical reflection as a process

Critical reflection is a central concept of different adult learning perspectives and preparation from RPL assessment and this justifies the comprehensive discussion of the concept. Different authors have added their perspective of reflection which contributes to a better understanding of the concept (Boud & Knights, 1994; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). This is essential in the conceptual framework of RPL assessment (Lamoreaux, 2005:7). Since a characteristic of adult learners is to use experience as a learning resource, reflection enables learners to re-examine their lives, resulting in increased confidence and self-esteem (Mahe, 2007:207, 210).

In Mezirow’s transformative theory he argues that by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical reflection. Rogers (2002:115) regards critical reflection on experience as core to learning and with reference to RPL assessment, Fiddler et al. (2006:5, 6) describe reflection as the “mediator that
converts experience to learning”. In both RPL assessment and adult learning a rich body of experience is essential for learning, but the experience only yields explicit knowledge when reflected upon. Critical reflection is a concept that was coined by Freire (1972), who drew attention to the fact that oppressed people lack a critical understanding of and thinking on their own reality.

In terms of the RPL candidates Van Kleef (2007:12) confirms reflection as a characteristic of the adult learners, who tend to be more reflective and dialectic in their thinking than younger students. Underwood (2003:52) agrees that the capacity for self-reflection is evident of a mature mind, prepared for study. This brings to mind Mezirow’s argument (1990a, 1990b) that critical reflection may be a unique characteristic of adult learning, as it develops an awareness of why adults attach the meanings that they do to reality. In this regard Merriam (2004b:63) points out that critical reflection requires a certain level of cognitive development. It seems to be embedded in the practical knowledge and life experience of an adult learner. The opportunity for reflection can give the adult learner the opportunity for reinvention and rediscovery, discovering identity as a learner and creating a new sense of self-awareness.

The need for critical reflection within adult learning is central to different learning theories which agree that experience does not always equal learning, but that reflection is necessary to turn experience into learning or learning from the experience. Knowles with his andragogical approach and Kolb with his constructivist approach both regard reflection as key to the learning of the adult (Harris, 2006:7). When adults learn, they relate what they learned from past, current and possible future experiences. The main concept is that learning is achieved by critically analysing experience, and that all learning is embedded in experience.

Brookfield (2000a:143) argues that reflection only becomes truly critical when it leads to transformation. He finds the terms “reflection” and “critical reflection” confusing, questions the use of the term “critical” and objects to it since reflection need not be critical. He regards critical reflection as being connected to the social critical theory; therefore critical reflection and transformative learning are equivalent processes, with critical reflection not always a prerequisite for a transformative learning experience.
Mezirow’s thinking was criticised because of the lack of affective learning; however, he included the role of emotions at a later stage. The criticism is supported by Taylor (2000:303), who refers to several studies indicating the relevance of affective learning and emotions in achieving a transformative learning experience, rather than the emphasis on critical reflection. Boud and Walker (1998), Boud (2007) and Yang (2004b:847) include the affective component as emotions in critical reflection. A more holistic approach including all aspects of a learner profile adds to building learner confidence.

Brookfield (2000b:37, 38) provides a pragmatic constructivist approach to adult learning, where the role that adults play in constructing their reality through reflection is recognised. He regards the creation of a collaborative supportive learning context with “critical friends” or peers as necessary to ensure that critical thinking is responsive to the learner’s needs. This approach is similar to Wenger’s community of practice.

From a transformative learning perspective the adult learner as an active participant has the responsibility for deciding whether to change behaviour or not as an outcome of reflection. In terms of the paradigm shift, Yang (2004b:848) argues that learners also need to be freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes or values that may have “distorted their lives”. Despite some concerns, any context or culture can allow for critical reflection. Fasokun et al. (2005:57) and Ekpenyong (1999:449) point out that critical reflection is integrated in indigenous African learning, as the acquisition of skills and learning comprises a process of discussion, reflection and evaluation of experiences. A critical reflection process is also integrated in experiential learning.

The theory of RPL practice is grounded on the experiential learning cycle proposed by Kolb (1984), with experience being the central point of learning. Cyclic reflection is central to the learning process with engagement in the four modes of learning, i.e. experience, reflection, abstraction and experimentation, to ensure effective learning. A point of criticism is that both the context of learning and the personal affective dimension are ignored. As mainly an individual perspective of learning (Andersson, 2006:37), Kolb’s experiential cycle lacks a holistic approach to learning and
reflection, since an RPL assessment approach needs to consider both the negative and positive experiences. In the critical reflection process, negative experiences need to be addressed to ensure that they do not block the learning experience or become a barrier to learning. Therefore the expansion of Kolb’s learning cycle by Barnett (1989:4) and Jarvis (1987:16) needs to be acknowledged. Barnett’s model adds an active phase, namely as planning for implementation, and Jarvis adds skills and attitudes, with the learner as an active role player. From the perspective of Yang’s holistic theory, Kolb’s model “delineates learning” at an individual level and excludes social and cultural factors.

Reflection as a tool in transformational learning can lead to change and transformation. Self-authoring is also considered within transformational learning as a tool for meaning-making. To ensure a complete discussion on transformative learning, it is necessary to refer to self-authoring.

2.6.4.4 Transformative learning: self-authoring

Kegan (Patten, 2007:1) adds the importance of transformation as change within the learner’s meaning-making system. This means that the learner needs to take a step back and reflect on learning and knowledge, and gain a new perspective of the way they know or experience the learning. In this process self-authoring allows an individual to construct reality in such a way as to gain a better understanding of the self and the context, and to deal with possible negative prior experiences. The adult learner can benefit from self-authoring as it fits the profile of adult learners who often have interrupted learning careers and a segmented life-world (Scanlon, 2008:18; Patten, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003; Magolda, 2009). Self-authoring provides a competency to “reconstruct themselves” (Scanlon, 2008:30). Adult learners engage in reflexive self-authoring to analyse learning contexts, life transitions and life circumstances to allow them to make choices (Scanlon, 2008:18). As a reflexive process it allows for appraisal of past and current learning contexts to allow for taking informed future learning decisions. The practical implication of the role of self-authoring is that it assists in the process of making sense of life experiences.
A perspective not to see adult learning in isolation allows for the inclusion of a brief discussion on narrative learning. Fenwick (2001:v111) remarks that different orientations cannot be synthesised since they offer insights for one another and dialogue between them proves to be a valuable approach to adult learning.

2.6.4.5 Narrative learning

There are links between self-authoring within the transformational learning perspective and narrative learning, as adult learners have the ability to “story” their lives (Merriam, 2008:96). The perception of development and change of the narrative approach shows similarities with transformative learning’s reflection on practice (Tennant, 2006:128).

According to narrative learning, learning is embedded in the lived experiences of the adult learner (Merriam, 2008:95). It provides the opportunity to write narratives about different learning contexts such as prior life experiences, community involvement, social context and work experience. It enables learners to “make meaning of an experience” (Merriam, 2008:97) to enable them to be prepared for an assessment process that requires the writing of a reflective life story as a prior learning paper. A narrative approach is a means of both “understanding learners and a teaching tool” (Mullet, Akerson & Turman, 2013: 72,74). Stories matter to adult learners, therefore they provide a framework that fosters trust and adds to securing learning success.

Within the context of this study a theoretical overview of adult learning theories requires reference to the contribution of critical theory, because “critical perspectives have influenced RPL discourse in South Africa” (Osman, 2006:206).

2.6.4.6 Process-based approach: summary

The process-based approach to learning theories contributes to a more holistic perspective of a learner profile, as these theories acknowledge the key role of peers, group support and the facilitator to enhance the learning experience. Reflection in
combination with other processes is central to preparation for assessment since reflection is core to turning diverse learning experiences into relevant learning.

2.7 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to give a comprehensive overview of adult learning theories, since they provide a theoretical framework to describe the learner profile and the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. Adult learning theories often seem to overlap and to share common themes, such as considering the previous experiences of the learner, the active involvement of the learner and reflection. Adult learning theories and the perception of knowledge inform the different RPL assessment models that will be described in chapter 3. In the overview learning theories are discussed based on a framework with four perspectives of adult learning theories. These perspectives should not be seen in isolation, but rather in dialogic interaction for an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the learner profile, since a holistic approach can describe the learner as a whole person. A holistic approach encompasses all aspects of the learner profile imbedded in an eclectic approach that creates space for dynamic interaction between different theoretical perspectives and paradigms.

The holistic approaches as suggested in Yang’s holistic theory (2004b:849) maintain that the dynamic interaction between knowledge, individual and social levels determines learning. Although the theory provides “an integrative framework” to examine some of the adult learning theories (Yang, 2004b:845), thus creating an awareness of the merits and limitations of existing theories, the contributions of all relevant adult learning theories should be considered in developing a learner-centred approach towards assessment. The eclectic approach (Vella, Berardinelli & Burrow, 1998:1) allows for the combining of elements and concepts of adult learning theories most suitable to support the findings of this study.

This chapter aimed to provide a point of departure for the discussion on RPL assessment in chapter 3, since RPL practices are concerned with the experiences of the adult learner, adult learning and adult education.
CHAPTER 3
RPL ASSESSMENT: AN OVERVIEW IN CONTEXT

*When you arrive at your future, will you blame your past?*

Robert Half

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of chapter 2 was to provide an overview of adult learning theories. The theoretical framework on adult learning theories contextualises a learner-centred RPL assessment approach because areas of adult learning theory such as learners’ life experience and reflection are “positively aligned” with RPL (Van Kleef, 2007:5). A discussion on RPL assessment is therefore grounded in adult learning theories and adult education. There are similarities between RPL, adult learning and adult education, the main similarity being the adult learner at the heart of both processes.

Despite similarities, a distinctive characteristic of RPL is that it is “essentially outcomes and assessment driven” (Castle & Attwood, 2001:64), which motivates the need for the discussion on RPL assessment from a theoretical perspective. The practices of RPL are “inherently learner- and student-centred” (Frick et al., 2007b:131); thus it is an assessment approach considering the characteristics of the learner profile. Van Rooy (2002:75) is of the opinion that since the learners’ needs form the point of departure in RPL, the latter should comply with adult learning principles.

The aim of chapter 3 is to discuss RPL assessment. An overview is given of international and national perspectives of RPL to contextualise the relevance of the learner and assessment in the process. International case studies are included to illustrate benefits associated with RPL. The national overview includes the current context of RPL within higher education, since the target group represents access to higher education through RPL assessment. A brief overview of main RPL-related research is given as proof that RPL is considered to be a relevant research topic within higher education, and also to identify matters that relate to both the learner profile and to RPL assessment. The discussion on RPL assessment is informed by
the SAQA unit standards on the implementation and management of RPL and theoretical aspects of assessment. It includes matters such as preparation for assessment, assessment as learning and assessment as a sustainable approach. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of portfolio assessment and preparation, and the quality assurance standards for RPL assessment.

The international practice of RPL has impacted on its implementation in South Africa, and has contributed to the development of current practice in higher education. A brief overview of the international context of RPL is therefore necessary.

3.2 THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF RPL

The concept and the process of recognising the skills and learning of adult learners are both a national and an international priority. The need for RPL is embedded in the notion of lifelong learning (Frick & Albertyn, 2011:145; Wihak, 2011:116; Evans, 2000) and a sound assessment approach to recognise what adult learners have learned outside the formal education systems. Lessons learned from international processes can guide the national processes and approach towards assessment; however, the aim here is also to show distinct differences between the two contexts. Therefore different acronyms used by different countries reflect the approach towards assessment in that country as learning takes place within a certain context and social environment.

3.2.1 Concepts of RPL: acronyms

International practice is characterised by different acronyms for the same concept. Each acronym reflects a country’s understanding of RPL and contextualises the practice, as RPL is context-specific (Harris, 2000:2, 15). The various internationally used acronyms for the concept of the recognition and accreditation of prior learning have conceptualised the essence of RPL practices. Despite concerns (Nieman, 2001:144; Frick et al., 2006:23) that the series of acronyms could lead to confusion, the use of different acronyms for the same concept is an indication of the comprehensiveness and different facets of the concept and process of RPL. They also imply the possibility of considering different foci and approaches towards RPL.
practices as the RPL process has a specific focus within a certain context. Therefore any RPL intervention with a clear focus and assessment integrated in a process will ensure that the acronyms do not lead to a variety of interpretations or add to a “controversial approach” (Frick et al., 2006:23).

RPL is often defined differently based on a country’s specific historical need for it; the preferred acronym is therefore an indication of the main purpose of RPL. Michelson (2006:142) refers to the “differing historical moments” that impacted on the emerging of RPL in different countries. Examples are New Zealand where the need was to overcome the backlog in aboriginal education (Michelson, 2006), and the UK universities which were looking for ways to attract mature students when they were faced with a demographic decrease in student numbers (Peters, 2005:273). In South Africa RPL also resonates with challenges faced by higher education (Osman, 2004a:139, 143), within a changing political context, demanding a response to the need to provide access opportunities to previously disadvantaged adults. In a useful comparison of RPL implementation in countries with best practice, Motaung (2007:101) indicates that social justice is the main purpose of international RPL practices; however, within the context of social justice there are different approaches. An example is Werquin (2011), who perceives recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a potential mechanism to promote lifelong learning.

A summary (Motaung, 2007:103; Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:55; Werquin, 2011) of the most common acronyms used is presented in the table below.

**Table 3.1: RPL acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APCL (UK)</td>
<td>Assessment of prior certified learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APLA (UK)</td>
<td>Assessment of prior learning and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC (UK)</td>
<td>Accreditation of current competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APEL or RPEL</td>
<td>Assessment of prior experiential learning/recognition of prior experiential learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ireland, UK, US, SA)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APL (UK)</td>
<td>Assessment of prior learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA (US)</td>
<td>Assessment of prior achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA (US, Canada)</td>
<td>Prior learning assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAR (Canada)</td>
<td>Prior learning assessment and recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPL (Australia, New Zealand, SA)</td>
<td>Recognition of prior learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVC (Netherlands)</td>
<td>Erkennen van elders informed verworven competententies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROCC (SA)</td>
<td>Recognition of current competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARPL (SA)</td>
<td>Assessment and recognition of prior learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RNFIL</td>
<td>Recognition of non-formal and informal learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAS/RAC(Flanders)</td>
<td>Recognition of acquired skills/competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPL</td>
<td>What has been learned in every possible learning environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the different acronyms it is evident that although different countries consider different approaches and systems, the acronyms can be regarded as a label (Stenlund, 2010:784) for a process where the concept of assessment of prior learning is central. The acronyms indicate the different types of learning and knowledge that are involved in the assessment process, for example prior, informal, non-formal and experiential, and the achievements and competencies which may include knowledge, skills and values. Terminology used such as recognition, prior, learning, experiential, “competenties” (competence) and assessment imply that the RPL process is more than just recognition of experience, but an assessment process to make different forms of knowledge and learning “visible” (Bjornavold, 2001:24) as it values different forms and contexts of learning. A process is suggested in the act of recognition, assessment and accreditation. The variety of approaches as reflected in the acronyms can inform a national approach. However, since RPL is regarded as a
complex matter (Harris, 2000:1), the context needs to be specified because the learners need to be prepared for the demands of assessment within a specific context. Although these acronyms confirm that there is little agreement about definitions and concepts, Werquin (2011:105) states that international agreement may not be needed for the recognition process to be implemented.

The different acronyms contribute towards conceptualising RPL as a process to be implemented within a certain context and with a definite purpose. Assessment is a central aspect within this process that takes different forms of learning, knowledge and contexts into consideration. For the purpose of this study, the term "recognition of prior learning or RPL" is used to avoid confusion, since it is the preferred term/acronym used in local legislative documents.

3.2.2 Perspectives of RPL

The implementation of RPL is guided by international models. In national studies and articles on RPL (Nieman, 2001; Motaung, 2009; Geyser, 2001; Smith, 2003a, Deacon, Osman & Buchler, 2009; Frick et al., 2006; Moore, 2000) an overview of international practices and lessons from abroad is shared. However, Geyser (2001:36) warns that the vast differences between RPL candidates in South Africa as a developing country and those in developed countries such as the USA and Canada are obvious. The learners from the developed countries are sophisticated and more articulate in comparison with the diverse, multilingual context in South Africa. In comparison with other countries, RPL in South Africa is a fairly new initiative.

A few examples from different countries prove that internationally there are established systems in place. The term PLA (prior learning assessment) is used in the USA, where it is a prevailing practice in most of the prominent higher education institutions, and provision is made for the adult learner. Well-developed models for RPL have been established in the USA driven by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). It has a history of almost 40 years, and was introduced in the USA after World War II to assess the skills of war veterans returning from Vietnam. In Canada although prior learning assessment and
recognition (PLAR) has been in practice for the past 25 years, its contribution is still considered as being undervalued by educators (Van Kleef, 2007:1, 15).

As in South Africa, the concern in both Canada and Great Britain is the lack of substantial research on RPL (Evans, 2000; Van Kleef, 2007) and a lack of cohesion in educators’ conceptual understanding of RPL/PLAR. Lester (2007:188) and Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006:369) report that despite the fact that the process of the assessment and recognition of prior experiential learning (APEL) in Great Britain is considered an established practice and part of mainstream education, it is still underused. The concept of APEL is promising for adult learners, as qualifications based on workplace competence are available and it is possible to achieve a whole qualification based on relevant workplace learning. Despite the international research on RPL and the islands of good practice, it is “in nature fragmented” (Breier & Harris, 2011). This notion is in line with Van Kleef’s views (2007), who mentions that internationally RPL does not have an organised body of knowledge. Michelson refers to the “undertheorisation” of RPL practice (Andersson & Harris, 2006:143). A real concern is that despite a long history of RPL and well-established practices, there is a lack of international research and RPL research is still regarded as an “emerging field” (Harris & Wihak, 2011:12; Stenlund, 2010:783).

However, despite the above concerns, there are many examples of procedures and programmes that prove the benefit of RPL, such as case studies mentioned below. The discussion of the case studies below is an example of an RPL process in practice based on empirical research.

3.2.3 RPL-related case studies

Case studies can provide useful guidelines and perspectives for the RPL process within the South African context. The SAQA unit standard (SAQA, 2010a:6) mentioned in chapter 1 requires RPL practices to be outlined in terms of both national and international models, trends and findings; hence the inclusion of two exemplary international case studies, one Canadian and one US-based study. RPL as an assessment strategy gained considerable prominence in countries such as the USA and Canada. The reason for selection of these case studies is that they
demonstrate the implications of RPL at different levels, namely one at candidate level and one at institutional level.

The first study is a cross-Canada study to investigate PLAR activities at seven institutions across Canada (Aarts et al., 1999) and proves to add value to the study due to the learner-centred nature of the case study as empirical research. This study found sufficient evidence to claim that the PLAR assessment process benefits the learners. The study was based on learners’ perception of PLAR and an analysis of PLAR activities at seven colleges. The title of the report, *A slice of the iceberg*, is a metaphor depicting the concept that a small percentage of adult learning is recognised and that most of the learning, as tacit learning, exists below the surface, making it difficult to identify and recognise the learning (Aarts et al., 1999:vii). The implications of the metaphor sensitised me, as a researcher, to the relevance of the research problem to prepare learners for assessment, especially learners within the context of this study who were adult learners at a distance learning institution in Africa. This study confirms the basic belief that underpins RPL practices: the fact that people can learn outside the boundaries of formal learning and that this learning can be assessed (Van Kleef, 2007).

The non-formal and informal learning that exists below the surface can be more difficult to recognise and assess; thus there is a need for sound preparation for assessment to ensure that RPL functions as a bridging mechanism. Peters (2005:282) cautions against barriers in this preparation process, for example the learning as a result of different forms of experiences must be presented according to the norms and regulations of the assessing institution, the university. Despite the wealth and nature of the adult’s learning “below the surface”, the assessing institution has the “power to recognize knowledge” (Peters, 2005).

The Canadian study builds on the international literature on RPL where findings confirm that RPL is an academically sound practice that benefits both adult learners and institutions, and that successfully links informal to formal learning (Aarts et al., 1999:72). As an academic process, it requires the educators responsible for learner support in the RPL process to be committed to adult learning. The RPL process benefits the learner at different levels. Some of the key findings of the study are that
PLAR students were successful students and their achievements such as pass rates were higher than those of traditional students. However, Stenlund (2010:791) maintains that based on the findings of a few studies there are no differences between the academic achievements of RPL students and other students. Further benefits (Aarts et al., 1999:69, 71) for students who complete the PLAR process is that it contributes to learners’ employability after completing formal studies. The RPL process benefits experienced workers as it “offers recognition for learning from their work and life experiences” (Aarts et al., 1999:154). The RPL process has proved to enhance learners' self-esteem and their confidence in their ability to learn and adds to the motivation to complete their studies. The contribution of the findings of the case study is to conceptualise RPL as a process that benefits the learner at a personal and educational level. The preparation for assessment not only entails preparing for the compiling of a portfolio, but leads to “new learning outcomes” (Brown, 2002:232) associated with personal benefits of the developmental process. The findings regarding the personal benefits associated with RPL are supported in other empirical studies by, among others, Lamoreaux (2005), Pearson (2000), Osman (2003) and Brown (2002), confirming adult learners’ experiences of change, transformation and increased self-knowledge related to prior learning assessment.

The second case study provides lessons learned from best practice in adult learning and was conducted in the USA (Flint et al., 1999). The study was selected due to its similarity with the South African context, as one of the distinguishing characteristics of American higher education is diversity (Geyser, 2001:32). A second reason was that it also represents the context of higher education. The study provides insight into the key role of considering adult learning theories in practice, since the characteristics and needs of adult learners differ from those of traditional learners (Flint et al., 1999:1x). The six institutions for this benchmarking study were selected based on their exemplary practice of meeting the needs of adult learners. Since benchmarking is a process of identifying outstanding practice with the purpose of improving performance, the findings of the study serve to provide an example of best practice in implementing RPL according to adult learning principles.

The perceptions of the institutions are that adults bring a rich and complex history of experience to learning, and that experience has a direct and important relationship to
new learning. Some of the findings were that the learners use their own and others’ ideas to draw meaning from experience. The individualised approach to learning encourages adult learners to reflect upon their prior learning experience as a way of enriching the learning process and identifying learning goals and strategies. Assessment is considered a critical element of the learning process, where the profile and characteristics of adult learners continually shape the underlying assumptions that support the assessment model (Flint et al., 1999:111-112).

These above perceptions of adult learning are evident in the different programmes of institutions. The context of the institutions supports adult learning opportunities, and as adult learning focused institutions they subscribe to practical principles in their RPL practice (Flint et al., 1999:58). These principles include engaging adult learners in ongoing dialogue to assist in making informed educational planning decisions, advising and encouraging learners to take responsibility for further learning. They realise that the initial contact between the assessing institution and the adult learner is critical, as they need to allay the anxiety which adult learners often experience.

As in the Canadian study, the US benchmarking study acknowledges that peer collaboration and a supportive climate are essential. The collaborative learning experiences centred on the lives and work of adult learners. In this context adult learning is enhanced when learners are provided with opportunities to interact with peers, and when learning takes place in a context that minimises anxiety. The characteristics and contexts of adult learners influence the design of learning experiences, designed to provide diverse learning experiences while meeting academic standards. A last principle is that adult learners are recognised as a diverse group, where it is not possible to categorise adults.

The main contribution of these case studies lies in the awareness that they create of the needs of the adult learners and the empirical proof that an RPL process benefits the learners and that adult learner characteristics and needs influence practice. The implementation of RPL in South Africa can build on international practices and lessons learned, such as the successful implementation of RPL in the US since the 1970s, in the UK and Canada in the 1980s and the recent implementation in Australia, New Zealand and Europe (Nieman, 2001:140; Geyser, 2001:30).
However, these case studies also draw attention to the lack of a case study representing the non-Western perspectives. Lloyd (2012:52) confirms the need for South African case studies where RPL has been conducted credibly and authentically. The findings of these case studies will support conceptual conclusions of empirical findings as posed in chapter 6.

3.3 THE CONTEXT OF RPL IN SOUTH AFRICA

3.3.1 A background overview

A distinctive characteristic of the RPL discourse in South Africa (Geyser, 2001:30; Osman, 2004a; 2004b) is the political agenda with its principled goal of bringing about social justice (Shalem, 2001:53). The main purpose of RPL is access and redress as a need in South Africa (SAQA, 2002:8) with the vision of being a tool for transformation (Breier & Harris, 2011). The claim for social justice set a demand for adults to have “access to opportunities” (Edwards, Sieminski & Zeldin, 2000:1). Therefore RPL as access to learning provides a “ladder of opportunity” to learning and enhanced social mobility.

In South Africa, RPL is implemented within a unique situation of diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, adult learners being disadvantaged by a previous political system, high rates of unemployment and a skills shortage. Therefore RPL is central to skills development as stated in the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), since it aims to address the skills shortage. To address this context and need, the requirement of the NSDS 111 is that all principal and sectorial national learning programmes must include RPL access routes by 2016 (Nel, 2010). This will ensure that valuable skills and learning gained by mature learners will benefit the country.

Existing policy documents on education and training-related legislation frame RPL. In a comprehensive overview of current South African legislation which impacts on RPL, Lloyd (2012:35) concludes that legislation creates an enabling environment for RPL. RPL takes account of the complexities of learning contexts and knowledge and the background of struggle for education in South Africa; therefore legislation
provides a supportive framework for the benefits associated with RPL (Lloyd, 2012). The policy documents that capture or imply the importance of RPL on a national basis are mentioned or described by a number of local authors (Kistan, 2002; Smith, 2003b; Heyns, 2004; Frick et al., 2006; Moore, 2000; Breier & Burness, 2003). The importance of and the need to increase opportunities for mature learners to access higher education are recognised in various policy documents, such as the Higher Education Act (Government Gazette, 1997), the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 2001) and the Draft White paper on Higher Education (Ministry of Education, 1997).

The vision for transformation is confirmed in both outcomes 2 and 3 of the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001:28), which articulates the need to increase graduate outputs and access opportunities for mature learners, workers and the disabled to higher education as an important policy goal. The legislative imperatives of RPL create an awareness of the rights of learners with relevant experience, respect for people’s knowledge and giving previously disadvantaged adult learners an opportunity to enter formal education. The latest legislative document, the draft Green Paper for Post-school Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012:78), confirms the relevance of including access opportunities as one of the means to ensure redress of past injustices, to ensure a qualified labour force and to open learning opportunities. The Green Paper states that RPL policies should “assist with the placement of learners who do not meet the formal requirements for entrance” and systems should be strengthened “so that institutions make alternative routes for access possible”.

The possibility of RPL in higher education is not only protected by legislation, but it is also pedagogically supported by adult education theory. The implementation of RPL has a sound theoretical underpinning and supports the premise that RPL is based on adult learning theories and forms the basic principles and assumptions of RPL. Frick et al. (2006:27) identify main themes based on international and national research to support the pedagogical motivation for RPL. Adult learners can succeed in higher education as a result of their life and work experiences, as the process of RPL builds on the variety of useful experiences that adults have gained. The experiences can include knowledge, skills and the ability to apply knowledge and skills. They have
gained attributes such as motivation and self-knowledge to assist in their development. A country can benefit from these personal attributes and experiences of RPL candidates, as adults have a critical role to play in the economy and the development of South Africa because of their experience and knowledge (Walters & Koetsier, 2006: 107; Buchler et al., 2006:34). The need to increase graduate outputs (Department of Education, 2001) can be supported by providing alternative admission routes as access for skilled people who do not meet the admission requirements of tertiary education, but who have relevant skills and the motivation to complete a university degree.

The implementation of RPL in South Africa is actively supported by SAQA, which is the body responsible for the development of the NQF. The objectives of the NQF as outlined in the NQF Act 67 of 2008 and SAQA Act of 1995 support the mission of RPL, namely access, redress and full personal development of each learner. One of the principles of the NQF that underpins the objectives is RPL, namely “through assessment to give credit to learning which has already been acquired in different ways” (SAQA, n.d.). SAQA is mandated to develop policy and criteria in consultation with the Quality Councils for RPL (Bolton, 2011a, 2001b), giving an advantage to local RPL practices that can benefit from the national RPL policy (SAQA, 2002; 2013), which acts as sound guidance for RPL implementation. The commitment to the learner is captured by one of the NQF objectives, namely to contribute to the full personal development of each learner.

However, against this background of supportive initiatives, Samuels (2011) refers to a 20-year “struggle” to fully implement RPL, which comes as a disappointment. It seems that RPL has not achieved the political goal of social redress (Harris, 2000; Luckett, 1999) and years after the inception of RPL in this country, it is still considered as a challenge to higher education (Kistan, 2002:169). Despite the possibilities of RPL as a practice to create an awareness of the rights of learners with relevant experience, respect for people’s knowledge and giving previously disadvantaged adult learners an opportunity to enter formal education, there remains under-representation of certain traditionally excluded groups (Osborne, 2003:48) and a need to put policy into practice. This is confirmed by an international task team’s finding that in South Africa both the “uptake of RPL” and the impact are at a lower
level than would have been expected (Gunning, Van Kleef & Werquin, 2008:6, 7). Despite the “noble objectives” and the fact that RPL is seen as a key element of policy reform, widespread barriers are still a barrier, such as admission to higher education.

A concern is that despite the theoretical awareness, RPL policies still have not addressed key concepts of “translating policy into practice” (Ntsoe, 2010:34). There may be a multiple known and unknown reasons for the reluctance to provide access opportunities. It could be as a result of “very little literature on RPL in the distance higher education context” (Kizito, 2006:128) or the total lack of empirical research on non-traditional learners. The nature of the practice should be specified in terms of the current context and the practical implementation at learner level.

3.3.2 The current context of RPL practices: challenges

The current status of the development of RPL practices in South Africa is described in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (Gunning et al., 2008). Besides providing an overview of the unique context of RPL in South Africa, it also provides an opportunity to benchmark local RPL practices against an international context since this international investigation of RPL was done across 22 countries and five continents. The OECD report is based on an international project entitled “Recognition of non-formal and informal learning” (Gunning et al., 2008) with the aim of investigating the impact of RPL policies, the status of RPL in different countries and the benefits of such recognition. The challenge is to build on the existing islands of excellent practice mentioned in the report.

The reality of RPL in SA was discussed extensively at the National SAQA RPL Conference (held in Benoni, South Africa, on 23-25 February 2011). The main theme was bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice with the strategy to refine and facilitate the implementation of national RPL policy. This resulted in a national declaration on RPL (SAQA, 2011), namely that although the RPL promises of the early 1990s have not been fulfilled, since 1994 some progress has been made towards implementing RPL. The islands of existing excellent RPL
practices are acknowledged and do exist, but there is a need for a fully fledged national RPL system and a need for common understandings of RPL. The societal value of recognition of non-formal and informal learning should be included to ensure that policy becomes practice, where developmental RPL is the dominant mode. Blom (2011) emphasises the need for a new RPL discourse that moves from socio-political matters to a pragmatic approach grounded in educational practice. These discussions contribute to the conceptual understanding of RPL as a notion where policy becomes practice in the implementation at learner level. This implementation, similar to the international context, needs to be grounded in sound research practices, where a community of RPL scholars have a vital role (Wihak, 2011:116) to play.

The reality of the current context, the contribution of some of the existing practices, the background and development of RPL are reflected by research. In a Sabinet internet search conducted in March 2011 on articles published in accredited South African journals from 2000-2011, twenty articles were found. These do not include all the national research outputs on RPL, but give an indication of main research themes, reflecting the reality of the current RPL context. Main themes that emerged from the abstracts of these scholarly articles (Kistan, 2002; Deacon et al., 2009; Snyman, 2004; Beekman, 2001; Greyling & Brokenshaw, 2006; Motaung, 2007, 2009; Shalem, 2001; Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003, Osman, 2004b, Osman & Castel, 2002, 2006) are that RPL is associated with access and with the non-traditional learner as the adult learner. The relevance of preparation for assessment is a concern and the question of bridging the gap between two worlds of knowledge is raised. The recognition of the practical knowledge of adult learners is recognised, as this knowledge comprises wisdom, knowledge within a social context, practical knowledge and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems. A prominent theme is the political context of RPL and the policy and legislation guiding RPL implementation.

Research has led to an awareness of the benefits of RPL at different levels and in different contexts, and has managed to capture some of the challenges. Including an overview on research initiatives may contribute to bringing recognition of non-formal and informal learning out of its “relatively isolated position” (Konrad, 2010:8).
Within the workplace context RPL can be a cost-effective tool to address a skills shortage, such as high level professional and managerial skills (Kistan, 2002:169), and within the context of higher education it can create an awareness of workplace learning and possible inclusion in learning programmes. In a national audit and analysis of education research undertaken from 1995 to 2006 (Deacon et al., 2009:1073) some of the primary research themes are the relevance of RPL, the promotion of indigenous knowledge and access to higher education through RPL. Another theme is that as an assessment process RPL has the potential to benefit learners at a personal level (Nieman, 2001:143; Wihak, 2011:116; Nel, 2010:20) by enhancing their motivation, confidence, pride and self-esteem.

These themes reflects the need for research within the South African context on the personal benefits associated with RPL assessment, such as the success rate of RPL candidates and the wide range of “transformational” effects on the individual (Travers, 2011:267). In an overview of international research contributions on the personal transformational effects as a result of engaging in an RPL process, Travers (2011:268; 2012) refers to aspects of self-awareness, personal development and improved self-direction and self-regulation. The contribution of the research is that it provides valuable practical matters for inclusion in an RPL process, enhancing the quality of the process, and creating an understanding of a learner-centred approach.

Despite an awareness of the relevance of research, Osman (2003:47) refers in her study to the “slender body of local research and literature on RPL”. This was still the case a few years later, where another Sabinet internet search conducted in February 2012 on the number of RPL-related articles published in 2011 indicated only two scholarly articles (Singh, 2011; Frick & Albertyn, 2011). Although this may not be a true reflection of publications, since not all databases were searched, if confirms that the South African RPL research field mirrors the fragmented nature of international research (Wihak, 2011:118). There are similarities in the recurring themes that emerge from international studies and national RPL research, such as the fact that the widening of participation in higher education is central to educational policies (Osborne, 2003:43; Peters, 2005:278; Stenlund, 2010:787). Both national and international research confirms that access to higher education for non-traditional learners must be “actively facilitated” (Osborne, 2003:45) and there is a need for preparation for assessment (Peters, 2005:273; Stenlund, 2010:791). This need for
preparation emphasises learner support, which is critical in RPL practices (Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:58; Harris, 2000:27). The research agrees that despite policy initiatives, there is an under-representation of traditionally excluded groups who benefit from RPL (Osborne, 2003:48). The challenge remains to include the possibilities of adult learners, who have a critical role to play (Buchler et al., 2006:34) both in higher education and in the country.

It is evident that both internationally and nationally there is more academic and practitioner discussion about the topic, rather than actual practice, as confirmed in Valk’s international study and published research (2009). However, despite these concerns RPL locally has the potential to be built upon, because the contribution of local RPL-related research is perceived as being critical to the international RPL research community (Harris & Wihak, 2011:8).

Research confirms that the practical application of policy at practice level “remains relatively low in relation to its potential” (Scott, 2010:20). Only when policy becomes a reality in the lives of adult learners will RPL be able to contribute to the national mission of transformation. Transformation is regarded as a key aspect within the current higher education context (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012) and it is evident that RPL is imbedded not only in legislation, but also in the new challenges that higher education has faced since 1994.

