

Mature Women and the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. Realising the Potential of Recognising Prior Learning

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Against a background of 'second-wave' lifelong learning in Aotearoa New Zealand a new framework for post-compulsory national qualifications was introduced. The resulting competency-based system was argued to present a number of benefits for mature women including flexibility in curriculum and delivery and portability across educational sectors. Competency-based education was to include provision for recognition of prior skills and knowledge gained in formal learning environments and the workplace as well as informal learning environments such as the home and the community. Such recognition was a significant factor in gaining support from women's groups given the potential to recognize and value the domestic labour of women and the skills and knowledge that flow from it. This article explores the rhetoric around recognition of prior learning and discusses approaches to realise its potential. It then draws on research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand to suggest that the potential of recognition of prior learning is yet to be realised.

Competency, Women, Recognition, Education, Assessment, Prior Learning

INTRODUCTION

As always, I listened to Radio National this morning as I commuted through the rush hour traffic to my Melbourne office. One small, but significant, item caught my attention: a major bank has commenced a recruitment drive for mature women to take up front-line positions. Why? Because the skills they have acquired in undertaking their domestic responsibilities equip them particularly well to deal with customers. While this item may have gone unnoticed by many listening to the airwaves this morning, it resounds for me as a public endorsement of what many women privately understand.

I relate this story to frame up some thoughts on competency based education for mature women in Aotearoa, New Zealand. James and Saville-Smith (1989) argue that all cultures have maintained a central motif. Britain's central motif was class, South Africa's central motif was race. In New Zealand, the central motif was gender. A gendered culture was derived from the complex interaction between indigenous and colonial structures early in the colonization process. The colonial household and its basis in subsistence production was undermined by pressures on land availability and waged labour opportunities for men. This brought men increasing independence and women increasing dependence on either a man, or where men abandoned their dependants, on the State. This change in the nature of interdependence, coupled with the need to control the social disorder associated with single men, resulted in the State "reinforcing the family in new ways. It emphasized the social control role of women as wives and mothers and, in doing so, set the context for the

systematic expression of a gendered culture which has dominated New Zealand ever since” (ibid p.29).

While Keynesian welfarism was overt in defining women in New Zealand society by their work in the home and emphasizing this as a rational life trajectory for all women, recent policy directions have covertly shifted this perspective. While still assuming the naturalness of women’s domestic responsibilities more recent discourses have cast these responsibilities as irrational and an impediment to women’s ability to compete as individuals in the labour market (O’Neill 1995). In this context, the policy response became one of better equipping those who are excluded to compete for limited opportunities in the labour market by providing them with skills by way of ‘second-chance’ education and training paid for by the State. One such response is the Training Opportunities Programme, established in 1993 to “break patterns of disadvantage” (Te Puni Kokiri 2001 p.5). Training Opportunities was based in an argument that access to quality training programs would help disadvantaged individuals take the first step on the staircase to further education and, ultimately, employment. It provides full-time fully funded training to people who meet specific eligibility criteria and are registered with the Department of Work and Income or Workbridge¹. Training Opportunities has also been a lead mechanism in the New Zealand Government’s implementation of a competency-based national qualification regime. The qualification regime was intended to offer disadvantaged groups portable, recognized qualifications that would enable enhanced opportunities to break through employment barriers.

THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK AND MATURE WOMEN

Subsequent to educational administrative reforms in 1989, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was set up in 1990 to establish a comprehensive framework for all post-compulsory national qualifications. The new National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was to cover all general, academic and vocational qualifications from senior secondary school to degree level. Three nationally recognised qualifications would be available – National Certificate (levels 1 to 4), National Diploma (levels 5 to 7) and Degree (levels 7 and 8). Within this eight-level framework, all qualifications would relate to each other and increased flexibility would be apparent in the gaining of qualifications and the recognition of competency already achieved (NZQA 1991). The building blocks of the NQF are unit standards, which use standards-based assessment and are aligned to one of the eight levels. Each unit is constructed of learning outcomes (called ‘elements’) that must be achieved to gain credit towards the qualification sought; achievement in each of these elements is assessed against performance criteria which state the standard required to demonstrate competency. The new framework was mooted to offer improved accessibility to internationally understandable qualifications, increased responsiveness to social, economic and technological change and fuller participation by groups traditionally disadvantaged in gaining higher qualifications (ibid).

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which resulted was initially seen to have a number of beneficial characteristics for mature women, including the ability to collect small chunks called ‘credit’ and build these into qualifications. Every learner gaining credits on the NQF would receive an annual Record of Learning (ROL) that listed all unit standard and achievement standard credits, National Certificates and National Diplomas achieved in the previous year. A ROL provides an evolving record for the learner to use in planning and

¹ An employment placement agency for people with disabilities.

accessing their future learning as well as being a resource to present to prospective employers.

The competency based model fostered flexibility and was argued to enable an approach which accommodated the individual histories of learners as well as their differing wants and needs through allowing them to construct individual programs of learning. Lifelong learning opportunities would be enhanced as opportunities for gaining credit would not be tied to specific educational organizations or courses. The standards-based methods of assessment would enable assessment procedures to take many forms, all concerned with actual performance against clearly defined standards. Furthermore, the role played by industry in setting standards would ensure useful learning that would link more directly to employment opportunities (Sissons 1995, Mersi & Smith 1996, NZQA 1991).

