An Exploration of Student Focused Initiatives to Support Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Case Preparation

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An Exploration of Student Focused Initiatives to Support Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Case Preparation

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This thesis is entirely the work of the undersigned, and has not been submitted for an award in any other institution or university.

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Dr. Siobhán O'Sullivan; Research Supervisor

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is recognition given for relevant learning, regardless of how or where it was gained, prior to starting on a programme or module. This research explores a number of student focused initiatives to support RPL case preparation. An action research methodology was used where existing RPL procedures in an Institute of Technology setting were examined and evaluated. The aim of the research was to create a positive environment for RPL case preparation. A mixed method using both qualitative and quantitative approaches such as questionnaires and focus groups was used to gather data. The initial survey captured the existing picture of RPL in 2011. This was followed with an exploration of reflection using focus groups. Changes to the existing processes included development and re-evaluation and further amendment to the existing website. A Valuing Learning space was added to encourage documentation of competencies and this was followed with a trial of e portfolios and their subsequent evaluation. The findings contribute valuable insight to a complex field in education. They reveal that improving online supports is constructive for students preparing RPL cases. They further demonstrate that e portfolios are a significant tool and mechanism to activate learners and are purpose built scaffolds for RPL case preparation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction, Learning in a Time of Change

1.1 Introduction

The research undertaken in this thesis is an exploration of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the approaches which might be used to effectively support the student. The term RPL is used to denote Recognition of Prior Learning from this point onwards. The chapter begins with a consideration of the significance of RPL and the learner in a time of change where many are returning to education as a result of the economic downturn. The work explores the support of the student tasked with prior learning case preparation for assessment. Finally, the chapter introduces the literature review and the research undertaken in this thesis.

1.2 Learning in a time of change

This is an exploration of RPL in a time of change. As society aspires to the knowledge economy, the way we live, work and learn is constantly changing and evolving. Knowledge, innovation, the creation of knowledge and learning itself are all highly valued today (Duvekot *et al.*, 2007).

Globalisation, that process which occurs through interaction or trade in "*goods, capital, labour and ideas,*" has impacted Higher Education and resulted in broad changes as to how education is organized with the creation of a variety of different frameworks and the increasing uptake in Higher Education (D. Bloom, 2005). These events are compounded by the rapid changes in the use of technology impacting on how we live and work (Wheelahan & Miller, 2002).

The global economy is in recession and increasingly workers are returning to education to avail of reskilling and upskilling opportunities or additional qualifications. This steady influx of people returning to education is seen as a natural feature of a knowledge economy, as stated in '*Tomorrows Skills; Towards a National Skills Strategy'* the skills needs of any

economy is ever changing. It is natural to see a shift in the types of reskilling and continuing professional development sought as citizens adjust to changes in the economy at a Macro level (Forfas, 2007). It is likely that education and training provision will be influenced by the significant developments within particular sectors such as pharmaceutical and biotechnology; food and drink; medical devices and ICT sectors. This cohort of students will have significant life skills and will readily avail of RPL to access Higher Education and to arrange for formal credit for what is already known (McNaboe & Condon, 2010).

RPL is of increasing significance in this context. This broader cohort of adults has different needs to the traditional student. They are highly motivated as a rule but also have to balance education with other commitments such as work and family. Appropriate supports must be put in place should they choose to include RPL as part of their learning journey (Coles & Oates, 2004; Werquin, 2007). Education providers must be prepared for this cohort of students and engender to appropriately support them with their RPL case preparation (Lester & Costley, 2010). What steps can be taken to achieve this support ? The day to day work of the researcher involves helping students as they build their RPL cases, mentoring them through the task. This is the focus of this research thesis.

1.3 Demand for RPL is increasing

Over the last number of years, in Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland, RPL provision has grown from 53 cases in 2000 when it was formalised, to 142 in 2005; 502 in 2010 and 528 in 2012. There are 7000 full-time students and 7000 part-time students enrolled. The range and complexity of RPL cases presented and successfully assessed has significantly broadened and diversified over the years showing the abilities of staff in supporting the preparation and then the assessment of the prior learning cases. This knowledge and capability is significant; it underpins a level of comfort that took time to cement into the foundations of the institute but once embedded was very much embraced and supported across all disciplines and levels of learning (Cork Institute of Technology, 2012*a*). The significant changes in the economy have reflected the demand for RPL in the same timeframe. Staff have risen to the challenge in every way and the level of ability with assessment of RPL cases that has been achieved has reinforced their reputation as solid providers of education which allows for RPL. However there is so much more to be done to

develop RPL provision. The challenge is to consider what supports would lend to better RPL cases being prepared ? Improving supports for the students undergoing such a process will benefit all stakeholders; namely students and staff of a college.

1.4 Research Aim: To support the student with RPL case preparation

Students need support with the task of preparing a prior learning case (Lester & Costley, 2010). They must understand the assessment requirements of academia within which their programme resides (CEDEFOP, 2009; NQAI, 2005; UNESCO, 2012). It is high stakes assessment, in that the candidate is drawing from significant learning events from their previous life experiences and they are presenting it now for academic credits as part of a programme (Conrad, 2008). They are claiming formal academic credits for their prior learning both formal, non formal and informal learning. He/she takes a leap of faith when deciding to put in an RPL case. In essence, it is an act that challenges the conventional assessment routes of the college with their own prior learning. To take this step takes courage and commitment (Conrad, 2008).

Research Question and Overall Aim

When RPL policy and practice are embedded in an organisation, what additional supports should be put in place to help with RPL case preparation from a student's perspective ?

All stakeholders benefit from having good support systems in place (CEDEFOP, 2009; NQAI, 2005). The staff benefit as the material is easier to assess when well-presented and the evidence well signposted. The students benefit if the support system is well designed, because they are shown what is required each step of the way, it should be robust enough to easily portray a sense of what is required of the students. This support can take the form of online examples and 'how to' tips in videoclip (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). The staff assessing the prior learning material can expect authentic RPL cases well supported with evidence drawn from the candidates life experiences. It is a requirement to present material that will support an argument that has become reflective in nature. The person must showcase what

they know against the learning outcomes of a module and why the learning presented is significant (Murphy, 2010; NQAI, 2005; Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

1.5 Research Focus: The starting point of the research carried out in this thesis

In a time of increasing demand for RPL a key issue to address is to consider what supports might be most effective for the student. The starting point of the research is to capture what students think of how RPL was today in 2011. This was the first step in the research. To explore this question the researcher asked thirty students who had prepared a prior learning case in the previous year how they found the act of RPL case preparation. This investigation took the form of a questionnaire, to capture a picture of RPL case preparation for experiential learning in 2011. This resulting insight was presented at the NAIRTL conference in 2011 (O'Leary & Coughlan, 2011).