### 3.3.3 RPL within a higher education context

#### 3.3.3.1 A tool for transformation

The transformative role of RPL as a tool for transformation encompasses different elements and has different focal points. Transformation implies the inclusion of non-traditional learners, an inclusion of multiple contexts of learning and knowledge previously considered as non-academic knowledge. RPL as driven by legislation imperatives and personal needs of prospective learners is best understood against the “background of struggle for Education in SA” (Walters, 2013).
Osman (2003:2) proposes RPL as “a cornerstone for change and transformation”. The current context of RPL is grounded within the need for transformation in higher education, and it is assumed that RPL will play an integral role as agent for the transformation of education and training also at learner level. A distinctive aim of RPL as transformation should be to benefit the learner at a personal and educational level by empowering learners with new possibilities. At a national level RPL is conceptualised as a tool for transformation because it has the potential to facilitate hope for learners in higher education (Frick & Albertyn, 2011:145; Geyser, 1999). RPL as one of the objectives of the NQF, namely to bring about “sensible transformation”, has the potential to make a difference in the lives of millions of learners in South Africa (Isaacs, 2000:63).

Despite the perceived role of RPL within the debate on transformation in higher education, a concern is still that “limited access to higher education institutions” (Unisa, 2008b:3) placed higher education well out of reach of not only South Africans, but of adult learners in Africa. Underwood (2003:52) warns that in the implementation of RPL the unique situation of South Africa should be considered for the RPL framework, and that its success depends on how the RPL framework understands social pressures and experiences of the people it affects. The transformation objective can only become reality if it acknowledges the complexities of the personal and educational background, needs, experience, knowledge, context and diversity of prospective candidates as adult learners.

3.3.3.2 Possibility and potential

Despite the need for the implementation of RPL, the process has been resisted in some institutions of higher education (Geyser, 2001). As an RPL assessment strategy it requires a new perspective on learning and on knowledge (Michelson, 1999: 99; Geyser, 2001: 30). This observation is still relevant today as confirmed by the OECD report (Gunning et al., 2008:11), which found that despite the SAQA RPL policy having access as one of the focal points besides equity and redress, only three universities seem to address the need to provide access through RPL. This raises a new awareness about the need for providing access possibilities to tertiary education. Heyns (2004:17) explains that in “all the new education Acts, explicit and
implicit reference is made to the widening of access to non-traditional learners”. Legislation such as the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation states that access is a major transformation imperative (Department of Education, 1996).

The vision of the current Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2009), for RPL has the potential to reposition it within adult education in South Africa. By providing a practical option for adults, an RPL possibility is stated at learner level:

“The field of adult education and training needs re-invigoration and dedicated focus in the coming period … to enhance and expand further higher education and training opportunities for adults. In addition, the department will be finalising a proposed ‘matric’ equivalent qualification appropriate for adults, through amongst others strengthening policy on recognition of prior learning.”

“He can’t be expected at 45 to go back and redo his matric” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2009; 2012). Nzimande is of the opinion that RPL has to become a central component of education. However, there is a need to build on ground work initiated to ensure that RPL is not only “paved with good intentions.” (Jones, 2013: 8) but that a fully fledged RPL system becomes a reality, The reality of the current context and needs of adult learners holds opportunities for mature adults as RPL assessment enables them to build on relevant learning acquired from work and life experiences (Cretchley & Castle, 2001:488; Castle & Attwood, 2001: 61; Buchler et al., 2006:34; Osman & Castle, 2002:63, Snyman, 2004). There are different groups who have different purposes of seeking alternative access to tertiary education. The first is under-qualified adults with some level of training and education who want to improve their qualification. This group may also include access to postgraduate studies, for example admission into an MBA programme (Singh, 2011:803). Another group is adults who lack the formal minimum requirements, but who have acquired a wealth of experience and are motivated and committed to succeed at tertiary level. Nel (2010:11) regards access through alternative admission routes as the main objective for seeking access to tertiary education and training.
The nature of the diverse forms of prospective RPL candidates’ knowledge may have potential for higher education. RPL’s agenda to support transformation of the education and training systems (SAQA, 2002:11, 14) refers to a holistic, developmental and incremental approach which acknowledges different learning contexts and the dynamic nature of knowledge construction. Lloyd (2012:42) remarks that legislation and policies, such as the Green Paper (2011) and the NSDA 111 suggest creating an enabling and positive environment for “all forms of knowledge to be assessed”. As an assessment approach, RPL contributes by “expanding the potential for knowledge acquisition, expression and delivery” (Brown, 2011:1). Through the inclusion of “non-traditional” (Wyatt, 2011) learners in higher education and by creating opportunities of alternative assessment options, an awareness of diverse forms of knowledge and learning is created. Since practical wisdom is acquired with experience, Breier and Ralphs (2009:480) argue that a greater understanding of practical wisdom can make a relevant contribution to the implementation of RPL. The very nature of RPL candidates as adults with experience implies a readiness for learning opportunities, since experience can be perceived as the foundation of all learning (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993). The purpose of RPL assessment is to facilitate a mediating process between different contexts of knowledge, with an additional benefit to create an awareness of the value of alternative knowledge systems.

The diverse learning contexts of adult learners allow for an awareness of diverse forms of knowledge. Frick and Albertyn (2011:147) perceive the transformative potential of RPL in challenging existing knowledge structures. Pityana (2007) acknowledges the failure of higher education after apartheid to provide alternative frameworks of knowledge production. A benefit of RPL that merits consideration is the fact that it creates awareness of alternative knowledge. Pityana (2007:6) encourages us to “rehabilitate the indigenous African knowledge systems”. Taking cognisance of the wealth of learning that mature learners can bring to higher education will allow RPL practices to acknowledge their potential to influence and enrich the curriculum. RPL has the potential to include a process to acknowledge participants’ knowledge as valid “practical wisdom” (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:767) and, by recognising this knowledge, ensure that it does not remain
“unnoticed”. The use of an assessment tool, such as portfolio assessment, that is able to capture the experiential learning of learners (Brown, 2011:1, 10) proves to be useful to create an awareness of diverse types of learning acquired in different learning contexts.

Ntsoe (2010:30) draws attention to the intended role of expanding access to higher education through distance education in South Africa. He further argues that since RPL as transformation is at the “core of open and distance education” (Ntsoe, 2010:39), it has the potential to provide non-traditional mature learners with the “necessary competencies”. Against the background of research initiatives and legislation, the common thread that remains the key benefit of RPL assessment is “access to lifelong learning” (Singh, 2011:805). To fill the gap between policy and practice it is imperative to address the need of the large group of potential learners who were prevented from completing formal schooling and who will most definitely benefit from an alternative access route to higher education (Heyns, 2004:23, 25).

The legislative background that allocates a high priority to educational benefits at learner level, the need to make RPL a more attractive assessment option for inclusion in access policies and the “trend towards student-centeredness” (Mitchell & Le Roux, 2010:2) and “learner engagement in ODL” (Van den Berg, 2011: 63) motivate the need to discuss a learner-centred assessment approach. A focus on a learner-centred approach aims to offer a second opportunity at education success to working mature learners who have encountered obstacles along their way (Jones, 2013: 8.) The generic SAQA unit standard on RPL provides a guideline for a critical discussion on an RPL assessment strategy.

3.4 THE DEVELOPMENT, SUPPORT AND PROMOTION OF RPL PRACTICES

A definition of RPL within the context of higher education forms a point of departure for conceptualising RPL assessment. The definition within an ODL context is relevant here, as it is formulated in terms of SAQA-approved principles, where RPL is defined as an approach that allocates high priority to learner-centred support systems for preparation of assessment (SAQA, 2002:12).

91
The definition in the Unisa RPL policy (2005b) is as follows:

"Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the identification, assessment and acknowledgement of an individual’s skills and knowledge within the context of a specific qualification, irrespective of how and where they have been acquired. It is the acknowledgement of skills, competencies, knowledge and work ethos obtained through informal training, on-the-job experience, and life experience when measured against specific learning outcomes."

The definition implies that RPL assessment forms part of a process. Despite claims that assessment of prior learning is complicated, and appears to be complex (Frick et al., 2007a:642), others maintain that the process is clear and simple (Motaung, 2007:101). The process entails identifying knowledge, matching the knowledge, skills and experience against assessment criteria and standards, and assessing and crediting the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience gained according to the purpose of the RPL assessment (SAQA, 2002:7). The definition’s key pointers of the individual and the diverse nature and context of knowledge are further discussed within the context of RPL assessment.

A later definition of RPL is the “practice of acknowledgement of individuals’ knowledge and competence, irrespective of how, where and when learning has taken place” (Stenlund, 2013:1). The “acknowledgment” implies a personal and academic recognition of worth at learner level.

3.4.1 Unit standard on RPL practices

RPL practices in South Africa are formalised and guided by the SAQA unit standard, i.e. “Develop, support and promote RPL practices” (SAQA, 2010a). The specific outcomes and assessment criteria give explicit guidelines on the implementation of RPL. The assessment criteria of this unit standard require, among other things, the need to explicitly overcome the visible and invisible barriers to learning and
assessments and to create a credible system as an effective and creative vehicle for lifelong learning (SAQA, 2002:11).

The SAQA RPL policy guides the approach to RPL assessment by stating the “route to the assessment” (SAQA, 2002:8) with advice and support as key elements in the process. The unit standard explains that the RPL candidates require assessment that reflects a holistic approach, including preparing RPL candidates for RPL and engaging with RPL candidates. The holistic approach dovetails with Travers’s research (2012:45) on the multiple benefits associated with RPL assessment, including both personal and academic benefits (Geyser, 1999:194). RPL has implications for the individual’s career, learning opportunities and self-esteem. The assessment process draws attention to the need to address a variety of factors that “constitute barriers to effective learning and assessment practice” (SAQA, 2002:12) and to the relevancy of the candidates’ profiles and the acknowledgement of learners' diverse needs and backgrounds.

To derive a common understanding of RPL assessment, the assessment process, assessment as a learning intervention and preparation for assessment are discussed.

3.4.2 The assessment process

Assessment can be defined as a structured process for gathering evidence and making judgements about a candidate’s performance. It is considered to be a learning process integrated in the “conversion of practical knowledge into academic terms” (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:775). Although the rules for assessment of learning are the same for all types of learning (Fiddler et al., 2006:2), the approach may differ. A distinctive difference between traditional assessment and RPL assessment is that within the RPL context it is not simply an assessment process and does not exist in isolation (SAQA, 2013:8), but involves a preparation process to support learners to make prior learning explicit. As an assessment process it includes steps associated with assessment such as planning and preparing for assessment, preparing candidates for assessment, conducting assessment, evaluating evidence, making a judgement and providing feedback. The assessment
is undertaken against the nationally approved assessment criteria to ensure the credibility of the assessment.

Despite seemingly clear guidelines, Simosko (1988:10) talks about a certain mystique that seems to arise when it comes to the assessment of prior learning. RPL assessment is often imbedded in matters such as what constitutes valid knowledge and what should be considered in a preparation process (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:769). An uncertainty about the assessment may be due to the specific profile of the RPL candidate, the type of knowledge being assessed and the fact that RPL assessment is often perceived to be contested practice as a result of quality assurance concerns or the political and social discourses around RPL.

RPL assessment is associated with an additional purpose because it aims to bridge the gap between the two contexts of learning: the world of experience and the academic world. Different authors refer to the concept of “bridging the gap” between the two worlds of knowledge and contexts of learning (Motaung, 2007:53; Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003:47, Breier, 2001). An RPL process can specify strategies to bridge the gap or tension between the two worlds, and hence the need to specify the role of RPL assessment as the proposed tool to bridge this gap (Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003:47). Sandberg and Andersson (2011:769) confirm that candidates often lack the experience of higher education and need support in this process. Therefore a “new approach to valuing learning” is needed (Breier, 2001; Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003:73), since it is not only a process to facilitate access to new learning opportunities, but also a process to “build bridges” between different learning and knowledge contexts. RPL candidates should be well prepared to translate their prior learning in the context of higher education to ensure that the gap is closed.

Assessment of prior learning is perceived by Geyser (2001:31) as essential for future and new learning. It aims to provide a bridge to the academic context of knowledge and norms. However, RPL assessment also holds the possibility to ensure student success after access. In this regard Boud and Falchikov (2006:400; Boud, 2000) raise awareness of the need in higher education to align assessment with long-term learning. This has implications for assessment to adapt a learning-oriented approach.
A holistic approach (Fiddler et al., 2006:10; SAQA, 2002:12) is required in RPL assessment that allocates a high priority to a learner-centred developmental approach that subscribes to lifelong learning principles. A key element of a holistic approach (SAQA, 2002:12; 2004) is that the assessment process aims to form, shape and guide the candidate. As a principle of a holistic approach (SAQA, 2002; 2013:8) an appropriate combination of candidate guidance and support, teaching-learning, mentoring and coaching are required. The process of RPL assessment requires a respect for adults’ learning (Fiddler et al., 2006:12, 101) acquired in a variety of contexts. Van Kleef (2006:22) remarks that SAQA’s holistic view of the assessment process should take both the context of the learning as well as the context of the learner into consideration. As a holistic approach it aims to provide relevant advice and support prior to, during and after the RPL process (SAQA, 2012; 2013:14) which provides the opportunity for sound preparation for the assessment process with lasting effects for even after the RPL process.

The suggested holistic and integrated approach requires an in-depth understanding of what constitutes applied competence within a specific context (Heyns, 2003). This refers to the level of the knowledge and skills that have been acquired (Whittaker, 2006:2) in accordance with the breadth, depth and level of learning acquired. The Education, Training and Development Practices Project report (National Training Board, 1997:106) suggests that the competency model should be used, as this model accredits applied competence and comprises practical, foundational and reflexive competencies. The benefit of this model is that it offers opportunities for access to higher education, since it includes experience and, in the case of prior learning, relevant work, life and community experience (Van Rooy, 2001:63). The assessment of applied competence needs to specify the required knowledge to be assessed. Since informal learning and lessons learned from life experience are considered to be at the “heart of adult education” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001:25) because of its learner-centred focus, the assessment should consider the nature of the experience and knowledge involved.

RPL assessment as associated with experiential learning (Fenwick, 2000:243) is conceptualised within different theoretical perspectives and contemporary learning
paradigms (Brown, 2011; Fenwick, 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Experiential learning is often explained as a process of learning from experience, but Fiddler et al. (2006:4) argue that it is a similar but not equivalent process. They define experiential learning as associated with the nature of learning activities in which a learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied, whereas learning from experience entails the meaning that something holds as the outcome of a reflection process. Experience is therefore transformed into learning outcomes through a process of reflection. The tacit nature of experiential learning requires an individual and personal involvement in the meaning-making process experience. The process of interpretation of meaning comprises a specific preparation process where factors such as reflection and personal self-awareness are pivotal (Houston et al., 1997:185). The adult’s prior learning experiences are mostly unstructured, since the learning is derived from experience, and practical knowledge is tacit in nature (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989:188) and “unevenly developed” (Mandell & Michelsen, 1990:9). Scanlon (2008:19) refers to the “segmented nature of the life-world of the adult learner” where these segments can either support, enhance or detract from the student’s learning experience.

As mentioned in the discussion on international case studies in section 3.2.3, RPL assessment is considered as a beneficial process. Joossten-ten Brinke et al. (2008:51) explain that as a beneficial process it allows for the recognition of different types of learning. RPL assessment is a process that benefits the learner at different levels, as it can have cognitive, social and therapeutic effects on the learner (Ralphs, Deller, Cooper, Moodley & Mokadam, 2011:4). The different phases of assessment are perceived to have potential for a learning process, as new knowledge is often acquired through the RPL process (Ralphs & Deller, 2011; Ralphs, 2012), for example in the preparation for assessment as the pre-assessment phase.

The main difference between RPL assessment and a “traditional” assessment approach is that it has as a point of departure the outcomes or results of learning (Heyns, 2004; Geyser, 1999:194) since learning as a result of diverse life and work experiences are assessed (Fiddler et al., 2006:7). The context or source of learning as the “input process” (Werquin, 2011) is often unknown, as learning is acquired in different contexts. Consequently, assessment is not always seen as the end of a
process, but also as a first step in a learning programme built on prior learning and knowledge, for example RPL for access to higher education. A benefit of this process at the start of a programme (Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2009:72) is that it empowers the learner and contributes to the motivation to continue with studies. The assessment process may involve learning and gaining new skills to prepare learners for a new context.

The responsibility of RPL assessment to consider the learning context of tertiary education as a post-assessment context requires a shift in assessment practice. Boud (2000:159, 160) argues that assessment is never only what it appears to be, but has a role of “double duty” to have sustainable significance. For RPL assessment a sustainable approach has the potential to equip learners for lifelong learning, which includes the demands of distance and open learning after access. A sustainable approach to assessment can inform assessment as a strategy to bridge the gap between “the outside world and academia” (Peters, 2005:273). Skills, associated with a sustainable assessment approach, such as self-assessment and communication skills required for identification and articulation of learning, are necessary skills for preparation for assessment and the post-assessment context.

To conclude, an RPL assessment process is concerned with the result or outcome of the learning. Therefore it should consider the experience and knowledge of the learner, personal learner development, the context of assessment and the process of preparation for assessment. As a bridging intervention, a sustainable approach of assessment as learning considers the contexts before and after assessment.

For the purpose of this study the RPL assessment process comprises pre-assessment as preparation, assessment as evaluating evidence and making a judgement and post-assessment as the context after assessment and after access to formal education.

3.4.3 Preparation for assessment

The need for preparation is confirmed by one of the outcomes of an extensive overview of RPL-related research, where Stenlund (2010:790) confirms the need to
give more attention to the preparation phase. Joossten-ten-Brinke et al. (2008:29, 30) further motivate the relevance of support due to the nature of the knowledge of prior learning and processes involved, yet considering the profile of the “types of candidates” involved. However, the need for improved preparation is a general concern. In a national research project on the status of educational research in South Africa, Deacon et al. (2009:1081) found that the phenomenon of under-preparedness emerges as a common theme in almost every context. Prinsloo (2010) draws attention to the problem of under-preparedness of students, and states that much of the ODL implementation is concerned with the under-preparedness of students entering higher education and ODL. Although the focus is on traditional students who have completed a school-leaving certificate and gained admission to university, it may be a bigger barrier for mature learners who gain entry through the proposed “alternative pathways” (Prinsloo, 2010:3). Since RPL in higher education is regarded as a “high stake assessment” which sets requirements for the standard and validity of assessment (Stenlund, 2013:13), it is relevant to ensure that the learner is fully prepared, and that assessment as a learning intervention also prepares learners for lifelong learning or for the context after access.

The complexity of the RPL process lies in striking a balance between academic assessment and learner support (Unisa, 2005b:5). To achieve “state of the art” implementation (Valk, 2009:83), an RPL strategy should aim to achieve in the assessment approach a close symbiosis between assessment and support to be able to prepare candidates for both for the demands of assessment and of higher education. A learner who has been out of the educational system for some time will lack confidence about their ability to learn (Gravett, 2001:8) and may experience a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty about the new world of academia. Personal matters, such as self-concept, prior emotional experiences and previous negative experiences of learning, can be involved to further add to barriers that learners may experience. The preparation for assessment needs to involve preparation on a personal level as specified by the learner profile.

What RPL candidates often have in common is that their educational paths have been disrupted usually because of inequalities of the past or personal problems. Those students who have been out of the education system for a long time are likely
to be unfamiliar with the demands of academic language and educational processes. They experience a range of social and personal barriers that result in high levels of stress and much of this is related to prior negative experiences of formal education and assessment. Boud and Falchikov (2006:403) argue that even in traditional assessment at higher education institutions, assessment practice is associated with negative influences. The identified need for preparation should be perceived at two levels, namely the personal preparation of the RPL candidate for the new learning context and the preparation of knowledge and learning as evidence for the portfolio. The preparation should also draw on the personal strengths of learners. Mature students who entered university via RPL are mostly motivated by a need for personal fulfilment (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004:134), an attribute that could contribute to their success.

In a holistic approach that allocates high priority to learner-centred support systems to assist in the preparation for assessment, barriers to an effective assessment practice need to be identified and addressed (SAQA, 2002:12). The SAQA unit standard under discussion states that RPL needs to be promoted in a manner that addresses emotional, cultural, linguistic and economic factors that constitute barriers to effective learning and assessment. The nature of the barriers, as included in a learner profile, sets certain requirements for the preparation for assessment to prepare the learners effectively for the demands of the assessment. These barriers are not a given but should be identified in the empirical research on a learner profile as it can influence assessment. As lifelong, adult and self-directed learners, RPL candidates can be prepared to be able to identify their own barriers and take responsibility for addressing them.

The tacit nature of informal and incidental knowledge requires a structured preparation intervention, as the candidate needs to make “the transition between informal and non-formal learning, on the one hand, and formal learning on the other” (Motaung, 2009:80). The nature of the prior learning may constitute a personal barrier. As non-traditional learners who are not accustomed to the academic demands of tertiary education, they are unable to make the transition on their own. A practical example is the support to adult learners to arrive at abstract conceptualisation – a requirement for access to formal higher education (Osman &
Castle, 2002:67). This transition relates to preparation for both formal and epistemological access (Morrow, 2007) to be able to cope with the demands of the knowledge universities require. A variety of assessment and learning skills, such as critical reflection and ability to articulate learning, are necessary to “surface tacit knowledge” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001:30).

The individualistic nature of the knowledge involved in RPL assessment requires preparation. Deller (2007) refers to workplace experience that can be acquired collectively, for example teamwork. In non-Western cultures learning and experiences take place within the collectivist paradigm, but the RPL candidate is required to provide evidence of individual learning. Since the target group has extensive work and life experience, their learning is socially constructed and must have taken place in “social and community settings” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006:405). In the recognition of the rich diversity of knowledge, a holistic approach to assessment is advocated (SAQA, 2002:12). This approach considers a variety of factors. The preparation for assessment needs to support the ability of a learner to separate individual learning from the collective learning experience, such as the individual’s role in teamwork. This can be achieved by creating an awareness of the role of context in learning experiences, such as learning acquired in a cultural and social context.

The concept of RPL therefore holds inherent barriers as it is associated with a discourse on the different forms of knowledge and learning, what constitutes relevant knowledge and the inclusion and exclusion of different types of knowledge (Cooper, 2011; Frick, & Albertyn, 2011; Harris, 2000). The academic discourse around RPL matters, such as the recognition of the inclusion of different types of knowledge (Shalem, 2001; Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003), should not add to the complexity of RPL, but should be employed to the benefits of non-traditional learners who have acquired prior learning in different contexts. However, Lloyd (2012:52) found that not one of the barriers associated with RPL is of such a nature that it cannot be addressed. The perception of knowledge can impact on the approach towards the assessment process and the possible way of looking at RPL practice (Frick & Albertyn, 2011:148).
The demands of an assessment tool and the attitude of the assessor can be a barrier to assessment. To add to the complexity of the preparation for assessment, Stenlund (2010:790) draws attention to the role of the academic as assessor who may only perceive knowledge as valid if presented in the prescribed academic format. Although a flexible approach to assessment tools is advocated, the reality is that the assessment tool is often predetermined by the assessment institution, for example the portfolio of evidence. Despite the fact that RPL is included in the vision and mission of higher education, the irony is that the academics, who are required to act as the assessors and facilitators, can be a barrier and can impact negatively on the practice of RPL. Academics may consider involvement in RPL as an additional workload with the perception that it can impact on academic standards (Nieman, 2001:153) or the epistemological position of the academics does not consider the possibilities of RPL (Osman, 2003:233). Shalem (2001:53) refers to this as the conservative epistemological assumptions, which may prevent candidates from discovering their own voice. The requirements of the assessing institution and the use of academic discourse as a means of control and exclusion can act as a barrier, and can be the “power” to only recognise knowledge and learning as specified by the academic institution (Peters, 2005:282). To avoid any unforeseen barriers the learners must be prepared for the specific demands of portfolio assessment and assessment at tertiary level in general. A practical solution in the implementation and management of RPL is to involve academics who are trained to act as RPL assessors, have a clear understanding of alternative assessment options, are committed to access and redress and adhere to adult learning principles. In this regard Lloyd (2012:52) recommends training for educators on RPL assessment and pedagogy.

The learning context can cause a barrier to learning, for example the demands of an ODL context. Within the African and specifically the South African context, there are certain context-specific barriers. Lephalala and Pienaar (2007:4) mention that the students at Unisa who study through ODL experience a variety of barriers. These barriers include language, since English as the medium of instruction is often students’ second or third language. There are students who are not familiar with the university context since they are first generation university entrants from family backgrounds who have no knowledge of university education. Even within the
international context the concern that participants had a “mystified view” of higher education is raised (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:767). To add to this barrier, they have limited access to financial and emotional support and come from poor backgrounds with a high unemployment level. Against this background the RPL candidates as mature learners can experience more barriers as they lack a formal learning background. The preparation should ensure that assessing institutions do not set learners up to fail.

To conclude, the preparation for assessment should consider four main aspects. They are the personal learner profile, including personal matters and barriers, the context of assessment and learning, the nature of the knowledge involved and the preparation as a learning process. For the purpose of this discussion preparation relates to portfolio assessment. Portfolio development requires adult learners to be involved in active learning activities such as to reflect on, analyse, evaluate their experiential learning and equate prior learning with academic learning (Brown, 2011:11). Since RPL is perceived as a specialised pedagogy (Ralphs, 2011; 2012) with complex mediations of knowledge, learning and assessment inherent in the approach and design, the preparation process needs to be grounded in supportive adult learning theories. The assumption of assessment as learning is further discussed.

3.4.4 Assessment as learning

Assessment as a learning intervention is supported by the notion that the concept of RPL draws on theories of learning (Andersson, 2006:36). Assessment is regarded as a learning process where the assessment has the potential to impact on the learning (Biggs, 1999; Boud, 2007, 2009, 2010). However, this study argues that most of the learning takes place during the preparation for assessment, which is why assessment is regarded as a process.

The experience of assessment as learning can be aligned with Yang’s definition of learning (2003:117) in terms of a process where knowledge is created, acquired and transformed in a different context from the origin. To ensure that learners are prepared for the demands of the new learning context, they need to develop skills
that equip them with the ability to become self-regulated learners as they understand the assessment process and skills associated with assessment (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher & McPhail, 2013:1). The experience-related skills are transferred to the academic context. This relates to RPL assessment; Bolton (2011a:2; Bolton, 2011b) describes RPL in terms of a series of activities involving teaching and learning and therefore an RPL assessment process has the potential to be a valuable learning experience. Different authors refer to RPL as being more than an assessment process, and assert that it should be considered a learning process (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:774, 767; Frick et al., 2006:146; Blom, 2007; Fiddler et al., 2006:40). In general in higher education it is evident that there is strong support for perceiving assessment as a valuable tool for learning (Dochy, Segers & Sluijsmans, 1999:332) because if the student as an active learner gains insight into the assessment process, they learn to use assessment tools as learning as they are able to reflect on their own learning process. Taras (2002:501) argues that assessment is at the “heart of a learning process” where they are assisted in taking responsibility for their own learning, thus becoming self-directed learners.

The need for an “assessment as learning” approach is that it introduces learners to the discourse of formal education (Ralphs, 2011). RPL candidates as learners often lack experience of higher education (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011:769). The assessment can be perceived as a learning opportunity where pedagogical approaches are used to “mediate between the experiential learning of RPL candidates and the discourse of higher education” (Hendricks & Volbrecht, 2003:49). These learning interventions mainly take place during the preparation phase as support to find the links between practice and theory and tacit and informal knowledge and structured and formal academic knowledge. The need to focus on RPL as “returning-to learning” (SAQA, 2013:11) enables learners to engage successfully in further learning that will contribute to both educational, employment and personal goals.

An approach that can contribute to the lasting effect of RPL assessment as learning is the inclusion of a sustainable assessment approach. The framework for sustainable assessment (Boud, 2000:156) includes pointers that can be aligned with learning outcomes for a portfolio workshop as preparation for assessment.
Sustainable assessment skills include the development of self-assessment and reflective peer assessment (Boud, 1991). The notion of “assessment as double duty” (Boud, 2000:159) correlates with a premise of preparation for RPL assessment, namely that it comprises not only preparation for assessment, but also an active engagement in assessment as learning, since it equips learners for lifelong learning and new learning contexts. Boud (2000) states that a preparation for sustainable assessment builds on the belief that all students can succeed. The process includes building students’ confidence in their own ability to learn with a focus on the learning process rather than the end product. Within the RPL context Joossten-ten Brinke et al. (2008) stress the importance of a sense of confidence about the learning process and the preparation for learning.

Key aspects of a sustainable assessment model are beneficial for an RPL assessment approach. This acts as a sound basis for students “to undertake their own assessment activities” (Boud, 2000:151) after access to further education. Active involvement adds to a valuable authentic learning experience and enhances confidence as an adult learner (Boud, Sampson & Cohen, 1999:413; Kearney, 2012:2). These skills should be included in the portfolio workshop because candidates are expected to compile a portfolio of evidence after a preparation workshop. The inclusion of a sustainable learning and assessment approach (Boud, 2000; Boud, 2010; Boud & Falchikov, 2006:407-410; Beck, Skinner & Schwabrow, 2011:8; Kearney, 2012) in a portfolio development workshop implies the active involvement of learners in preparation for assessment. These skills will contribute to success in the post-assessment context of entry into formal studies, as self-assessment and peer assessment are perceived as being at the “core of higher education” (Nulty, 2011:503). Some concepts associated with assessment skills need further explanation.

Self-assessment is imperative in preparation for RPL assessment, and is defined as the active involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning (Dochy et al., 1999:334). Boud and Falchikov (2006:402) explain self-assessment as the lifelong learner’s ability to develop the capacity to be an assessor of their own learning in alignment with long-term learning. Joossten-ten Brinke (2008:13, 29) mention that learners require support in gathering suitable evidence because of the
difficulty of the self-evaluation process and evaluation of their own prior learning. They are often not aware of the extent or the lack of their knowledge and the value of the different forms of experiences. Acquiring the skill of self-assessment during preparation for assessment will help ensure the quality of evidence submitted for assessment since the tacit and unstructured prior learning has to be "codified" in the language of the qualification (Ralphs et al., 2011). This can be a challenging and demanding task. The development of the self-assessment skill further facilitates the process to make the tacit learning visible (Bjornavold, 2001:1).

Additional benefits of the ability of self-assessment is that learners become skilled in evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses and are able to set realistic and focused goals for themselves (Birjandi & Tamjid, 2012:514). The development of self-assessment and self-reflection skills contribute to student achievement (Boud, 2010:157; Duncan, 2011; Du Plooy, 2007), which can be useful for the development of an adult learner profile and for success within higher and distance education. Self-assessment may include critical reflection when learners have the responsibility to prepare their own competence profile (Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:52). The sustainable value of self-assessment and self-reflection for the context of higher and distance education “take place a personal, cognitive, social and critical level” (Du Plooy, 2007:36). Self-assessment and critical reflection can be combined with both peer assessment and peer learning.

Peer assessment is defined by Falchikov (1995) (in Dochy et al., 1999:337) as a thought process in which groups and individuals rate their peers. As a preparation strategy learners will be able to give immediate feedback. For example, feedback on peers’ life stories and drafts of essays is useful, as Dochy et al. (1999:339) argue that peers have a better opportunity to observe peers during the learning process and often have more insight than a facilitator into what others do. To contribute to a learning experience during preparation, for example a portfolio workshop, learning approaches such as peer and collaborative or cooperative learning are included in an assessment strategy (Boud et al., 1999:413, 424). A general benefit associated with peer assessment is that it serves as a tool of improving learner engagement (Weaver & Esposto, 2012). Both self-assessment and peer assessment require learners to be familiar with assessment criteria and standards. Adhering to criteria
and standards within an academic context may be an unfamiliar concept for RPL candidates; therefore an understanding of these concepts should form part of the preparation process. Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2003:147) confirm that a structured intervention involving developing students' understanding of assessment criteria and the assessment process can contribute to improving learning.

The consideration of including self-assessment and peer assessment in an RPL process is further supported by theories relating to adult learning. Birjandi and Tamjid (2012:515) explain the role of these assessment approaches in relation to constructivism. As self-assessment, a constructivist approach acknowledges the individual and personal nature of knowledge as “actively constructed by individuals”. Peer assessment involves learning as social interaction, relating to Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism. Both activities depend largely on the “ability to be self-reflective” (Nulty, 2011:497), a characteristic of the adult learner identified by different theories.

Dochy et al. (1999:340) maintain that both self-assessment and peer assessment foster reflection on the learning process and learning activities. Reflection relates to the activities to identify knowledge acquired and ability to apply skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking. By “fostering reflection” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006:409) it manages to link new knowledge and acquired assessment skills. There is agreement that the role of reflection in learning and preparation for assessment is a key component (Breier, 2008:26; Van Kleef, 2007:7; Brown, 2011:4) and a “methodological tool” (Harris, 2000:2) for turning experience into learning. In this regard Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Heyns, 2004:29; Fiddler et al., 2006:2) is the common model most referred to as it contributes to a deep learning experience of reflection as preparation for the assessment. To be considered is the fact that learners interpret life experiences differently (Yang, 2003:121, 121) and therefore interpretation from tacit learning should include a variety of activities.

To conclude, assessment as a sustainable learning strategy should be included in a portfolio workshop as preparation. It is argued that a sustainable assessment approach to RPL assessment involves a changed orientation towards assessment as learning, because it will “equip students for a lifetime of assessing own learning”
The conceptualisation of assessment for learning that “encompasses a holistic approach” (McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery & King, 2011:749) based on current theories can contribute to a structured RPL process as a credible and accessible process. Assessment as learning should consider the “characteristics and uniqueness” (Bezuidenhout et al. 2005:21) of adults as learners.

The assessment approach must consider the learner profile and the purpose of the assessment. RPL assessment models will therefore now be discussed. Three models are described as possible approaches.

3.5 AN ASSESSMENT APPROACH: THREE MAIN MODELS

The adult learning theories described in chapter 2 provide a framework for the credit exchange model, the developmental model and the transformational model. Frick et al. (2006:29) explain that the educational theory and practice of RPL led to the development of the three models, which enable practitioners to negotiate their focus and their approach to matters such as learning, experience, knowledge, the role of the candidate, possible benefits of RPL and assessment. Osman (2004a:139) regards the models as useful in understanding the complexities around prior learning because they provide a sound educational base to RPL practices. The strengths and weaknesses inherent in the different approaches of the models are considered for the specific context and purpose of an assessment strategy.

The relevance of considering models for an assessment approach is justified by different authors who discuss and compare the models (Harris, 2000; Osman, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Breier, 2008; Frick et al., 2006:29, 30; Deller, 2007:131). Sandberg and Andersson (2011:778) emphasise that there is still a lack of research on the validity of RPL models; however, they do not need to be prescriptive. These models should not be seen in isolation since aspects of each of them can contribute to a better understanding of the RPL assessment process.

The preferred use of an assessment tool and approach is guided by a specific model or combination of models. An understanding of the different models may lead to a
critical perspective of the role of the portfolio workshop and inclusion of aspects of these models in the preparation for assessment.

