

Recognition Pathways: Capacity Building for the Individual Peer Educator and the Sector

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The Scarlet Alliance National Training Project :

- created a Nationally recognised Diploma of Community Education, customised for the sex worker peer education sector.
- trained a group of experienced peer educators as formal workplace assessors. (Successfully completing a certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment)
- offered Recognition of Current Competency in the Diploma of Community education to experienced sex worker peer educators
- developed a raft of resource materials to support the RCC process including an assessor guide, a getting ready guide for applicants and a package of assessment tools

Relationships Australia SA was the Registered training Organisation (RTO) and all aspects of the project were driven by peer workers from the sex work sector across Australia.

SLIDE 1

This project has been grounded in both political and professional motivations.

It is political in that there is a specific agenda to publicly recognise the skills and knowledge of peer workers who for a long time have been marginalised by mainstream professional groups and undervalued as a workforce.

And it is professional in that it has required formal assessment of peer based education activities against national standards, thus inviting analysis, rigorous review and ongoing practice reflection.

To achieve its aims in relation to each of these agendas the project has drawn on two major educational philosophies.

SLIDE 2

Firstly, Skills Recognition and

Secondly, the concept of Learning Cultures and Learning organisations

Skills Recognition - through a process known as RCC (recognition of current competence) sits within a theoretical framework of Adult Education and more recently, Life Long Learning.

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It is a process of assessing and validating an individual's skills and knowledge, which they have obtained through any combination of formal or informal learning, including life experience and on the job experience.

Commonly, western cultures have separated learning from working and from lived experience. Great value has been given to theoretical knowledge acquired through a process of study at educational institutions such as schools and universities. The understanding has been that we must gather so called 'correct' and appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes through formal study before we can act professionally. So we must do the study before we are let loose in the world of work. This has sometimes been called the "front end loading" model of education. (Foley 1995). Enormous respect and validation of this type of learning is embedded in our employment practices – evidenced through the notion of essential qualifications and concomitant rates of pay.

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This 'front end loading model' can achieve a great deal and certainly has merits. However, it tends to overshadow other, equally legitimate pathways of learning. It favours theory over more practical skills and implies that learning stops once we leave the education system. We can become so saturated in this approach that we forget that valid learning occurs every day in multiple contexts. And classroom study is not the only way.

The model does not seem to appreciate that all learning is worthy of being acknowledged. This is the basic principle underlying recognition processes – that valuable skills and knowledge can be learned in ways other than formal, institutional education processes and these knowledges and skills have the right to be respected and receive due credit within universally accepted frameworks.

Relationships Australia SA (RASA) has been interested to make this recognition and validation process accessible to workforces where expertise has commonly been discounted due to the taboo nature of the work and/or the lack of academic background of its workers. This includes peer educators and positive speakers in particular. There has often been little opportunity for many such workers to attend university, and its structures and learning methodologies have in any event not always suited people. The very life experience that is crucial to their role and is so significant in maximising the impact of their work has often operated to exclude this work group from formal education.

By bringing recognition processes to these work groups we are aiming to achieve two things:

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1. To value learning from life experience and on the job. In so doing to increase confidence and open up career pathways for workers.

(if you achieve a nationally recognised qualification such as the Diploma of Community Education you can start to engage with the front end loading system since you have evidence of learning as it is understood by mainstream).

2. To make learning processes visible. To encourage practice reflection and engage the whole sector in capacity building.

For sectors that utilise the skills of a largely professionally unqualified workforce it is possible to get caught in a downward spiral of decreasing credibility and demoralised workers. (Just think about youth workers, or care assistants...)

No matter how skilled and innovative they are the lack of formal recognition in a world that so highly prizes the academic approach, can lead to poorly defined job roles, low pay and lack of power in relation to other sectors.

The RCC process works to not only validate current expertise in ways recognised by the mainstream, but also to increase professional rigor. By requiring practice reflection and the articulation of methodology, RCC encourages analysis and new learning.

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In this project we offered recognition at the Diploma level which is a high level qualification. It would normally take two years to complete a diploma in the classroom and it can articulate into the first year of an undergraduate degree.

It is nationally recognised within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and this particular diploma of community education has been customised (or tailored) for the sex worker education sector.

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This diploma has 5 work areas or topics that must be covered. (see slide 6)

An additional area titled working with mental health and substance use issues was also offered for those workers who wished to gain additional relevant competencies.

The RCC process is detailed and thorough.

SLIDE 8

The process

- Application
- Briefing
- Preparation
- Assessment interview
- Supervisor's report
- New learning or gathering more evidence
- Award qualification

SLIDE 9

Evidence

Evidence is gathered to assess an individual's ability. It must be:

- Current evidence

- Valid – it actually demonstrates what it says it does
- Authentic – it is honest, true record of the person's own work
- Sufficient - there is more than one example to corroborate skill

SLIDE 10

Multiple approaches are used to ensure the above evidence is gathered:

- Portfolios of work prepared by the applicant
- Face to face interviews are conducted to explore applicant's understandings of their work
- References are sought from current supervisors to verify authenticity

In addition an assessor might decide they need further evidence and seek to observe the applicant first hand, or watch a video of the applicant at work. We have sometimes set up role plays, required workplace projects to be implemented or given extra written tasks to test out areas of practice where evidence has been deemed insufficient.

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What is NOT adequate evidence:

- Years of employment in the sector – 'time served' does not necessarily equate with skills
- Reputation alone
- Turning up to an assessment interview without portfolios and comprehensive preparation for questioning
- Thin descriptions of practice without analysis

Scarlet Alliance is now talking about maintaining a core group of qualified peer assessors within the sector and having an ongoing RCC process where employees are working towards their diplomas on the job.

Learning culture

In taking up this system-wide approach the Sector is building a culture of learning and its individual agencies are on a pathway towards becoming learning organisations. (Senge 1990).

SLIDE 12

A learning organisation is one that aspires to continuously develop and create new understandings about its work. Its employees are vitally interested in the impact of their work and how to monitor and improve their approach. They know that they never finish learning but are continuously revising their positions on 'best practice'. This type of organisation makes visible how it learns and incorporates learning into workplace action rather than having a single training strategy that expects learning to occur off the job. It understands that all practice is a learning opportunity rather than a result of complete knowledge.

By taking on a recognition process Scarlet Alliance is positioning itself as a learning culture. It is one step in orienting the sector towards continuous reflection on its work and recognition of learning in every day practice. In having to describe what we do we build new knowledge and new insights into

the application of this knowledge. In being required to explain our approaches and theoretical perspectives through the assessment process we become clearer about their impact.

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Many workplaces view learning as an external activity constructed by experts. They also see something like RCC as an opportunity for worker's personal development and miss the system-wide application. Scarlet has taken learning into its heart and used systems thinking to look strategically at learning. I think the sector will truly reap the benefits of this approach.

This project has also been a real learning experience for Relationships Australia as we have worked in partnership with Scarlet and I'd like to acknowledge the incredible attention to detail and active engagement in all parts of the process that the executive and other key players have shown, including the project officer Julie Wylie. An independent evaluation is almost complete and the results so far are very encouraging.

Thank you.

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