1.6 Why reflection is significant: a second focus of the research

Reflection and having the ability to reflect is a key skill to have when preparing a prior learning case. Reflection serves to underpin the process of RPL case preparation (Murphy, 2010). Any candidate must have the ability to sift through the many previous key learning events in his or her life and select from them those that best fit against the learning outcomes of a particular module. In building their case, they are selecting with the purpose of claiming credit for this prior learning. The second step in this research was an exploration of reflection with two focus groups (O'Leary & Goggin, 2010). This was to understand how reflection is viewed by students; to see if there were difficulties getting into reflective mode; and if so how could this research help ?

1.7 Introducing the methodology to be used

An action research methodology is used to guide this research which proved both a practical and insightful approach for the task in hand. This thesis is set in a time when the web is a powerful vehicle with an abundance of technologies freely available (e.g. web 2.0) to support the learner and promote collaborative work so the research is influenced by the various technologies becoming available (Prensky, 2012).

Action research as a methodology has allowed for seven interlinked pieces of research to be carried out in the timeframe of the thesis.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to a process where prior learning is given a value (NQAI, 2005). RPL is a complex field in education and each piece of research contributes to providing an insightful overall picture. In practice with RPL, no two prior learning cases are ever the same in terms of how the case is prepared; what learning is used to build it; or what evidence is used to support or backup the case (Arnold, 2010; Colvin, 2006). Adding to this broad spectrum of variables are the assessors who will take an individual stance when making a judgement (Conrad, 2008). And yet once policy, procedure and practice are established in any Higher Education establishment; time itself supports the development of a culture where RPL is mainstreamed (Bjornavold, 2007; Coles & Oates, 2004). The findings here reveal that outside of time itself, there are simple things that a college can do which will be a significant support to the student and promote a positive culture for RPL. This positive culture should embed and normalise the practice of RPL across Higher Education providers in a time where demand for such provision will likely increase (Hunt, 2011).

1.8 Why RPL is significant now; the drivers of RPL

1.8.1 The Knowledge Economy

The creation of the knowledge economy was supported by key policy developments. The Bologna agreement, signed on the 19th June 1999 had the aim of developing "*A Europe of knowledge*" to enhance European citizenship and underpin peaceful democracy (European Commission, 1999). This was followed in 2000 with the publication of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* embedding Europe in the knowledge age. The Commission defined lifelong learning as:

> *"all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence"* (European Commission, 2000).

The Memorandum also stated that lifelong learning must become the core principle behind which all education and training provision is delivered (European Commission, 2000). The challenge then is for education and training to provide for this reality and to allow the

individual learner make lifelong learning possible. In 2006 Andrew McDowell, Chief Economist for Forfas outlined how knowledge and knowledge creation was a key driver of economic growth (McDowell, 2006). It follows then that the resulting drive to increase and widen participation in higher education would be supported by all levels of society. RPL has a key role in this context to facilitate entry and/or to formally acknowledge relevant prior learning and incentivize the learner through the awarding of credit.

The increase in participation in Higher Education is significant and is a key driver for the growing importance of RPL. It is expected that the number of full-time students enrolled in Higher Education will increase by almost a third between 2009 and 2018, in 2009 there were 62,200 graduates from this sector (Department of Education and Skills, 2010).

1.8.2 Globalization

Knowledge is more highly valued than ever in the context of global economic systems within which higher education plays a key role (Marginson & van-der-Wende, 2007). The globalisation of Higher Education reflects the reality of knowledge having no boundaries The increase in demand for and the broadening of participation within Higher Education will result in an increase in demand for RPL. The European University Association Trends 2010 reported on the broad reaching implications of globalization in Higher Education including the implementation of the National Frameworks. It considered the *"deep reaching change agenda"* that has been adopted by Higher Education (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Similarly, the European Higher Education Area highlights RPL as a key tool to significantly broaden participation in education. The ministers involved in the creation of the Bologna Process highlighted the *"vital contribution"* education will play in supporting the development of a Europe where creativity and innovation thrives (Official Bologna Process Website, 2009). RPL is a key instrument which will encourage the broadening of participation in Higher Education allowing individuals return to and accelerate within the learning system.

1.8.3 Changing profile of the learner

As participation in Higher Education broadens there will be a steady increase in the number of mature students. The current level of 13% of the proportion of mature students within the broader student population is expected to reach 25% by the year 2022 (Department of Education and Skills, 2010).   A range of initiatives, European and National will consolidate this trend, however the exact uptake is difficult to quantify in a time of recession where migration and emigration has implications for those attending or taking up educational programmes (McNaboe & Condon, 2010).

1.8.4 Changing demands in education

The Expert Group on Future Skill Needs analysed student numbers for science and technology programmes in its report *'Monitoring Irelands Skills Supply, Trends in Education and Training Outputs, 2010' (McNaboe & Condon, 2010)*. The numbers of engineering students increased between 2008 and 2009 while courses related to the construction sector showed a significant decrease in 2009. This decrease reflected the collapse of the construction industry in Ireland. The numbers of students participating in computing and science related disciplines increased in the same period. At postgraduate level, the number of PhD enrolments increased for science and technology related areas in 2007-2008 (McNaboe & Condon, 2010). These changing profiles in student numbers are likely to continue in the context of high unemployment in the construction and retail sectors.

RPL has a significant role in such an environment. As described in *'Developing RPL in the Context of the National Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives'* RPL can be used to support the achievement of a more responsive *"demand led provision"* where education is attuned to the reskilling and training needs of employees; including an awareness of the knowledge, skills and competencies of workers within particular sectors. The report considered a scenario where provision can be fine tuned to meet particular regulatory requirements of staff for particular qualifications and how RPL might play a supporting role in such a case. The report also highlighted priority groups (the unemployed, those with low levels of qualifications, immigrants and older people) which could be targeted for RPL and upskilling (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2010).

In August 2010, an additional twelve million euro was made available for 5000 unemployed people to avail of additional education and training (Qualifax NQAI, 2010). These Labour Market Activation (LMA) initiatives have brought a new stream of students to Higher Education. In the following two years, the Government led Springboard Initiative has continued to provide free access to HE for the unemployed (Springboard, 2012). A large number of this cohort would have previously worked for a number of years and would be eligible candidates for RPL within a programme where the previous learning was relevant. RPL has been highly successful in this context and a number of the candidates have availed of the option.

1.8.5 Role of National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in promoting lifelong learning in Ireland

The NFQ and education frameworks in general play a key role in promoting lifelong learning. A framework of qualifications provides a way of comparing qualifications (National Framework of Qualifications, 2011). The structure provides a simple description of the education system making it easier to understand from the perspective of an individual or the employer. The learner is enabled in accessing education when and where in life it is appropriate. It could be argued that RPL and lifelong learning are inextricably linked as emphasized by Sean O'Foughlu in 2003 when he outlined his *"vision for the recognition of learning;"* one where learning is seen as a process that happens over a lifetime (NQAI, 2003a). RPL plays a key role in a society where individuals access the learning system over a lifetime depending on their needs.