3.5.1 Credit exchange model

The credit exchange model is also referred to as the procrustean RPL model (Harris, 2000) and the technical or market framework model (Osman, 2004a:140; Deller, 2007:131). RPL is perceived from a technical/human capital perspective (Breier, 2008:28) and is useful within a training context where goals are made explicit. The objective of the assessment process is to match experience as learning against behavioural objectives, such as Bloom’s taxonomy of learning. This model only accommodates those aspects of a learner’s prior learning which fit or match prescribed outcomes and standards of a programme, subject or qualification. The candidate is required to match learning acquired in another learning context against learning outcomes as a process of “non-critical rational review” (Breier, 2008:28). This model requires the development of clear learning outcomes, and therefore a benefit for the assessment institution is that it needs to ensure clearly defined outcomes and assessment criteria that are easily accessible to learners. This model is assessment-based, with a purely technicist approach, where the preferred methods of assessment are standardised tests and examinations. Osman’s argument (2004a:141) that it favours those who already benefit from educational opportunities implies that as a process it does not meet the main vision of RPL for access, equity and redress.

Any approach has advantages and disadvantages. An aspect of the credit exchange model, based on the behaviourist theory, that can benefit RPL candidates is the idea of trial and error as stimulus and response. Behaviourism perceives learning as a change in behaviour and assessment as a measurement of the input and output of information (Nath & Sajitha, 2010:4). In practice this means that if a candidate is found not yet competent after the first assessment, a second opportunity is given to improve on the first performance. This may have implications for portfolio assessment where candidates lack academic language skills, as the candidates get the opportunity to improve on a portfolio for second submission. Although the behaviourist concept of conditioning and reward is usually not associated with adult
learners, RPL candidates may feel motivated by the “reward” of a subject credit or the feeling of personal achievement during a portfolio workshop. Fasokun et al. (2005:52) suggest that a facilitator should also include in a sympathetic manner the idea of reward and trial and error to help learners to improve on learning. In the context of a portfolio workshop this applies to the writing of drafts as preparation for an essay.

Despite criticism against this model (Frick et al., 2006:30) that it does not provide an opportunity for the candidate to reflect on prior learning and its significance, this model does provide credit opportunities to learners who can complete a qualification in a shorter period. A learner who has completed a similar learning programme within the workplace can be credited for the learning, and does not need to redo the same learning. An example is in-house training programmes within the banking sector that can be aligned with similar academic subjects at university level. A benefit is that the administration, assessment and accreditation processes for this approach are relatively simple; a disadvantage is that it does not contribute to the development of the candidate and may not prepare the candidate for further learning experiences.

Breier (2008) confirms that this is the preferred model in South Africa, but it does not offer any new possibilities to higher education as it is not congruent with the transformation agenda stated in policies. It is a useful approach for skills training such as assessor and moderator training programmes. It recognises only knowledge that can be matched against rigid learning outcomes and does not provide an opportunity for the inclusion of any knowledge or learning outside the prescribed formal structures, such as non-traditional learning and indigenous learning. Neither does it provide opportunities for learner empowerment on a personal level, or access for non-traditional learners. An RPL candidate whose prior learning experiences are not recognised or acknowledged by a process within this model may experience this process as a personal failure.
3.5.2 Developmental model

The developmental model can make provision for non-traditional knowledge because the perception of knowledge is that it is not equal to academic knowledge. RPL is perceived from a liberal/human perspective (Breier, 2008:30) and allows for the inclusion of the personal narrative and self-development. Adult experience is perceived as valuable and worthy of recognition if reflected upon and turned into learning. It has a liberal humanist framework based on the humanist learning theories and constructivism (Deller, 2007:132; Breier, 2008:29). A constructivist approach encourages critical thinking and aims at developing motivated learners. The model is further informed by Knowles and Rogers’s contribution to adult learning theories (cf chapter 2, section 2.6.1). Knowles’s andragogical approach emphasises the key role of experience and considering the needs of adult learners. Characteristics of the humanist theory (Fasokun et al., 2005:52), such as emotional support to the learner, the need for preparation and acknowledgement of the adult learner’s experiences, influence the assessment approach as development.

The developmental model requires respect for the adult learner’s experience and support of individual empowerment (Osman, 2004a:142; Osman, 2003). However, the reality in the current higher education context is that the recognition of knowledge that falls outside the field of prescribed academic knowledge is still not a reality and remains a contested matter. In practice this means that even if a candidate has knowledge and experience acquired within a different context, such as business management, the experience is appreciated, but they still need to prove their competence by means of a challenge examination.

The development model of RPL is committed to in-depth reflection on past experience and aims to help candidates derive learning from the reflection. Although this model acknowledges the contribution of Kolb’s learning cycle, a concern is that the process of reflection can have limitations for those adults who are not comfortable with reflection, and who do not already possess the required academic literacy skills (Harris, 2000; Buchler, 1999). However, Fasokun et al. (2005) confirm that critical reflection is well established in African non-formal learning contexts.
The humanist and learner-centred approach of the developmental model acknowledges the role of a portfolio development workshop as a developmental process that facilitates the opportunity for reflection, sufficient learner support and the development of RPL candidates.

### 3.5.3 Transformational model

Both the transformational and the developmental model subscribe to a learner-centred approach. However, the distinct difference between the transformational model and the previous two models is the emphasis on the cultural and social context, and the sensitivity to indigenous and alternative knowledge; thus it is also known as the radical approach. This model perceives RPL from a critical/radical perspective (Breier, 2008:31) and supports RPL as a tool for social redress.

A contribution of the transformational model to an assessment approach is that it provides for “the diversity and the richness of the individual and collective experience” (Frick et al., 2006:30). This implies that this model has the potential to contribute to transformation in a higher education context because it creates an opportunity to include other collective knowledge acquired outside the academic context (Stenlund, 2010:788). Frick and Albertyn (2011:150) align the transformational approach with the pedagogy of hope since it provides the space to include transforming individual learners, enabling empowerment and transferring knowledge in the process of assessment. However, the requirement of this approach to recognise non-formal knowledge on its own terms as valid knowledge (Osman, 2004a:142) will be questioned by traditional academics, and the current academic framework does not make provision for the inclusion of alternative knowledge. Based on experience with academics within higher education, I am of the opinion that academics have not made the mind shift in their approach to RPL, and often regard it as a threat to their perception of what constitutes valid knowledge. This may be as a result of a lack of RPL training, not having direct experiences with RPL candidates and only being exposed to academic experience and not workplace experience.
Both the liberal/humanist perspective of the transformational model and the Trojan horse model of Harris (2000) echo the initial political agenda of RPL for this country. The Trojan horse model builds on the critical/radical as well as technical/human perspective towards a radical/social constructionist vision of RPL where reflection aims to contribute to individual development and curriculum change. The social learning theories (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.2) allow for a broadening of boundaries on what is considered valid knowledge as proposed by the transformational approach (Osman, 2004a:143). In an assessment strategy valid knowledge can include the communities of practice of social learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1993; Wenger, 2002:4) where, for example, a diverse group of learners discover in a group context the value of a social learning experience and share information about culture, traditions and knowledge gained through experience (Gravett & Henning, 1998:64).

A distinguishing characteristic of this model as an approach to RPL assessment is the aspect of reflection. The purpose of reflection is not mainly extracting learning from experience for credit purposes, but rather for individual development purposes. As a workshop activity, this approach is useful for learners with negative and emotional life experiences to reflect on these experiences in order to make sense of them. The personal reflection as self-empowerment enhances the self-esteem and confidence of learners, and provides motivation for returning to learning. An assessment tool that allows for the inclusion of the personal experience and self-development is the portfolio of evidence. An empirical inquiry done in a higher education context with adult learners (Osman, 2006) indicated that learners tend to be positive about portfolio development and portfolio assessment.

The contribution of the transformational model is relevant in a portfolio development workshop. It ensures the personal empowerment of learners and support in the workshop as a transformational learning process to equip RPL candidates effectively for the demands of a “new” learning context.
PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

RPL assessment is often associated with portfolio assessment, despite the availability of a variety of assessment tools. Portfolio is the preferred assessment tool as it offers an opportunity to provide a collection of evidence (Harris, 2000:148) and has proved to be a beneficial method that allows for self-development, learner empowerment and flexibility (Michelson et al., 2004). The collection of evidence sets expectations of a portfolio workshop as evidence from informal learning which needs to be submitted in a form meeting academic standards as “codified” knowledge (Ralphs, 2013:36).

Osman (2003:71) makes a case for portfolio assessment and portfolio development as a “solid option” in higher education that is intellectually rigorous and socially inclusive. This current study claims, as confirmed by empirical research, that the portfolio development workshop is key to the assessment approach. Although portfolio assessment is considered to be the preferred tool in RPL for access, there are a variety of suitable assessment tools for RPL assessment. In deciding on a suitable assessment method, the criterion in the selection should be the “fit-for-purpose” assessment approach (Heyns, 2004:13) to meet the needs of the RPL candidates. RPL assessment can make use of traditional assessments, such as examination, a relatively cost-effective tool. It also allows for alternative assessment methods such as a presentation and the possibility of a combination of tools. A portfolio can also be combined with another method, such as an interview, which is suitable as an integrated assessment approach (SAQA, 2002:29). A prerequisite for successful portfolio assessment is the development of a portfolio workshop structured towards the needs of a learner profile.

A portfolio of evidence can be defined as a file or folder of information and evidence which proves what a learner knows, can do and believes in. It describes and provides evidence of knowledge, skills and values gained through experience (Unisa, 2005a:3). Joossten-ten Brinke (2008:27) consider it a suitable assessment tool as it provides space to include evidence of learning acquired in informal, formal and non-formal learning contexts. RPL candidates are required to “transfer or translate prior learning from one context to another” (Sandberg & Andersson,
2011:775). This implies a personal process, where the portfolio becomes a record of life and provides a perspective on prior, current and future learning and on the self. Michelson et al. (2004:1) describe the portfolio as an assessment tool that offers adult learners the opportunity to identify knowledge and skill gained over years and to articulate and provide evidence of prior learning. Since adult learners tend to be more “reflective and dialectic in their thinking” (Van Kleef, 2007:12) and engage in problem-solving activities, portfolio assessment provides challenges to the adult learner to organise learning into a manageable form suitable for assessment. The benefit of the portfolio is that it also provides an opportunity to include evidence outside these boundaries, such as reflection on community involvement, cultural background and valuable learning gained from experience.

The purpose of this type of portfolio is that it assesses “potential” (Breier & Ralphs, 2009:483) to be able to cope with university studies, and the question arises whether this type of portfolio truly prepares the learner for the demands of higher education. The portfolio assessment should also consider inclusion of “post-RPL access” (Cooper, 2011:41), a notion related to Morrow’s epistemological access to the demand for academic knowledge. The portfolio development workshop, which is a bridging intervention, needs to address both pre-assessment and post-assessment contexts.

The portfolio is more than an assessment tool; it is also a learning tool. The compiling of a portfolio in itself is regarded as a learning experience by which experiences are translated into relevant learning (Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009:188). Portfolio assessment implies a developmental process to compile a comprehensive document that requires an abstraction of learning from experience (Peters, 2005:277). The appropriate assistance during the workshop is required to guide candidates in “finding” their own knowledge, to demonstrate the link with future studies and to guide the discourse, thus promoting self-directed learning, which is essential for distance learning. Van Kleef (2007:10) argues, from a self-directed learning perspective, the role of a skilled facilitator as coach, since adult learners often lack awareness of their prior learning and lack confidence in their role as adult learners. In considering the learner profile, the facilitator plays a crucial role, given “the academic backlog” (Snyman, 2004:46) of candidates.
The use of a portfolio as an assessment tool is a controversial matter. However, it is beyond the scope of this research to argue that since portfolio assessment is a given in this context. Despite criticism against the use of the portfolio of evidence, it remains a prominent RPL assessment tool with advantages. Advantages mentioned by Osman (2003, 2004), Lumina (2005), Michelson et al. (2004) and Van Niekerk (1998:82) are that portfolio assessment can play a role in the development of self-directed learning since it comprises a learning process, where learners are actively involved in preparation to compile individual portfolios.

Therefore the focus is on the portfolio development workshop to ensure that candidates are fully prepared for the demands of the assessment and that they find it a beneficial process. From a learner point of view, Lumina (2005:494) confirms that learners enjoy the process and challenges of building a portfolio. Michelson et al. (2004) provide a comprehensive overview of portfolio development models, with a point of departure that it is a “reflective bridge” to encourage learning skills such as self-exploration, reflection and dialogue. Peters (2005:274) agrees that workshop outcomes are a functional strategy to bridge the gap between the outside world of informal and unstructured learning and formal learning or “academia”. Simosko and Cook (1996:94) refer to the purpose of portfolio development workshops as helping candidates prepare for assessment, and having “control of the assessment process” where the candidate is a “key partner”. A properly developed workshop can provide a “barrier-free environment” (Lephalala & Pienaar, 2007:7) for the preparation of the portfolio.

This research argues that the benefits are mostly associated with the portfolio development workshop as a preparation process. It provides the opportunity for the learner to be involved in the process as a unique and whole person. Brown (2002:231) mentions a wide range of benefits, grounded in adult learning theories, associated with portfolio development, but with the concern that “little has been written” on these benefits. Benefits include personal and educational benefits such as self-knowledge, improved communication and organisation skills, greater appreciation of reflection, raised awareness of work-related skills and an awareness of own development.
Because portfolio assessment is regarded as an alternative assessment tool that allows the inclusion of a variety of evidence and non-formal knowledge, it is essential to ensure standards.

3.7 STANDARDS IN ASSESSMENT

National researchers on RPL such as Heyns (2004), Motaung (2007:3) and Frick et al. (2006) argue for a commitment to quality assurance to ensure a valid, practical and effective RPL system. Joossten-ten Brinke et al. (2008:51) refer to international research that confirms the importance of high quality standards for the assessment of prior learning, and suggests guidelines for optimal quality criteria. I argue that the quality should already be integrated in the preparation for assessment. In a learner-centred approach the workshop approach should foster learner responsibility towards the required standard of assessment. In defining quality assurance in RPL (Amichand, Ireland, Orynik, Potter & Van Kleef, 2007: 4) the focus is on the learner as the most important “stakeholder” in the process, therefore the need to consider their needs and to actively involve them in the process.

Since higher education is concerned with ensuring the quality of standards, the RPL assessment should be made against certain criteria, standards and benchmarks. As a form of outcomes-based assessment, RPL assessment should adhere to the required principles of a sound and credible assessment practice. The SAQA unit standard, “Develop, support and promote RPL practices”, requires assessments to uphold the principles of currency, sufficiency, authenticity, reliability and validity of evidence. Stenlund (2010:789) confirms the importance of quality assurance in RPL assessment, based on an analysis of a comprehensive review of published RPL-related research. It is further required (SAQA, 2002:11) that consensus be generated around the criteria and support systems within which the integrity and quality of all assessments are protected.

The international standards as compiled by CAEL form the quality assurance for most of the practices internationally and in South Africa. The purpose of standards is that they serve as a “reference point” (Bjornavold, 2001:30) as the assessment is concerned with both formal and non-formal learning. The CAEL standards,
subscribed to by both SAQA (2002) and the University of South Africa (2005), ensure a sound assessment strategy and process that will enhance the credibility of RPL assessment. The setting of standards contributes to the meaningfulness of the assessment as the RPL process meets both the needs of the candidates and the educational institution (Joossten-ten Brinke et al., 2008:57). Within the South African context of RPL as access and redress, where notions of entry to further education and the valuing of prior learning are key objectives, the setting of standards for quality assurance ensures the “protection and the integrity of the system” (Heyns, 2004:14). A requirement of an RPL assessment process is that the use of standards must not only reflect program expectations, but also facilitate the measurement of learning achievements (Van Kleef, 2007:8). To achieve the focus of aligning assessment with long-term learning, Boud and Falchikov (2006:408) state that learners should be given practice and guidance in identifying and engaging with criteria and standards.

3.7.1 The CAEL standards

The ten CAEL standards comprise academic and administrative standards and ensure quality assurance in assessing the learning. The inclusion of these standards in an assessment strategy ensures that misconceptions and poor practices are avoided (Fiddler et al., 2006:77). It avoids the possibility of confusing learning with experience, and assessment is treated as an integral part of learning and should be utilised as a learning experience (Fiddler et al., 2006:18). A further requirement is that the assessment strategy that has possibilities of creating learning opportunities for additional or new learning should be appropriate for the “characteristics of the learner” (Fiddler et al., 2006:40).

The CAEL-endorsed standards are divided into two categories pertaining to the academic assessment process and the administrative context. The first five standards refer to standards for the assessment process and the last five refer to administrative standards that contribute to the quality assurance of the process. As these standards are self-explanatory and imbedded in the theoretical background of RPL assessment, no further discussion is required. The benefit of adhering to these
international standards is that it simplifies a process that seems complicated. These standards are merely listed as in the original format as proposed by CAEL.

For the purpose of the discussion only the academic standards are included as the RPL candidates need to be prepared for the requirements and demands of assessment as an academic process. The inclusion of both standards and criteria for valid assessment ensures that in the preparation for assessment the type of evidence candidates prepare meets the approved standards.

3.7.2 Academic standards for quality assurance

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is awarded and accepted.

To ensure the quality of the assessment process as integrated in an RPL strategy, Fiddler et al. (2006) provide clear guidelines on the standards, principles and procedures. The standards encapsulate the main principle of RPL, namely that it is based on relevant learning.

3.8 SUMMARY

The conceptual framework on RPL assessment is summarised in table 3.2. The propositions capture the main points of RPL assessment, as contextualised within the theoretical overview.
### Table 3.2: RPL assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition</th>
<th>Theoretical background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A learner-centred approach</td>
<td>Legislation and policies provide an enabling context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practice based on adult learning theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment as central in an RPL process</td>
<td>International and national RPL-related research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International acronyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPL assessment as a personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity for adults with experience</td>
<td>Exemplary international case studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RPL-related research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates an awareness of diverse learning contexts and different forms of knowledge</td>
<td>RPL as tool for transformation in South African context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for assessment key as assessment needs to bridge gap between two contexts</td>
<td>RPL for access: Context of higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RPL-related research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A holistic and developmental RPL assessment process</td>
<td>SAQA unit standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAQA RPL policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation as a sustainable learning approach</td>
<td>Sustainable assessment theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult learning theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A portfolio development workshop as preparation for portfolio assessment and contexts after access</td>
<td>Portfolio assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sustainable assessment theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CAEL assessment standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RPL assessment needs to be explained within the wider context and background to fully understand the motivation for preparation for assessment and the rationale for considering the learner profile in assessment. In this chapter the current local context of RPL was explained and discussed against the international context and the research background. Legislation and policy create an enabling environment for the implementation of RPL. However, there is a need to put policy into practice to
benefit the learners who would like to apply for access to higher education based on a wealth of relevant experience. To ensure that policy becomes practice at learner level, a sustainable assessment approach aims to prepare RPL candidates for demands of assessment and for lifelong learning. The preparation supports learners to bridge the gap between two contexts.

Against the background of the theoretical overview of adult learning theories and RPL assessment, the empirical research aims to describe the learner profile and to explain the influence of the learner on RPL assessment. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the motivation for the empirical research and a description of the research approach and methods employed in the study.
We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk.

Thomas Moore

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The research comprised two phases. The first phase was a detailed literature overview of adult learning theories and RPL assessment. The literature review was undertaken to gain an in-depth theoretical understanding of the adult learner profile, adult learning and the role of the portfolio development workshop within the context of RPL assessment. The target group for this study attended a portfolio workshop as preparation for assessment. Based on RPL candidates’ feedback in the portfolio workshop evaluation forms after they attended the workshop, and also in references in their prior learning papers on the value of the workshop, it was evident that the portfolio workshop was considered a valuable and purposeful intervention meeting the needs of the learner profile.

The theoretical overview of chapter 3, section 3.2.2, referred to international empirical research on the learner profile of RPL candidates (Aarts et al., 2003) and to a benchmark study on benefits associated with RPL (Flint et al., 1999). However, the theoretical overview and discussion of international empirical research cannot fully capture the lived experiences of adults in the preparation for the RPL assessment process; hence the motivation for further empirical research. There is a need to allow research participants to voice their own perceptions, feelings, needs and experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:21; Schurink, 2001a:245). Capturing the individual’s point of view based on personal experience directs the attention to the specifics of this particular case (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a:16) to provide sufficient and suitable data for recommendations for a learner-centred RPL assessment strategy where the learner profile influences the preparation for assessment. The literature
overview provides a framework to contextualise the research findings of the empirical study as the second phase of the research.

The purpose of the research was to answer the main research question as stated in chapter 1, section 1.3.

How does the learner profile influence RPL assessment?
The main research question is supported by the following subquestions:

- What is the learner profile?
- What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for RPL assessment?
- How does the learner profile influence learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop in RPL assessment?

The aim of this chapter is to describe the research design and methodology for the empirical research employed in the study. As part of the research methodology, the research instruments, the data collection and data analysis process and methods are described. The use of a specific data collection and analysis approach is justified within the context of a qualitative approach to address the research problem. To meet the requirements of a qualitative research design my role as researcher is stated. As stated in chapter 1, section 1.7.1, a constructivist interpretive paradigm was used for the empirical study.

4.2 RATIONALE FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The rationale for the empirical research was to ensure that the recommendations for a learner-centred RPL assessment strategy are based on the learners’ perspectives. Being an interpretive enquiry, the study aimed to interpret, describe and report on the reflections and lived experiences of RPL candidates as research participants. Against the background of the theoretical overview as the guiding framework, an authentic learner profile can be compiled by interpreting the research participants’ own version of their life stories and the meaning they bring to their experiences. The
role of the portfolio development workshop in preparing learners for RPL assessment is captured by personal reflections, perspectives and feedback of participants who attended an RPL portfolio development workshop.

The reason for using empirical research lies in the description of qualitative research, namely that it involves the studied use of empirical materials such as a life story and photographs as visuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a:5). The empirical component meets the criterion of an interpretive constructive research strategy that believes that the reality can only be known and fully understood by those that personally experienced it (Schurink, 2001b:247). This gives the opportunity to adult learners as RPL candidates to voice their personal experiences of the “reality” of the portfolio workshop in preparation for the RPL assessment.

The empirical research provides an in-depth enquiry and insider perspective (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:3; Babbie & Mouton, 2001:309) of the learner profile of research participants. This perspective can either be an etic or an emic perspective. With an etic approach the researcher makes generalisations about the data from an outsider perspective, an approach that would not do justice to the authenticity of a learner profile. However, an emic perspective of inquiry (Schurink, 2001b:242, 283; Morse & Richards, 2002:49) provides an insider approach. The empirical study as an emic perspective justifies a qualitative research design since qualitative researchers are interested in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 1991:6) and how they make sense of their world and the experiences that they have in it. The concept of meaning is central in qualitative research; Shank (2002:5) defines the essence of qualitative research as a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research paradigm as a research design attempts to understand and describe people in terms of their own assumptions and perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b; 2003c). A qualitative approach provides the opportunity to report on the personal experiences of research participants, as qualitative research is concerned with the individual’s point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a:16) of lived
experiences. As a research design it allows the researcher to capture the true meaning that participants reveal in the research (Creswell, 1994:15). It provides a unique opportunity to describe and understand human behaviour from an “insider perspective” (Mouton, 2001:194). Within a qualitative paradigm qualitative data is able to better reveal than quantitative data the valuable role of RPL in “supporting adults in transition” (Aarts et al, 2009:68). Therefore it was considered a suitable approach to give the researcher the opportunity to gain an authentic understanding of research participants’ experiences of the preparation for the RPL assessment process.

McMillan and Schumacher’s definition of qualitative research (2001:395) encompasses the essence of qualitative research as the inquiry that “describes and analyzes people’s individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions”. Qualitative research as an umbrella concept (Merriam, 1998:5) can further be defined in terms of describing the concept, characteristics and underlying assumptions (Creswell, 1994:145). The following characteristics of qualitative research contributed to answering the research question:

- As a research strategy it focuses on an inductive research process where the researcher does not go in with preconceived ideas. This approach provides an opportunity to understand and describe learner profiles in terms of their own definitions or descriptions.
- The research is concerned with how research participants make sense of their lives and experiences; therefore the researcher interprets data in terms of the meanings people bring to the experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:395; Merriam, 1998:6). Henning et al. (2004:20, 22) describe this process of interpretive research as a communal process of interaction where the researcher interrogates the knowledge systems of the participants to give meaning to the meaning-making process. As an interpretive paradigm the research participants are considered as active participants in the research and this enables the researcher to get close to their lives and personal experiences.
A qualitative research design (Mouton, 2001; Babbie & Mouton, 2001:48; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) is interested in the world of real people and real experiences and provides the researcher with an opportunity to enter the context-specific world of research participants. It also allows for possibilities for exploring both common experiences of individuals and the meaning that they attach to experiences.

Within the context of higher education and RPL research, a qualitative research paradigm is considered the most appropriate, since the learners’ context, their opinions of and reflection on an experience and their profiles are valued. Mulenga and Liang (2008:309) confirm that a qualitative study provides a more extensive and deep understanding of adult participation in higher education. A further benefit of a qualitative approach is supported by the nature of the data collected in a similar international study on the value of RPL for adult learners. Aarts et al. (1999:68) maintain that qualitative data reveals better than any quantitative approach the valuable role that RPL can play in supporting adults. Osman (2003:19) summarises the benefit of a qualitative approach in a local RPL study, stating that qualitative research allows for research participants’ personal reflections on their RPL experiences.

Since the opinions of the learners as research participants are key in this study, a qualitative case study research strategy, based on a constructivist paradigm (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009; Baxter & Jack, 2008:544), puts the researcher in contact with the empirical world of the research participants. An advantage of a qualitative case study methodology is the close collaboration between researcher and participant, enabling participants to tell their stories and share their views (Baxter & Jack, 2008:545). This research perspective gives the researcher a better understanding of participants because knowledge is constructed by those who personally experience it (Schurink, 2001b:247).

A case study research strategy was employed in this study because it provided the opportunity to gain in-depth insight into research participants’ experiences and life stories. The target group of this study, as bounded by time and activity, comprised RPL candidates enrolled for the RPL access programme at an ODL institution. The
candidates attended a three-day portfolio workshop to prepare them for compiling a portfolio of evidence as RPL assessment. A benefit of a case study strategy for this study was that it allowed the holistic and meaningful characteristics of a learner profile to be retained within a real-life context (Yin, 2009:4, 83; Baxter & Jack: 2008:554), being the participants’ personal life stories and their reflections on the role of the workshop. Both Baxter and Jack (2008:544) and Andrade (2009:45) confirm that a case study approach provides the opportunity to include participants’ different perspectives on an experience, thus providing a rich source of data. This approach gave me as researcher the opportunity to interpret the lived experiences of participants’ personal reflections and feedback on the portfolio workshop.

As a qualitative strategy a case study allows for multiple data sources of evidence to be used (Baxter & Jack, 2008:554; Yin, 2009:99). The benefit of this strategy for this study is that the multimethod approach not only produced a better understanding of the learner profile within a real-life context and the role of the workshop within that context, but also enhanced credibility. It requires the involvement of the researcher to interpret the meaning-making process of research participants’ life stories and experiences. Because of the role of the researcher and involvement in the process, a real concern within a qualitative research approach is potential bias. But, as Shank (2002:4) states, it is impossible to do qualitative research without getting involved.

4.4 ROLE OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

The key role of the researcher is that of primary instrument for data collection, analysis and interpretation (Merriam, 2008:7; Henning et al., 2004:7; Babbie & Mouton, 2001:309; Merriam, 1998:6, 7). This ascribes a certain responsibility to the researcher who is not only responsible for describing and interpreting data, but also needs to be “extremely sensitive to the role of context” (Henning et al., 2004:20) in making judgements about the data. This responsibility requires the researcher to be aware of his or her own background and value system and to acknowledge it up front, as this will minimise potential researcher bias. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:16, 416) caution that if the researcher is known to research participants, he or she can easily be subjective in becoming emerged in the participants and context
being studied. To ensure the quality of the research, a reflection on my role as researcher is required.

In this case study approach I created the role of researcher for the purpose of the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:435); however, a real concern was not to be biased and not to let previous experiences with the participants influence my interpretation and analysis of data. A real danger of research within this context was that, based on workshop experience with this target group, I tended to be subjective, and could become biased and over-involved. On reflection, a strength of the current research is that I, as the researcher, also acted as the workshop facilitator. I was therefore able to form a rapport with the candidates and could interact with them “in their own language, on their terms” (Kirk & Miller, 1986:9). Since this case study was concerned with the learner profile of a specific group of adult learners, I aimed to strive in my role as the researcher to give a voice to the learners. As researcher, I also acted as the portfolio workshop facilitator and the RPL academic coordinator for the RPL programme. I had the opportunity to develop a relationship of trust with the RPL candidates. The benefit of prior experiences with a group enhances access to the participants as a result of trust and rapport with the group (Probert, 2006:4). Therefore this relationship facilitates the first phase in data collection to “negotiate entry” (Morse & Richards, 2002:51). As researcher, my prior relationship with the research participants as a workshop facilitator may have contributed to feedback received from the data collection, which proved to be sufficient data for data analysis. It is evident that much of the success of data collection depends on the relationship between researcher and participants and the researcher’s ability to build a rapport with the participants.

The role and position of the researcher requires not only giving a “voice” (Henning et al., 2004:8) to the participants, but also acknowledging the researcher’s voice. This close relationship with research participants requires from the researcher a certain ethical approach, namely to honour the perceptions of the participants (Hastings, 2010:307). The researcher can make meaning from engagement in the process and has the opportunity to be involved in the lives of research participants, which demands certain characteristics from the researcher, such as being intuitive and
sensitive (Merriam, 1998:21) to the context of the study and the information being gathered.

The role of the researcher is integrated in the trustworthiness of the research. My role as a facilitator requires me to explain my situatedness, as my focus is not value-free, and I need to disclose my “intuitive understanding” (Merriam, 1998:7) of the participants and of their life-world. I had to set aside my own experiences, perceptions and assumptions to ensure that they did not distort the findings of the study. Burns and Grove (1987, in De Vos, 2001:337) refer to this as bracketing where the researcher puts previous experiences, knowledge and assumptions in brackets. This is complemented by the process of intuiting (Burns & Grove, 1987:80), which requires the researcher to reflect on the process to ensure that he or she remains unbiased and does not enter the research with preconceived assumptions. Both bracketing and intuiting are the researcher’s responsibility to ensure the rigour of the process, they guide the researcher to focus on the objective of the research, and ensure that no preconceived conceptual framework directs the research (Loock, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 1999:53). My preconceived ideas based on experiences with the target group were rather used to the benefit of the study, namely to provide a framework of understanding the target group.

However, the qualitative researcher remains in essence subjective as he or she “interacts with the subject” (Schurink, 2001b:242) from an emic perspective, where the researcher aims to understand the subjective experience and perspective of participants. The researcher’s experiences, background and values impact on the selection of data as a data-making process, as described in the next section. To ensure the validity of the research, qualitative research as a multiperspective approach provides the researcher with the opportunity to employ multiple research methods.

4.5 RESEARCH METHODS

The research methodology focuses on the research process, the methods employed to gather suitable data and the procedures that are able to deliver both data and findings to enable the researcher to answer the research question (Babbie &
Mouton, 2001:104; Henning et al., 2004:36; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since a case study allows for multiple sources of data as evidence, three data collection methods were used. The multimethods are “highly complementary” (Yin, 2009:101). I take cognisance of the different uses of qualitative terminology, such as paradigm, approach, strategy, methodological and methods, but for the purposes of this study and for semantic consistency I abide by Mouton’s use (2001:140) of “research methodology” within a qualitative paradigm.

4.6 DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of the data collection is that it serves as evidence for the empirical research. The data collection methods were selected to ensure a rich description of data.

For the multimethod data collection approach three methods were used. The use of documents such as written material and photographs (Morse & Richards, 2002:97; Henning et al., 2004:20) captured the insider perspective of research participants. The reflection on lived experiences as captured in the participants’ feedback on the questionnaire and the use of personal narratives, such as prior learning papers, met the requirements of a constructivist research paradigm (Schurink, 2001a:247). The first method was the use of RPL candidates’ prior learning papers or life stories as data that they had to include in the portfolio of evidence. This was used to compile a learner profile. The second method was an open-ended electronic questionnaire that included photographs. The purpose of the second data collection method was to get feedback from learners on their personal experience of the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for assessment. This questionnaire was sent to participants through Google Docs, an internet-based research website. This was a suitable data collection method as the e-mail addresses of RPL candidates were available and the majority of students had access to computers. A benefit of electronic surveys is that they provide a quick and easy form of data collection. The third data collection method was used for triangulation purposes. RPL candidates were asked to share their experiences of the RPL process at a national RPL-SAQA conference. The five students made their personal reflections available to the
researcher, who used them for triangulation of data and for making inferences to be used in recommendations.

4.6.1 Prior learning papers

The use of participants' prior learning papers, as narrative or personal life story, aimed to answer the first research subquestion, namely:

What is the learner profile?

One of the assignments in the portfolio of evidence that candidates had to submit as part of the RPL assessment was the prior learning paper. The prior learning paper as a narrative is a reflective life story in the format of a written and structured essay. Life stories are a suitable data collection tool, and Shank (2002:15) remarks that stories seem to be a key element in many forms of qualitative research. The motivation for using the prior learning papers in this study was based on written feedback from learners after the portfolio development workshop and in the reflection form in the portfolio of evidence. As confirmed by Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007:466), most people are keen to share their stories. People also tend to be open when sharing their life stories. As De Fina (2009:233) states, personal experience is key to getting a rich, thick and nuanced understanding of research participants.

The decision to make use of the prior learning papers as a form of document study is further supported by advantages that Strydom and Delport (2005:318) mention. Document study is relatively low cost, and more affordable than a comprehensive survey. The participants are more likely to confess and share personal information in a document as opposed to an interview. Another advantage is that during the portfolio workshop the facilitator emphasised the relevance of the prior learning paper as a key document within the portfolio, which contributed to the quality of the documents.

The prior learning paper provided the opportunity to analyse authentic written material as the learners had to write their personal life stories and experiences.
These papers were considered a form of written narrative enquiry where the stories were the means of understanding the participants better (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007:464) and provided the opportunity to create an in-depth learner profile. In the prior learning paper as narrative, the learners had the opportunity to make sense of lived experiences (Burck, 2005:252) and the freedom to decide on a suitable approach. Every prior learning paper told a unique story of the way in which a learner had made meaning of his or her life and experiences. The prior learning papers as personal documents can be considered to be reliable sources of data as the learners had the freedom to decide what to include or exclude from the life stories. They truly reflect the participants’ characteristics as adult learners on a personal journey to university studies through an RPL assessment process. Of interest to this study is that some common themes emerged from the life stories – an indication that this specific case as a bounded system shares specific characteristics.

A disadvantage that Strydom and Delport (2005:319) mention, namely that the researcher is dependent on the linguistic abilities of the participants, was used to the advantage of the study. Recurring examples of a lack of certain linguistic skills may indicate a barrier to learning or a common gap that this specific group of learners experienced. This learning gap could be addressed in the portfolio workshop as preparation for the assessment.

Representative samples of prior learning papers are included in the appendices of this study, as Appendix A. The prior learning papers have been saved electronically in case of further enquiries.

4.6.2 Open-ended electronic questionnaire

The main purpose of the second data collection method was used to answer the second research subquestion, namely:

What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in the preparation for RPL assessment?
To get more details on the role of the workshop and its effectiveness as preparation for assessment from the participants’ perspective, a questionnaire was included. Duan (2011:84) confirms in a review of several sources on data collection methods, such as Creswell (2002:403), that the questionnaire is considered a reliable data collection method. In this study an open-ended questionnaire as a reaction questionnaire was used that could capture more nuances of the participants’ experiences.