Solutions to women's inequality which lie in education and individual empowerment often draw on arguments that explain inequality in terms of traditional attitudes and socialization yet ignore the role of the State in creating and reproducing certain gender relations (Ghosh 1996). The same gender motif underlies inequities in employment as underlies those in the home, these inequities arising through discourses which categorise as skilled, and therefore valued and rewarded, only that work that takes place in paid employment (Cox and Leonard 1994). The resulting gender inflectedness of the word 'skill' seems to lead many women to deny it relates to what they do and reinforces the process whereby women categorise their skills as personal qualities. Yet research has demonstrated that the skills that are denied in women are often sought in executives: patience, stamina, flexibility, empathy (Acker 1989; Byrne 1993 cited in Willis and Kenway 1996). This issue is central: the denial of women's skill by employers and by women themselves affects their process of entering employment. These factors contribute to lower average wages for women, which reinforce women's secondary role in paid employment, and in turn reinforce women's primary association with the domestic sphere (Connell 1994). Thus the gender motif remains and, notwithstanding their level of qualification, structural barriers to women's participation in the labour market persist.

As such, it is no surprise that opportunity for recognition of prior learning² was seen to be of central importance to mature women. This recognition was to be the mechanism by which the structures that render unpaid domestic labour invisible through its identification as 'natural' (for women) and, therefore, unskilled would be challenged (Cox and Leonard 1994, Sissons 1995). Recognition of prior learning was to include all learning regardless of where, when or how it was gained, as well as learning undertaken in formal environments and in the workplace (NZQA 1991). Processes would be available to align women's evidenced skill to the elements of competency standards and to formally recognise those skills in the form of credit towards qualifications. Undergoing a process of identifying and applying for recognition of their skill was argued to have benefits in and of itself including the potential to enhance motivation and raise self esteem by fostering the learner's appreciation of their own experience and expertise. It would also develop skills in evaluation, communication and team-working as the evidence of competency is brought together (Stephenson & Weil 1992).

² I prefer the term 'recognition of prior learning'. However some writers use the term 'recognition of current competency'. In other instances both terms are included with recognition of prior learning being used to refer to prior learning evidenced by qualification and recognition of current competency being used where no such evidence is available.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Although opportunity for recognition was a key component in promoting the NQF to women's groups, implementation in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as in other countries that have attempted it, has proved problematic. While NZQA originally had a role in assessing prior learning to enable recognition, it is now expected that all assessment has benefited from the development of practice and accredited training providers arrange recognition to suit their own contexts and learners (NZQA n.d.). While there is no fixed cost involved, applicants must usually be enrolled with a training provider to access the opportunity. In other words, a learner must enrol in a program before they can ascertain how much of the program they will actually need to complete. The approach to assessment will depend on whether there is evidence of the prior learning.

Some examples will illustrate how the process ideally works³. An adult has been competent at something for years but has no qualification. They have been employed by an advertising agency or working with a volunteer organization so they can prove that they are competent. They can produce samples of their work, letters of validation from peers and supervisors, etc. There may be no need for formal assessment tasks as the samples of work and testimonials become evidence that can be evaluated against unit standards. The learner can provide evidence of prior performance.

Sometimes there isn't any evidence to consider. Learners arrive at an institution ready to enrol for a program. They look at the work to be covered and realise that they can already perform some or all of it. A word processing student has been doing audio transcriptions to record his grandparent's life story. Other learners have read intensively about history or economics and have accumulated a depth of knowledge. These learners have not been demonstrating their skills or knowledge within an established organization so they will not be able to produce convincing evidence of their competence. In this instance, learners need to be assisted to identify the parts of a program in which they are already competent and assessment arranged, probably by the tutors running the program. In some cases learners then attend only relevant parts of the program; in other cases they complete the remaining unit standards on individual programs. At times, they may be referred to a different training provider who can better meet their learning needs.

These examples alert us to the potential power of recognition of prior learning for mature women who seek learning opportunities after years of managing homes, rearing children, coordinating family activities, working in full-time, casual or part-time roles, volunteering for community positions and so on. While most men do not experience the same level of responsibility for domestic labour, the argument and process are equally applicable. Australian research suggests a number of factors must be addressed if women are to benefit from recognition of prior learning. First, clear information about provisions and processes must be provided and this must occur well before enrolment. Secondly, counselling must be readily available to ensure that women understand the concept and the procedure to apply. Thirdly, systems must be improved to ensure it is timely, happens prior to commencement of a course and in time for women to make an informed decision about applying. Fourthly, any assessment that takes place in relation to recognition must take into account the lack of confidence many older women will experience regarding formal assessment. Finally, issues of cost, for providers and learners, must be overcome (Burns et al 1997). However, even where recognition is occurring there is some evidence that it is following a norm-orientated, reproductive philosophy that does little to encourage applicants to reflect critically on either

³ These examples are drawn in part from NZQA.

their experiential learning (Jones & Martin 1995) or the structural constraints they face. Given the centrality of this concept to the new qualification regime in general, and to women in particular, its thorough implementation is of singular importance.