1.8.6 Role of significant projects

Nationally, a number of projects have served to act as drivers of RPL. Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) projects ran from 2006 – 2013 and were worth €510 million. The fund was created to allow collaboration and innovation in teaching and learning in Higher Education and to foster access and lifelong learning (Higher Education Authority, 2006). The

'*Education in Employment*' project focused on providing access routes to education for those already in employment but who were seeking upskilling opportunities requiring a flexible responsive approach from higher education. The project team created a model of education delivery that was supportive of the circumstances of the learner (Education in Employment Project, 2009). The project had four complimentary strands: RPL; work based learning; progression of craftspersons and ethnic minorities in the workforce. However the work on the RPL strand was significant in that it served as a catalyst to reinforce the practice of the communities of institutes and universities involved in the area. The resulting reports and symposia strengthened this (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

A second project Roadmap for Employer-Academic Partnership (REAP), was funded under the second round of the SIF programme. There were eight partners in this project who worked to identify the learning needs of workers and draw up a partnership between employers and Higher Education which was responsive to these needs (Higher Education Authority, 2008). RPL is a central theme underpinning this collaboration between learners, Higher Education and the workplace facilitating learner advancement and enabling formal recognition of learning. These projects served to further the cause of RPL in Ireland in the timeframe 2006-2013.

1.8.7 Legislative pressure

Changes in legislation have also served to act as drivers of RPL today. As the workforce becomes increasingly more streamlined and new legislation is introduced there is pressure on the individual to achieve the necessary qualifications in order to obtain employment. The legislation also impacts those already in a job to maintain future employability. A recent report highlighted this occurrence when reporting that Fás, the National Training Authority had previously provided RPL in partnership with trade unions and employers for the retail and banking sector (*Expert Group on Future Skill Needs*, 2010).

In addition to changes in workplace legislation, changes in legislation supporting the provision of Higher Education have served to significantly impact the demand for RPL.

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is a key area of policy interest across Europe and relates directly to the establishment of the two European Frameworks and the national frameworks behind them. The establishment of the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF - LLL) and the *Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) have RPL as a central theme within, and have served to highlight it (European Commission, 2011*a*). National frameworks have followed suit, resulting in a Higher Education sector which must deliver RPL in a responsive, timely manner. In 2005, the NQAI published '*Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* (NQAI, 2005). There is an increasing demand for RPL resulting from this publication and a growing awareness that in a time of change RPL is a central provision which will be used appropriately by Higher Education to accommodate the needs of the learner.

1.9 Introduction to the structure of this thesis

This thesis is set out in the following manner. It begins with a literature review and is followed by the actual enactment of the research; then results and discussion of the findings.

The literature review begins with a consideration of what RPL is and that then follows with an exploration of reflection and how it relates to the area of RPL case preparation. Chapter 4 considers how to harness the emerging web based technologies to support the student with the preparation of their prior learning. Chapter 5 focuses on lifelong learning then the area of valuing learning and how it might support RPL case preparation. Finally chapter six reviews e portfolios; what they are and how they might be used to support RPL and lifelong learning.

The enactment of the research begins by taking us through the steps of capturing what RPL case preparation was like in 2011 followed by an exploration of reflection as relates to the area. The later steps included the upgrading of the Institute website for RPL followed by its evaluation; the addition of a valuing learning page follows and final two steps involved the

trialling of e portfolios and then the evaluation of this trial. Finally, the results and discussion are presented in the latter part of the thesis.

Chapter 2

Recognition of Prior Learning

- explains what is RPL is and the benefits of RPL

Chapter 3

Reflection

- why reflection is important for RPL case preparation

Chapter 4

Harnessing technology for RPL case preparation

- exploration of how technology can help support the student

Chapter 5

Lifelong learning and valuing learning

- why lifelong learning is important
- exploration of the concept of valuing learning

Chapter 6

Using e portfolios to scaffold RPL case preparation

- consideration of e portfolios for RPL case preparation and as instruments to support the lifelong learning mindset

Chapter 7

Methodology

- explaination of the approach used to guide this research

Chapter 8

Enactment of Research within this footprint.

My question is how to better support the student with their task as they prepare an RPL case ?

Figure 1.1: *Overview of the literature review and the research*

Chapter 2   Recognition of Prior Learning and Experiential Learning Theory

2.1 Introduction to RPL

Learning occurs throughout a lifetime and people accumulate knowledge, skills and competencies through formal education in addition to more informal activities such as training at work or through involvement with community and voluntary groups. Traditionally, formal learning leads to a primary qualification whereupon an individual obtains work. However changes in how we live and work and the emerging knowledge economy have resulted in a renewed emphasis on lifelong and lifewide learning.

Globally, the establishment of the education frameworks have resulted in greater transparency of qualifications across nations encouraging broader participation in Higher Education (Bjornavold, 2007; National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2010; Werequin, 2010*b*).

Recognition of Prior Learning refers to a process where prior learning is given a value (NQAI, 2005). It is known by a number of terms throughout the world and it is defined in various ways (see this chapter Table 2.1); all include the idea that it is the assessment of learning prior to a particular point. RPL is a general term which encompasses all types of prior learning. Recognition is the process where learning is given value. Prior Learning is all learning which has taken place prior to entering a programme or seeking an award (NQAI, 2005).

In 2000, the European Commission's '*Memorandum on Lifelong Learning'* emphasised the importance of lifelong learning stating it is no longer one aspect of education provision but that it must become the *"guiding principle"* for participation in education across the broadest *"continuum of learning contexts".* The Memorandum outlined the importance of education and training within the context of rapid changes in how we live and work and the importance of keeping up with these innovations (European Commission, 2000).

According to the Memorandum, individuals have the right to choose the learning pathway suited to themselves rather than a predetermined route. This encourages the individual to return to education over a lifetime for a variety of reasons personal; work related or for reasons depending on the stage of life (European Commission, 2000).

Hence, significantly now, policy is supporting and encouraging an individual's learning path. This will facilitate the individual to take a lifelong learning approach; accessing the formal system when needed throughout a lifetime, while allowing for non formal and informal learning to be accredited through RPL. The Memorandum, categorised learning as formal, non-formal and informal. The following figure is adapted from this.

Formal Learning

Occurs in accredited education and training Institutions; leading to recognised awards such as diplomas and degrees

Non Formal learning

Arises through training within the workplace or community based settings

Informal Learning

Unintentional learning arising from activities in the workplace, hobbies or those of a voluntary or community based capacity.