A questionnaire was used, since it is a cost-effective and a practical method to collect research participants’ perspectives within a distance learning context. An open-ended questionnaire was considered the most suitable; Aarts et al. (1999:199, 132) suggest in a similar study that this approach allows the adult learner to focus on the entire RPL experience as an adult learner. Within a qualitative research paradigm the advantages of the questionnaire are similar to those of an in-depth interview and standard open-ended interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:444) where participants can reflect on personal experiences and explain how they interpret an event, such as the workshop. A benefit of the open-ended questionnaire used was that it reduced interviewer flexibility, as the researcher was not able to change predetermined questions.

In this data collection method two approaches were combined, namely the use of an open-ended electronic questionnaire and that of reflexive photography. To ensure that in the context of this study the participants were active and creatively involved in the research process, reflexive photography was included in the questionnaire. The use of visual ethnography in the questionnaire supplemented the research as the visual enriches the data. The researcher took photographs not with the research purpose in mind, but mainly at the request of participants to capture the experience of the workshop and for work-related record-keeping. The photographs represented and symbolised aspects of the workshop experience as a tool for preparation for assessment. The photograph collage was included in the electronic open-ended questionnaires sent to research participants, and participants were invited to respond to the questions based on their reflections of the collage.
The use of photographs in the data collection had the potential to produce good data, as the visual representation of a colourful collage of photographs was used to facilitate the recall memories of attending a portfolio workshop, and led to reflection on the experience. According to Schulze’s research (2006; 2007, the usefulness of reflexive photography for qualitative research is that it offers a novel approach to studying participants’ feelings and perceptions. Photographs serve as useful symbols to elicit feelings, meanings and experiences, and to identify issues. As image-based research it stimulates thinking on the personal value ascribed to a learning experience. The photographs inspired reflection, as they gave an idea of how the participants experienced the workshop. A further benefit is that they stimulated both reflection and a critical analysis of a learning experience that took place some time ago, for some participants a year or more ago, as they sharpened memory and gave an immediate character to the data collection (Schulze, 2007:540).

The advantages of reflexive photography are that it appears to be non-threatening to participants, less biased and provides the opportunity of eliciting additional information on the experience (Schulze, 2007:539). As a data collection method it was suitable for the study because it met the two main requirements that Henning et al. (2004) stipulate for qualitative research, namely achieving a thick description of data and giving the research participants a voice. The participants could put into words the meaning that they attached to the workshop experience from the point of view as adult learners.

The questions of the open-ended questionnaire mainly served as guidelines and were structured according to aspects relating to the contribution of the portfolio workshop in the preparation for RPL assessment. The questionnaires were sent electronically to respondents via Google Docs, which was a suitable data collection tool within a distance learning context. Creswell (2002; 2007) supports an electronic mail mode as a useful data collection method. The benefit is that it provides rapid access to large numbers of people and a detailed and rich database for qualitative research. Creswell (2002:402) warns, though, that the use of e-mail raises complex ethical issues such as permission to participate and protection of privacy of responses. These matters are addressed in the discussion on ethical matters and in
the criteria for selection of research participants. To ensure that research participants responded to the electronic questionnaire, the e-mail messages were followed up by a text message, referred to as an SMS message. This informed the participants that the questionnaire had been sent and that they had to respond. The validity and the usefulness of SMSs via cellular phones are supported by Meyer and Bushney (2008), who indicate that 98% of Unisa students have access to cellular phones.

The open-ended questionnaire was sent electronically with a link to the web-based program for research data collection Google Docs, which is an easily accessible tool for both researcher and respondents. Google Docs provides a link to include photographs in a questionnaire. A further benefit of using Google Docs for the electronic questionnaire is that the feedback from research participants is available in a structured format according to the guiding questions used in the questionnaire. The return of this data collection method had some limitations as some candidates had problems in accessing the Google Docs website because they did not have access to the internet. I resent questionnaires to individual participants as they requested, and received the feedback e-mail and not through the Google Docs feedback format. This feedback was also included in the analysis to ensure that these participants were included. Participants with disabilities were included, and as the four visually impaired students were known to me, I contacted them, and explained the research to them. They were allowed to respond electronically by sending the feedback to my personal e-mail address and not through the web-based feedback mode. The questionnaire, the photographs and an example of an electronic feedback form are included in the study as Appendices B, C and D.

The flexibility of the qualitative research design allowed for the inclusion of a third data collection method that was not initially planned. To add a further voice to the learners and for triangulation purposes, the third data collection tool was learners giving feedback on general RPL-related matters. The relevance of this data reflects a commitment in the national RPL approach to a learner-centred approach.
4.6.3 Learner feedback at national conference

The third data collection method was as a result of SAQA’s request to me to form a representative group of RPL candidates to share their testimonies at a national RPL conference held in Benoni on 25 February 2011 (SAQA, 2011). For the learner feedback session at the conference a purposive and convenience sample was selected. I contacted five learners who had successfully completed the assessment process, who were registered students at the university at the time and who were within travelling distance from the conference venue in Benoni. A diverse group was identified and they were immediately willing to participate as they saw this as an opportunity to share their experiences and also to promote RPL.

The five respondents are referred to as participant A, B, C, D and E. They were between the ages of 23 and 40 years. The following biographical details about the participants are available:

A – black male from Johannesburg, originally from Nigeria, career as pastor, registered student for the BBA degree
B – white, English-speaking female from Pretoria, laboratory assistant at a contact university, registered for the BSc degree
C – white, Afrikaans-speaking male from Vanderbiljpark, plant foreman at Sasol, registered for ND: Engineering
D – white, Afrikaans-speaking female from Witbank, procurement officer and buyer at Eskom, registered for the BCom degree
E – black South African male from Pretoria, entrepreneur, trainer and manager of family-owned business, registered for law degree

The instruction was open and no briefing was done before the session; therefore the participants were not influenced by me or by the purpose of this research. They were merely requested to reflect on their experiences as mature learners in an RPL process.

Although the third method allows for a purposive and convenience sample, the selection of participants for the first two methods needs to be stated as my close relationship as both researcher and facilitator of the participants and prior experience...
with the group required transparent and clear criteria in the selection of research participants.

4.7 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Details of all RPL candidates who registered for the RPL mature learner assessment programme over a period of five years were available, and these learners were invited to participate in the research. Candidates were between the ages of 23 and 40 years. They did not meet the admission requirements for access into degree studies, and had to follow the RPL access programme, a mature learner assessment programme. Rather than selecting participants, all participants were given the opportunity to participate in the research. A written invitation (see Appendix E) was sent to all learners, whether they had completed the programme or not, to ensure that a holistic description could be given of a diverse target group. The written invitation requested participants to reply if they would be interested in participating in the research. In the letter the purpose of the research was explained and the ethical measures were fully disclosed. The participants were therefore able to make an informed decision whether they wanted to participate or not. The RPL candidates who volunteered to participate in the research returned the reply form and a list was compiled of all the research participants. See Appendix F for a representative sample of a completed reply form. The letter of invitations comprised two parts: a request to participants to submit a copy of their prior learning papers and the option to participate in the questionnaire.

All participants had the choice to make their prior learning papers available to the research. They could either submit them electronically or by fax or give permission to the researcher to make a copy in cases where portfolios had not yet been returned to learners. Based on the available prior learning papers, I drew a purposive sample (Neuman, 2003:213), which gave me as the researcher the right to select cases with a specific purpose in mind, namely to obtain information on the learner profile. To ensure that the data was manageable, I decided not to make use of all prior learning papers. This allowed me to select cases that were especially informative as purposive sampling allows for the selection of information-rich cases
for in-depth study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:401). However, I still had to ensure that prior learning papers were representative of a diverse target group.

Participation in this research was voluntary. In using the voluntary participation approach I had to consider that participants had to reveal personal information in their life stories. Participants had different motives for coming forward voluntarily. Although there as the possibility that there may not have been sufficient volunteers, the willingness of learners to participate in the research could be an indication of their commitment to the programme or the benefits that they may have experienced at a personal level. There is also a disadvantage of this approach: this could also lead to a possible error (Mouton, 2001:106) where research participants may have produced responses they thought I was looking for. To address this concern the participants were informed that their responses were dealt with anonymously. However, a concern about making use of available subjects is that the representativeness of such subjects is unknown (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:202).

In a qualitative enquiry non-probability sampling (Neuman, 2003:211) is used which allows the researcher not to determine the sample size in advance, but to “[select] cases gradually” that clarify and deepen understanding. The purpose of the qualitative study guided the sampling process as “dynamic, ad hoc and phasic” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:404) to ensure the richness of the case. The electronic questionnaire was sent to all participants who confirmed that they would like to participate. They were considered “good participants” as they were willing to reflect on the portfolio development workshop and were interested in the research. The researcher was responsive to the possibility of a strategy that may have gaps, and decided to follow up on the electronic questionnaire with a general SMS to participants to ensure feedback on the questionnaire.

The collection of data using three different methods requires a process to analyse the data.
4.8 DATA PROCESSING

Data processing comprises the procedures for data analysis and data interpretation. De Vos (2005:335) explains that the inseparable relationship between data collection and analysis is an integrated process to ensure a coherent interpretation of the data. However, in the case of this study the analysis was postponed until the bulk of the data collection had been finalised, to prevent the analysis from interfering with the openness of the qualitative enquiry. De Vos (2005:336) warns that rushing into mature conclusions should be avoided, and therefore there should be a fine balance in managing the overlapping of data collection and analysis.

The collected data was transformed into a form appropriate for analysis, and data was analysed following an inductive approach. The results are reported and the implications discussed in the findings and the recommendations of the study. Both the data collection techniques and data analysis aim to truly capture the characteristics of the learner profile and the authentic perceptions and experiences of learners as workshop participants.

The analysis comprised three phases. For the first phase themes were identified that contributed to an in-depth description of the learner profile and the second phase focused on the role of the portfolio workshop in the preparation for assessment. The third phase of analysing the feedback of RPL candidates served as triangulation and confirmed inferences made based on the data analysis.

An approach of text analysis of documents (Lieblich, Truval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998:62) was followed to turn the collected data into evidence for empirical research (Hofstee, 2006:117). As a point of departure thematic analysis as an inductive and interpretive approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006:77; Thomas, 2003:2). During the last phase of the analysis, aspects of a narrative approach as holistic analysis were included. A benefit of a narrative methodology in terms of life stories is that the main themes are constructed around a core of events (Lieblich et al. 1998). Yet it allows the freedom of individuality to select what to include in the narrative, giving the researcher the rich data to discover identity.
In the data analysis there is a subtle interplay of the researcher’s prior knowledge of the research participants’ experiences, the identification of themes and the background of the literature interview. However, to ensure the rigour of the analysis, the data analysis process is described and problems are acknowledged.

4.8.1 Prior learning papers

The steps proposed by Tesch (1992:95, 142-145) and recommendations by McMillan and Schumacher (2001) served as a point of departure in a systematic and structured process. An eclectic approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:463) was followed that allows for steps to overlap and the steps are considered merely as a guideline towards a data analysis process that is integrated, cyclic and analytical (De Vos 2005:334). The eclectic approach also serves to enhance triangulation (Yin, 2003, in Kohlbacher, 2006).

4.8.1.1 Holistic overview

The prior learning papers as narratives or life stories were read for a holistic overview and a general understanding of the text. Sixty papers were read. This enabled me to get an impression of the suitability of the text, and also to get a broad perspective of the participants and possible topics. In this first step to become familiar with the text I followed an inductive approach and, as Morse and Richards (2002:169) suggest, I bracketed what was known about the topic and learned from the data. I made notes in pencil in the margin on possible ideas regarding topics and themes.

This first phase also allowed me to implement an aspect of the holistic approach (Lieblich et al., 1998:12, 62) where I considered the life story as a whole and identified a central theme, such as ability to manage life and career development and general ability to handle change in life despite disruptive experiences.
4.8.1.2 Topics

In identifying topics as the next step, I adopted a more purposive approach to sampling (Neuman, 2003:211) by selecting a smaller specific collection of prior learning papers and setting them aside. Fifty were used as a smaller collection. From these 50 papers, a manageable number of 40 prior learning papers were selected that seemed the most comprehensive and informative and were also interesting to read. These papers were numbered in numerical order, for example 1, 2, 3, for identification of participants’ papers.

I identified topics that would add to a general better understanding of the learner profile. A topic, as text that is comprehensible by itself, is considered to be the descriptive name for the subject topics of the segment (Tesch, 1992:117; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:469). The units of meaning were considered as either a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph. I identified topics such as an unstable childhood, responsibility to care for siblings, the role of mother as mentor and support, dramatic life-changing event, incomplete school-leaving certificate, and work effectively as member of team in the margins.

4.8.1.3 Categories and subcategories

The topics were listed on a separate sheet. They were refined and connections between similar topics were found and clustered. During this process I developed a sense of recurring topics, unique topics and similarities and differences between topics. The clusters of topics were grouped as categories and possible subcategories. This also served as an initial process to refine the organising system (Tesch, 1992:143). The purpose of an organising system ensures that the data is manageable, can be structured and has the flexibility to fit the research purpose (Gleane, 1999:136).

Codes were allocated to categories, for example:

- Childhood – CH
4.8.1.4 The coding process

I went back to the entire set of data using the coding structure and coding was done until a stage of saturation was reached. During this process it was possible to reflect on the research question and to start relating categories and subcategories to different aspects of the learner profile, such as personal attributes, motivation and process of development. In reflection, a practical problem was to decide whether a topic belonged to a certain category and to take decisions on categories. It was evident that categories overlapped and were interrelated.

4.8.1.5 An organising system of categories and subcategories

The result of the analysis was compiled in a working document incorporating most important categories and subcategories. Categories were grouped as themes. The relevance of the themes was that they captured key aspects of the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006:82). During this process, I paid attention to the actual content of the categories, as illustrated in the example in table 4.1.
Table 4.1: An example of categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal attributes</th>
<th>Life experience</th>
<th>Lessons learned</th>
<th>&quot;...the story of my life which includes important lessons that contributed to my growth...&quot; (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perseverance despite challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I have taken my own negative experiences as a child and turned them into a positive role...” (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>“faced challenges in my life...” (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life-changing event</td>
<td></td>
<td>“…during prison I learned everything...” (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.8.1.6 Recoding process

To confirm the organising system of the analysis I returned to the first group of prior learning papers for a recoding process, using four different coloured markers to identify codes relating to the four approaches in the literature overview of adult learning theories. Recoding is considered by Dey (1993:199) as a quality assurance approach to ensure that the researcher stays close to the data and does not make presumptions about proposed categories. I further realised that categories and subcategories overlapped and were connected and related. For example, a subcategory such as multiple role responsibilities can be as a result of both context and process of development. The responsibilities can be perceived as a barrier to learning, a motivation to study and also a source of learning and development. The multiple roles and responsibilities contributed to acquiring knowledge and wisdom as a mature learner. These concerns were solved in the consensus meeting with the independent co-coder where agreement was achieved by comparing the result of coding sample text.
4.8.1.7 Pattern seeking of themes

In forming categories and subcategories it was possible to seek patterns and relationships, and concepts crystallised. The categories were further clustered as main themes relating to the research question on the learner profile. The identified themes were considered in rereading some of the prior learning papers as an iterative process (Dey, 1993:231) by returning to the first phase of the analysis. This approach provided a holistic overview since it was also possible to identify a central storyline in the data. The perspective of the holistic overview included aspects of a narrative analysis approach and contributed to a more reliable analysis as main themes were confirmed. A benefit of narrative analysis in this study was confirming themes on how participants accounted for themselves and their life experiences, because the structure of the life story as a narrative provided insight into the way in which participants made sense of their lives (Henning et al., 2004:122) by presenting their prior learning, personal attributes and motivation to study in a life story form. The narrative core (Richmond, 2002:7) may be of special interest, for example where a specific life event seems to guide the entire life story and impacts on decisions taken. In this narrative approach it was possible to discover a main theme as the core of the life story, such as change and self-actualisation. Lieblich et al. (1998:63, 110) refer to the total life story which provides a global impression and understanding of the individual profile imbedded in main themes.

4.8.2 Feedback on electronic questionnaire

The data was analysed according to the predetermined categories based on the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. In forming categories, subcategories and themes under the different questions, it was evident that categories across the feedback on questions overlapped and correlated and those topics were repeated in feedback on all nine questions, for example topics such as the key role of group work, the peer support and enhanced confidence. I had to reduce overlap and redundancy among categories as described by Thomas (2003:6) by clustering categories and subcategories under four main themes that emerged in the feedback from all the different questions.
For quality assurance purposes recoding was done with an inductive approach following the steps as described for analysis of the prior learning papers. The purpose of the inductive analysis was to allow topics and themes to emerge from the raw data (Thomas, 2003:2). The analysis was not done according to questions, but rather per feedback page. The themes correlated with those identified during the more structured analysis according to the questions.

The feedback on the electronic questionnaire has been saved electronically for ease of access. Representative examples are included as Appendix D.

### 4.8.3 Learner feedback at national conference

The presentations of the five RPL candidates at the conference were analysed following the steps as described under section 4.8.1 for prior learning papers. The feedback was analysed from both an ethic and emic perspective (Morse & Richards, 2002:49; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:473, 474) as themes and categories had already been identified in the analysis of prior learning papers and feedback on the questionnaire. See Appendix G for a representative sample. Themes could be confirmed and it was possible to make inferences on the influence of the learner profile on the portfolio workshop as a tool for preparation for assessment. See section 4.6.3 for the biographical details of the participants and the identification of participants.

### 4.9 DATA MANAGEMENT AND PRESENTATION

To ensure data management and presentation the schematic representation displaying the research findings is based on an example (Modungwa, 1994, in De Vos, 2005:347), giving an overview of themes, categories and subcategories. To add to the reliability of empirical data, the schematic representation as a framework is a way to manage the analysed data as an explanatory link to the conceptual framework of the recommendations of the study.
From the data available I had to infer and deduce to be able to answer the research question on the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. Inference in qualitative data analysis is confirmed by Dey (1993:159, 188) to be a suitable approach since qualitative data refers to a limited number of cases, and allows for inferring explanatory links between sets of data. It provides a basis for inferring generalisations and applying them to answer the research question. The results of the analysis of the prior learning papers and of the questionnaire allowed for inferences by drawing conclusions based on relationships between sets of data and by finding connections and consistencies between both categories and subcategories. The linking of the two sets of data was well grounded in the data analysis and in the analysis of the third set of confirmed inferences and correlations. The explanatory link, imbedded in the theoretical framework, between the learner profile and the role of the portfolio workshop as preparation for RPL assessment aims to answer the main research question on the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. Lieblich et al. (1998:10) refers to Bakhtin’s dialogical approach (1981) where there is an interactive approach between the researcher as the reader, the participant’s voice as the narrator and the theoretical framework and research question.

This is fully disclosed in chapter 5 under the findings of the study.

4.10 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The opportunity of a qualitative research design to give a voice to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006:80) and for the researcher to be actively and creatively involved in the process requires a process to ensure validity and reliability. The researcher can use a combination of strategies to enhance design validity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:407). These strategies are the inclusion of participant language as verbatim accounts, the use of the participant researcher as in the use of authentic narratives and a multimethod strategy as triangulation.

In the data analysis intercoder reliability was employed (Peter & Lauf, 2002:79) to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data analysis (Thomas, 2003:7) through a process of consistency of the analysis. An expert in qualitative data
analysis at Unisa acted as the independent co-coder to ensure intercoder reliability. Copies of the prior learning papers and the feedback on the electronic questionnaire as raw data were sent electronically to the independent co-coder. The independent co-coder identified categories and created themes from the raw text (Thomas, 2003:7). During a consensus meeting the themes as outcome of the data analysis were discussed and changes were made as required and agreed on.

Validity and reliability were further enhanced by triangulation as an approach in an interpretive qualitative research design to enhance both objectivity and validity (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:309). In this study different data collection methods were employed. The multimethod approach provided a more holistic view and description of the data collected. Triangulation was further confirmed by referring to completed studies that have been conducted on the same topic (Morse & Richards, 2002:76). Aspects of the findings of the empirical research component can be confirmed by the study of Aarts et al. (1999) on similar experiences of RPL candidates.

Triangulation adds to establishing strategies of credibility, dependability and confirmability in a qualitative approach. The purpose of triangulation in qualitative research is to achieve crystallisation as it provides the qualitative researcher with the possibility of interpreting data from different points of view or perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:5). The crystallisation process results in reflecting a clear and transparent representation of the reality of the research participants. Aspects of trustworthiness overlap with triangulation as measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, Guba’s model of trustworthiness (1981) was applied. The criteria of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality were applied through strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in the research design (Krefting, 1991:217; Loock et al., 1999:55). The steps taken in this study to ensure trustworthiness are illustrated from examples based on the research process. The strategies were applied as follows in this research study:
4.10.1 Truth value through credibility strategies

More than one approach can be employed to ensure the credibility of the research. (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:166) mention the research design that explains the data collection procedures used to answer the research question and the context of the research to ensure the credibility of the research. I established the truth of the findings by making use of more than one data collection method and by triangulation. To ensure credibility accurate descriptions of the research participants’ experiences as direct unedited quotations are used in the description of research findings. Credibility was further ensured by disclosing the relationship between the researcher and the research participant and stating my role as workshop facilitator (Krefting, 1991:220).

4.10.2 Consistency through dependability

Both validity and the consistency were ensured by employing a code-recode procedure during data analysis and making use of an independent co-coder. To establish confirmability, an audit trail of representative examples of the data and data analysis are included in the research study as an appendix. De Vos (2005:346) recommends that to ensure that the criterion of credibility is met, the researcher should state the parameters and the boundaries of the study.

Two useful approaches to ensure validity are to check the findings with the research participants and to refer to existing literature. A form of participant confirmation was used in this study where a group of five students volunteered to share their prior learning experiences at a public forum of a conference. Their experiences in the form of a testimony were also analysed for main themes and are included in the appendices of this study. A further approach to ensure the validity of the findings is to confirm through supporting literature whether the research findings of the study are consistent or not with similar research.
4.11 ETHICAL MEASURES

In addition to the ethical measures stated in chapter 1, the study was undertaken in accordance with the ethical rules of the university where the research was conducted. The prescriptions as stipulated by the ethical policy of the university were followed. The ethical policy of the university required me as the researcher to apply in writing for ethical clearance. This was done, and the clearance was granted. The letter of permission for ethical clearance is included as Appendix H.

McMillan and Schumacher (2001:421) warn that despite ethical guidelines, the potential ethical dilemmas in the research should be addressed. Therefore care was taken to ensure informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, privacy, empowerment, caring and fairness in both the research collection and the presentation of the findings. To address this concern a summary of the university’s ethical policy is included in the letter of invitation sent to research participants.

4.12 SUMMARY

The purpose of the empirical research was to collect and analyse data to be able to compile a learner profile and to determine the role of the portfolio development workshop as preparation for assessment from participants’ personal perspectives. The third set of data served as triangulation. Inferences made from the three sets of data enabled me to answer the research question on the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment.

Chapter 4 explained the use of empirical research to answer the research question. A qualitative research design was followed. Within an interpretive constructivist research design a case study strategy was employed. The case study strategy enabled a detailed study of the learner profile and participants’ personal experiences of RPL. A multimethod research method was used for both data collection and data analysis. In the data analysis the benefit of an inductive approach was employed as the themes and categories emerged from the data. The data was analysed and interpreted for discussion under the research findings in chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Make it a rule of life never to regret and never to look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can’t build on it; it’s only good for wallowing in

Katherine Mansfield

Besides pride, loyalty, discipline, heart and mind, confidence is the key to all

Joe Paterno

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 4 the need for the empirical research was explained. The data collected was analysed following an inductive qualitative text analysis approach. The findings of the data analysis are presented and discussed in this chapter (5) to answer the research questions in chapter 6. The literature review of chapters 2 and 3 form the conceptual framework that supports the explanation of data in chapter 5 and recommendations in chapter 6 to ensure that research is anchored in literature (Henning et al., 2004:23).

The discussion on findings is organised under three main sections: the first section presents the findings on the analysis of the prior learning papers and aims to describe the learner profile, the second section describes the analysis of the questionnaire feedback on the role of the portfolio workshop from participants’ perspectives, and the last section describes the experiences of participants of RPL. The last section serves as triangulation.

The discussion of the findings of the empirical research is supported throughout by direct quotations from the data. Quotations were selected as representative of a statement echoed by many of the respondents (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010:164) to ensure the quality and accuracy of themes and categories. The direct quotations ensure that findings of the data analysis are presented in a transparent manner, as they reflect the personal opinions of participants.
The findings of the analysis of prior learning papers (PLP) are referred to as Data A. Themes and categories are numbered for ease of reference; therefore a category in Data A, referring to the context of the learner profile, is referred to as category 4.1 (PLP). There were 40 prior learning papers and so they were numbered from 1 to 40. Quotations with a numerical reference in brackets thus refer to a specific paper, for example PLP3 refers to prior learning paper number 3. The process of selection was used as described in chapter 4 (section 4.8.1). The electronic format of the feedback received was in columns under a specific research question, and did not always distinguish individual respondents clearly. (Refer to Appendix D for a representative copy.) Therefore the feedback was divided into distinguishing columns and numbered. Columns were alphabetically divided into A to J, and participants’ feedback numerically from 1 to 60 onwards, since 60 responses from participants were analysed. Therefore a response to question 1 is identified as A6. The combination of the letter of the alphabet and a number distinguishes Data B from Data C.

The third set of data is referred to as Data C. The initial purpose of results of the third set of data, namely the participants’ feedback at the RPL-SQA conference, was for triangulation. However, due to the nature of the data and the results of the analysis, it proved to have multiple purposes. It is most suitable for making inferences and to serve as an integration of results of the empirical research. Therefore direct quotations and references to themes of Data C (SAQA) are used to confirm categories of both Data A and B. The discussion of Data C is used as a summary of the description of the empirical research results. The five participants are referred to as A, B, C, D and E (SAQA). (Refer to Appendix L for a representative copy of analysed data.)

Table 5.1 summarises the data referencing.
Table 5.1: Summary of data referencing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>Referencing method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DATA A</td>
<td>Prior learning papers: the learner profile</td>
<td>PLP1 (1-40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA B</td>
<td>Electronic questionnaire: role of the portfolio workshop</td>
<td>A3 (A – J) 1-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA C</td>
<td>Feedback at SAQA-RPL conference: triangulation</td>
<td>Participant: A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 ANALYSIS OF PRIOR LEARNING PAPERS

The interpretation of the data analysis of participants’ prior learning papers as life stories or personal narratives aims to describe the holistic learner profile of the research participants. In the first place the prior learning papers present the life journey of participants.

5.2.1 Life journey as a central storyline

With the reading of the prior learning papers to get an overview of the themes, I was able to compile a central storyline that related to aspects of narrative analysis. The narrative analysis confirms the main themes that emerged as a result of thematic analysis, as discussed below. The stories managed to bring across who the participants really were and how they felt about themselves and their prior learning, and how they saw the link between their experience, the current context and future studies.

The emotional aspect of taking a step back, thinking about one’s life and writing a life story is an intense experience. A participant described this as follows: “Today I am writing this story from the bottom of my heart” (PLP21). It is evident that participants saw the writing of a life story as a turning point in their lives, since learning is associated with emotions. A participant confirmed that “the prior learning paper has initiated a beginning of a future” (PLP19) and a personal achievement as “I enjoyed
writing my life story as I realized how I have conquered during my life journey regardless of not having matric” (Data B). Most stories revealed a complicated life characterised by a prominent life-changing event or a turning point and emotional experiences such as divorce, interrupted childhood, being a victim of abuse, a devastating disappointment, retrenchment or unexpected changes resulting from the context or from relationships.

The participants were characterised by relationships and an engagement with family, work, culture, social contexts and community. They interacted constructively, and had therefore developed personal attributes, skills and knowledge through their interaction with different contexts and people. They had also undergone a process of transformation from being a person with an incomplete school-leaving certificate, due to unforeseen circumstances and wrong personal decisions, to a mature person willing to embark on a formal learning road.

The learner profile is rooted in diverse and dichotomous life and work experiences. Participants shared the story of their career and personal and educational background. They analysed their lives and relevant experiences, with an awareness that “relatively every day of everyone’s life come with an experience” (PLP22). The life stories showed a link between different experiences and reflected positive self-change and self-development as a result of the experiences. By relating lifetime development, participants explained attributes and experiences that they had developed during their lifetime. It was evident that they could reflect on characteristics that they developed, as participants admitted that:

“I learned to be tolerant to different personalities…” (PLP11)

“another value ... to discover who you are ... discovery of my potential…” (PLP16)

Life transitions formed the storyline of the narrative with life lessons at the heart of the life journey. The stories were divided into sections, usually starting with a description of childhood, and lessons learned through childhood context and family relations. Regarding an educational background, the school career was characterised by initial achievement, such as “enjoyed school” PLP8) and “exelled
at what I did” (PLP10), but high school represented a turning point where they had to leave school. Participants referred to reasons for this such as “had to drop out of school due to financial reasons” (PLP7) and “When I found I was pregnant” (PLP6).

Beginning with where they started working, their career development was described, followed by the reasons for different positions, what they had learned from jobs and an overview of career progression. The career development path was often unique, dynamic and unfolding due to changing contexts and active involvement in context. Typical was dramatic career progression, such as “started as waitress and work myself up … creditor’s department” (PLP9) and intense development such as from “being born into a very poor rural family … walking 15 km to school … to being promoted as training manager due to exceptional performance” (PLP25). Informal learning often took place as a result of unintentional learning experiences. The unplanned learning experiences often triggered an interest in further learning. They had already experienced the context and consequences of a changing employment environment, leading to a feeling of confidence in the self and ability to deal with change. Participants projected a positive attitude towards work, a commitment towards career development and a personal learning curve, developed through diverse work experiences. Most stories shared highlights or a special experience, a personal problem encountered and the manner in which the problem was solved.

Initially having to leave school caused a major disappointment, but these learners were willing to take any available employment opportunity, and soon became focused on self-development. Because they had not completed their secondary education, this became a barrier to their formal education and hampered employment opportunities, such as a permanent position or promotion. One participant confessed: “verbally appointed as academic quality manager … then realised that I don’t have a degree” (PLP5). However, positive attributes and characteristics influenced adjustments they had to make and played a key role during their life journey and development path, and as non-traditional learners they remained committed to learning, because they “value the importance of education” (PLP3).
The writing of the life story as a reflection on learning resulting from experiences proved to be a useful discovery process. Participants became focused on formal studies and were therefore prepared to embark on the new venture. The prior learning papers, constituting pleasant learning material due to the narrative nature and the personal storyline, revealed the adult learners’ need to share a life story and their experiences. The papers reflected holistic descriptions comprising personal and career development, different contexts and relationships and learning gained through diverse experiences. The individual nature of participants as learners was evident in the unique life stories, which provided an opportunity to describe different aspects of the self in recognition of the whole person. There was in most cases a balance between sharing personal details and the characteristics of motivated adult learners who are able to take control of educational experiences.

The narratives reflected a strong sense of self in relation to multiple contexts and relationships. By sharing a wide spectrum of experience from childhood to the current context in two to four pages of the prior learning papers, participants showed evidence of the ability to collect information, analyse and evaluate it and present it in such a way that it demonstrated their learner profile and ability to learn from experience. The individual nature of participants as learners was evident in the unique life stories, but common themes and categories emerged.

5.2.2 Discussion of themes

Against the background of the life journey, the main themes and categories capture the central aspects of a description of the learner profile. The results of the empirical findings as themes and categories are presented in the following table, and then discussed.
Table 5.2: The learner profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Personal attributes and characteristics</td>
<td>1.1 Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 Ability to change and develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4 Established value system, for example religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 Mature due to life and work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Multiple learning contexts</td>
<td>2.1 Family background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Social and work learning context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience</td>
<td>3.1 Work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Life skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Process of growth and development</td>
<td>4.1 Developed life and work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 A future orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsequently the themes and categories are discussed under the heading of the relevant category. The data analysis found four main themes that constitute a learner profile. The first theme is the personal attributes and characteristics of participants as the learner agency. The second theme relates to the multiple and diverse learning contexts that participants were exposed to. The third theme relates to the distinct adult characteristic of a wealth of knowledge and skills that participants acquired through extensive and diverse life and work experience. The last theme is that the adult is characterised by a process of development and growth.

5.2.2.1 Theme 1: Personal attributes and characteristics

The first theme reflects the learner agency and describes personal attributes and the learner characteristics of participants. These are persistence, motivation, the ability
to change and develop, an established value system and maturity. The categories are described under the topic of the theme of that category.

i) Category 1.1: Learner persistence

Persistence was evident in participants’ determination despite negative life experiences and disappointments. One participant admitted that “life was a challenge…” (PLP7) with “personal heartache” (PLP8). Therefore problems were regarded as challenges, leading to an attitude of dedication and being hard-working. As a result of their determination to succeed, they developed the ability to rise above the situation, for example a participant who acts as manager based on relevant experience and determination. Their positive attitude of determination was a motivating factor after disappointments. A participant mentioned that “leaving the industry after over 12 years, I felt useless, but my strengths lies in looking for opportunities and making use of them” (PLP21). Life experience often includes life events beyond the person’s control. One participant regarded these events as the “biggest turning point in my life” (PLP8) which usually resulted in determination to succeed. The attitude of perseverance is as a result of the ability to handle unforeseen events. A strong sense of religion appears to support persistence, as a participant shared: “I couldn’t have gotten there without God” (PLP19). This is confirmed by participants’ attitude of never giving up on achieving personal goals and a sense of commitment to achieve. Participants stated perseverance as follows:

“Never lost hope in achieving my goals” (PLP4) and a realisation that “one has to work hard and be committed…” (PLP5)

The attitude of persistence resulted in development of personal characteristics. Participants described their characteristics in the following terms: “...became a trustworthy person…” (PLP10); “...my positive and persuasive manner…” (PLP11). The characteristic of persistence led to a self-belief (“self-encouragement is one of the values that push me forward” (PLP16)) and perseverance that they could achieve and have a purpose despite disruptive situations, discouragement and no
formal qualification. The perseverance amidst challenges built on the strengths of participants, such as being “matured and grown mentally” (PLP8), “my positive and persuasive manner...” and “I don’t let any one get in my way with my job” (PLP11).

Persistence is often linked with role responsibilities, relationships and awareness of barriers, showing the interrelatedness between different aspects of the learner profile, but with a determination to succeed, although “it was a long hard road to journey” (PLP10). Determination to succeed is often as a result of childhood experiences. A disruptive childhood led to perseverance to be successful, as explained by participants:

“Some of these childhood experiences exposed me to learning how to be independent and surviving through difficulties … my poor background afforded me the opportunity to accept responsibilities and imbued me with determination to change my status in life” (PLP19)

and

“This [a broken family] drive me to set goals and to develop myself according to a plan ... to persevere despite adverse circumstances, and I have always been able to find solutions and make plans” (PLP40)

A typical past situation was parents with a limited view of education, and therefore not interested in educational growth, and not available for support. However, this seems to have motivated participants to remain determined and to take responsibility for their own learning. Participants were often first generation students and this acted as further motivation to succeed and to be the first one in the family to obtain a degree. In some cases this led to an unforeseen barrier to further studies, as the concept of the environment of tertiary education was an unknown context. Since they had overcome other obstacles, they were determined to deal with this barrier too, and showed a sense of perseverance to achieve the goal of being successful in both work and formal studies. In contrast to the unsupportive family context of the past, the current family context was supportive. Participants had a sense of responsibility towards their current family who were supportive in motivating them to
succeed. The sense of perseverance was accompanied by a strong sense of motivation as being “self-motivated” (PLP17) with a realisation that “with hard work you can achieve…” (PLP15).

ii) Category 1.2: Motivation

Motivation comprises both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and often a combination and integration of both. Motivation was integrated in multiple goals such as personal, work-related and role-related goals. The personal goals were intrinsic self-motivation and self-determination, and as a result of a belief in abilities to achieve and to overcome barriers. The personal motivation to study, being goal-oriented and their experiences enhanced the participants’ readiness to study. Their need to be acknowledged and to receive recognition for the value of accumulated knowledge acted as a personal motivation to obtain a formal qualification.