THE REALITY

Early in 2002 I undertook a research project involving a small group of mature women involved in the Training Opportunities Programme in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The six women who took part in semi-structured interviews were aged between 30 and 50 years and came from wide-ranging backgrounds and life experiences: one woman was Samoan, one was Maori. One was English, but had been raised in New Zealand since childhood. Two had no children, two had children still at home and one had an active caring role as a grandparent. Three had some form of disability, including deafness. All the women were relatively new to competency-based approaches to education and training, however they all had broad life experience including previous experience in paid and voluntary employment. A number had prior formal qualifications. The common characteristic for these women was their desire to be out there; their intent to get as much as possible from their learning experience.

The research was concerned with the broader question of whether competency based models were able to provide for more reflective forms of learning. The contention that competency-based education must undermine reflection and constructive learning was not supported. The participants demonstrated a conscious pursuit of learning; all indicated they felt privileged by the opportunity they had to attend the program and were determined to pursue every opportunity to learn. The women did not feel they were held to a pre-determined path of learning and opportunities for reflection occurred in both formal and informal environments. As well, the use of role-play in both learning and as a component of assessment created a forum where stories could be told and perspectives explored. Access to a liaison tutor as an additional resource was greatly valued and ensured support, academic and personal counselling. The findings supported research that links competency-based education and informal and incidental learning; it is precisely the flexibility within the model that enabled the women to walk their own path in a way, and at a pace, that met their needs. The value of unit standards for the women lay in being able to check back on what 'competent' meant. The information around what they had to do to demonstrate competency was clear and accessible at all times; they found it both useful and reassuring to be able to draw on this information. A wide range of assessment was occurring, opportunities for assessment were flexible, yet thorough. In summary, the women were finding their program to be both relevant, and rewarding.

However, the findings supported suggestions to date around the difficulties of gaining access to recognition of prior learning. Despite a wealth of life experience, and claims by participants to broad life experiences and a good number of pre-NQF qualifications, none of the woman appeared aware of the opportunity to recognise their current competencies. Indeed, even the concept that they had been making a contribution while acquiring those skills was not apparent to them:

It was very important for me to get back into the workforce and um make my contribution to society and give back some of what I've, you know, give back some of what I've been receiving.

Across the participants there was such a range of prior learning both with and without evidence that it was somewhat surprising to find no reference to a process of recognition at commencement and before an individual training plan was put in place. For one woman, her prior experience with the NQF had been fraught. Having completed a competency-based

program, she had arrived at her current training provider without any credit on her ROL for the skills she had gained:

Well, none of my stuff was put onto NZQA from my other course. ... It was unit-standard based and what I didn't get at the time which was before I came here of course was that it was up to me to go to NZQA and put all my units on and I didn't actually, yes, so I didn't do that, I didn't understand that and didn't do it.

As a result of this incorrect advice from a prior training provider, this woman was re-doing material she had already learnt and for which she had already been assessed as competent. Another woman who had gained Trade Certificate many years before, had raised a family and worked in both paid and voluntary roles for many years had no recognition of having learnt anything before arriving at the program.

This situation is disappointing, to say the least. Regardless of the implications of this sort of occurrence for the implementation of a competency based regime, three very costly consequences result for the learner. Firstly, the confidence they have gained in their ability is diminished. Where as once they were "good" at something, now they apparently have no skills, despite their program being in an area of employment they have previously operated in. Secondly, they do not get the opportunity to critically reflect on their experiences to date and their aspirations for the future. Finally, they do not come to understand the rationale behind the implementation of the new qualifications regime; this means they are less likely to understand how they can use the NQF to their benefit as they reach for those aspirations.

CONCLUSION

What is the central issue in this situation? Not that these women did not get credit on their ROL for their prior learning. A process of recognition does not guarantee that credit will be awarded. Even where a recognition process is undertaken there will be instances where, for example, competency is only evidenced in some elements of a particular unit standard and credit cannot be awarded until competency is evidenced in all elements.

What is disturbing is that there was no process of recognition in place that gave opportunity for the women to critically evaluate their prior experiences and the expertise gained by way of those experiences. This appeared to be the situation despite the training provider having a commitment in their Mission Statement and having put actions in place to empower their learners through their learning process. On other aspects, the training provider demonstrated a thorough understanding of the principles of competency based education and of the processes required in assisting learners to taking charge of their learning. Yet on this central feature of identifying and recognising prior learning there was no evidence of any process, let alone one that would foster the women's appreciation of the value of their experience and expertise. In my ongoing professional work I continually encounter anecdotal evidence to suggest this situation is far from isolated.

In closing, I reflect again on the news that a major bank is seeking to acquire the 'informal' skills of mature women. Actions like this provide an ideal opportunity for a renewed focus on formal recognition of mature women's prior learning. This must not only take place at the policy level but also at the level of practice where discussion, debate and professional development must be widely facilitated to realise the potential of competency based education for mature women.

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