Fig. 2.1 *Categories of learning; adapted from the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (European Commission, 2000); *images from www.cit.ie/rpl/formsoflearning/*

RPL encourages lifelong learning and the return to education throughout a lifetime depending on an individual's needs. It may be formative (supporting a learning process but not leading to a qualification) or summative, leading to a qualification or to the award of credit (Duvekot, 2010). In Higher Education, summative RPL is further categorised into certified RPL or experiential RPL (NQAI, 2005). Certificated learning is learning that has previously formally accredited. On assessment, it can result in admission to a programme, advanced entry to a programme or the award of exemption(s) from module(s) on a programme (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009; Werequin, 2010*b*). Experiential learning is learning that has not previously been assessed or awarded credits. It is gained through life and work experiences and is often unintentional learning. On assessment it can be awarded credits and grades (NQAI, 2005).

2.2 The Origins of RPL

RPL emerged with the work of Morris Keeton amongst others in the USA in the 1970's (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006). The *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning* (CAEL) led the field in 1974, initially funded as a project by the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, to investigate the validity and reliability of assessing for college credit learning that had occurred outside the college classroom (Wertheim, 2011). The Educational testing service and CAEL was established in 1974 and was among the first organizations to consider prior learning assessment. CAEL set out standards for awarding credit through assessment and Morris Keeton was one of the first to promote experiential learning (Fiddler, *et al.,* 2006).

2.3 RPL is known by a variety of terms around the world

Recognising all forms of learning is a priority policy area for a number of organisations such as the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD), UNESCO, CEDEFOP and the European Commission. RPL is known by a number of terms throughout the world for example; Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL); Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL); Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL); Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement (APL & A); Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC); Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL); Learning Outside

Formal Teaching (LOFT); Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) which is used by the OECD. This variety of terms reflects the diversity of practices and traditions in existence regarding RPL. Recently, the OCED has stated that the use of various terms is to be accepted given the complexity of learning systems throughout the world and that standardisation of terms would only be necessary within a political entity (Werequin, 2010*b*).

Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa have been significant users and developers of RPL procedures and processes. In the United States of America, RPL has a long tradition and is known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the USA said it is *"earning college credit"* for learning gained in work and life and it acknowledges that adults bring their experiential learning with them into the classroom (Colvin, 2006). Even countries such as Trinidad & Tobago use the term PLAR and define it as:

> *"the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired by experience or exposure to a particular field of knowledge or occupation"* (National Training Assessment of Trinidad and Tobago, 2011)

In Canada, RPL has been used since the early 1990's in post secondary education (Aarts *et al.*, 2003) where it is known as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). A number of organizations regulate and support its delivery, namely the *Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment* (CAPLA), in existence since 1994 which operates across its states. There is, in addition to CAPLA the *Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning* (CIRL) an organisation dedicated to supporting ways of recognising learning arising from all activities (Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, 2012). Interestingly, the *Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials* (CICIC) reports widespread acceptance and use of PLAR at second and third level (Canadian Information Centre for Foreign Credentials, 2011). The *Canadian Institute for Recognising Learning* was established in 2003 and has published principles for PLAR implementation (Van-Kleef, 2011).

The *Australian Qualifications Framework* (AQF) was established in 1995 to support the provision of qualifications from each education and training sector under a comprehensive National Framework. The AQF defines RPL as *"an assessment process"* whereby relevant

prior learning is presented for credit (Australian Qualifications Council, 2011). In 2002 a report by Wheelahan and Miller considered RPL to be one which;

> *"assesses the individual's learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes or standards for entry to/or partial completion of a qualification"* (Wheelahan & Miller, 2002)

The *New Zealand Qualifications Framework* was launched in July 2010 replacing two earlier bodies, the *National Qualifications Framework* and the *Register of Quality Assured Qualifications* (KiwiQuals). Prior Learning and credit transfer is a central aspect of the framework which provides general information on what is entailed with recognition. The same standards apply to all learners within the Framework (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2012).

The *South African Qualifications Authority* (SAQA) replaced the older *National Qualifications Framework* which was set up at the birth of the South Africa as a nation in 1994. SAQA also has provision for RPL. The mission page of the website highlights the importance of people with *'flexible generalist'* or lifelong learning abilities. Recognition of Prior Learning is the term commonly used in South Africa (South African Qualifications Authority, 2012).

In Ireland, the *National Qualifications Authority of Ireland* (NQAI) stated *"Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value"* (NQAI, 2005). This process normally involves some form of assessment where the learner gains credit for this learning which may have been gained in a variety of ways either formally or through workplace training or through experiential learning within the workplace or in life generally.

The definitions in use are presented in Table 2.1, where organisations involved in RPL policy implementation at global and national level are selected.

Table 2.1 – *Definitions of RPL as presented by significant organisations*

Organisation	Definition
CAEL	"Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or the Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) to describe the process of earning college credit from learning acquired through work, training, volunteer experiences, and personal life. PLA helps students determine what they already know and what they still need to learn ... it recognizes that adults bring their personal and professional experiences to the classroom and that learning is a lifelong activity." (Colvin, 2006)
European Commission	"Formal learning is typically provided by education or training institutions, with structured learning objectives, learning time and learning support. It is intentional ... and leads to certification. Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional ... and has structured objectives. Informal learning results from daily activities related to work, family life or leisure. It is not structured and usually does not lead to certification.... It is unintentional on the part of the learner(European Commission, 2011*d*)
UNESCO	"The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience. ." (p. 85) (Visceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007)
CEDEFOP	Has separated the formative and summative aspects of RPL and terms such as the identification and validation of non formal and informal learning. Validation is;"... based on the assessment of the individual's learning outcomes and may result in a certificate or diploma" (CEDEFOP, 2009).
NQAI	Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged...Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal routes" (NQAI 2005).
OECD	"Recognition of learning is the process of recording of achievements of individuals arising from any kind of learning in any environment; the process aims to make visible an individual's knowledge and skills so that they can combine and build on learning achieved and be rewarded for it." (OECD, 2004)
AQF	"an assessment process that involves an assessment of an individual's relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual application for credit."(Australian Qualifications Council, 2011)
CAPLA	"identification and measurement of skills and knowledge acquired outside formal educational institutions. Assessments are most often used to grant academic credit or determine eligibility to practice a trade or profession. Recognition is based on an assessment of skills and knowledge obtained through work and other life experiences. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition may also include determination of future goals and individual training needs."(Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2011)
SAQA	"the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements." (South African Qualifications Authority, 2012)

In general, the definitions presented by the various organisations comply with the spirit of recognition for prior learning irrespective of how it was gained. The *European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training* (CEDEFOP) acknowledged the complexities involved with the use of terminology and in 2009 opted to separate the formative and summative aspects of RPL by referring to the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. CEDEFOP stated the identification of non-formal and informal learning to be a process which makes the individuals learning visible (CEDEFOP, 2009); they then went onto say the validation of non-formal and informal learning is based on the assessment of the persons learning outcomes and possibly results in a formal award (CEDEFOP, 2009).

In conclusion, although RPL is known by a number of terms throughout the world, reflected in the diversity of approaches and terminology used, it is well represented as a reality within Higher Education provision. As stated by Patrick Werequin of the OECD in 2010, RPL encourages people to return to education and is a valuable tool for the labour market allowing a,

> *"Shift of attention from pedagogy to assessment in knowledge transmission has potentially large implications for practice which should be fully considered"* (Werequin, 2010).