Life experience and lessons learned from experiences had a self-mentoring role and served as personal motivation:

“I have taken my own negative experiences as a child and turned them into a positive role…” and “...based on life experience...” (PLP7)
“...self-encouragement is one of the values that push me forward..” (PLP16)

Intrinsic motivation, being “self-motivated” (PLP17), was found to be enhanced by external factors such as current supportive relationships, responsibility towards children and employment needs. Extrinsic motivation was family and career-related. As parents, participants felt that by acquiring a degree, they not only set an example for their children, but they could build a better future for them. Even children can serve as a motivation to succeed, as one participant confirmed: “my children are my aspiration” (PLP8). The family often supported the personal goal to succeed: “My family are my aspiration…” (PLP3). As a result of different financial commitments, they were even more motivated to succeed academically as the cost involved in formal studies impacted on the family budget.
The dual nature of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation related to a realisation of self in relation to others: “My motivation for completing my degree will be not only to a person, but will affect the lives of those around me” (PLP20). Participants further realised that they had work experience, but that the lack of theoretical knowledge was a learning gap: “I want to achieve a degree so that I can combine it with my experience” (PLP17), and hence their motivation to obtain a degree as a requirement for further career development. Work experience was often found to be the immediate link between the motivation to study and the passion for what they did: “The passion I have for Law…” (PLP13).

Motivation of the participants was enhanced by previous work-related achievements, such as “I was soon promoted to a position of…” (PLP2). This serves as confirmation that they had the ability to achieve. A participant shared that “I received ‘worker of the year award’…” (PLP4). A commitment to learning and an attitude of embracing all learning opportunities supported the motivation to achieve. Participants referred to their personal learning curve as making use of “every learning opportunity that I got…” (PLP6) and “I have a passion for learning, whether it is a new gadget or learning more at work” (PLP 21). Therefore RPL was considered a valuable opportunity to help achieve success: “RPL as opportunity for a better life…” (PLP21). RPL is symbolic of newly achieved success, as one participant felt that “I am privileged to have the opportunity to obtain a degree through RPL … I never thought that I would get the opportunity to achieve what I always wanted to be” (PLP22).

The commitment to learning was complemented by the personal attribute of being mature (category 1.5), and having wisdom. The characteristic of self-knowledge enhanced the motivation to achieve a goal:

“I am motivated, diligent, energetic and persistent in everything I do…” (PLP2)
“never lost hope in achieving my goal…” (PLP4)
iii) Category 1.3: Ability to change and develop

Personal attributes of mature adult learners include proactive planning and a reflective learning attitude. As a result of an ability to change and develop, participants were task-oriented, committed and showed confidence in their own abilities. A personal attribute is the ability to change and develop due to both unforeseen and planned adjustments that they had to make during their lives. Change was often as a result of the context and circumstances beyond their control. As a result of this, participants had to learn to “to deal with change…” (PLP14). The ability to deal with changes and development resulted in an openness to alternatives and to make an informed choice regarding development.

The personal developmental path included diverse learning opportunities, and therefore an attitude of embracing learning opportunities. One participant was given the following employment opportunities due to the ability to adapt and change: cultivating cassava after school to pay for school fees, hotel receptionist, machine feeder at a brewery, training as an evangelist, salesman, youth ministry, church planter, administrator, pastor (PLP15).

iv) Category 1.4: Established value system

The established value system of these learners comprises a strong sense of the role of religion, belief and ethical values. Shaped by complex experiences and disappointments, the participants developed an ethical attitude of having respect, trust, taking responsibility and appreciation for opportunities. They were hard-working and realised that hard work led to success: “Worked extremely hard … progressed from assistant to debtors supervisor” (PLP2).

The strong religious orientation seemed to combat negative life experiences and aid the goal to achieve academic success. The majority of participants expressed a religious orientation as life mottos, such as:
“...by the grace of God…” (PLP2, 4)
“we couldn’t have gotten there without God” (PLP19)

v) Category 1.5: Maturity

Maturity is evident in the participants’ approach to studies, as they explored educational and career opportunities and knew what the most suitable qualification was to complement their work experience. They were able to carefully consider options and make informed decisions, and took responsibility for their own learning with an awareness of possible gaps or barriers. They usually consulted with line managers and with their human resource department at work about the most suitable qualification to complement experience.

They had developed mature characteristics, such as a sense of identity and self-confidence as an adult, and therefore the awareness of personal strengths as a worker. A participant shared the characteristic of “another value … to discover who you are, and the discovery of your potential” (PLP16). As mature adults, they managed to overcome personal barriers and were willing to share negative experiences, such as abusive relationships and even imprisonment. They realised in their life that they needed to take responsibility for their own learning and development, and therefore in the current context regarded RPL as an opportunity and that they were privileged to be included in such a programme: “RPL programme ... my dream become reality” (PLP5) and “privileged to get the opportunity” (PLP6). Although there was a sense of uncertainty about the demands of the unknown context of higher education, there was also a sense of resolve to “see problems I experience as challenges” (PLP16).

As mature learners, their lives were further characterised by the demands of multiple role responsibilities. A participant explained that “as I became wiser and older my responsibilities and role increased” (PLP22). They were aware of the realities and the demands of being a parent, a spouse, a child, an employee, an entrepreneur and community member. They were actively involved in these different roles, and were either concerned about their new role as a student or regarded that as simply another challenge.
As non-traditional learners, they were often not aware of the depth, breadth and value of learning. They tended to be either over-confident about the extent of their experience or lacked confidence about their ability to learn and to cope with studies. However, they developed a reflective learning attitude, as a result of experience, as participants explained that:

“I have since realised that I should have made better choices which would have let to better consequences” (PLP39)
“My life and work experience have impacted on my career path by being a more positive, passionate and hard worker” (PLP40)

5.2.2.2 Theme 2: Multiple learning contexts

Multiple learning contexts comprise both current and past family background and social learning contexts. Experiences in different contexts reflected their roles and responsibilities as citizens, employees, family and community members.

i) Category 4.1: Family background

The majority of prior learning papers included a description in chronological order of childhood experiences and the impact of family and relationships on experiences and development. Diverse experiences as a result of challenges of past contexts are reflected in the following quotations:

“will go to bed without food” (PLP2)
“did not care much to offer us stability” (PLP9)
“free from sexual abuse” (PLP9)
“being a single parent was starting to take its toll...” (PLP10)
“life was a challenge...” (PLP7)

Relationships are key, since identity is integrated in diverse relationships of the past and current context. These relationships resulted in informal learning; participants referred to “mum for my siblings” (PLP7), “being a mother, student and wife at the
same time…” (PLP6), “to deal with different customers” (PLP17), “brought up from poor family in very rural area”, “assist community with financial skills” (PLP21).

There was a slight concern among participants that the different educational experiences may continue to define and determine their adult learner identity. A distinguishing mark of childhood and family contexts is often a disruptive past context, causing emotional experiences and a feeling of isolation due to a dysfunctional or complex context. These emotional life experiences may lead to barriers in learning. Probably years after the events, participants shared personal information such as:

“…until I lost my dad…” (PLP7)
“devastated by his rejection once again…” (PLP9)

However, they developed responsibility, with a supportive mother often as a role model or mentor:

“this taught me at a young age to be responsible” (PLP4)
“an amazing mum that raised us on her own…” (PLP9)
“my mother was a very strong and multi-tasked woman…” (PLP4)

In contrast to often unsupportive relationships of the past, current relationships were found to be supportive and acted as a strong motivation to study and to be successful.

ii) Category 4.2: Social learning context

The social learning context includes strong cultural roots, multilingual language contexts, community involvement, school background and different work-related contexts. Participants developed a sense of belonging and commitment to a community and a sense of citizenship: “disadvantage community … women neglected in training…” (PLP17). The previous negative perception of women in education had a similar negative result as that of the previous political context. Participants described the effects on learner identity as:
“dreams shattered with school riots” (PLP15)
“it was in my matric year when violence broke out in the school” (PLP22)

Unintentional learning often takes place within unplanned learning contexts, such as
different and diverse career positions due to unforeseen and planned career changes. A participant reflected on different roles and jobs as follows:

“besides mother and spouse … started as a clerk. Part-time bookkeeper … student at Bible college … teacher at Bible college … PA at Old Mutual … receptionist … office manager … insurance industry … part-time teacher at High School” (PLP6)

In the working environment they developed a sense of uniqueness despite the climate of collaboration and involvement in teamwork. Different work-related contexts lead to acquiring skills, knowledge and learning, and therefore the working context is included under the theme of skills and knowledge.

5.2.2.3 Theme 3: Developed and acquired knowledge and skills

This theme comprises knowledge, learning and skills acquired through life and work experience. In the analysis, knowledge and learning acquired were categorised as one theme. The first category consists of skills, knowledge and learning as a result of work experience.

i) Category 3.1: Work experience

The life stories of the participants reflected both individual and unique career paths and shared experiences that led to knowledge and skills. A distinct characteristic of the participants was that their adult identity was characterised by work experience, and thus careers reflected their identity. One participant claimed that “career is close to my heart” (PLP14). The extent of experience confirmed the value of the working environment as a learning context. A commitment to a career probably contributed to the achievement of extended learning and development of a self-directed learning
approach. Participants identified a distinct individual learning curve within the community of learning, as an ongoing process and commitment to learning:

“In my life I have been exposed to different types of knowledge, and I have gained and am still gaining new experiences” (PLP4)

“Counselling these women has taught me many things” (PLP3)

It is necessary to specify the learning gained as a result of working experience, rather than giving a broad description stated as “work experience … broadened my knowledge base…” (PLP8). Most of the learning was acquired as a result of a self-directed learning attitude.

The work experience comprised the following distinct subcategories. Only key words referring to the specific skills are used, and not the entire sentence, as the key words capture the essence of the learning.

- Job-specific knowledge, skills and general work experience relating to the intended qualification:
  “reconcile sheet accounts, forensic auditing, signing off annual financial statements…” (PLP11)
  “involved in industry … understanding of terminology…” (PLP14)

- Knowledge gained from different career positions, including management, project management, trainer and leadership skills: “opportunity to manage the office” (PLP6). Therefore practical knowledge was relevant to their contexts.

- Entrepreneurial skills already visible from a young age: “looking for new opportunities” (PLP9), “I started selling during break times” (PLP12).

- Communication skills and customer service, which included negotiation, persuasion and selling, interpersonal and intercultural communication skills: “enjoy working with different kinds of people” (PLP4), “I gained experience how to negotiate deals with new clients” (PLP19).

- Professional working skills, such as an ethical awareness, responsibility, respect for opinions and people and for different perceptions, ability to
socialise within a working environment, self-management, identifying career-related training and learning opportunities, understanding the world of work, a sense of self in relation to changing demands of workplace context and practices.

- Skills integrated with daily routines, such as report writing and completion of forms, thinking skills, ability to deal with criticism, development of a critical attitude, creative skills and problem-solving.
- Interpersonal skills such as learning how to work effectively with difficult people, respect for differences, capability to negotiate, collaborate and relationship building.
- Collaborative learning that is linked to learning of others, such as teamwork, decision-making and approach to projects.
- Useful practical and work-related skills: “knowledge I developed through practical tasks throughout career” (PLP11), such as administrative duties and ability to handle a changing working environment, “process journals, type letters, handle external correspondence, prepare for monthly meetings” (PLP9), self-management, awareness of strengths and weaknesses, accountability, responsible for own development, commitment to company, helpful, ability to work under pressure: “solving problems under pressure” (PLP19), awareness of deadlines.
- Skills, knowledge and learning as a result of formal training: short training courses attended, for example project management, in-house formal training opportunities such as computer skills: “attended seminars, workshops and celebrations” (PLP22), “I completed various short courses” (PLP15).

Work experience comprises both practical work experience as experiential learning and developing an individual career identity. Knowledge was mostly gained through active involvement in the workplace. One participant explains this as follows: “As time passed I was given more responsibilities, I got hands-on experience and I was given the chance to work on several assignments on my own” (PLP13). A reflective learning attitude is evident: a participant realised that knowledge was gained from experience - “practical work experience broadened my knowledge base” (PLP8).
Through work experience they gained a sense of responsibility and were exposed to a wide variety of opportunities: “I had to set up different admin systems” (PLP13).

The data reveals more evidence about skills gained than formal knowledge acquired. The knowledge often resembles applied competence as the ability to think about knowledge and to apply knowledge and learning in a practical manner. Skills gained through workplace experience often relate to general life skills, such as social skills, interpersonal skills and ethical values.

ii) Category 3.2: Life skills

Life skills comprise personal and generic knowledge as learning integrated in daily routine and social environments. The interconnectedness between categories and themes is evident in a category such as personal learning because of multiple roles and responsibilities as adults. They gained life skills from roles, such as “learned to be tolerant to different personalities” (PLP11). As parents they learned to be accommodating, even in the new role of student. A participant reported that her daughter would “have a study buddy” (PLP13).

Knowledge appeared as life lessons learned through experience, and wisdom as reflected in a life motto:

“all my experiences were my greatest teachers...” (PLP10)
“as much as challenges can make one stronger, but overcoming challenges will complete an individual” (PLP19)

Learning was also acquired through contact with social contexts, voluntary work and community involvement. Learning contexts involved unplanned contexts such as prison (“during prison I learned everything...” (PLP10)), doing voluntary work (“I also work as voluntary crisis worker at Patch child abuse centre” (PLP3)) and social contexts, as in “my friends influenced me” (PLP12).

The data reveals evidence of the learners’ practical application knowledge, but few formal learning skills. They developed social skills such as a social awareness, self-
awareness and an interpersonal sensitivity. Life skills gained from community involvement and culture included having a sense of community, willingness to contribute, to be involved in the community and a need for belonging to a group. Through experience they developed an emotional maturity as a life skill.

5.2.2.4 Theme 4: Process of growth and development

This theme includes the development of life and work experience and participants’ future orientation. The interdependent co-coder drew my attention to the relevance of future orientation, as it was initially not included in data analysis. An interrelatedness of themes is evident, as personal attributes influenced participants’ ability to make adjustments through their life journey and to develop and grow as a result of dichotomous past life and work experiences. The learner profile further reveals the ability to negotiate developmental opportunities and changes through their lifetime.

i) Category 4.1: Life and work experience as a process of development

As reflected in the life journey as a central storyline (cf. 5.2.1), participants underwent a personal development process through experience. A participant shared this as “the story of my life includes important lessons contributing to my growth” (PLP3). Participants felt proud of their experience, and one admitted that “the knowledge I gained was life time experience that prepares me” (PLP2). The development process resulted in the ability to unconsciously apply knowledge and to learn from decisions taken. The process of growth in the participants led to a strong sense of future orientation.

ii) Category 4.2: A future orientation

The future orientation of these learners was supported by motivation to achieve success, and as a result of being persistent. The life-changing events seemed to have enhanced the future orientation and commitment to future goals. Participants described the turning point as “the biggest turning point in my life…” (PLP8) and in
terms of change: “the event that changed my life forever ... I had learned to deal with change...” (PLP14).

Future orientation is linked to career development as a dynamic process of growth, for example, one participant “started as waitress and work myself up ... creditor’s dept” (PLP9) and another participant was “employed as bus cleaner ... currently an accountant...” (PLP11). Due to participants’ future orientation, they had a willingness to start at the bottom and to start small. Goals of mature learners sometimes seem unrealistic, such as planning a master’s when still busy with RPL. Therefore there is a need for more focused goal setting.

Probably also due to their future orientation was an attitude of proactive planning, for example combining career development and formal studies. One participant realised that despite the fact that they “can not change the past ... [they] can dictate the future” (PLP21). Participants realised the benefits and value of a formal qualification as being “...empower[ed] with education” (PLP4). The motivation to study and the selection of the particular qualification served as the vehicle for future growth, as it builds on work experience and personal attributes and a need for recognition of skills and abilities. The need for personal and career recognition is reflected in the process of growth and development and the commitment to make use of opportunities.

5.2.3 Summary

The four main themes that emerged from the thematic data analysis are personal attributes and characteristics as learner agency, multiple learning contexts, knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience and a process of growth and development. These themes are also evident in the storyline of the narrative analysis. The themes and categories overlap and are interdependent and interconnected, for example knowledge and skills are acquired as a result of different learning contexts. The four main themes interlink, for example the personal attributes of perseverance and being motivated contribute to a developmental path of growth and of acquiring learning. An example of interrelatedness between
categories is that the characteristic of being motivated supports perseverance and the ability to deal with change and unforeseen circumstances.

The second set of data refers to the feedback on the electronic questionnaire, as responses on the role of the portfolio development workshops, hereafter referred to as portfolio workshops or workshops.

5.3 FEEDBACK ON THE ELECTRONIC QUESTIONNAIRE

5.3.1 A general overview of the role of the portfolio workshop

The role of the portfolio workshop is described and explained from participants’ personal perceptions. The quotations are used in exactly the same format as received in the electronic feedback format of the Google Docs website page used for the research. Therefore grammatical and spelling errors are not corrected. The language errors may reveal gaps in learning or the human factor when completing an electronic questionnaire.

Participants’ assumptions and reflections of the role of the workshop experience were not influenced by peers, as they completed the electronic questionnaire individually some time after they had attended the workshop. By the time they reflected on the role of the workshop, they had already completed the RPL assessment and most of the participants were probably busy with formal studies at an ODL institution. Participants perceived the workshop as an experience, associated with an institution; a participant mentioned that “I had a wonderful and fulfilling experience. Thank you Unisa!” (I25). Therefore some participants’ responses referred not only to the portfolio workshop, but also to the entire RPL assessment process:

“I found the process to be valuable” (H2)

and another participant felt that

“RPL is really useful to persons who want to pursue the dreams and career goals” (I38)
The feedback on the questionnaire also serves to confirm key aspects of the learner profile with a view to triangulation. Participants reflected in the questionnaire feedback on their personal characteristics as being “motivated” (H21), “an independent learner, patient and interested in learning, hard-working, [having] persistence” (H28), “my personal strength is my ability to perseverance during tough times”, “goal-orientated” and religious – “by God I am going to see it through” (H20) and “my personal strength is that I thrive of learning” (H16). “Also the fact that I am passionate about my job and know what I want to study help me to stay focus” (H17) and “my personal strength is my ability to work without supervision and to work hard even in awkward positions” (H22). These quotations reflect the personal attributes of table 5.2 on the learner profile.

The data reveals participants’ general perceptions of the role of the workshop and their personal experiences of the workshop. Participants’ responses revealed the multiple purposes associated with the workshop as preparation for assessment. These benefits are both at a personal and an academic level.

“It made me realise how important it is to know myself, it really helped me to master myself...” (B9)

“The main purpose was to explore your qualities and not compare your lack of education with others” (F14)

They not only perceived it as vital for compiling a portfolio, but regarded it also as a useful generic preparation tool for further tertiary studies after access. The learning associated with preparation for RPL assessment reveals the workshop experience with lasting benefits for further studies. The following participants’ remarks indicate the sustainability of the preparation process as follows:

“It benefit me in a lot of different ways, ... it gave me a preamble on how distance education works” (C23)

“it provided me with a very strong foundation for my studies. The RPL assessment was of help to me as I am now doing my degree” (I50)
Participant perceived the workshop as being essential for compiling the portfolio of evidence, and admitted that they would not have been able to do it without the workshop. The workshop as a suitable and essential preparation intervention for RPL candidates was stated in participants’ feedback as follows:

“The workshop is really vital for RPL students” (B37)

“After the workshop the portfolio was a breeze. I would not have been able to compile a portfolio, without attending a workshop” (B53)

“Without attending the workshop, I would not have scored a distinction for the portfolio” (B38)

The responses to the first of the nine questions in the questionnaire, as captured in the first column of the Google Docs webpage (see Appendix J) dealing with the first impression of the collage, are the most illuminating. The collage in general elicited an immediate response and evoked memories of the experience and the personal meaning assigned to the experience. The collage is included as Appendix C to contextualise the experience of the workshop.

The guiding first question was:

What is your first impression when you look at the collage? (Question A)

The diverse responses as first impressions, reflected in key words such as comrady (sic), enjoying, comfortable surroundings, working together, enthusiasm, eager to learn, same reason, opportunity, different cultural backgrounds, comfortable, extremely proud, inspired, breakthrough, mature learners, dreams come true, Unisa students, not alone, fun, pursue degree, new friends and communicating immediately capture the participants’ experiences of the workshop (see underlined words in Appendix J, column 1 – note that the reference to the specific participant is not placed in brackets. This is done in order to keep the continuity of the sentence. The participants’ words are used in inverted commas and in italics).

Additionally these quotations capture the four main themes that emerged from the analysis of all the questions. On reflection, participants felt after attending the workshop and completing the assessment that the role of the workshop
encompassed a personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity (theme 1) as being “inspired” (A23) within a cooperative learning context (theme 2) of “comrady” (A2). Knowledge and skills (theme 3) were gained through the workshop experience as they “were eager to learn” (A55), and the workshop was perceived as a transformational learning experience (theme 4) as a “breakthrough” (A30). It facilitated change, since participants made a paradigm and mind shift from being a mature learner with experience to an adult learner prepared for the demands of RPL assessment.

The emotions associated with the workshop experience and emotional involvement in learning are reflected by a spontaneous e-mail message sent by a participant in an immediate response when he received the electronic questionnaire:

“dit was fantasties om vandag weer na die foto’s te kyk en die “bizz” te ervaar van daai paar dae in die lokaal. Ek het in daai paar dae soveel waarde gekry en sal EWIG dankbaar wees!”

(Participant’s e-mail message not translated in order to capture authenticity)

Although the responses to the questions of the electronic questionnaire were analysed individually, interrelatedness and overlapping of themes occurred. This meant that the themes and categories could be collapsed and combined into four main themes. The participants’ authentic experiences are reflected in the four themes and categories below. The findings on the role of the portfolio workshop are presented as themes and categories in table 5.3, and then described.
Table 5.3: Data B (role of the portfolio workshop)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity</td>
<td>1.1 Self-actualisation and self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Enhanced motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cooperative learning context</td>
<td>2.1 Structured experiential learning context for both personal growth and creating a cohesive group spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Community of learning with shared goals and background of life and work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Acquired knowledge and skills</td>
<td>3.1 Relevance of preparation and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Preparation for assessment as a learning opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Developmental and transformational learning process</td>
<td>4.1 Preparation as transformational learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Developed adult learner profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Addressed barriers and concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of the workshop is explained under the headings of the themes and categories.
5.3.2 Discussion of themes

5.3.2.1 Theme 1: Personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity

This theme exemplifies the personal and social need for recognition and acknowledgement that lie at the heart of the purpose of RPL. The personal benefit of the workshop as a personal empowerment opportunity was acknowledged by one participant as follows: “I have increased my self esteem and on personal level I feel significant” (C18). As personal beneficial empowerment opportunity (category 1.1) it entails self-actualisation and enhanced motivation (category 1.2).

i) Category 1.1: Self-actualisation and self-awareness

The experience of self-actualisation as a result of self-awareness and increased confidence left participants with a sense of achievement: “I’m superman” (H19). The awareness of strengths and personal attributes led to a new sense of achievement and a changed self-perspective. There was a new realisation that “I can do all things if I put my mind to it” (H26). Participants could draw on personal attributes as strengths and could transfer strengths and skills to the learning context. It empowered participants at a personal level; a participant felt that the activities “helped to analyse myself and to plan my educational path” (F30). Due to the changed self-perspective and opportunities to explore personal strengths, it led to a new sense of self-awareness, expressed as follows:

“I gained a lot of confidence in seeing the large number of adult learners like me as I had a hard time with my age and therefore I was so motivated” (C22)

In exploring personal attributes and strengths on the road to self-discovery, a participant could “find out who I really am” (C6). This was a process of self-discovery as participants critically reflected on the self and on past experiences. The development of self-awareness was enhanced by the realisation of personal strengths: “It reminds me that I have come so far…strength is having the motivation” (A8). In the personal and group reflection on diverse learning experiences,
participants experienced a sense of achievement and confidence due to a changed self-perspective and the awareness of personal achievements similar to and different from those of their peers.

The confirmation of self-worth was experienced as a foundation for the achievement of goals, as participants could link life and work experience to the process of self-actualisation. Participants shared the following:

“I learned personal things about myself and it was a trip down memory lane writing my life story” (C21)
“apart from the workshop being fantastic, it also left me feeling stronger” (D21)

A changed self-perspective was achieved through reflection, which was an inward gaze on diverse learning experiences, resulting in a new perspective on experience and the value of work-related skills. The power of reflection and self-assessment was explained by participants as follows:

“Finding your inner self, weaknesses and strengths as we were forced to take time and reflect on our individual inner selves” (F22) and
“it made to take a back seat and some introspection and realised how much value I’m of and I’m unique” (F51)

As a mentoring process, the workshop experience inherently involved personal change and growth, tapping into personal strengths and attributes of participants. Participants realised that “the workshop gave me hope that I can achieve anything that if I set my mind to it’ because “strengths are life experience” (H25).

Activities such as self-assessment, self-analysis and critical reflection contributed to enhance further motivation. Participants reflected on their past and realised that they were indeed capable of overcoming challenges:
“There was a section of the workshop where I had to reflect on my past, how I grew up, the challenges that I faced and overcame and the personal learning…today I know that if I work hard, I can overcome challenges…” (F13)

The newly defined appreciation of valuable experiences and of the self resulted in an enhanced motivation to succeed.

ii) Category 1.2: Enhanced motivation

Participants were initially motivated as they attended voluntarily. However, different factors contributed to the enhanced motivation, as one participant mentioned that there was support:

“it gave me confidence that it was not an impossible task and help was available” (B55)

The development of confidence led to enhanced motivation as a learner: “I regained confidence in studying and in myself…” (I13)

Four main factors contributing to motivation emerged from the analysis. The first two are immediate supportive feedback from both the group and the facilitator and a sense of belonging to a goal-oriented group with a shared focus and with common goals. Besides the personal benefit, the feedback provided a frame of reference for further work on the portfolio. The matter of relevant evidence could have been problematic as a new concept, but participants received immediate feedback from the group and facilitator on the suitability of evidence, which created a feeling of certainty about the portfolio. Participants experienced a sense of being part of a wider and diverse learning community, which helped to alleviate all uncertainties about possibilities of achieving success. The third factor is the characteristic of being future-oriented, as participants realised that a dream could become reality, with the workshop as a stepping stone to degree studies. The fourth factor is that a sense of immediate achievement enhanced confidence since work experience was valued within an academic context.
The enhanced motivation within an educational context was the result of a supportive environment where a community of learning, mutual trust and respect created a sense of belonging to a goal-oriented group. The participants were committed to an active learning process that posed challenges and was encouraging, meaningful and fun. Both the individual and the group empowerment contributed to the enhanced motivation, as participants made use of the opportunity to share emotions, and were willing to listen to peers. They were interested in other life stories, because they realised that they had competencies and experiences in common. A participant remarked that:

“it inspired me to hear different stories about fellow learner’s journey, and how they overcame their challenges” (E5)

A contributing factor to the personal empowerment and enhanced motivation was the supportive learning context. The sense of belonging to a context of a community of practice added to the motivation. Participants felt as if they mattered.

5.3.2.2 Theme 2: Cooperative learning context

The context of cooperative learning created a learning opportunity of entering into discourse, a process of discovery and of sharing experiences and perceptions. The cooperative learning as a structured experiential learning context (category 2.1) and a community of learning with a shared focus (category 2.2) allowed for active learning opportunities based on a cohesive group spirit and a group of learners with a shared focus. The power of discourse, communication and the opportunity to find a voice in sharing were reflected or implied in a great majority of the feedback. It was even more valuable since it took place within a structured experiential learning context.

i) Category 2.1: Structured experiential learning context

The factors that contributed to the cooperative learning context were the collaborative or social interaction and enjoyment of learning. The group was built on mutual respect, trust and support. Participants felt that it was a safe environment to
share opinions and experiences. The group work further promoted interpersonal and intercultural interaction and dialogue. They were willing to learn from one another, and gained insights from other participants and a better understanding and perspective on portfolio assignment. The participants shared the group work experiences as follows:

“It showed the need for people to be effective team players and how effective this is in solutions to a task” (E57)

“I do not normally work well in groups, but since the workshop have realized that big business can be built through the strength of collective minds” (D20)

“Together it was evident as teams achieved more. This is a good process with advantages of group learning” (D38)

The opportunities for networking promoted interpersonal and intercultural interaction. Participants enjoyed the social nature of the workshop context, and the safe environment to voice their opinions and to share experiences and ideas. Effective learning was associated with enjoyment, as a participant mentioned that “group work was by far the most enjoyable aspect” (E58). As a structured context it contributed to valuable peer learning:

“by listening to different views from other students, and then drew conclusions as to what to use in the portfolio” (B29)

In the structured learning context participants could use their creative and thinking skills acquired through work experience to analyse approaches to assignments and thus gained multiple perspectives and a more critical approach to academic work.

ii) Category 2.2: Community of learning

The supportive and interactive group discussions contributed to task engagement and active involvement in learning activities. The aim of a community of practice was explained as follows by participants:
“The role of group work was to share ideas, experiences and cultural backgrounds. The idea was to help us prepare a portfolio to required standard through shared ideas and experiences” (D43)

Within the small groups they seemed to feel at ease to engage critically in discussions, to share and to articulate ideas. This probably contributed to an awareness of the value of other perspectives and a more critical learning approach, as “you get more ideas from different opinions” (D9). The openness to share was noticeable because participants were initially strangers at the beginning of the workshop, but could identify with a community of practice. They experienced a sense of belonging when they realised that “There are many other people in similar positions to mine, so I am encouraged to pursue a degree” (A49). The group work provided a challenging and exciting experience suitable to all cultures: “the wonderful and exciting week we had with different people from diverse cultural backgrounds” (A13).

The feedback reflected group work as an effective learning strategy for a diverse target group. Participants explained this as follows:

“I enjoyed group work, interacting with people of all cultures was very informative. I enjoyed putting together my portfolio after the workshop” (E32)

and

“I felt at ease, seeing people in the same situation and also made friends with who were my study buddies” (C37)

and

“group work in my perspective is invaluable as it installs a sense of belonging and learning. Everyone shared responsibilities in presenting, etc” (C47)
The learning process was as a result of group contribution and individual empowerment:

“I was a sponge, i learned from the other learners…” (D5)
“I was grateful for the personal attention…” (G24)
“I learned a lot of things that make us unique from each other” (E39)

5.3.2.3 Theme 3: Knowledge and skills gained

The acquisition of knowledge and skills takes place at two levels. The first is an awareness of personal learning as a result of experience and the second is “new” learning of academic-related skills and knowledge associated with portfolio development. The first category relates to learning dealing with the relevance of preparation and planning in academic work. The second category relates to the preparation for assessment as a learning opportunity. Underlying the new learning gained, there is also a personal learning process, as newly acquired self-knowledge.

i) Category 3.1: Relevance of preparation and planning

Participants became aware of the value of the learning experience in the preparation process and focused on that rather than on aiming to complete portfolio assignments during the workshop. Participants gained a new perspective on knowledge gained through diverse life and work experiences. This was more than just a decoding of experience, but a process where participants expanded their personal list of knowledge and skills acquired and became aware of the value of transferable skills. Participants could make new interpretations and connections of experience, for example practical problem-solving and creative thinking skills from the work environment could be transferred to the academic context. The planning and preparation process created authentic experiential learning opportunities as activities to engage in newly acquired assessment and learning skills. Participants commented on the value of planning as follows:

"with the notes and activities done during the workshop it makes it easier to complete the portfolio" (B13)
“the preparation reveals the many skills that I have” (F55)
“After the workshop I follow my notes and remember specific topics discussed at the workshop and relate other peoples’ experiences to my own and complete my assignments for the portfolio ... I was clear with everything” (G26)

The process of preparing for the portfolio seems more relevant and beneficial than the actual compiling of the portfolio as the process created an opportunity to tap into the tacit knowledge of the learners, for example entrepreneurial, management and thinking skills. Participants could draw from experience and knowledge and thus contribute to discussions on planning assignments, for example assignments on budgeting and problem-solving. The group work assisted in challenging set beliefs and assumptions, and they could freely participate as they were not judged or threatened. Knowledge and skills acquired though diverse work experiences and by acting in different career positions could easily be shared because all participants had work experience. The role of preparation was done in relation to multiple responsibilities; a participant shared the learning as “I benefitted in knowing on how to prioritise academic work and family and personal life” (C41).

Participants developed skills required for portfolio assessment and for higher education, such as considering different approaches and evaluative and analytical skills. The value of group discussions was “that it broadened my thinking” (C40) and it was a practical opportunity to be able to engage in activities that are valued in both higher and distance education, such as the forming of study groups after the workshop. Participants identified critical steps in the planning of a portfolio, and useful skills for further formal studies, such as brainstorming. They mentioned different steps for inclusion in a preparation plan:

“in focusing on key areas” (B16)
“discussing different topics” (E41)
“I learned how to plan and brainstorm” (B39)
“to prepare the final drafts and written work” (B16)
“I have a clear idea of what is expected of me, and now I do my very best in each assignment and examination” (H4)
A participant summarised the role of preparation in terms of personal development and learning: “The workshop was very informative and important. A lot of potential and skills were discovered. Sharing ideas and experiences motivated me and I was encouraged by opportunities to discuss problems…” (I43). Although portfolio assessment was initially considered as a huge task, after the workshop a participant remarked that “the portfolio was a breeze” (I43), and with preparation it was merely a matter of “putting together my portfolio” (E40). The relevance of planning relates directly to assessment as learning, which is described in the next category.

ii) **Category 3.2: Preparation for assessment as a learning opportunity**

The acquisition of essential academic support skills, such as study and academic writing skills, and skills mentioned in 3.1, explains why participants perceived the preparation as a learning opportunity. It gave them the opportunity to apply skills; a participant remarked that activities helped participants to “solve problems and bringing in new ideas and valuable concepts for producing the portfolio” (D25). All uncertainties were addressed, and one participant mentioned that “the workshop was of great assistance as there were a lot of questions that were clarified…” (B24). They could engage in the group activities as they shared a commitment to learning. A participant’s reflection confirms the experience of learning and co-learning as being pleasant: “I enjoyed the interaction and learning process thoroughly” (I16).

A variety of academic-related skills, such as academic writing and an introduction to research skills, were acquired. These acquired skills helped participants to be a “tool that sharpen me into university studies…” and “I can do a research based assignment, know how to plan and to put my work in an orderly manner” (F40).

One participant remarked about the new learning acquired in the workshop process as being “tremendously in preparing me for university studies” (D5).

The skills they acquired demystified the uncertainty about the challenges of distance learning, and created a feeling that they would be able to cope with further degree studies. The learning also proved to have a lasting effect as one participant explains:
“Some learners were able to form study groups that helped learners” (I48)

“workshop benefits me on a personal level by teaching me to set a time to reach my goals and objectives” (C55)

“I gained writing skills and planning skills” (C51)

“it gave me the basic tools I would need (and now utilise) when studying for my degree. I learnt to think more critically and analytically..in a manner acceptable at university standard” (B49)

The benefits of co-learning were experienced in a practical manner:

“The fellow learners provided their different ideas and experiences, based on their different levels of exposure in life and the collection of these ideas helped everyone” (D30)

A participant who was registered at the university felt that the preparation assisted in gaining specific useful skills: “as a Unisa student you must know how to arrange, organise and plan your work...” (C40). Participants developed an awareness of quality standards and evaluative skills in “producing a good standard of work” and thus becoming assessors of their own work. The preparation included assessment standards as a quality measurement: “It provided valuable information and tips on producing a good standard of work” (B39). With the focus on learning, participants became aware of barriers and learning gaps, such as academic literacy skills. A participant admitted that “the fear of not writing correctly was high” (G44).

Learning involves different aspects, besides preparation. The initial aim of one of the activities was to collect information on cultural diversity, through a qualitative data collection approach, to enable participants to write an essay on diversity in the workplace for inclusion in the portfolio. Unexpected feedback from a South African target group was the immense value of gaining a new cultural awareness and learning about other cultures. I expected the participants to be more familiar with diverse cultural knowledge, and so the appreciation and the enjoyment of the activity was unexpected. A possible explanation is that the intercultural and open discussions revealed more information about different cultures than was commonly
known. One participant explained this as follows: “*to talk about culture, tradition and diversities. It was my first time to meet with different people from different cultures … I learned a lot*” (E39).

Since participants were working adults and aware of the need for effective intercultural communication, they realised the necessity to learn more about different cultures. In the discussion participants could draw on their own cultural experiences, and could translate these into learning. Another explanation is that participants experienced a new sense and appreciation of their own cultural contexts and identity and wealth of their own cultural learning. However, learning gained about cultures emphasised the awareness of knowledge creation and sense-making through discourse, as knowledge was constructed in the intercultural interaction of groups. The opportunity for open dialogue within a community of trust seemed to have transformed their thinking and perception of other cultures. The participants’ ability to value diversity confirms that identity is integrated in culture, and can lead to enhanced self-confidence when accepting differences of others, and a feeling of acceptance by others.

The value of a structured preparation as a pleasant learning process was captured by a participant as follows: “*There was excitement and cooperation*” (A40). The data reveals that emotions often accompany the learning experiences of participants as adult learners. Participants attributed the learning gained to the experience of the workshop as a transformational learning experience with the power to have “*changed my life for better*” (I56) and a stepping stone and bridge to achieve a goal. Since the main purpose of the assessment is for students to gain access to university studies, the participants seemed to have had the main goal in mind of achieving a degree rather than just completing the portfolio.

5.3.2.4 Theme 4: Transformational and developmental learning process

The process confirms the vision of RPL as a learner-centred approach that considers the needs of the learner. They were empowered through participation and by taking ownership of the process. A participant shared a sense of pride as follows:
“I feel extremely proud that I was part of process and that I participated in a way that I felt that RPL was going to work for me”

(A17)

By far the most common feedback was participants’ experience of the workshop as personal empowerment, a transformational and developmental learning process. The theme comprises three categories to further describe the workshop experience. They are that RPL assessment was perceived as a transformational learning process, the workshop was an opportunity to develop an adult learner profile, and a process that addressed barriers about assessment and both personal and academic concerns. The workshop acted as a bridging opportunity, as one participant described it: “For me it provided a smooth transition to university studies” (F54).

Even experienced adults benefited from the bridging opportunity, as participants explained:

“it is a stepping stone for the who need to get passed the red tape in the workplace” (I47)

“I believe the workshop is a giant step in the right direction to educate a nation” (I32)

The workshop experience provided an opportunity to become aware of hidden skills and knowledge as an opportunity to develop potential. Active workshop participation led to a better understanding of the learning process, as they could reflect on and discuss how competencies were acquired. Valuable insight gained from participants’ feedback is that the process of development proved to be more valuable than the end result, i.e. the completed portfolio. As one participant said: “I gained confidence and felt relieved that university entry was not an impossible task”. It also “benefit[s] me in the workplace” (C58). The workshop focus was not only on successful completion of a portfolio, but on being an “amazing journey” (I16).
i) **Category 4.1: Workshop as a transformational learning process**

It was perceived as a transformational learning process that facilitated change for mature learners. One participant stated that it was a:

“foundation for our breakthrough in our pursuits as mature learners. I thank Unisa for giving us the opportunity.” (A30)

One participant felt even stronger about the change:

“The RPL workshop was the best thing to ever happen to me in my life. It changed EVERYTHING for me in so many ways. Without the workshop I have no idea where I would be now in my life. My studies bring me so much joy and fulfillment I never knew was possible.” (I4)

As a transformational learning process change was experienced at both a personal and academic level. Participants explained their personal feeling of achievement:

“I most enjoyed the unpacking of one’s skills. It is here that I learned to reflect on my life and saw exactly what I am capable of. Before that I felt like I was a failure in life.” (E49)

“it represents a turning point in my life where I realised I matter” (E47)

The process and active involvement took participants on a journey of self-discovery where their own learning and knowledge were revealed and where they could realise the value of their experiences. Participants mentioned the variety of opportunities for using work-related skills such as persuasion, social interaction and teamwork. Participants’ experiences served as the main source of knowledge, so participants were actively involved throughout the workshop. Although reflection was perceived by some as a difficult and tedious process to “filter through memories and experiences” (I30), and they “had to dig deep” (I31), they realised that the most important role was to discover their own self-worth. This led to change possibly as a
result of a new perspective on learning from experience, and by realising their full potential.

The workshop provided an opportunity where experiences and wisdom were acknowledged and participants could connect new learning to life and work experiences, and “broaden [their] mind to see things differently” (F6). In the process they realised that they had achieved more than what they were aware of and therefore felt a sense of achievement. Participants recognised the power of their experience, and that they could draw on their own strengths to address perceived concerns and barriers. A participant’s feedback reflects the increased recognition of personal accomplishments as follows:

“It makes you realise you have achieved a lot over the years and appreciate the skills you have that other people might recognise”

(C6)

During the preparation participants could make sense of their past as preparation for writing the prior learning paper and their life story. This probably contributed further to the transformational learning experience. Regarding the process to write the life story and extract the learning from experience, another participant mentioned that:

“I learned personal things about myself and it was a trip down memory lane writing my life story” (C21)

The workshop experience confirmed their goals as they gained a new perspective of their own learning and could develop an authentic academic identity. Participants explained this as follows:

“Experiencing an opportunity to make their dreams come true” (A32)
“I had a wonderfull and fulfilling experience” (I58)
“I am now more confident and ready for the task ahead” (H58)
ii) Category 4.2: Developed adult learner profile

The participants had to make a paradigm shift and by doing so, they became aware of the demands of their new role as an adult learner. They could transfer personal attributes and transferable skills as strengths to an academic context. Participants had to redefine their self, goals and roles and their current roles were perceived by some as a barrier.

Participants explained their new identity as follows:

“the workshop helped as to become mature learners who meet the level of qualification required” (F49)
“living like a student for three days ... it made goals seem even more achievable” (F4)
“by having created such a strong base I feel I am able to achieve anything I set my mind to” (E4)
“what I saw as a weakness now seems to count in my favour. I am now more confident and ready for the tasks ahead.” (H58)
“I learned to be an independent learner” (B38)

Participants had to develop a new perception of self by developing an adult learning identity built on personal and work-related strengths. Most participants reported on the change they experienced, as a result of gaining a new perspective on the self and on experience. The workshop served as an authentic introduction to be part of a learning community. Participants realised that they need not be defined by previous educational experiences of failure, but that they should draw on personal strengths, valuable skills and newly acquired academic skills to be defined as successful adult learners. Group and individual activities both affirmed a profile of a responsible, self-directed learner with potential.

In developing an adult learner profile they had to identify and address different barriers and concerns.
iii) Category 4.3: Addressed possible barriers and concerns

A requirement of RPL assessment is to identify and address personal learning barriers. One participant wrote: “In reflection on the portfolio workshop, there were very little feedback on concerns and barriers” (G20). Another participant’s response to problems experienced was that there were “no weaknesses” (G21) after the process. This is a concern as it may be that participants were not skilled enough to critically reflect on their own barriers, or were overwhelmed by an emotional feeling of confidence so that they were not yet able to identify academic barriers. Another possibility is that concerns and barriers might have been addressed as participants acquired the skills of time management, developed new priorities, discussed approaches to deal with conflicting priorities of multiple roles and had confidence in the RPL process and clarity on the demands of portfolio assessment. Participants explained:

“The workshop was of great assistance as there was a lot of questions that were clarified” (B24)

“I benefitted in knowing how to prioritise studies with my family and personal life” (C41)

In identifying their own barriers and weaknesses through self-assessment and critical reflection, one participant shared concerns about weaknesses as follows:

“a weakness of mine is that I don’t always grasp complex learning issues easily, I have to work hard and ask questions and put in a lot of effort to understand them” (G31)

The developmental approach of the workshop could have served to remove emotional barriers to assessment. One such barrier may be the impact of the fear of being assessed. A participant admitted that “I did feel at times that it was too much” (G4). However, as a learning process it assisted participants in articulating tacit knowledge, and therefore experiencing a feeling of achievement. The participants were exposed to a context and process where they rediscovered and embraced their authentic self and unlocked learning gained through experience.
The four main themes that emerged from the analyses of Data A and B are confirmed and summarised by the findings of Data C.

5.4 TRIANGULATION OF INTEGRATED FINDINGS

Participants received a general brief to share their experiences of the RPL process at a national forum (participants’ details; cf chapter 4, section 4.6.3). They did not receive specific guidelines and could decide which aspects of the RPL process they wanted to include. The five participants did not have any contact with one another prior to the conference and therefore could not discuss the brief.

The analysis showed that their personal testimonies included characteristics of the learner profile, the role of the portfolio workshop, RPL assessment and learning after access to an ODL context (see Appendix L). They unintentionally included factors that describe the influence of the learner profile on the portfolio workshop and on RPL assessment. The analysis of their experiences revealed aspects of the interrelatedness between themes. The views expressed by participants were largely congruent with the findings of the empirical research of the study, but with a distinct focus on the role of the workshop and RPL assessment as a sustainable process with lasting effects after assessment. This was probably due to the fact that all five participants were already registered students at an ODL institution at the time of the conference. The findings of the analysis confirm the themes of both the analysis of the prior learning papers and those on the feedback on the role of the portfolio workshop.

The essence of the workshop as an enriching experience is captured by participant A’s summary. His response to the general influence of RPL in his life confirms the findings of the questionnaire on the role of the workshop. Preparation for assessment serves multiple purposes which have personal benefits and serve as a preparation process for both portfolio assessment and degree studies. The long-term post-assessment benefits of the workshop are implied as the workshop equipped participants for lifelong learning. The experience of the participant quoted below is consistent with themes on the research participants’ knowledge and learning gained during the workshop, learning he felt could be compared favourably
with the learning associated with his degree studies. Participant A was rather explicit in explaining the role of the workshop as a learning process:

“The workshop was extremely important to me as it serves a **raider of navigator** to **accomplishing the task** of developing the portfolio of evidence. The benefit for me was not for the purpose of portfolio development but rather, it laid the **basic foundation for my degree**. The workshop for me is a concise BBA all I have been doing in terms of studies in past two and half years were covered in three days during the workshop. The **benefit** and value attached to the portfolio development process is **immense** … the **feeling of accomplishment, enthusiasm** and a memory of anxiety or anxious moments…” and “…the **group work had its own motivating effect**” (Participant A).

Participant A’s personal experience of the workshop reflects the four main themes, implied in the key words (researcher’s bolding of words) that emerged from the thematic analysis of the questionnaire on the perception of the role of the workshop. The main role of the workshop can be summarised in four key aspects of being a personal beneficial and empowerment opportunity within a cooperative learning context, where supportive group work contributed to enhanced motivation and a sense of accomplishment. Valuable knowledge and skills were gained during the workshop as a developmental and transformational learning process and were transferred favourably to his formal degree studies. It was a process of personal empowerment and the experience of a sense of achievement. It served as a useful introduction to further degree studies. Since participant A provided the personal testimony almost two and a half years after completing the RPL assessment, he was in an ideal situation to remark on the lasting effect of RPL assessment as a learning process.

Participants perceived the workshop as a bridging intervention that prepared them at a personal and academic level. Building on previous learning and experiences, RPL serves as a foundation for higher education. Participant C confirmed that he experienced the workshop as a personal empowering tool to success:
“without a doubt attending the workshop was the turning point for me - attending the workshop not only gave me all the tools to successfully complete the portfolio, but I had more confidence and self believe” (Participant C)

Participant B shared her mature wisdom in her perception of the role of the workshop as a bridge between two contexts, linking participants’ personal profile to context after assessment. Participant B further remarked on the workshop experience as a transformational learning experience, where participants benefited from group discussions that embraced both similarities and differences between members. There was general agreement that despite the perceived difficulties of portfolio assessment, the workshop was a key stepping stone to further success.

Characteristics of the learner profile were confirmed in an objective manner by participants’ perceptions of characteristics of peers as co-learners. They regarded RPL candidates as being motivated and committed to success (participants A and B). Participant B expanded on the profile of RPL candidates, and her perception of peers was that of individuals with determination although they had had setbacks in life. As mature learners, they carefully considered their choice of study and were therefore motivated to succeed. Despite internal motivation, they needed support as external motivation. They were dedicated people who could work independently, but also function well in group work. As an assistant at a contact university in the area, participant B noticed that RPL candidates were unique, but despite vast differences there were “fundamental similarities” – “The most common similarities are determination and the fact that they are already working” (Participant B).

Participant C concurred as he regarded RPL candidates as unique individuals capable of success:

“people who completed RPL, have a success story and are very unique individuals” and “An RPL student is a very specific kind of person” (Participant C)
Participant C confirmed the characteristics of a sense of future orientation, goal orientation and confidence in the self when he proclaimed that:

“I have come far since I started the RPL program, and I’ll be going to much greater heights!” (Participant C)

Participant C shared his success in the workplace to illustrate the impact that the RPL process had on his workplace success and learning. The future orientation of these kinds of learners influences the experience of RPL assessment as a sustainable process with a long-term effect on personal growth and career development after assessment. Three of the participants mentioned that:

“living/to live the benefits of RPL” (Participants A and D)
“the assessment served me well as I am moving places at work”
(Participant E)

it was an opportunity “to change for self-improvement” (Participant B)

Participant D confirmed personal attributes and added that as individuals with experience, mature learners develop perseverance, the ability to learn and problem-solving skills. The participants’ reflective learning attitude influenced the workshop experience as a transformational learning experience and turning point, since they could reflect on past experiences and experienced change and personal growth. Therefore these participants regarded RPL as not only a bridging opportunity to gain access to higher education, but as gratifying and beneficial. Due to perseverance and determination to succeed, participants aimed to achieve life goals. Participant D admitted that:

“I struggled to get university admission and it seemed that every way I turned doors were closed to me” and “Unisa and RPL gave me a chance to pursue my future studies.” (Participant D)

The participants’ need to be recognised applied not only in the workshop, but even more so at the public forum of a national RPL conference where learners could share experiences. The need to voice their own opinion and to share personal
experiences empowered participants in contexts from which they were previously excluded, such as higher education and education conferences. Participant D’s remark testifies to the need for a voice to be heard, as she said:

“Thank you for the opportunity to ... and we appreciate the opportunity to voice our opinions” (Participant D)

The participants’ awareness of change was reflected on as the workshop and RPL process was perceived as a life-changing journey that influenced their lives:

“Portfolio workshop as amazing journey and the absolute key and turning point” (Participant B)
“RPL changed my life forever” (Participant D)

Participant B shared some wisdom on the power of change as something that “we need ... for progress” and admitted the impact of a negative life experience:

“In reflection decisions that you regretted often have the greatest impact on change, development, determination and perseverance”

Both participants C and D shared the multiple benefits of the portfolio and the process for personal and academic development and for the workplace. In conclusion, the need for further research was mentioned as participant D felt that valuable experience should be recognised, reflecting a worthy future orientation of adult wisdom. The learner profile’s commitment to growth and development enabled participants to appreciate the role of RPL within a wider context. The main focus of RPL assessment as a process that recognises learning from experience is captured as follows: “Past does not have to determine future, but rather learn from lessons learned from experience” (Participant C).

The role of the facilitator is integrated in all four themes, and is discussed as a separate section.
5.5  THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

The role of the facilitator was explained through the participants’ reflection, mostly under general feedback on the workshop. Feedback on the role of the facilitator confirms personal characteristics of the learner profile as explained under personal attributes and characteristics (table 5.2). Participants’ feedback shows a need for somebody to acknowledge their potential and worth as prospective students. They need confirmation of a facilitator as a mentor and external motivation to assure them of the possibility of succeeding. Feedback from respondents in this regard was as follows:

“she believed in us as prospective students and saw only our potential” and “commitment and consistent mentoring” (Participant B)
“to motivate us and guide to successful conclusion of assessment”
(B12)

The facilitator’s role was regarded as that of mentor, coach, participant, facilitator and academic. From the participants’ perspective, the role of the facilitator was not perceived as mainly an academic one, which is unexpected as the workshop was the participants’ first contact with higher education. Participants mentioned the facilitator’s availability as a person and not only as an academic. The facilitator did not function as the sole source of information, but it was a co-learning process where the role and input of peers were also regarded as relevant. The participants appreciated the facilitator’s qualities of being able to give individual attention, having a sense of humour, being a motivator and showing sensitivity towards learners from diverse backgrounds. They appreciated a facilitator that was well prepared and available. The multiple roles of the facilitator and personal qualities that met the needs of the learners were captured by different participants’ feedback:

“commitment and constant mentoring” (I2)
“encouraging to study further in my career path” (I9)
“ready to assist with whatever query we had” (I14)
“made me feel that my dream of obtaining a degree is possible”
(E17)
“Professional and helpful, I appreciated that I wasn’t being judged.” (I9)
“Enthusiasm, helpful” (I54)

The key role of communities of practice where group members take responsibility implies that the facilitator should not interfere unnecessarily with group work, but mainly facilitate a conducive context for the establishment of group dynamics. In the respondents’ feedback on the benefits of the workshop, group work emerges as a key factor to learning and success in RPL assessment. A possible conclusion is that the facilitator managed to create an authentic space for group work and creative interaction and a community of trust conducive for discussion and connection. This was achieved in the workshop where the facilitator mediated learner participation and interpersonal and intercultural interaction. The responsibility of the facilitator was to facilitate a collaborative and active learning environment. The autonomy of groups was respected as participants became independent and self-reliant learners. Therefore support was perceived as the responsibility not only of the facilitator, but of learners too: “The role of fellow learners were [sic] very important.” (D14)

Since participants’ feedback implies change as a key element of the workshop, it places the responsibility on the facilitator to ensure that the outcome of a workshop is one where participants indeed experience the process as a transformational learning process. This was achieved, as evidenced by the following quotes:

“RPL workshop was the best thing to ever happen to me, ever in my life” (I4)
“The workshop changed my life. A lot of potential and skills were discovered during that time.” (I45)
“Workshop was a brilliant idea. Will recommend to any student” (F10)

5.6 SUMMARY

Chapter 5 presented the findings of the empirical research. The prior learning papers of participants were analysed and four main themes with categories
emerged. In the second data collection method participants had to reflect on their experiences and perceptions of the role of the portfolio workshop. The analysis found four main themes with categories and subcategories. The third data collection method served as triangulation and was used to summarise the empirical findings of the data analysis.

The interrelatedness and interconnectedness of the themes and categories are further discussed in the summaries of chapter 6. The inferences made from the findings of the empirical research allow for the conclusions and recommendations of the study. The implications of the findings are used to describe the learner profile, provide guidelines for learning outcomes for portfolio development and discuss the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment.
CHAPTER 6  
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Set your goals high, and don’t stop till you get there.*

*Bo Janckson*

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the research as stated in chapter 1 was to determine and explain the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. To achieve the aim of the research, the research problem was formulated as the main research question. It was formulated as follows:

*How does the learner profile influence RPL assessment?*

The main research question was supported by the following three subquestions:

1. What is the learner profile?
2. What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for RPL assessment?
3. How does the learner profile influence learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop in RPL assessment?

The purpose of this chapter is to determine whether the research aim, as stated in chapter 1, has been achieved. To answer the research question a literature study and empirical research were first undertaken. The literature study on adult learning theories and RPL assessment was done to form the theoretical framework for interpretation of the empirical research. The interpretations and conclusions are made with reference to the main aim and objectives of the study, and to answer the research question.

This chapter contains the summary, conclusions and recommendations of the research, and ends with suggestions for further research as an outcome of the findings of this study and a final conclusion to the chapter.
The next section provides the summary of key theoretical and empirical research findings.

6.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section contains the summary of the research findings that have led to answering the research subquestions as research conclusions.

6.2.1 Theoretical component

The research provided an overview of adult learning theories and RPL assessment. The summary provides the key theoretical findings of the literature review and is done with relevance to the research questions of the study.

6.2.1.1 Adult learning theories

The theoretical overview found that the approaches to adult learning theories are best described from four perspectives. Theoretical orientations highlight aspects of the adult learner that should be taken into account for practice. The learner-based, context-based, knowledge-based and process-based approaches do not function in isolation, but are interdependent and relate directly to one another; therefore, justifying a holistic approach (cf. chapter 2, section 2.7) to adult learning theories that allow inclusion of aspects from different learning theories. The central concept of learning is based on the interaction between the person or learner, the knowledge, the context of learning and the process involved.

There are pivotal concepts that run like golden threads through different theoretical perspectives, contributing to a description of the learner profile from different perspectives. The adult learner, as an active learner with experience (cf. chapter 2, section 2.3), is able to benefit from the social learning contexts of situated and cooperative learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as well as from a constructivist learning approach (cf. Terwel, 1999; chapter 2, section 2.6.4.1). Different approaches such as humanist theory, critical theory, transformative learning, and cognitive and social constructivism add perspectives to ensure a deeper understanding of the adult as an
active participant who is cognitively, affectively and socially (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.4) involved in learning processes. Further common concepts include the role of experience, motivation, the adult as self-directed learner and processes such as reflection and self-assessment. Experience as a pivotal concept is a distinctive characteristic of the learner profile, especially since learners draw on experiences as sources of learning and build on them in new learning contexts. The nature of the experience manifests in the way in which the adults approach learning and interact with their peers. The learner-based approaches therefore shape our image of the personal profile of adult learners in terms of distinctive personal attributes.

Knowles’s andragogical principles and the humanist perspective draw attention to the personal attributes of adult learners such as being self-directed, responsible, task-oriented, motivated, needs-driven and self-actualised (cf. chapter 2, section 2.4 and 2.6.1). As different theoretical approaches confirm, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a central role in learner success. A most useful approach (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.1.1) to motivation is the “strengths approach” (Simpson, 2008:160, 163) to learner support, where learner motivation is enhanced by realising the value of self-esteem and focusing on learner strengths rather than on learner weaknesses. The practical implication of learner-based approaches is that they draw attention to respect, trust and the role of interpersonal relationships (cf. humanistic approach, chapter 2, section 2.6.1; Lara, n.d.:2).

Furthermore, the adult learner has distinctive characteristics such as multiple roles and responsibilities, experience, emotions associated with learning and cognitive development that influence perspectives on learning. The personal profile does not function in isolation, but depends on other aspects, such as social contexts. By tapping into their personal attributes, adult learners develop, grow and learn through interaction with different contexts.

The learner profile is imbedded in multiple contexts (cf. context-based approaches, chapter 2, section 2.6.2) which means that the contexts in which experience has been gained need to be considered, for example a non-Western perspective and culture as context. Since experience has been acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts, learners need support to identify and articulate contextual
knowledge as situated knowledge. The learner profile benefits from supportive learning contexts and social interaction as proposed by social learning theory, situated learning, constructivism, cooperative learning, communities of practice and social constructivist approaches (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.2-2.6.4).

With regard to the context-based theoretical perspectives, they recognise the relevance of considering the learner’s experience in knowledge acquisition, social interaction, cooperative learning, reflection and communities of practice (Wenger, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991, Lave, 1993) as well as the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning from a constructivist perspective regards knowledge as not only attained, but also actively constructed from experience.

Adult learners bring different types of knowledge to the learning context, such as cultural knowledge, practical knowledge, wisdom, formal learning and situated knowledge (cf. knowledge-based approach, chapter 2, section 2.6.3). A holistic approach (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.3.3) towards knowledge can benefit an RPL assessment approach; Yang (2004b:849) argues that most of the existing adult learning theories define knowledge and learning too narrowly, and therefore do not display the richness of adult learning. The perception of what constitutes valid knowledge influences the approach to the learning process. The theoretical perspectives of process-based approaches confirm that adult learners grow and develop. They can therefore develop new perspectives of the self and their prior learning. Central to adult learning is Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.4.2) as a process leading to changed perspectives that is only possible through critical reflection on previous experiences. The active learner is central to the reflection process in making new meaning of their own experiences.

The interrelatedness and connectedness among the four perspectives are evident, as the process of growth is dependent on personal characteristics, life and work experience as well as a supportive learning context. The dynamic relationship between individual learning and learning as a social process contributes to learning through experience. Adult learners can develop their full potential since they thrive in a supportive and cooperative context of learning (cf. social constructivism and communities of learning, Lave & Wenger, 1991) with the social environment as an
important source of learning. Critical theory is committed to giving a voice to the learner through the power and dynamics of discourse and dialogue which draw upon the learners’ existing knowledge and experience, and their willingness to ask questions and listen. In developing their own voice, adults become aware of the wealth of their own experiences and potential to achieve their goals (cf. Freire, 1972, critical theory, chapter 2, section 2.6.2.1).

The theoretical overview found that adult learning theories complement and often support one another, as each adds another dimension to a holistic learner profile. The theoretical framework on adult learning theories points to matters to include in both the description of an adult learner profile and also when stating learning outcomes for a portfolio development workshop. The eclectic and holistic approach (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.3.3) serves as the framework to ensure that all aspects of a diverse learner profile and unique traits are covered since no single theory can really capture the complexity of a learner profile.

The second part of the theoretical overview included a discussion on RPL assessment.

6.2.1.2 RPL assessment

RPL assessment holds educational and personal benefits for the learner, as implied by legislation and policy, and as further confirmed by international case studies and RPL-related research (cf. chapter 3, section 3.2.3). However, there is a general concern that discussions on RPL as policy and legislation take centre stage; hence the inclusion of practical implications of a learner-centred assessment strategy that benefits the learner. The literature overview confirmed that both RPL assessment and adult learning theories are committed to the empowerment of the adult learner (Indabawa & Mpofu, 2006:81) as learning and assessment processes that enable someone to achieve a personal goal.

Central to the transformation vision, confirmed by SAQA’s research agenda (SAQA, 2010b:3), is the intention to ensure effective access to learning for learners, and lifelong learning and development opportunities. The background context informs the relevance of a preparatory workshop that builds on assessment theory as
pedagogy. The discussion on RPL assessment shows four aspects that relate to the main approaches on adult learning theories.

Firstly, the specific learner profile needs to be considered. Due to the unique learner profile RPL candidates need preparation for RPL assessment and exposure to learning. A conceptual framework for RPL assessment (cf chapter 3, table 3.2, section 3.8) makes an argument for RPL as a sustainable learning process based on adult learning theories and not only a technical assessment process.

Secondly, the context influences both the preparation and assessment approaches. The RPL assessment context, such as access to higher education and the context of the learner, needs to be acknowledged, since the context of the learner profile of this study differs from the international learner profile.

The third point relates to knowledge. The specific demands of portfolio assessment as well as the nature of the knowledge and experience require a portfolio workshop as preparation (cf. chapter 3, section 3.6). The portfolio workshop aims to bridge the gap between diverse contexts of learning because it prepares the learners for portfolio assessment and for the context of higher education after access.

The fourth point relates to the RPL assessment process. Key factors to consider in an RPL assessment strategy (cf. chapter 3, section 3.4.2-3.4.4) include assessment as a learning intervention, the relevance of preparation for assessment, and the identification and addressing of learner barriers. Skills associated with preparation for RPL assessment are similar to those associated with the sustainable assessment approach (cf. Boud et al., 1999:421 in chapter 3). As required by the CAEL-endorsed standards (cf. chapter 3, section 3.7), relevant learning gained from experience is assessed. Through processes included in a preparation for assessment, such as self-assessment and critical reflection, RPL candidates should be prepared so that they can meet the quality assessment standards.

Similar to adult learning theories, RPL assessment shows an interaction between the learner, the demands of the context, the diverse forms of knowledge and the process involved. The summaries of both the adult learning theories and RPL assessment
point to matters to be included in the description of the learner profile, the role of the portfolio workshop and the guidelines on learning outcomes for a portfolio workshop. The contribution of the empirical research was that it provided an in-depth and more detailed description of the learner profile of this specific target group. However, the theoretical framework formed a firm foundation for the interpretation of the empirical research and the research conclusions.

6.2.2 Empirical component

The findings of the empirical research are summarised, followed by the research conclusions.

6.2.2.1 Findings on the description of the learner profile

The main themes and categories (cf. chapter 5, table 5.2) found in the analysis of the participants’ prior learning papers are used to describe the learner profile.

To a large extent, themes on the learner profile correspond with those found in empirical studies on the profile of the RPL candidates, such as studies by Aarts et al. (2003), Pasupathi et al. (2007), Brown (2001), Pearson (2000), Michelson et al. (2004) and Lamoreaux (2005), which confirms the reliability of the findings. The contribution of the empirical research was that it illuminated characteristics not described by the theoretical framework and also unique characteristics not described by the studies mentioned. These are the strong sense of religion, a future orientation and a willingness to start at the bottom of a career ladder. Possible explanations are that these characteristics may be typical of the specific target group or that they represent the South African context. Also relevant to the South African context is that the value of culture as a context should be considered and sensitivity towards diversity and multiculturalism should be maintained. There is an eagerness and an openness to share cultural values and customs, especially with the acquired awareness that learning was gained through cultural backgrounds. Since valuable learning takes place within cultural contexts, the inclusion of a non-Western perspective should be included in the description of a learner profile.
The four main themes found in the data analysis reflect the main aspects of the learner profile (cf. table 5.2, section 5.2.2). They are personal attributes and characteristics (cf. chapter 5, section 5.2.2.1), multiple learning contexts (cf chapter 5, section 5.2.2.2), knowledge, skills and experience acquired through a journey of life and work (cf. chapter 5, section 5.2.2.3) and the process of growth and development (cf. chapter 5, section 5.2.2.4). The personal profile includes attributes and characteristics such as persistence, motivation, the ability to change and adapt, and maturity due to extensive and diverse life and work experiences. These factors result in an established value system and remarkably strong sense of religion. The multiple learning contexts comprise family background, work context as well as social involvement in the community and in cultural contexts. The knowledge and skills acquired can be categorised as extensive work experience and life skills. These learners undergo a process of growth and development where they develop competencies as a result of life and work experiences, complemented by a strong future orientation and an enthusiasm for learning opportunities.

The personal profile includes the whole spectrum of cognitive, social and affective characteristics. A variety of emotions was mentioned by the participants due to previous dysfunctional relationships and contexts, reflecting negative experiences. The emotions highlight the emotional aspects associated with adult learning and possible emotional barriers to learning, factors that can either hamper or enhance motivation for learning. Motivational factors are a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and influence the individual developmental process. Due to the adult learners’ focused motivation and the fact that they have encountered and managed obstacles along their way, barriers are perceived as challenges.

As adults, they have acquired diverse experiences through a developmental process of growth and learning (cf. chapter 5, sections 5.2.2.3 and 5.2.2.4). This process relates to multiple learning contexts; therefore, different contexts and backgrounds come into play that fall outside the framework of formal learning. They develop applied competence as the ability to apply practical knowledge; however, they realise their own learning gaps and the lack of a formal qualification.
The transferable skills gained relate favourably to critical cross-field outcomes. The skills are problem-solving skills, teamwork, an ability to organise and manage themselves within different contexts, an ability to collect, analyse and critically evaluate information as suitable evidence, and communication skills. These relate to their tacit knowledge and learning gained through often unforeseen and unplanned contexts. Although informal learning may not relate directly to academic outcomes, it can be translated as critical cross-field outcomes. This provides an opportunity to include learning gained though cultural contexts and through community involvement. It adds to the learner profile the possibility of inclusion of a non-Western knowledge perspective.

The empirical component showed that the learners define themselves in terms of their work experience and their multiple roles. In general, they develop competencies that may stand them in good stead in a formal learning context. These may include the development of entrepreneurial opportunities, a sense of being responsible citizens in different communities, sensitivity towards people from different contexts and backgrounds, and exploring a variety of career contexts. The overlapping and interaction between themes show that experiences leave a lasting impression of people’s journey through life. The influence of the learner draws attention to the holistic nature and purpose of assessment and learning, as it needs to consider all aspects of the adult learner.

These adult learners are able to reflect on the role of the portfolio development workshop some time after they have attended the workshop. The next section contains a summary of the analysis of the participants’ feedback.

6.2.2.2 Findings on the role of the portfolio development workshop

The portfolio workshop “...opened up an entire new world for me”.

The above quotation by a participant captures the multiple additional benefits associated with a workshop as preparation for portfolio assessment (cf. case studies in chapter 3, section 3.2.3). The value of learners’ perspectives on the workshop is that they provide a true reflection of what is required of a process of guidance,
support, mentoring and learning as preparation (SAQA, 2013: 7,8; Ralphs, 2012; 2013) within a specific context. The learners’ perspectives indicated the personal and educational benefits associated with a portfolio development workshop and with RPL assessment in general (cf chapter 3, section 3.2.3).

The four main themes and supporting categories (cf. table 5.2, chapter 5, section 5.2.2) which emerged from the analysis describe the role of the portfolio workshop. The four main pointers of the empirical research are confirmed by the theoretical framework on adult learning theories. The workshop serves as a personal beneficial and empowerment experience for learners within a cooperative and collaborative learning context (cf. context-based theories, chapter 2, section 2.6.2) where they gain knowledge, learning and skills through a developmental and transformative learning process (cf. transformative learning, chapter 2, 2.6.4.2).

On a personal level (cf. chapter 5, section 5.3.2), the workshop was experienced as a preparatory and empowerment opportunity where the participants benefited more from the personal development, the context and the learning process than from the final product, namely the portfolio assessment. The self-awareness and new discovery of the self led to greater persistence, self-confidence and readiness for completion of RPL assessment and thereafter to enrol for formal studies. Candidates felt empowered due to a feeling of self-actualisation, enhanced motivation and a belief in their own abilities and strengths to achieve an academic goal. Learners were motivated as they became “members” of a new learning environment where work experience was valued within an academic context. As non-traditional learners, they experienced a sense of belonging to a goal-orientated group with a shared focus and background because they realised that their dream to obtain a degree could become a reality.

The workshop was further perceived as a developmental learning process (cf. chapter 5, section 5.3.2.4) within a cooperative learning context (cf. chapter 5, section 5.3.2.2). In group work, the learning contexts were supportive for both personal growth, for creating a cohesive group spirit and for developing an own learner identity. The community of practice, as a safe social learning context, was experienced at two levels: at a personal level through the development of the
individual learning identity and at a social level by belonging to a group. Active learner involvement in interactive group discussion, peer feedback and active task engagement led to preparing for assessment as a valuable learning experience. Learners benefited from the variety of learning strategies, intercultural interaction, relaxed learning context and opportunities for social interaction.