2.4 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is learning which is gained in non-formal and informal settings or; *"Education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life"* (Houle, 1980). It is learning that is achieved through reflection on everyday experiences. Often it is unplanned and incidental to another task. Experiential learning is significant in that it has never been assessed before and in an age of lifelong learning where the learner may return to education it may acquire a new significance when relevant to an area of study. Experiential Learning is also known as Non-Formal and Informal Learning. The process of giving formal recognition to this type of learning is described by the OECD as Recognition of Prior Non-formal and Informal learning (RNFIL).

2.5 Models or theories of experiential learning

David Kolb and Roger Fry made a significant contribution to experiential learning theory when they created a model out of four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation on that experience, making abstract concepts from the experience and testing again in new situations (Kolb & Fry, 1975).
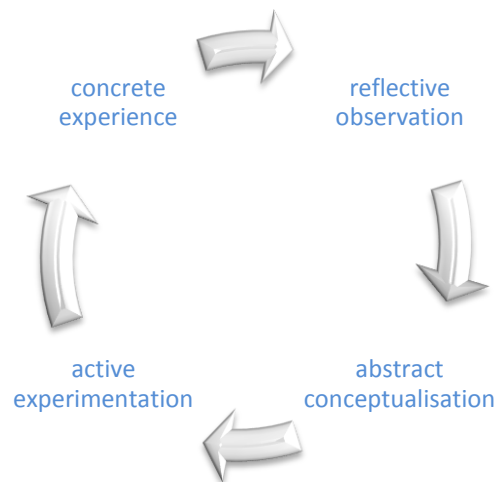
Fig 2.2 *Kolb's Learning Cycle* (David Kolb, 1984)

Kolb presented three models of the experiential learning process citing John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. He evaluated their common characteristics in order to define experiential learning (David Kolb, 1984). Kolb's work explored how an individual makes sense of real life experiences and the different styles of learning that may be involved. The cycle can begin at any point, however the process normally begins with a particular action and then the individual looks at the effect of the action in a particular situation. He described how experience changes the learning process; "*Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*" (David Kolb, 1984). He stressed that the emphasis was on *"the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to the content or outcomes"* (Kolb, 1984) and that *"knowledge is a transformation process being continually created and recreated"* (Kolb, 1984).

The work of Kurt Lewin formed the basis of Kolb's model where learning is a four stage cycle and experience formed the basis for reflection. This, in turn, informed the establishment of

new theories which were tested in new situations. The *'here-and-now concrete experience'* (Kolb, 1984) is emphasised to test abstract concepts and any action research is based on feedback processes. The process is shown below:

concrete
experience

observations and
reflections

formation of
abstract concepts
and
generalisations

testing
implications of
concepts in new
situations
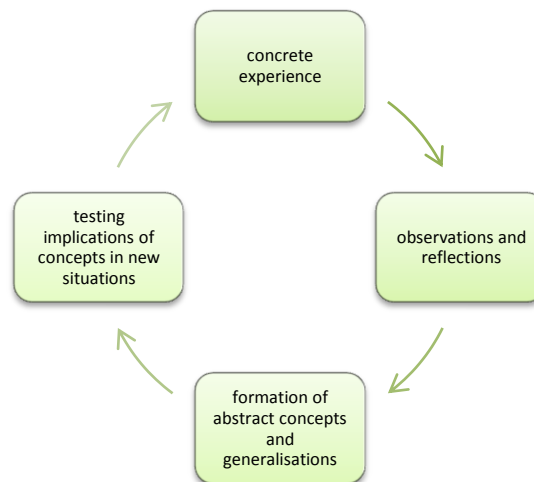
Fig 2.3 *Adapted from the Experiential Learning Model of Lewin* (DA Kolb, 1984).

A major influence on Kolb's work was Dewey who challenged educators to develop programmes that would not be isolated from real life experience (Dewey, 1938). His work was to later influence Kolb and Fry (Kolb & Fry, 1975).   Dewey stated that learning needs structure and order and must be based on a clear theory of experience. His theory of experience outlined two central themes, those of continuity and interaction. Continuity related to the idea that humans are affected by experience and that we learn something from every experience and build upon them over a lifetime. The other theme of interaction explains how past experience can interact with the present situation resulting in every person having a unique experience as a result.

> *"What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue"* (Dewey, 1938).

Dewey believed that education should be about realising one's full potential having the ability to use those skills for the greater good. He established that having an experience does not necessarily mean that a good learning opportunity occurs,

"The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938).

Dewey's model is similar to that of Lewin but he further developed the feedback process. The model is shown below:
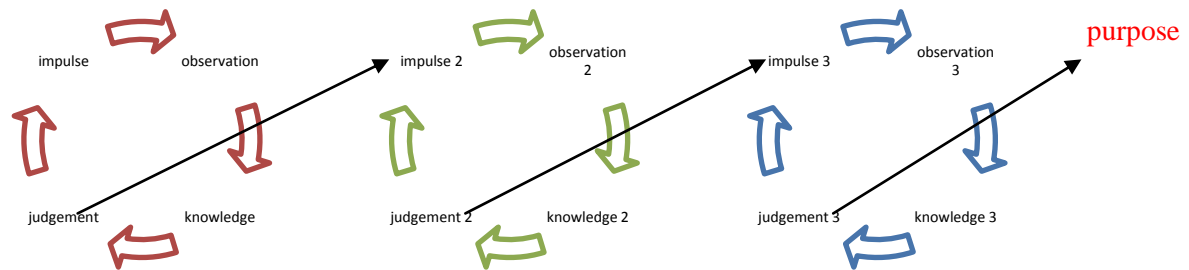
Fig. 2.4 *Dewey's Model of Learning* (DA Kolb, 1984)

The emphasis is on learning as a *"process which integrates experience and concepts observations and action"* (Kolb, 1984). He described how mature purpose develops from blind impulse and how each cycle of impulse, observation, knowledge and judgement develop as a result of the previous experience.

In describing the work of Piaget, Kolb outlined his four major stages of cognitive growth, from birth to the age of 14-16. Piaget's model reflected these four major stages of cognitive development. For Piaget,

"experience and concept, reflection, and action form the basic continua for the development of adult thought" (Kolb, 1984).

As a result of the similarities amongst the models, Kolb made a number of conclusions. They are outlined in Figure 2.5.
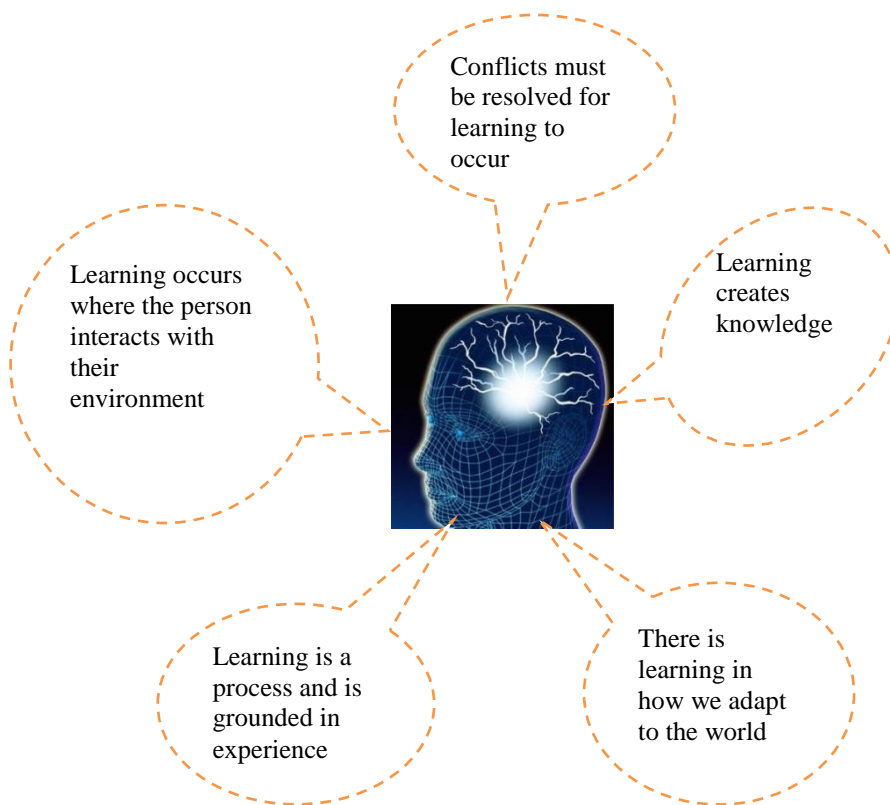
Fig. 2.5 *Adapted from Kolb's conclusions on the similarities between the models of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget* (Kolb, 1984).

Kolb concluded that learning occurs when experience is transformed into knowledge (Kolb, 1984). He emphasised the importance of the *"process of adaptation and learning,"* as opposed to content or outcomes and that the transformation of knowledge is a continuous, ever evolving process where reflection on an experience plays a central role in identifying what was learned in any situation.

Carl Rogers also made a significant contribution to the theory of experiential learning with his book "*Freedom to Learn in the 80's*" (Rogers, 1983). He recognised two types of learning: cognitive (memorising formula, tables etc.) and experiential (knowledge from doing). His work influenced the development of student-centred teaching and experiential education where the teacher is facilitator. He outlined the conditions where experiential learning can occur as those where the student is actively engaged and interacting with a task, can direct the learning process and where self-evaluation to assess learning is used. In

his earlier edition of *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers devoted a chapter on '*Methods of Building Freedom*' where the conditions for self-initiated, self-directed learning can be encouraged. Amongst the methods discussed was programmed instruction as experiential learning. Self-evaluation was another method discussed. He stated that *'the evaluation of one's own learning is one of the major means by which self-initiated learning becomes also responsible learning'* and that a person only *"truly learns to take responsibility for himself and his directions,"* when he can evaluate his own learning and goals and the extent to which he has achieved them. Thus for Rogers, the ability to reflect on ones learning and to evaluate it is a key skill for the self-directed learner (Rogers, 1969*a*, 1969*b*).

Jarvis further developed Kolb's experiential learning theory by developing a more complex model showing that there can be several responses to a learning situation (Jarvis, 1995). He categorised possible outcomes of the learning process as non-learning, non-reflective and reflective learning.

2.6 RPL in Higher Education

RPL is now commonly offered across Higher Education providers across Europe, America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It allows for the recognition of prior formal, non formal and informal learning at an appropriate point on an educational framework for non standard admissions; for advanced entry onto a programme; or for credits within a programme of study.

Briefly, the Irish Higher Education system is predominantly publically funded and operates under the legislative umbrella of the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF). In terms of scale there were 145,690 full time students in 2009 and 39,278 part-time students producing over 35,000 graduates (Higher Education Authority, 2010). The following policy framework applies. The Universities operate under the *National University of Ireland* and are governed by the *Universities Act of 1997* ("Universities Act 1997," 1997)   The Institutes of Technology are governed by the *Qualifications (Education & training Act) 1999* ("Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999," 1999). The *Qualifications (Education & Training Act) 1999* also established the *National Qualifications Authority of Ireland* (NQAI).
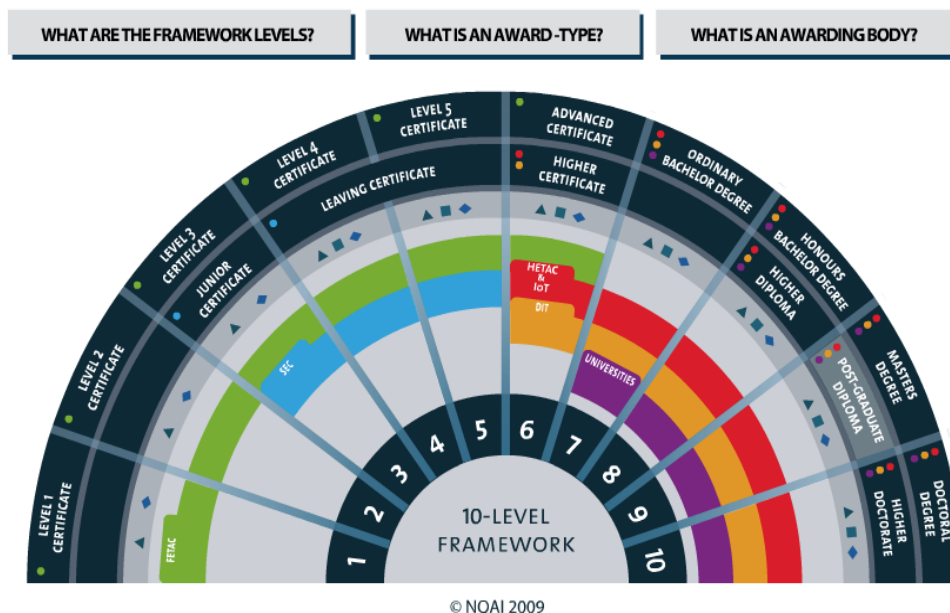
Fig. 2.6 *Levels of Learning on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications* (National Framework of Qualifications, 2010)

The Universities and Institutes of Technology operate in parallel with each other but with distinct and complementary roles. On the 6th November 2012, the *NQAI*, *Higher Education & Training Awards Council* (HETAC), *Further Education & Training Awards Council* (FETAC) and the *Irish Universities Quality Board* (IUQB) were amalgamated under the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012)* to form *Quality & Qualifications Ireland* ("Quality & Qualifications Ireland,," 2012). RPL is specifically provided for within this framework which articulates within the *EQF* and the *Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area*.