The workshop was experienced as a learning process where they gained new knowledge, skills and competencies (cf. chapter 5, section 5.3.2.3). They particularly benefited from learning the relevance of preparation and planning, such as writing drafts. The skills gained though preparation for assessment were associated with long-term learning skills and ensured a sustainable learning experience. Learning was validated, as they could articulate and describe learning gained through experience, and gained a new interpretation of their experiences as a guide for future learning.

The use of authentic activities where they could draw on experiences, life skills and job-related knowledge contributed to experiencing assessment not as a barrier that held threats, but rather as a sound foundation for further learning. The contribution of group dynamics played a key role that led to enhanced self-confidence, the opportunity to connect with other perspectives and to then critically analyse their own perspectives. In the context of problem-solving activities, they could draw on both their own tacit learning and on fellow learners’ experiences, as they could analyse approaches to portfolio assignments through reflective discourse.

The workshop was perceived as a transformative learning experience constituting change. By making a paradigm shift, participants developed an authentic adult learner profile and identity. They gained affirmation of being self-directed, motivated and responsible learners with potential and valuable experiences. Relevant is that literature usually refers only to personal benefits associated with RPL in general or specifically with portfolio development.

The significance of this research is that the benefits were experienced during the portfolio development workshop as preparation for portfolio development and assessment, meaning that preparation is key to a sound assessment process. The
unique contribution of the empirical research component entails several aspects that learner’s value. These are the relevance of preparation for assessment, assessment as learning, sustainable assessment and learning skills, learning as change and the role of collaborative learning to develop a new learner identity. The workshop as structured and sustainable adult learning opportunity prepared participants for the context of lifelong learning.

The significance of the study also lies in revealing the learners’ perspectives on RPL assessment and on what they really require from preparation. Participants benefited from assessment and learning skills associated with effective learning at higher education level, such as preparation for exam writing and for compiling assignments within an ODL context. It also includes skills such as reflection, self-assessment, peer learning, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The variety of activities assisted participants to identify knowledge, skills, competencies and personal attributes and to articulate them in terms of academic language.

The findings of the empirical research, as framed in the theoretical framework, are used to answer the research question. Since the theoretical overview supports the empirical research, it allows the researcher to answer the research questions in the form of research conclusions.

6.3 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The research conclusions answer the three research subquestions, as well as the main research question.

6.3.1 What is the learner profile?

In response to the first research subquestion, the empirical research confirms that the learner profile constitutes four dimensions as reflected in figure 6.1. These cannot function in isolation, as they are interdependent. Adult learners are characterised by distinctive personal attributes, knowledge, skills and competencies that they have gained in different contexts through a process of development and growth.
Figure 6.1: The learner profile

The personal profile as learner agency describes the learners as motivated, with a persistence to achieve despite negative life experiences. Their perseverance is evident in that they regard problems as challenges and are hardworking and dedicated. The learner profile is rooted in diverse life and work experiences, leading to acquiring a wealth of experiences. The diverse nature of extensive life and work experiences gained in a variety of contexts further motivates them to fulfil a dream of achieving a degree. Both life and work experiences are linked to motivation to study and related to the preferred qualification of study. This is enhanced by the characteristic of being mature adult learners who have explored educational and career opportunities and who have overcome most personal barriers. These learners enter higher education with relevant industry-related experience, wisdom, personal strengths and a commitment to success. They have experienced a life-changing event as a turning point in their lives, and are therefore ready to take full responsibility for their educational and career development. Although they begin formal studies at a much later stage in life, they feel ready and motivated to achieve academic success.

Due to a future orientation, adult learners plan proactively, are able to manage life and career developments, and are willing to start at the bottom of the career ladder. Therefore, they make an informed decision on the qualification for which they want to register and ODL as the preferred mode of instruction. Although they are aware of
the personal and educational challenges of formal education, they regard RPL as a gratifying experience and an opportunity for further growth and learning, as a true reflection of the vision of RPL (SAQA, 2012; 2013).

The learners have developed personal characteristics such as willingness to learn, openness, a sense of identity and self-confidence, that relate favourably to graduate attributes (Griesel & Parker, 2009:16) expected at university level. This is enhanced by relevant competencies gained through work experience, such as a sense of work ethics and the development of a self-directed learning attitude. The passion for what they do is evident. Furthermore, their internal motivation, self-belief, positive attributes and wealth of job-related experiences will stand them in good stead in a formal academic context.

Remarkable is adult learners’ ability to adapt as a result of unforeseen adjustments that they had to make during their life journey. As a result, they have developed a commitment to develop, a proactive attitude, an openness to alternatives as well as the ability to identify and embrace all learning opportunities. Learning experiences are often associated with emotions; therefore, the opportunity to enter higher education is an emotional experience. The adult learners’ perception of learning entails more than just an academic exercise, because it symbolises personal achievement, the fulfilment of a dream, a better future for their children and a means to career development.

As mature learners they have developed distinguishing personal qualities, preferences and roles. Although participants perceive multiple roles and responsibilities as possible barriers, these also serve as motivation to achieve and to set an example to their children.

An advantage mature learners with experience have is that, as working adults, they have already gained essential and transferable skills required by the employment market. They have gained knowledge through experiential learning in authentic learning contexts; therefore, they bring lived experiences and practical knowledge to the academic context. Their competencies and attributes include practical skills such as leadership, problem-solving, work-based experience of teamwork, an
understanding of diversity and a sense of self in relation to the changing demands of the workplace. This is also confirmed by literature (Griesel & Parker, 2009:6, 16; Druskat & Wheeler, 2003, in Clemens & Cord, 2013:15; Booysen, 2012). Due to work experience, they have developed a sense of professionalism and community. Their job-specific knowledge and skills, ability to apply knowledge practically and practical knowledge from different career positions will support academic development.

As mentioned above, the learner profile within the South African context has distinctive characteristics. Learning is often gained through a collective learning context where cultural traditions impact on the type of experience. The political context and dichotomous past life experiences often cause a situation where mature learners need to enter further formal education without a formal school certificate, yet a wealth of experience.

A distinctive competency of adult learners is to take a step back and reflect on learning as a life journey of self-discovery. They can relate that as a prior learning paper with a focus on learning through experience. They are proud of their achievements. They realise how experience has affected their development, readiness and commitment to register for formal graduate studies. They have clear and focused goals, are aware of their strengths and have overcome past hurdles.

From the learners’ perspective the role of the portfolio development workshop can be described as follows:

6.3.2 What is the role of the portfolio development workshop in preparation for RPL assessment?

A participant captured the key role of the workshop as a bridging intervention in the following words:

“The three-day workshop is the hinge between the motivated student and future success” (SAQA, Participant A)
The significance of the role of the workshop is its multiple purposes as a preparatory and explicatory forum, engendering a sense of commitment, certainty and confidence about the own role as learner, RPL and the context of formal education. It fostered a sense of belonging to an academic community and of accomplishment. The workshop broke down the barrier created through the fear of failure, by ensuring that learners grew in self-esteem, and drew on personal and experience-related strengths, thus leading to empowerment and motivation.

The preparation for RPL assessment not only prepares the learner for the demands of portfolio assessment, but also serves as an intervention for successful transition to higher education, and for the personal and educational demands of ODL. The workshop acted as a forum for bringing together and integrating the divergent areas of the adult learner’s life and learning experiences, multiple contexts and development processes into a holistic whole. This preparation for assessment provided a safe context to become aware of the value of experience which is usually undervalued or simply ignored. Participants perceived the workshop as being a bridging opportunity as it provided guidance and support with an appropriate combination of development, learning, mentoring and assessment approaches. It managed to connect and synthesise diverse contexts of knowledge and learning as a transition from using knowledge and skills in a working and informal context to that of a formal learning context. The focused learner support process assisted adults in developing an individual student identity or profile and adding the role of learner to their other multiple roles. This created the realisation among participants that they were not only adults, but mature learners, entitled to academic success.

As a social and transformative learning intervention it ensured that learners achieved enhanced self-actualisation, confidence and self-awareness through open communication, connection with peers and the care of a facilitator. Being a member of a group with similar backgrounds and aims added to the feeling of self-awareness and worth.

The workshop provided a variety of experiential learning opportunities for learners to master fundamental skills associated with success at higher education level. The workshop proved the relevance of individual and group participation as a learning
opportunity. It provided an authentic learning opportunity because participants were able to engage in activities that were valued in both higher and distance education. The workshop therefore unintentionally addressed the concern raised about under-preparedness of learners. In the workshop, learners could relate their experiences and knowledge to the academic material, and discuss approaches to problems until the group reached consensus.

As a result of the workshop experience, RPL candidates could make the mind shift from being a mature learner with experience to a prepared and motivated adult learner. The role of the portfolio workshop aimed to bridge the boundaries between academic knowledge context and the contexts of experiential learning as informal and non-formal learning. However, this process and the mind shift ensured that the two contexts did not function in isolation, but rather in interaction and synergy.

The answer to the previous two research subquestions informed the answer to the third research subquestion. The answer to the third subquestion is based on inferences and deductions made from available data. The discussion refers to the integration of the empirical learner profile (cf. table 5.2, chapter 5, section 5.2.2), the role of the portfolio workshop (cf. table 5.3, chapter 5, section 5.3.1) and learners’ testimonies (cf. chapter 5, section 5.4). The response to this subquestion forms the basis for the learning outcomes of a portfolio workshop, as included in the recommendations.

6.3.3 How does the learner profile influence learning outcomes for the portfolio workshop in RPL assessment?

The causative relationship between themes and categories of the learner profile, and those of the role of the workshop form the framework for the response to the third subquestion. When comparing the themes of the sets of data, direct similarities, interrelatedness and connection between themes can be found. For example, the personal profile of self-awareness and motivation are a common theme of both sets of data. Both sets of data reflect the four main themes of personal attributes, knowledge and learning, context and processes that can be aligned with the four approaches to adult learning theories (cf. chapter 2).
The learning outcomes of a workshop therefore stand firmly on the four pillars of the theoretical framework of adult learning theories. Since the relationships between themes are not linear, a specific characteristic can influence different themes and categories of the role of the workshop. There are four main aspects of the learner profile that influence the learning outcomes, namely the personal learner profile, the multiple learning contexts of the adult learner, knowledge and skills acquired through experience, and the process of growth and development.

6.3.3.1 Personal learner profile

The participants drew on personal attributes to participate and interact in a new learning context and process. By creating a new awareness of the value of personal attributes and characteristics, the process enhanced learner motivation and commitment as adult learners. It is evident that the workshop approach embraced the personal profile because it capitalised on prior learning and personal attributes as a strong source for learning.

The learner profile benefited from a variety of opportunities to reconstruct the learners' perceptions of personal experiences and strengths. The participants came to the workshop with diverse learning and life experiences, and unique and distinct characteristics to be built on to facilitate a transformative learning process. Therefore, work experience forms a firm foundation for a wide variety of structured learning activities. By guiding learners to draw on relevant life and work experiences, they became empowered learners who could take control of preparation for assessment.

The characteristic of motivation contributed significantly to willingness to be actively involved in all aspects of the workshop. An approach of confirmation of strengths, rather than weaknesses, suited the learner profile as they could draw on previous personal achievements and were therefore intrinsically motivated. In cases where participants were aware of weaknesses, they were made aware of practical ways to convert weaknesses into strengths. For example, a perceived weakness as being shy should be transformed into a skill of being a good listener, and in group discussion the participant with good listening skills took the role of scribe. However,
they flourished on confirmation by the group for distinctive contributions and perceptions. The enhanced motivation addressed the affective domain of the learner profile, as they were able to develop cognitively through the process.

The characteristic of maturity forms the basis of the development of an adult learner profile. As adults, they are accustomed to directing their personal and work lives; therefore, they could be prepared to manage their own learning paths. Personal learner attributes influence learning outcomes of the workshop and therefore any such workshop should involve personal beneficial and empowerment opportunities that create an awareness of personal attributes and characteristics as well as facilitate enhanced motivation. Both the future orientation and the diverse experiences of the learner profile make these learners receptive to the benefits of a sustainable approach.

6.3.3.2 Multiple learning contexts of adult learners

Due to the influence of context on experience and a sense of community, participants appreciated the supportive workshop context of social learning as a community of trust and a social learning experience. Through exposure to different contexts, they developed an appreciation for cultural and social values as well as diverse relationships, resulting in an ability to benefit from social interaction. A background of active involvement in multiple contexts was a useful skill for participating in small group discussions. The characteristic of being open to alternatives led to an attitude of openness to learn from other perspectives, to critically engage in discussions and planning of a group presentation. The participants’ willingness to share during the workshop built on their natural enthusiasm for learning and passion, for example problem-solving and project planning as approaches to the academic assignments.

Emotional experiences due to dysfunctional relationships or past complex contexts should be addressed. Since emotions are associated with past life experiences, both the affective and intellectual aspects should be acknowledged in the learning process. Reflection and interpersonal discussions on personal experiences at the beginning of a learning experience ensured a smooth workshop. Participants needed
to realise within a supportive learning context that they were not victims of their past, but needed to build on their future orientation to be successful as adult learners. The act of being assessed can be another emotional barrier; hence, the need to build competence and self-confidence in the new role as learners in a higher education context.

The multiple learning contexts of learners should be acknowledged; therefore, the learning outcomes had to ensure that the workshop context created a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

6.3.3.3 Knowledge and skills acquired through experience

The experience-based nature of tacit knowledge needs to be transformed into suitable evidence in a format ready for academic assessment. It is therefore necessary to make tacit knowledge gained through experience explicit. A variety of assessment and learning skills are necessary to bring unstructured knowledge to the fore. The preparation for assessment had to prepare learners to articulate prior learning in terms of academic learning outcomes and to develop an academic orientation towards experience.

The cooperative learning context of the workshop drew on the adult learners’ skills acquired, such as communication skills, role-related skills, having a sense of community as well as social skills. The communication and interpersonal skills, awareness of effective customer service and acquired dialogic skills stood the participants in good stead, because they could tap into knowledge, experience and skills when participating in group activities. Participants felt at ease with group work activities as a learning technique, since the workshop resembled a work environment where teamwork is often used for decision-making based on problem-solving. By becoming aware of the wealth of their own skills and knowledge, participants experienced a sense of accomplishment and enhanced motivation as early as the preparation phase for assessment.

By eliciting participants’ indigenous knowledge, practical life skills, wisdom and cultural knowledge, the workshop activities could draw on an extensive knowledge
base for discussions. Participants could share their own cultural experiences in a discussion activity, leading to a new awareness of the role of context and culture in shaping personal perceptions, identity and learning. The inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the workshop enriched the learning process, as participants explored the value of intercultural relationships and cultural wisdom. The discussion on cultural diversity proved to have multiple unforeseen benefits, such as creating an appreciation for other cultural perspectives and a new awareness that culture need not hamper the newly developed identity as an adult learner.

To acknowledge the knowledge and skills acquired and the need for assessment as learning, the workshop outcomes should include learning opportunities to gain knowledge and learning and skills including a new perspective of personal experience.

6.3.3.4 Process of growth and development

The characteristic of experiencing a life-changing event as a turning point in life is reflected in the participants’ experience of the workshop as change. The ability to develop and grow is reflected in developing an adult learner profile. The new profile entails a paradigm shift on the part of the learner to be able to function as an adult learner in the ODL context. The workshop context provided a safe context to develop a learner profile and then to become competent in the new role as they are valued as members of the group with a shared vision.

The learner profile of being future oriented dovetails with the workshop outcomes that support skills associated with a sustainable learning approach. As responsible citizens they could take ownership of a transformative learning process. To acknowledge learner growth and development the learning outcomes should facilitate a transformational learning and development process that results in change, personal and academic empowerment and assessment as learning.

Certain activities relate directly to the specific needs of the learner profile. One is writing a prior learning paper as narrative. The participants confirmed the value of preparing and writing the prior learning paper as their personal life story in which
they could link past experiences to current contexts and future learning, and could reflect on the significance of experiences. The preparation for and writing of the prior learning paper served as an opportunity to apply newly acquired academic literacy skills, self-assessment, peer assessment and reflection.

The answers to the subquestions contribute to the answer of the main research question as the aim of the study.

6.3.4 The influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment

The main research question of the study was as follows:

What is the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment?

Through participants’ expressions of the workshop experience as being far more than just preparation for assessment, I was able to better understand the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment. Figure 6.2 captures the essence of active learner involvement and consideration of the learner profile in the RPL assessment process.

Figure 6.2: The influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment
As shown in figure 6.2, the learner profile benefits from a workshop as preparation for assessment, because it bridges the pre-assessment or pre-access and post-assessment or post-access phases. The workshop is about change and empowerment, as it facilitated a fundamental change in learner profile, self-perception and self-awareness. Participants saw the workshop within the bigger context of RPL as playing a major role in assessment since “it enables anybody the opportunity to study” (participant). The assessment process is therefore reciprocal where the learner profile benefits from the assessment and the assessment process and learning also influence the learner. The holistic learner profile needs to be considered in all phases of the process, since the success of RPL candidates needs to be ensured during assessment, but also within the context after assessment or post-access as a lifelong learning process. All aspects or dimensions of the learner profile should be considered in RPL assessment.

Firstly, preparation for RPL assessment is a key aspect of the assessment process. A distinctive characteristic of RPL learners is that learners benefit from assessment at different levels and, in general, find RPL beneficial. The preparation for assessment needs to be responsive to the learner profile. Since the learner profile directs the preparation for the assessment, a flexible approach should be followed to truly reflect the learner profile.

Considering the background of RPL candidates where the gap in a formal academic qualification has often hampered further formal education and employment opportunities, they need a focused preparation for the new academic context. Learners benefit from preparation for assessment that includes a sustainable learning strategy. Preparation as a learning opportunity contributes to a more holistic approach towards assessment as learning.

Secondly, preparation influences the learner assessment at a personal level. The learner has a need to be acknowledged as a valued learner with experience and possibly needs more initial support. Acknowledgement of personal worth as self-knowledge empowers and motivates the adult learner. The truly developmental process of RPL (SAQA, 2002; 2013) of perceiving assessment not only as an end in itself helps learners to develop personally as lifelong learners. RPL assessment
constitutes more than academic recognition. The contribution of RPL assessment is that it leads to recognising the self as a learner agency, recognising different contexts of learning and knowledge, and recognising a learning journey as a process.

Thirdly, the learner benefits from the personal contact and motivation of a committed facilitator in preparation for assessment. The learner profile requires the assistance of a facilitator who is able to play multiple roles of academic, mentor, coach, co-learner and facilitator to meet the diverse needs of the learner. The responsibility of the facilitator is to establish and maintain a cooperative and supportive learning context and process where adult learners have sufficient opportunity to share their knowledge and experience, and to participate as valued members of a new learning context.

The facilitator also has the responsibility of ensuring that prospective RPL candidates are prepared for portfolio assessment at both an educational and a personal level. Therefore, the facilitator needs to facilitate the transformative process of development and change. The facilitator should be familiar with the learner profile, and should have appreciation and respect for adult learners’ experience and perspectives. Furthermore, a facilitator should be committed to adult learning theories, have respect for different cultures and have a commitment towards adult learners’ development.

The fourth and last matter is that the learner profile requires more than a technical assessment process. Learners need to make a personal mind shift to the new learning context of higher education and therefore develop an awareness of the reality of the academic context after access. A learner-centred approach to assessment as learning requires a paradigm shift where listening to the learners is central. The learner profile benefits from an adult learning focused programme as preparation. A pedagogical process based on assessment as learning ensures that baseline learning, as a sustainable learning process, is in place, as a foundation for further assessment and learning is in place.
The findings of the research question and subquestions enabled me to make the following recommendations concerning the influence the learner profile has on RPL assessment.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

“...the nation is hungry for education...” (participant)

The words of a research participant support the recommendations that are aimed at benefiting the learner. The recommendations are applicable to the RPL context at different levels. The first recommendation refers to RPL at national level.

6.4.1 RPL assessment within a national context

A learner-centred RPL assessment strategy should draw on the enabling national policies and legislation that support RPL. Policy should become practice; therefore, there is a need for a practical and workable approach to RPL where benefits are extended to learner level. The following aspects as scaffolding will contribute towards a learner-centred RPL assessment approach:

6.4.1.1 Listen to the voice of the learner

There is a need to truly give a voice to mature learners with experience by also acknowledging them at a personal level as people with valuable experience. Through experience they have gained wisdom, valuable skills and personal attributes to benefit a nation. Successful RPL candidates could also act as mentors to contribute to a well-educated nation committed to lifelong learning. The power, potential and value of RPL is then shared with academics and policy-makers at learner level. Given the vision of lifelong learning and the need of the learner profile for preparation, a sustainable approach should be followed.
6.4.1.2 Develop a sustainable RPL assessment strategy

In the light of the policy vision of a sustainable RPL strategy, there should be a reconceptualisation of assessment as sustainable learning strategy. Since assessment is only concerned about the outcomes or the result of learning, RPL candidates are usually not included in a learning opportunity. There appear to be characteristic sustainable assessment practices in the particular RPL context of this study. Similarities between sustainable assessment and preparation for assessment lie in the need for practices such as self-assessment, peer learning, reflection, cooperative learning and fostering a positive self-image. A sustainable strategy requires a preparation process.

6.4.1.3 Barriers should be addressed during preparation for RPL assessment

Prospective learners’ non-formal knowledge and experience-related background should not be barriers, but rather useful sources of learning on which they can draw when bridging diverse contexts of knowledge and learning. A sustainable approach can build on prior learning and employ adult learning-based approaches to foster long-term goals.

The second recommendation applies to higher education and specifically to the context of ODL.

6.4.2 RPL assessment within an ODL context

RPL candidates, as mature learners with experience, have much to contribute to the context of higher education within an ODL institution. Due to their multiple responsibilities and roles, an ODL context is the preferred option for formal studies. They have already developed valuable personal learner attributes, wisdom, graduate qualities gained through work experience and specific job-related experience through experiential learning contexts that can contribute to their success as students. This learning gained through experience relates to learning and skills associated with the context of ODL. It comprises attributes (Booysen, 2012; Griesel & Parker, 2009:16) such as openness to alternative perspectives, problem-solving skills and being a
self-directed learner. This learning should be acknowledged and recognised in an RPL assessment strategy, and assessment as learning should build on these skills. However, the context of higher education should realise that the needs of mature learners may differ from those of traditional younger students. To be truly committed to a “transformation charter” (Unisa, 2011) and a student-centred approach (Unisa, 2005b), a higher education institution has the following responsibilities:

- The specific needs of RPL candidates as adult and mature learners should be included in an institutional conceptual framework for student support and learning. Adult learners who have not yet had previous contact with distance learning and with the formal academic context require communication and a sense of connection. In other words, they have a need for relationships and of belonging within an academic community.
- The preparation for assessment should ensure the success of learners before and after access. A learner-centred strategy should see RPL assessment as a developmental journey and process where listening to the voice of the learner is included.
- Academics should realise that often there is a gap between the context and knowledge gained through experience, and the formal context of academic knowledge. RPL candidates require assessment and learning skills associated with a sustainable assessment approach to bridge this gap.
- Higher education should be more receptive to the value of including different forms of learning gained in different contexts. Academics should be willing to be open to alternative knowledge systems.
- Access possibilities should be endorsed for mature learners with experience who, for a variety of reasons, do not meet formal admission requirements, but have the potential to succeed in formal graduate studies.

The last recommendation refers to RPL assessment at a learner level. A recommendation at learner level will ensure that discussions on RPL assessment will not merely stay in a theoretical and political vacuum, but will also affect the learner. The learning outcomes ensure that preparation for assessment is responsive to the learner profile.
6.4.3 RPL assessment at learner level

In a learner-centred RPL assessment strategy, the last recommendation is that the following guidelines should inform a portfolio development workshop. Besides the main purpose of the workshop, namely to prepare students to compile the portfolio of evidence, a set of secondary outcomes is necessary to prepare the learners holistically. These outcomes serve as an essential prerequisite for successful portfolio assessment. They act as subjacent learning outcomes and are essential in ensuring that the main aim of the workshop is achieved. The underpinning pedagogy for these outcomes combines the eclectic and the holistic approaches towards adult learning theory with a sustainable assessment learning approach.

The outcomes should be to:

- develop a holistic learner profile by integrating diverse aspects and multiple learning contexts of a profile
- make learners aware of the wealth of knowledge that they already have, as well as the value of their knowledge based on experience, ensuring a realisation of their own worth
- facilitate the personal discovery of skills, learning goals, learning styles, focus and self-knowledge
- socialise learners into the transformative learning process by creating a cooperative and supportive learning environment to ensure development, change and collaborative learning
- include academic-related and assessment skills as fundamental skills to facilitate preparation for assessment as a sustainable learning opportunity
- bridge the gap between being an employee and being an adult learner in higher education by facilitating the paradigm shift as the learner develops an adult learner profile as a confident learner with his or her own voice
- create experiential learning opportunities for learners to apply assessment and learning skills
- guide learners to extract learning from life experiences, thus becoming aware of their own skills
create sufficient learning activities to facilitate active learner involvement, together with interpersonal, intercultural and group interaction for sharing experiences.

The learning outcomes give a voice to prospective RPL candidates as their distinctive characteristics and workshop experiences are considered in an assessment strategy.

6.5 Reflections on Study

To be able to reflect on the value of the study, it is necessary to consider the contribution of the research and to specify its limitations. The research also created an awareness of the need for further research.

6.5.1 Contribution

Literature on RPL agrees on the function of RPL as bridging the gap; however, the specifics of the bridging intervention are hardly mentioned. The guidelines for learning outcomes of a portfolio workshop aim to meet this need. To bridge the divide not only an academic or learning and assessment-based preparation is required, but also a personal preparation and development process. The person should therefore not be separated from the assessment process and purpose. The study’s findings on the holistic description of a learner profile and the workshop learning outcomes as preparation for assessment hold the possibility of benefiting any target group. RPL assessment is therefore not only a process in isolation, but it should be a sustainable process that considers the learner as a person within a context, influenced by diverse contexts. Besides personal attributes, the learner brings a wealth of diverse knowledge and skills to the assessment, which requires a focused preparation for assessment approach.

RPL-related research shows that, despite the fact that RPL began in all earnest about 40 years ago, it is often still a contested practice and the possibilities of empowering learners have not yet achieved their full potential. My research only sought to describe the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment.
Therefore, a study with the learner at the centre of the RPL assessment process contributes to a better understanding of the learner profile. The empirical component shows that the RPL candidates, often perceived as non-traditional in higher education, are indeed learners with individual worth who are able to contribute to the context of higher education. The study aimed to make a contribution towards empirical evidence on an RPL preparation intervention that truly meets the needs of the learner.

6.5.2 Limitation

The limitation of this study is that the study was confined to only RPL candidates who followed the mature learner assessment programme for RPL access at an ODL institution. The results and guidelines may therefore not be applicable to other cohorts of learners, such as RPL for access to postgraduate degrees or learners at contact institutions. However, the main finding can be generalised that the learner profile influences RPL assessment.

6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

The wise words of a participant at the SAQA-RPL conference (SAQA, 2011) support the need for further research:

“RPL should be given the chance and the opportunity to be fully researched, developed and implemented like it deserves to be”

A research study is never complete and therefore I have become aware of the following possibilities for future RPL-related research:

6.6.1 RPL as sustainable assessment practice

Aspects of preparation for assessment that emerged from the workshop feedback are similar to the key aspects of a sustainable assessment strategy. However, more research is needed on the nature of a sustainable RPL assessment strategy. Since
no application of sustainable assessment ideas is currently available for RPL, there is a need to explore this possibility.

In a personal e-mail message to me, Boud (2012) regards research on sustainable assessment practice as an "unoccupied niche" because it seems as if no research has been done in this field. A sustainable RPL assessment approach has long-term benefits for learners, as it ensures the success of the entire RPL process. There is a need to further explore the characteristics of sustainable assessment practice in different assessment contexts.

6.6.2 Mentoring

Participants benefited from a mentoring context, even though mentoring had not yet been fully included in the workshop context. Only the informal concept of a "study buddy" was applied. Based on feedback from participants after completion of the RPL assessment, a useful approach would be to include mentors to ensure that the dynamics of the workshop context lasted during formal studies within an ODL context. Mentors could also assist in the development of confidence and competence during formal studies (Underwood, 2003:53).

6.6.3 Access to postgraduate studies

In the light of the current urgent need for RPL-related research, as supported by SAQA’s current research agenda (SAQA, 2010b; 2011) and the fact that an ODL institution has a well-established RPL process in place, a similar study could be done at postgraduate level. The research could consider the influence of the learner profile on RPL assessment to determine the type of preparation these learners require to ensure success at postgraduate level.

6.6.4 Success rate of RPL candidates

To follow up on the success rate of learners who have gained access to an ODL university via the RPL mature learner assessment programme, their academic success after admission needs to be determined. The success rate of these
learners can also be compared with those admitted through the conventional access routes. An empirical study of this nature has not yet been conducted in this country or within an ODL context.

6.7 CONCLUSION

Only after learners realise the value of knowledge from personal experiences, discover learning goals and self-knowledge and grow in self-esteem, empowerment and motivation are they ready to compile portfolios to help them gain access to university and start the lifelong learning journey.

After every workshop, I realise anew the human need to be acknowledged and treated with respect. Respect relates to personal worth, knowledge, contexts and learning processes as a life journey.

The political agenda of RPL will only benefit adult learners with experience if preference is given to one of the key objectives of RPL and NQF within the South African context, namely to change the lives of RPL candidates (SAQA, 2013: 2). RPL faces the challenge of policy that needs to become practice, and to benefit and empower prospective adult learners by acknowledging the worth of their experience. By adhering to the principle of RPL as a pedagogical approach, the relevance of preparation is evident. As a powerful and sustainable learning intervention, it has relevance beyond the formal assessment context, as it contributes to learner empowerment and a commitment to lifelong learning. To ensure that RPL achieves its vision and purpose, a key aspect to consider is that the learner profile influences the RPL assessment strategy.


Boud, D. 2012. Personal electronic message (e-mail) from author. (30 November 2012).


Hofstee, E. 2006. Constructing a Good Dissertation: A Practical guide for finishing Master’s, MBA or PhD on schedule. Johannesburg, South Africa: EPE.


Jones, B. 2013. RPL is paved with good intentions. Supplement to Mail & Guardian. 3-9 May.


Kasworm, C.E.  2003.  Setting the stage: Adults in higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 102:3-10.

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.751963](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.751963) [Accessed 09 January 2013.]


Whittaker, S., Whittaker, R. & Clearly, P. 2006. Understanding the transformative dimension of RPL. In Andersson, P. & Harris, J. (eds). *Re-theorising the*
recognition of prior learning. Leicester: National Institute of Continuing Adult Education.


MY RPL PRIOR LEARNING PAPER

I was born in a rural village in the mid-western part of Nigeria. My parents were peasant farmers, who both worked hard to raise their eight surviving children. With me being second to the last born child. When I was 14, my mother became ill. My father, who became a victim of his father's extraordinary love for his mother. Who was the most favorite of all the king's wives. He was sent out of the palace, before the age of six to be raised, by one of his father's chiefs, in the Village.

His father took such decisions in quest to spare his life from the treat of being killed, by the same women, who killed his mother out of jealousy. His father, though being a powerful king, denied him the rights to education, because there was no school, in the village as at then. The only way he could have been sent to school, would mean he coming to leave with the king in the palace, in the city. My father, still over taken by these negative events of childhood, fails to appreciate, the need to educate his children, even though he taught himself to read and write. This almost resulted to me dropping out of school at form three (third year in secondary school).

Some of these childhood experiences exposed me to learning how to be independent and surviving through difficulties. Seeing what my father had gone through, born a prince but raised by one of his father's Chiefs as an orphan. No inheritance from his parents, except a piece of undeveloped land measuring about 1000 square meters. He managed to acquire for himself, more than twenty five hectares, of farm land. In a totally strange village, much more than most inhabitants of the village, got me inspired to succeed through difficulties. I was drawn to independent farming besides that of the family. I began by cultivating my own cassava. I had to travel about 25 kilometers by bicycle every morning, (50 kilometers return trip) early before 6:00 am. To tap rubber because, my father had a lot of plantations, and return to the city, to attend afternoon classes. By so doing, I was able to pay my tuition and buy some books. I realized early in life, the value of education. So I did this, with the understanding that, if I could finish my secondary education, the chances of going further are brighter. Moreover, for what education means to the family, as none of us have gone beyond Secondary level, except grand children.

My poor background afforded me the opportunity and training, to accept responsibilities and imbued me with determination to change my status in life. This gave birth to the desire for me to migrate to the United State of America in my final year. Where I thought, would offer me the opportunity both to study and work, to support my family and pay my tuition fees. Unfortunately, the plans ended in futility as I was denied visas twice within six months. I ended up writing my final exams without any form of preparations.

After I completed my secondary education, I got a job as hotel receptionist, where I received training, in handling of guest, and call centre related matters. Thereafter I found a better job offer with a brewery, as a machine feeder in the bottling Department. Here I had my first experience of working in a team. Though I enjoyed working with different people, and the experience gained. I developed a team spirit, and how to work under stressful condition, survival skills, and leadership. I did not really like the environment, for the fact that, the product, produced was contrary to my conviction; even though, I was not so strong in the faith then.

With improvements in my brother's financial position to offer financial support, I re-enrolled to write matric again. Unfortunately for me, the results were never released, on ground that, there was suspicion of examination malpractices at my centre.

Though I was not involved, or implicated in any of these malpractices, I had to pay the price. Only few students, whose parents were well to do, lobbied the release of their children's results.

RPL 001Y 20.11.2010
During this period, I became actively involved in Church activities with Church of God mission International. Where I received training in Evangelism and soul winning, I gained valuable experience in soul winning and Church planting which has been of immersed benefit to me in current life endeavours. I then moved to South Africa in 1994 en-route to Europe in search of better life. The agent I paid, to get me to Switzerland, dumped me and others in South Africa. I found myself surviving the difficult way again in Johannesburg.

When I arrived in Johannesburg, I became actively involved in Church activities. I also got several sales jobs, selling beddings, house wares and cell phones; etc to make a living. These afforded me the opportunity to develop, direct marketing technique, and also how to teach new employees direct marketing skills. However, I became actively involved in youth ministry in Ever Increasing Faith Church. Where I helped mobilized, and provides leadership to the youths and offering them support and motivation, to actively participate in ministry work. During this period, I led the youth to organized crusades in Alexandra Township. Where I had the opportunities too, to become a guest speaker on Sunday morning Christian show in Alex FM, we also planted a Church in Mmabatho.

In 1997 I got married to Constance, who was a member of the flock, as youth pastor. And the Lord has been gracious to us; we are blessed with six children.

Apart from me leading the youth, shortly after my ordination as a full time pastor in 1998, I got promoted to the level of a resident pastor, (pastor in charge of a parish) as a result of my zeal, hard work, leadership qualities and intelligence. When the fullness of time came in 1999, I started the Bread of Life Bible Church international Incorporated, upon the leading of the Lord, a Church that transcends racial, cultural and ethnical background. Moreover, I also started Vision Alive pre-school in 2001 to cater for the needy in the Church and community as part of our effort to participate in community development and empowerment program, today, we run two centers by the grace of God.

I have chosen a career in business administration (BBA), to allow me the opportunity to pursue a professional career and to enhance professionalism, and effective management skill as a pastor, and also as a person, working with community. Furthermore, to create effective entrepreneur skills and to build capacity needed to run the Church academic institutions.