2.7 Benefits of RPL

The benefits of RPL can be considered in terms of whether it is summative, formative or generic RPL.

The formative approach to RPL supports career development. It relates to the interaction between an individual and the workplace. A careful mapping process or learning plan can clarify an individual's hopes for the future whether it is future employment or additional educational attainment. This approach was highlighted in Duvekot's *"lifelong learning in the L3 triangle"* (Duvekot, 2010).

In the summative approach, where prior learning is assessed for credits, RPL offers an alternative route to formal qualifications. RPL relates to the interaction between an individual and the Higher Education provider. The benefits of RPL used in a summative manner are many and include the fact that a value is put on prior learning. It is a formal acknowledgement of the value of this learning. This formal recognition is a confidence boost for the individual learner. In addition, RPL can offer real time saving advantages to the student who does not have to learn anything twice and can focus on other areas of their coursework or life demands as necessary. It is now possible to obtain a full award through RPL; such an award is based on 100% experiential learning.

As stated by Duvekot in 2010, RPL can work as a '*matchmaker*' between the upskilling needs of the labour system and how the learning system can respond to meet these needs. The EQF and National Frameworks articulate the learning outcomes and RPL links these academic terms to real-life *"function-profiles from the labour system"* (Duvekot, 2010). The interaction between the two systems (generic RPL) supports the operation of summative and formative RPL. Generic RPL offers protection for Higher Education providers (actual documentation, policy and procedures and through which the process must operate) and the labour system (in terms of employees complying with legislation). RPL, when established in a sector, results in a community of practitioners and support between providers. The recent Irish Education in Employment SIF funded project illustrated how through the initial impetus of funding that practice was established and the benefits of

strength in one Institute were shared and developed with others for society's greater benefit (Davies, 2010).

The benefits of RPL are many and they are presented in literature around the world. According to Qualifax, the Irish national learners database, the benefits of RPL include the acknowledgement of the learners knowledge as valuable and relevant, it provides for entry for non traditional students to third level, it is a confidence boost to the individual and allows for shorter timespan to achieve a qualification (Qualifax NQAI, 2011).

In 2010, the OECD presented the benefits of RPL in terms of benefits for employers, governments, for the individual and for education providers/awarding bodies (Werequin, 2010*b*). This was summarised in a Government report from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. This summary is presented in Appendix A.

RPL is well established in Australia. Amongst the material used to promote it is a toolkit for volunteers in the community sector where the benefits of RPL are outlined in terms of it being an access mechanism for further studies and that it allows for formal acknowledgement of life skills (National Volunteer Skills Centre, 2006). There are various approaches from around the world to present RPL to eligible candidates. The following themes are common to all, namely that: RPL acknowledges the value of learning regardless of how it was gained. It encourages access for '*non-traditional'* students, it eliminates unnecessary repetition, it can shorten the time necessary to complete a qualification, it encourages lifelong learning and enhances the self-esteem of the learner (Werequin, 2010*a*). These benefits are tangible to the individual; the workforce and to the education provider and suitable in the context of the establishment of the qualification frameworks and policies resulting from them.

In Ireland the '*National Skills Strategy'* presented an ambitious vision of the labour market in 2020 where 48% of the labour force having qualifications at levels 6-10 on the NFQ and where 45 % have qualifications at levels 4 to 5 and where the remaining 7% would have levels 1 to 3 (Forfas, 2007). A recent report stated that RPL is highly relevant in terms of facilitating the National Skills Strategy (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2010). RPL can

make a real difference in terms of labour market activation and can contribute to the provision for future skill needs of the workforce.

2.8 The Importance of learning outcomes

Recent policy updates have resulted in education focusing on a learning outcomes approach (European Commission, 2011*c*). This is significant in that an outcomes based approach acts as an enabler of RPL and such systems that allow for the accreditation of non formal and informal learning. The *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* focuses on the results of a learning process, or the achievement of learning outcomes, which can be achieved through formal, non-formal or informal means as opposed to the length of time of a programme of study. Therefore, when validating formal, non-formal or informal learning it is the achievement of learning outcomes which is at the core of the process (European Commission, 2011*d*). Programmes are written in terms of learning outcomes. Achieving the learning outcomes is a requirement of any student regardless of the assessment method in order to gain the required credits.

In the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF), a learning outcome is defined as a statement of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process (European Commission, 2008). The following table (2.2) outlines the definitions of knowledge, skills and competence according to the EQF:

Table 2.2: *EQF Definitions of Knowledge, Skills & Competence* (European Commission, 2008).

Knowledge	means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual;
Skills	the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)
Competence	the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy

RPL encourages a change in emphasis from that of knowledge input to assessment of outcomes which will have huge implications for the labour market in terms of lifelong learning and the education system in terms of supporting this shift (Werequin, 2010).

2.8 Summary of chapter

This chapter considered various terminology and definitions of RPL around the world today followed by an exploration of the theory of experiential learning. It followed with a discussion on the benefits of RPL. RPL has been promoted as a key feature which supports education providers respond to demands to broaden access and provide a flexible responsive approach to learner and workplace needs.

The benefits of RPL are many and range from recognising lifelong learning, improving morale, increasing access to education and encouraging the standardisation of training for the volunteer sector. Various organisations have quite rightly categorised the benefits in terms of the workplace, the individual, the learning organisation and others such as education providers and governments. RPL is a very relevant aspect of provision for HE today. The chapter finishes by highlighting the importance of a learning outcomes approach to assessment.

Chapter 3

Reflection; Why it Matters

Fig. 3.1 *The pensive; an instrument for*

sorting out jumbled thoughts

and examining them

one at a time

(Rowling, 2000)

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical roots of reflection and the major contributors to the field are considered here. Definitions of reflection are explored and then reflection is linked to the core of RPL case preparation. It explains why reflection is central to the process of preparing a learning portfolio. The chapter finalises with an exploration of how to encourage reflection in a practical way while building a prior learning case.

3.2 Theoretical roots of reflection and definitions

An ability to reflect is central to RPL case preparation. To be able to reflect on a task is the ability to concentrate on something and give it careful consideration. *'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire'* has been quoted (Miller, Divall, & Maloney, 2012), where Dumbledore mentioned a stone basin; "the pensive;" to Harry, as an instrument for reflection where jumbled thoughts can be sorted and examined one at a time; saying:

> *"it becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form"* (Rowling, 2000).

Reflection involves looking carefully at something and separating out the strands or themes of a problem or thought to be considered. The field of reflection is significantly informed by the work of John Dewey, Paulo Friere, Donald Schon and David Kolb. Any definition of

reflection should begin with a consideration of the input of these authors. More recently Jennifer Moon and Nona Lyons have made interesting contributions to the area and so their work will be explored here too.