My experience highlights is, the privileged of preparing the 2003 Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International conference Budget, to torn of $45,000-00(R250, 000-00. Also I had to administer the funds for such event, when I have not acquired any formal accounting training, or skills necessary to undertake such project.

My present learning experience as pastor and an entrepreneur is interlinked, in the sense that, Business Administration forms, an integral part of a pastor, and entrepreneur responsibilities.

My attitude towards work or profession, is that of determination, resilient, confidence, honesty and hard work which, were acquire through up bring and life experience, that failure is not an option for me. My goal is to obtain a degree as a pastor, and enshrine myself into the academic arena as I look forward to utilizing my talent in the area of teaching. I have learned to face challenges, and obstacles, like Caleb who said give me the mountain Joshua14:12, I have learned to face what others considered challenges or obstacles like John the Baptist, place in the wilderness with time, I will transform it in to fertile land.
PRIOR LEARNING PAPER

My name is also known as Simon. I turned 40 years this year on the 10th of May 2010.
I have been involved in the security industry for the past 20 years and had in the process gained a lot of experience. I only worked for three companies in these years, something I am proud of considering the fluidity of the industry.

I am presently working for Chubb Security SA, which is considered to be the largest security companies in the country not in the world. I work in the Data Department and have formed a very solid understanding and cooperation with my colleagues since I joined the department three years ago. I am a natural hard worker who is future orientated and my characteristics are that once I start something, I do not rest until I have achieved it. Reading is my hobby and I can say without any doubt that I am up to date with all world current affairs, political, social or otherwise. Spending a day without having read any article is always diarised as my saddest day. I am basically a book worm.

I am self motivated, diligent, energetic and persistent in everything that I do. The purpose of this portfolio is to demonstrate my ability and readiness to study further and accumulate more knowledge in a field that I have spent half of my life physically involved in.
The vehicle to carry my dreams is the RPL process. The moment I cross this bridge, (RPL) then I will be definitely sure that nothing will stop me thereafter.

The RPL programme played its role and laid a solid foundation for me in which to build my academic empire.

MY LIFE STORY

I was born 40 years ago, surrounded by the beauties and the sweet smelling winds of the Matopos hills, in a very poor family. The only source of income was a small dwindling herd of cattle, goats and chicken. At least my mother, who was by then a single parent managed to feed us by buying and selling goats at a profit.
Sometimes we will go to bed without food and not a single neighbour will realise it. This is how proud my mother was. In 1976, my two elder brothers left the country and joined the armed struggle in Zambia and life became a bit easy as my mother was only to feed five mouths.

The moment of triumph and gaiety in my life started in 1977, aged seven when I started my grade one at St Mary’s Primary School, 15 kilometres away from home. The long gravel road to school soon took all the excitement out of me but the toughness and resoluteness in me was born.

At the age of 19, January 1990, I found myself working as a security guard for a company called Prichard Services Group (PSG) situated in Johannesburg south, next to Booyens. The country was going through some political transformation and life as a security guard was not roses at all. In September 1991, I was attacked and stabbed in Alexandra Township and only survived by the grace of God and had to spend nearly a month in the then Johannesburg hospital.

274

RPL 001Y 2.03.2009
Well, at that time I had already fallen in love with the security industry and there was no going back. My workmate at PSG happened to be a Mr Sam Mbhazima Shilowa who had an influence in me in terms of reading. We were stationed at Standard Bank, Tywitt Avenue in Rosebank. Mr Shilowa would come to work with his books and would hide at the bank's basement to read. This was between 1990 and 1991 and his love for books rubbed on me without him noticing it.

Since then a day will never go without me reading.

In 1992, I was promoted to a position of a control room operator. My main duties here were to book guards on duty and keep the time sheets up to date, make daily reports and submit them to management for their monthly reports. I was very effective in carrying out my duties and was awarded with a Bronze Award certificate on the 29th of April 1994 for exceptional performance. In 1995, I was moved to central Johannesburg to help establish a security branch, which we named CENTRAL JOHANNESBURG PARTNERSHIP (CJP)

The purpose of this branch was to fight crime, which at that time had gone out of hand in the central business district. Business people were the sponsors. My tasks were to liaise with the SAPS at the then John Vorster Square to plan and pinpoint troublesome spots. The project was very successful and is still operational to this day.

The knowledge I gained here was a lifetime experience that prepared me for future security related jobs and for my studies in Security Risk Management.
RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

RPL RESEARCH: Mature learner assessment programme (RPL pre-access)

Dear RPL Candidate

You agreed to participate in the RPL research project referred to above. The aim of the electronic questionnaire is to gain feedback on your experiences during the RPL Portfolio Development Workshop.

Please use the following instructions as guidelines to reflect on your experiences of the workshop:

INSTRUCTIONS

- Study the attached collage of photos taken during the portfolio workshops. Reflect on your experience as a mature learner during the workshops, and then respond to the photographs.
- You do not need to comment on individual photographs, but are required to respond to the collage as a whole. Even if you do not appear in any of the photographs, your responses are valuable.
- Your response may be in the form of sentences, bullets (words/phrases) or a general paragraph of not more than 10 lines.
- Please reply electronically to the questionnaire (via e-mail to msnyman@unisa.ac.za) OR see below the link for the questionnaire, and please follow the instructions.

https://sites.google.com/site/rplresearchunisa/

QUESTIONS

Please respond to the following questions:

1. What is your first impression when you look at the photographs/collage?

2. Did the portfolio workshop help you to compile your portfolio for RPL assessment? How?

3. How did the experience of attending the workshop benefit you as a mature learner on a personal level? Explain in one sentence.

4. What was the role of groupwork and/or fellow learners (students) during the workshop?

5. Which aspect of the portfolio workshop did you enjoy most? Explain briefly.

6. What do you consider as the main role/contribution of the portfolio workshops in preparing you as a mature learner for RPL assessment?

7. Did you experience any frustrations or barriers in preparing for the RPL assessment? Specify in one sentence.

8. What do you consider as your personal strengths and weaknesses as a mature learner/RPL candidate?

9. General remark: Any additional remark or feedback

See below the link for the questionnaire, and please follow the instructions.

https://sites.google.com/site/rplresearchunisa/

I will appreciate if you can complete and submit your responses to the questionnaire within the next week. I am looking forward to your feedback and the valuable contribution you will make to my study! For any further enquiries, please contact me on msnyman@unisa.ac.za.

Yours faithfully

Ms Snynman RPL ACADEMIC COORDINATOR

*This research is done according to the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (approved – 21.09.07)
What is your first impression when you look at the photographs / college / assessment?

Timestamp
31/10/2011 09:45: a whole lot of 56 people did RPL

I am shocked that

How did the portfolio workshop assist you to compile your Portfolio for RPL assessment?

I met other people who were in the same situation as me and it encouraged me to press on with my studies.

What was the role of groupwork and/or fellow learners (students) during the workshop?

I was a sponge, i learnt from the other learners their experiences and challenges.

Which aspects of the portfolio workshop did you enjoy most?

When we where given a task to do we all put our heads together and came up with a solution.

What do you consider as the main role / contribution of the portfolio workshop in preparing you as a mature learner for RPL assessment?

It was helpful as we were able to go through the whole portfolio questions. It helps as sometime you just don't know where to begin.

Did you experience any frustrations or barriers in preparing for the RPL assessment?

no not this time.

What do you consider as your personal strengths and weaknesses as a mature learner / RPL candidate?

Procrastination

Please make any additional remarks or give additional feedback on the workshops.

The workshop was quite helpful to me and I know if it helped me it can help a whole lot of other people too.

I see a lot of enthusiasm, eager to learn and very happy learners. I also see a lot of different type of people from all different backgrounds that all have one goal and that is to better their future and study further.

31/10/2011 09:47

I think the role of groupwork was to assist one another in different aspects and also to get a better understanding of peoples cultures and differences.

Firstly I think the assessment focuses on reading and writing skills and also enables you to recognize important skills that you might have taken for granted or maybe not even realize you where good at.

My barrier was my personality. I am very shy and don't interact with people I don't know, I also don't like to speak up in front of a crowd so that was terrifying to stand in the front of the class and speak to people I don't know.

My strength and weakness is my family cause as much as they support me and my reason for wanting to study further, they also are my first priority which could influence my study time and dedication.

Strengths - I am more mature and understand how important education is and I take the learning experience more seriously.

Weakness - Making time to do the work as I am working fulltime

I would like to thank Marlic for the excellent job she did in giving the workshop I have learned alot and is much appreciated.

It makes you realize that you have achieved alot over the years and appreciate the skills you have that other people might not recognize in themselves.

The knowledge gained by doing a self assessment and looking back at all the life skills learned over the years.

By attending the workshop I met a few people that was in the predicament as I was. Help me to form groups and work together to accomplish the goal.

The interaction with the group and to hear what they do on a daily basis and what degree they are interested in pursuing

I noticed by attending the workshop I was able to complete the assessment correctly, by doing it by myself I would not have done well.

Interacting with the group

Really enjoyed it.

31/10/2011 09:50: It reminds me that I have come so far.

31/10/2011 09:52: I made it real that it will take hard work and dedication to complete my degree.
RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Date: AUGUST 2010

Research towards a DEd thesis: RPL mature learner assessment

Dear RPL Candidate

You participated in the RPL pre-access programme (mature learner assessment 0006x), and I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. This research will form part of my PhD thesis with the proposed title:

RPL: The influence of the learner profile on recognition of prior learning assessment.

The data collection for this study comprises two parts:

Part 1 (The prior learning papers)

As part of the research I want to analyse the prior learning papers of RPL candidates to determine main themes, e.g. mature learners are motivated and have a wealth of experience. I would like to ask for your permission to include your prior learning paper as part of this research. If you agree to be included in this research, please e-mail or fax me the copy of your prior learning paper. By sending me the copy, you give permission that I may use your prior learning paper for research purposes.

Please e-mail or fax the copy of your prior learning paper to msnyman@unisa.ac.za or 0865810543. You do not need to include any personal details or your student number. Please indicate the year in which you wrote the paper. If you e-mail (the preferred mode) or fax the copy of your prior learning paper, please indicate the following:

Hereewith, my permission to use the prior learning paper as a research document for your doctoral research:

And then attach the copy of your prior learning paper. You are welcome to indicate who is sending the paper, to allow me to thank you. However, you have the choice to remain anonymous.

If you do not have a copy of the paper, but would like to be included in the study, please complete the ATTACHMENT (page 3) and e-mail or fax it to me.

If possible, please respond to this request within one week after you have received the letter.

Part 2 (Research questionnaire)

The second part of the research will be a questionnaire that will be sent to all RPL candidates who wish to be included in the research.
If you wish to be included in this second phase of the data collection, and are willing to respond to the electronic questionnaire, and answer a few questions, then please complete the ATTACHMENT. You may also e-mail me the confirmation.

As part of the electronic questionnaire I will ask you to respond to photographs taken during the portfolio workshops. If you took good and/or interesting photographs during the workshop, and are willing to share them with me, please e-mail me the photographs.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This research is done according to the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (approved – 21.09.07). I would like to highlight the following points mentioned in the policy:

Respect for and protection of participants’ rights, which imply that I will not disclose any personal details of participants and will protect and respect at all times the identity of you, the research participant. In the research study, I will refer to research participants as student A, B, C etc. All information will be handled as confidential and anonymity will be maintained.

The criteria for selecting research participants should be fair; therefore I will include the students who reply to this letter. You, as a successful RPL candidate, have the right to decide whether you want to participate in this research or not.

Participants should be seen as indispensable and worthy partners in research. As a researcher I will respect and protect the rights and interests of participants at every stage and level of research.

The benefit of this research project will be to streamline and improve the current RPL pre-access process and to develop a strategy towards a learner-centred RPL assessment process for admission to higher education. The process will benefit mature learners with experience to gain access into university studies.

I am looking forward to your response and valuable contribution to my study. You are welcome to contact me for any further details on this research programme.

Please keep me informed of your academic achievement! Best of luck with your further studies at UNISA.

Yours faithfully

M Snyman (signed)
Ms M Snyman
RPL ACADEMIC COORDINATOR
ATTACHMENT

I, ..........................................................................
Student number 4456 0582
(complete the RPL pre-access programme in 2008)
and would like to be included as a research participant in this research project.

1. My prior learning paper

I do not have a copy of my prior learning paper, however I give permission that you may make a
copy of my prior learning paper (included in my portfolio submitted to your office) and to include it
in the research.

AND/or

2. Research questionnaire

Please include me in the questionnaire, and I give permission that you may send the questionnaire
in an electronic format to the following e-mail address.

My e-mail address is: (please print clearly)

carmel.electrical@vodafone.co.za

Student name:
Signature:
Date:

Please e-mail or fax this attachment within two weeks after you have received this letter to:
msnyman@unisa.ac.za or 086 58 10543

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. I can ensure you that future RPL
Candidates at UNISA and at other institutions will benefit from your input, and will certainly allow us
to improve on our RPL assessment process.

Kind Regards

Marici Snyman

(If you prefer the electronic version of this ATTACHMENT, please send an e-mail to me,
msnyman@unisa.ac.za)

*If you still need to complete the RPL001Y and the RPLMATH, please contact me for
further details before 30 November 2009. You will get the opportunity to complete the RPL
pre-access assessment, otherwise you need to apply again in 2010. Please send/fax a
written request to msnyman@unisa.ac.za or 0865810543. Please make use of this
opportunity to gain admission to formal studies at UNISA.

Date: 21/10/09
Life in general is a pretty serious matter to me. If presented with a problem I might take a while to come up with a solution. But there will be a solution. My experience was that people who completed RPL and have a success story are very unique individuals.

The main purpose of RPL as I experienced it, was to explore your past experiences good or bad and to take value from those experiences and to realize what worth it has added to your life and to then have the open mindedness to make the necessary changes to improve and better yourself. The RPL work shop was for me the accelerant to change my outcome. Although one must always consider the human factor. All individuals do not think, react and learn the same from their past. To some it may be a burden or a curse because they have become their past. Ultimately RPL’s place in the Learning environment would be immeasurable if the people completing the program could make the leap from being normal to being different and making the difference in their own lives.

What RPL has done for me: I left school in 1997 to pursue my career at Sasol Secunda with only Grade 8 and the idea to further my studies using their program they had, to complete N Courses. Unfortunately being only 17 with more pocket money than I ever had and no one forcing me to study, spending my time studying wasn’t my top priority. In the beginning of my career I studied when there was some degree of motivation, and I completed my N3 Maths and Science in 2002, where after I lost all interest in my studies.

I became aware of RPL through my company who used the program through UNISA once before for a group of candidates who needed RPL for credits in the work environment for promotion purposes, unfortunately there were some barriers that could not be removed, and that prevented me from following the same route. Due to this I missed a Promotion opportunity. Because with my N3 qualifications and 10 years service at my company with all the courses I complete, by completing the RPL program the company would acknowledge my Sum of efforts being equal to that of a Senior Certificate.

I started my correspondence with Unisa early 2009 and got involved in the RPL program in July that year. I started right away on the assignments but due to uncertainty my progress was slow. Fortunately I had the opportunity to attend a RPL work shop in Florida. Without a doubt attending the work shop was the turning point for me, the facilitator quickly empowered us with the correct tools to develop our thought process and you could feel that she had the believe in us as prospective students and that she only saw the potential within us as in devalues.

Attending the workshop gave me all the tools to successfully complete the portfolio, although it wasn’t all that I took home with me after those three days. Not only did I leave there more confident, I had the self believe that I could accomplish anything. I successfully completed the RPL program in November 2009 with good results. I became aware of my experiences. Besides realization and recognition of contributing factors (positive or negative) to one’s life, learning from these experiences is the important and difficult part. Though this is and never will be an easy task, it is a fundamental part of learning and developing. It is about developing the ability to learn, and then choosing to learn or not to learn from these experiences.

Early this year I was appointed as Process Forman at Sasol’s Global Venture Support on Steam plant. GVS is responsible for supplying personnel for Sasol where there might be a shortage of qualified personnel and also to supply personnel for local and overseas projects to run the project, Train Local residents and hand over the completed project. Not only do I get the opportunity to be part of amazing new things, I will be acting as ambassador for my company and country. What could be more exciting? Due to all these new changes that took place in my life, I’ll most likely change my field of study to fit in with my new possibilities. One thing I do know is that I will continue to grow personally and academically.

I have come far since I started the RPL program, and I’ll be going to much greater heights still.
7 July 2011

Ms M Snyman
RPL Office
DSAR UNISA
Florida Campus

Dear Ms Snyman

REQUEST FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE: Recognition of prior learning: Towards a learner-centred RPL assessment approach

Your application for ethical clearance in respect of the above study has been received on the 13 June 2011 and was considered by the PARC Unit Research Ethics Review Committee Members.

The Committee approved the contents of your application for ethical clearance and is pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been granted for this study as set out in your application, until 31 December 2012.

We trust that sampling and processing of the relevant data will be undertaken in a manner that is respectful of the rights and integrity of Unisa’s students, as stipulated in the Unisa Research Ethics Policy, which can be found at the following website:


Congratulations on an interesting and very relevant study. We would like to wish you well in this research undertaking.

Kind regards

[Signature]

PROF TS MALULEKE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH

cc. HEAD OF DEPARTMENT - RPL
My prior learning paper

January 1987 – June 1989 7 South Africa Infantry

I took my first job was out of desperation wanting to prove myself, I was willing to start at the bottom. I knew I could work myself up.

I have started as a clerk checking incoming and outgoing stock. Through this I learned the importance of my job. Figures were my strong point at school. After this I was appointed as an examiner on all the clerks doing the in and out stock. I learned to work with people and how to be confident at what I do. I also learned how to work time consuming and give feedback on deadlines.

Thereafter I was offered another opportunity of doing the regiment’s funds. Here my love for bookkeeping started and I saw it as a challenge. I gave it my all and found my work fulfilling. I needed to do minutes and agendas. I also needed to sit in at a meeting from time to time to give feedback on the usage of funds and the availability thereof. This also thought me to show respect to someone of a higher rank than me, and to learn through these experiences. I needed to keep statistics as well. This was a whole new field and not the most enjoyable part of my job.

July 1989 – December 1992 Motherhood

I refer to my introduction where I related my experiences.


I was privileged to be set apart for 18 months thought out of the Word, the books of the Bible, children’s evangelism, practical outreach, performing in front of an audience, identifying our weaknesses and strengths. I enjoyed preaching the most, especially the preparing of the sermon working on it for days. I learned about compiling these sermons, having a theme, introduction, main ideas and conclusion, to keep everybody interested. My weakness was individual work. I was a good team leader. In my introduction I mentioned my other weakness – being a mother, student and wife at the same time.

April 1995 – December 1995 Gluckstad Primary School

I was appointed to teach Bible as a subject and with the responsibility to lead the Christian Fellowship on Wednesdays. I enjoyed the interaction between myself and the kids. They grew on me. I experienced a lot of brokenness and was fulfilled when I could help and guide them. Through this I experienced the love of teaching and working with children. I loved the professional way the school operated. My responsibility was to improve the social life of the learners. I enjoyed every minute of it. It was a big disappointment knowing we had to move away.

December 1997 – January 1999 Old Mutual

I was desperately looking for something in which I could prove myself again. I was offered a morning office job. It suited me because my children were in primary school and I had the afternoons to work with them. I started as a personal assistant of a marketer. This was a completely new field and very interesting. Because of my background I knew how to work myself up. I started from scratch. I made use of every learning opportunity getting myself educated in this field. Old Mutual presented many courses training their staff for which you do not receive any proof, such as telephone ethics, taxation, life insurance product guidelines.

4760-791-2(1)
Assignment 1.1: Prior Learning Paper

My name is I am 41 years old. I am married with two daughters. I live in Somerset West in Cape Town. I was born in England and we immigrated as a family to South Africa in 1977. My childhood and education all started in Johannesburg. I attended an all girl's Catholic school. School for me was a mixture of having fun and socializing with my friends and being an average student. My household was a mixture of having some good times, but there was always the feeling that life was not predictable or following some kind of orderly structure. My father travelled a lot and when he was around the house our schooling and education performance was not very high up on his agenda. It never seemed to worry me at that time about his stance on school, but I think deep down there was always this nagging feeling that he took no interest in my brother and I. My Mum was a hairdresser and loved the interaction with her clients and colleagues. I often remember sitting in the shop feeling tired and frustrated as I may have needed help with homework or more down to basic needs, was a meal and then time to study or do something related to school. This matter never seemed to concern my Mum. I suppose she tried to make up her lack of interest in my schooling by over compensating in other things.

I continued through high school trying to do the best that I could. At home things were not all that harmonious between my parents. There was always a screaming match, tears and the threat that one of them was about to walk out of the marriage. This continued until the end of my school career. After school I went to a Secretarial College and then went oversees for a while, where I travelled extensively.

My first "real" job was with an employment agency. My position was a Personnel consultant. My duties were to build up a client base and bring in job specifications. Interviewing the applicant and reference checking, and then placing the applicant into a position that is suitable and meets with the job requirements of the client. At the end of each month we had to work out how many placements we had made, the goal was to meet the monthly target. In this position we had a lot of opportunities to attend human resource workshops and their was ample in house training in dealing with interview techniques, labour related queries and my ultimate best was the training in human behaviour. It was at this point that the seed was planted in my interest in Psychology and the working of the human mind. Interest -> passion -> career in formal studies.
Question 1
What is your first impression when you look at the photographs / collage?

Emotions
I was excited when I first saw the photographs because the collage is a foundation for our academic pursuit as a mature learner. I think this is a great opportunity.

RPL - Adult Learner
11/11/2011 23:08

RPL as Opportunity
286

It reminds me of my days during the RPL program. It help a lot, its like a manual for operation with details.

Profile: Mature
I look at the photo's and I see beautiful happy people in their 30's, 40's, 50's and more, all smiles.

Opportunity
Experiencing an opportunity to make their dreams come through.

Personal:
experience dreams future

Workshop as Learning experience.

Timestamp
14/11/2011 09:07: 38

Justification for selecting this approach
The portfolio workshop provided clearer information and guidelines on how to compile my portfolio and provision of enough evidence to support my work.

Attending the workshop upgraded my reading and thinking skills.

The group discussion on cultural diversities in our society and workplace. This cultural diversities is what we encountered in our everyday life so I enjoyed it as the group discussion helped me to know how to handle such issues any time. In fact that aspect was full of fun.

The fellow learners provided different useful ideas and experiences based on their different levels of exposure in life and the collection of these ideas gave every one helping hand to work individually.

The portfolio workshop mainly helped me to analyse myself and to plan my educational paths. I did not.

Learning from others people's life experience and sharing ideas.

The aspect I enjoyed most is the area of writing about my life experience. I enjoyed groupwork. Interacting with people of different cultures and backgrounds was very interesting and informative. I also enjoyed putting together my portfolio.

The role is to bring you back to studying, and bringing out the confidence in you that you achieve your dream.

Yes in some areas as a mature person with other responsibilities not that easy.

The main role was to show us how to compile a portfolio by ourselves. To realise our achievements in life and how this can contribute to our further studies. No

My strengths are my ability to study and learn new things. My weakness is my hectic lifestyle.

I believe that the workshop is a giant step in the right direction to educate our nation.
What is your first impression when you look at the photographs / college?

The portfolio workshop assisted me in many ways, especially the discussion forums by a group of people from different work environments, cultures, believes and educational backgrounds. Different educational backgrounds was a great encouragement especially by people who had dreams of flying high. A lot of ideas were shared during that time. I realised that age is not a barrier to education. It gave me the boost I needed reminding me that I can be anything I want and it did not matter how long I had been out of school as long as I had taken the step to accomplish my goal. To get my degree.

The portfolio workshop assisted me in many ways, especially the discussion forums by a group of people from different work environments, cultures, believes and educational backgrounds. Different educational backgrounds was a great encouragement especially by people who had dreams of flying high. A lot of ideas were shared during that time. I realised that age is not a barrier to education. It gave me the boost I needed reminding me that I can be anything I want and it did not matter how long I had been out of school as long as I had taken the step to accomplish my goal. To get my degree.

The workshops to me are very informative and important. A lot of potential and skill was discovered during that time. Sharing ideas and experiences motivated me as an individual and I was very encouraged especially by elderly people who wanted to empower themselves with education.

I would recommend that those who have been out of school for a while and need confidence and renewal of their minds before entering University to use the RPL workshop.

The workshops to me are very informative and important. A lot of potential and skill was discovered during that time. Sharing ideas and experiences motivated me as an individual and I was very encouraged especially by elderly people who wanted to empower themselves with education.

I would recommend that those who have been out of school for a while and need confidence and renewal of their minds before entering University to use the RPL workshop.
SAQA CONFERENCE

Dear SAQA Members, teachers and RPL advisers. I am here today with other RPL students to share with you what my personal experience of RPL has been. Thank you very much for allowing us to come and share our thoughts and experiences with you - I hope that we are able to show the true faces of RPL students and help you to see how much RPL has changed our lives for the better and thus can also do for other students struggling in similar circumstances, to overcome their academic pitfalls, stumbling blocks and challenges.

There is a thin line between success and failure. There is that space between winning and losing that is sought after and is often indistinguishable from the many crossroads and signs along the way. How many of us at one point or another in our lives have bought a book or read an article with the express purpose of finding exactly where a crossroad to success lies? If you can find that threshold and make that great leap from mediocre failure to astounding success, then you have discovered something not only significant for your own life, but surely owe it to other travellers to share the location of this amazing place.

To me this great pathway to success is the Recognition of Prior Learning Course (RPL). More specifically, the three-day RPL Portfolio Workshop is the hinge between the motivated student and future success. To state that the RPL Portfolio is an intensive and in-depth project is completely understating the seeming enormity of the task. There is a saying amongst the RPL students that goes: “If you can do the RPL, then you can do anything.”

Every one of the students here beside me today, and countless others not here today, have many reasons for needing the RPL Programme. Factors relating to their geopolitical backgrounds, lack of funding, lack of understanding or inadequate school training. My reason for needing RPL was due mainly to the fact that my family suffered a terrible bankruptcy that meant that I was taken out of school at 15. With the meagre funds we had we attempted to home school me along the Cambridge IGCSE and O’level system. My parents were working very hard to keep our family together and making ends meet so I never had tutors or professional academic help with my studies. I did my very best, however after the second year of failure I was 17 and my family doubted that it was worthwhile to continue.

As many young people I started working, basically any job I could get, and I started working for the University of Pretoria as a website designer, a skill I had picked up during my teens and a skill which was now paying the bills as it were. I still desperately wanted to take up studies again and get in to University, mostly to ensure that I could procure a better job and make sure that what had happened to me didn’t happen to my infant sister later in her life.

I tried everything that I could think of, I applied and tried to take up the IGCSE’s once again, to attempt to get my University entrance requirements. You must remember that at this point I had no Matric or Matric exemption certificate to my name. The cost of enrolling at an IGCSE institution was too great, too expensive and frankly out of my reach.

RPL – SAQA speecho
From: [sfestile@pioneerfoods.co.za]
Sent: 30 October 2009 09:32 AM
To: Snyman, Maria
Subject: Document1
Attachments: Doc1.doc

Morning Ms. Snyman

I have just received your letter in which you request me to grant you permission to use my "Prior learning paper". Herewith my permission to use the prior learning paper as a research document for your doctoral research. I would also like to thank you and your institution for a job well done towards recognizing the potential that's in every RPL candidate. Keep doing what you do best and may the Lord be with you and your team through every step you take towards improving the future of every adult learner and everything that you may wish for, thank you so much Ms. Snyman!

Kind regards
Web: http://www.pioneerfoods.co.za/ Disclaimer: http://www.pioneerfoods.co.za/email_disclaimer.asp Pioneer Foods subscribes to Tip-offs Anonymous, an anonymous and completely independent crime disclosure service (Telephone hotline 0800 005 909, or e-mail pioneerfoods@tip-offs.com Contact the Pioneer Foods help desk should you have any questions regarding this e-mail legal notice: 0800225359 "Please consider the environment before printing this e-mail or its attachment(s)"
The marketer was offered a branch manager job and I was offered the branch PA position. This changes my morning job into a full day career. Secretarial duties were starting to become my strength. I learned to work on computers and perform doing internet tasks. I needed to take all management phone calls and act professionally. I had to make appointments and learned that the way I presented myself to clients will smooth marketer's path towards making a sale.

As time went by, I got to know what was crucial to ask and how to be quiet. I started performing tasks such as the drawing up of wills and doing tax forms to ease the load off the manager's hands. Apart from all this, I learned how to order goods from head office do salary pay slips, getting a leave chart in place, as well as the planning of functions. I also started to train new recruited staff. Data processing was a huge task. I needed to set up minutes and agendas for meetings and set goals for the branch. I needed to do weekly planning and see to it that the other staff achieve these goals. Unfortunately 3 branches were combined and needed to work as one branch. The branch manager and secretaries were the first to go.

February 1999 – December 2008 Ferdie de Vos Brokers

I started as a receptionist with a total new clientele who needed to learn to trust me. I knew I had to start all over again proving myself. As time went by, clients started to trust me with requests. My responsibilities became more and I was good at problem solving. I knew how to address a matter and keep going till it was solved. My personality made clients like me. The number of clients grew and the business growth increased. I became the PA of the owner and also the Human Resource Manager. I needed to manage the office and see to it that everything went smoothly when owner was out of the office.

One day the owner approached me with an offer of an opportunity to manage the office and clientele because he decided to move to another town to establish a second branch. The whole office became my responsibility. This was not new to me as I already done this. What was a big responsibility was to treat each client and every decision made as if it were my own business. During this time I started to achieve credits as issued by the Financial Insurance Act. Unfortunately the IISA of South Africa closed down after doing 2 subjects with them. The owner wanted to make me a key individual of the business but my qualifications regretfully did not allow this at all. I was placed under a lot of pressure and that became a personal problem to me. The solution was to bow out and give someone else this opportunity. I did not know what the future held. I knew my career path was heading towards something else, new and challenging.

September 2009 – Current position

After leaving the insurance industry after over 12 years, I felt useless but my strength lies in looking out for opportunities and taking them. I helped out temporarily at the local high school from time to time during January till August 2009 and proved myself to be professional and responsible. Because I had always teach, I enjoyed doing this every step of the way. I refer to the introduction where I explained how it came that I become to be an educator.

The problem that I faced was my qualification. I was fortunate to hear there was a solution to this problem by studying with Unisa in order to gain the required qualifications. Another problem that I came across was time. I knew I should structure that and work according to a plan.
Morning Ms. Snyman

I have just received your letter in which you request me to grant you permission to use my "Prior learning paper". Herewith my permission to use the prior learning paper as a research document for your doctoral research. I would also like to thank you and your institution for a job well done towards recognizing the potential thats in every RPL candidate. Keep doing what you do best and may the lord be with you and your team through every step you take towards improving the future of every adult learner and everything that you may wish for, thank you so much Ms. Snyman!

Kind regards

Web : http://www.pioneerfoods.co.za/ Disclaimer: http://www.pioneerfoods.co.za/email_disclaimer.asp Pioneer Foods subscribes to Tip-offs Anonymous, an anonymous and completely independent crime disclosure service (Telephone hotline 0800 005 909, or e-mail pioneerfoods@stop-offs.com Contact the Pioneer Foods help desk should you have any questions regarding this e-mail legal notice: 0800225359 “Please consider the environment before printing this e-mail or its attachment(s)”
The marketer was offered a branch manager job and I was offered the branch PA position. This changes my morning job into a full day career. Secretarial duties were starting to become my strength. I learned to work on computers and perform doing internet tasks. I needed to take all management phone calls and act professionally. I had to make appointments and learned that the way I presented myself to clients will smooth marketer’s path towards making a sale.

As time went by, I got to know what was crucial to ask and when to be quiet. I started performing tasks such as the drawing up of wills and doing tax forms to ease the load off the manager’s hands. Apart from all the I learned how to order goods from head office, do salary pay slips, getting a leave chart in place, as well as the planning of functions. I also started to train new recruited staff. Data processing was a huge task. I needed to set up minutes and agendas for meetings and set goals for the branch. I needed to do weekly planning and see to it that the other staff achieve these goals. Unfortunately 3 branches were combined and needed to work as one branch. The branch manager and secretary were the first to go.

February 1999 – December 2008 Ferdie de Vos Brokers

I started as a receptionist with a total new clientele who needed to learn to trust me. I knew I had to start all over again proving myself. As time went by, clients started to trust me with requests. My responsibilities became more and I was good at problem solving. I knew how to address a matter and keep going till it was solved. My personality made clients like me. The number of clients grew and the business growth increased. I became the PA of the owner and also the Human Recourse Manager. I needed to manage the office and see to it that everything went smoothly when owner was out of the office.

One day the owner approached me with an offer of an opportunity to manage the office and clientele because he decided to move to another town to establish a second branch. The whole office became my responsibility. This was not new to me as I already done this. What was a big responsibility was to treat each client and every decision made as if it were my own business. During this time I started to achieve credits as issued by the Financial Insurance Act. Unfortunately the IISA of South Africa closed down after doing 2 subjects with them. The owner wanted to make me a key individual of the business but my qualifications regretfully did not allow this at all. I was placed under a lot of pressure and that became a personal problem to me. The solution was to bow out and give someone else this opportunity. I did not know what the future held. I knew my career path was heading towards something else, new and challenging.

September 2009 – Current position

After leaving the insurance industry after over 12 years, I felt useless but my strength lies in looking out for opportunities and taking them. I helped out temporarily at the local high school from time to time during January till August 2009 and proved myself to be professional and responsible. Because I had always teach, I enjoyed doing this every step of the way. I refer to the introduction where I explained how it came that I become to be an educator.

The problem that I faced was my qualification. I was fortunate to hear there was a solution to this problem by studying with Unisa in order to gain the required qualifications. Another problem that I came across was time. I knew I should structure that and work according to a plan.
Assignment 1.1: Prior Learning Paper

My name is I am 41 years old. I am married with two daughters. I live in Somerset West in Cape Town. I was born in England and we immigrated as a family to South Africa in 1977. My childhood and education all started in Johannesburg. I attended an all girl's Catholic school. School for me was a mixture of having fun and socializing with my friends and being an average student. My household was a mixture of having some good times, but there was always the feeling that life was not predictable or following some kind of orderly structure. My father travelled a lot and when he was around the house our schooling and education performance was not very high up on his agenda. It never seemed to worry me at that time about his stance on school, but I think deep down there was always this niggling feeling that he took no interest in my brother and I. My Mum was a hairdresser and loved the interaction with her clients and colleagues. I often remember sitting in the shop feeling tired and frustrated as I may have needed help with homework or more down to basic needs, was a meal and then time to study or do something related to school. This matter never seemed to concern my Mum. I suppose she tried to make up her lack of interest in my schooling by over compensating in other things.

I continued through high school trying to do the best that I could. At home things were not all that harmonious between my parents, there was always a screaming match, tears and the threat that one of them was about to walk out of the marriage. This continued until the end of my school career. After school I went to a Secretarial College and then went oversees for a while, where I travelled extensively.

My first "real" job was with an employment agency. My position was a Personnel consultant. My duties were to build up a client base and bring in job specifications. Interviewing the applicant and reference checking, and then placing the applicant into a position that is suitable and meets with the job requirements of the client. At the end of each month we had to work out how many placements we had made, the goal was to meet the monthly target. In this position we had a lot of opportunities to attend human resource workshops and their was ample in house training in dealing with interview techniques, labour related queries and my ultimate best was the training in human behaviour. It was at this point that the seed was planted in my interest in Psychology and the working of the human mind. Interest → passion → career → formal studies.