John Dewey considered reflection as a mode of thinking; it is to have an awareness of the actions that need to be carried out next;

> *"the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration"* (Dewey, 1930)

Dewey said reflection included the following states;

> *"doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty in which thinking originates and an act of searching, hunting, inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt, and dispose of the perplexity"* (Dewey, 1930).

Reflection is a messy process then, one without a clear or defined path, a process through which one must give time and consideration to in order to question and challenge oneself so as to come up with a solution to a situation or problem. Reflective thinking has a purpose and a conclusion and that it leads to enquiry; this in turn leads to the person seeking evidence to support the outcome (Dewey, 1930). He maintained that attitudes mattered too and that it is important to be open minded, free from prejudice and whole hearted with the enquiry.

Paulo Friere defined learning as having both active and passive (or reflective) components. Friere maintained that a person learns by doing or constructing and also by thinking or reflecting about these activities. He maintained that new learning arises out of the combination of action and reflection of *'praxis'*. He considered reflection as an "*interrogation of the political, social, cultural contexts of learning and living,*" resulting in a critical awareness or inquiry (Lyons, 2010*b*). It was his belief that education was never a neutral process that it was influenced by the broader social and cultural contexts within which it was delivered. His work has informed how we look at or read society today and the influences to which we are all subjected to. His major works were *'Pedagogy of Oppressed'* (Friere, 1972) and the *'Politics of Education'* (Friere, 1985). He believed that we bring our own experiences and learning with us to the education process and this frames what we learn and how we place this knowledge. It was also his belief that we should act to

challenge our realities and reflect as to how we can transform society through further action and reflection.

Donald Schon acknowledged his connection to the work of Dewey and considered reflection as a *'way of knowing'*. His work considered the theory and practice of learning and his contribution includes *'reflection on action;' 'reflection-in-action'* and *'double loop learning'*. By *'reflection on action'* he maintains that one reflects back on a particular situation or action in order to distil lessons learned from that event or happening. In contrast *'reflection-in-action'* assists us as the task is being completed. It is that workspace that allows us to adjust or tweak something as one works on it if it doesn't seem right. It is purposeful in that the adjustments must bring about the right action. It is the skill of *'thinking on your feet'* and reacting accordingly when new or unexpected events happen;

> *"The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour"* (Schon, 1983).

With *'reflection-in-action'* practitioners try to solve unexpected happenings *'on the spot'* and will adjust their verbal language to clarify a point or change their behaviour to accommodate an unexpected happening and try to resolve these as they emerge. It takes a working knowledge of an area to have this ability to combine various elements or components of a problem and transform them to arrive at a working solution (Schon, 1983). These ideas have been influential and are widely supported. Finally double loop learning was another key contribution to the theory of reflection and arose from Schon's collaboration with Chris Argyris (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Double loop learning is the attempt by an individual or organisation to repeatedly solve a problem, changing the approach with each attempt and trying again until the problem is solved. Single loop learning on the other hand is where the individual or organisation makes several attempts to solve the problem but varying nothing each time, just repeating the attempt. This thesis has evolved through an action research spiral with reflection as a central part of the process informing the next step through a consideration of the overall picture in order to improve how RPL is supported. The reflective element is core to the process and allowing for it has revealed valuable insight.

Reflection is a key element to David Kolb's experiential learning cycle who was influenced by the work of Dewey (David Kolb, 1984). To make sense of an experience we must consider the previous events and attempt to make sense of them. This reflective step is where we consider the information or experience and transform it through actively experimenting as to what to do next; then form a plan for the next step which takes into account this information.

concrete
experience

reflective
observation

active
experimentation

abstract
conceptualisation
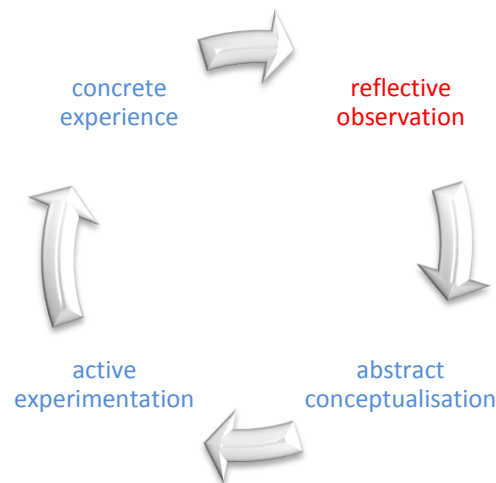
Fig. 3.2 *Kolb's learning cycle* (David Kolb, 1984)

A more recent contributor to the field of reflection is Jennifer Moon who considers reflection as a type of process which relates to a set of ideas:

> *"a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex set of unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution"*
> (Moon, 1999*a*, 1999*b*; Watton, Collings, & Moon, 2001)

Nona Lyons work in *'The Handbook of Reflection and Reflective Enquiry'* provides significant contributions from academics around the world (Lyons, 2010*b*). The text underlines the importance of reflective practice in today's uncertain world of banking crises, financial market collapse, where former pillars of democracy are dealing with new uncertainties. Nona Lyons cited the works of Dewey, Schon and Friere when defining reflection and presented them in an interpretative framework linking the ideas of each theorist into one construct. In a previous work Nona Lyons and Vicki la Boskey defined reflection as something that was done intentionally either alone or with others to investigate something in order to understand it better; it looks at past events and into the future and that there is

normally a narrative aspect to the act *"and it often raises ethical issues for the people involved"* (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

3.3 Models of reflection

There are different models of reflection presented in the literature. Some models are based on Blooms taxonomy (B. Bloom, 1964) and others are based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle (David Kolb, 1984). Some of the models describe stages to getting into the reflective mode from descriptive to reflective; each level or stage becoming progressively more contemplative or searching (Watton, *et al.*, 2001). The models based on Kolb's learning cycle tend to be circular reflecting his work.

Benjamin Bloom identified different levels within the processes of thinking which he presented in terms of increasing complexity from simple recall to the higher levels of evaluation and creation (B. Bloom, 1964). He set out to classify educational goals and objectives with the *Convention of the American Psychological Association*. Their aim was to classify levels of thinking to better understand the learning process. The result was a classification or taxonomy of three categories: the cognitive (knowledge based); the affective (based on attitudes) and the psychomotive (based on skills). The cognitive domain had six levels and Bloom provided six definitions of learning ability ranging from simple recall to more complex such as evaluation. The levels are described as knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and creation (B. Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). The most basic level is knowledge acquisition or simple recall. Each level is increasingly more developed.

Fig. 3.3 *Blooms taxonomy of learning outcomes* (Bloom *et al.* 1956)

This approach is still widely used today when preparing learning outcomes in curriculum design. Blooms taxonomy provides a tool to measure learning and has been updated to better reflect the modern world (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, & Cruikshank, 2001). In the updated version the top two layers have been interchanged.

Fig. 3.4 *Updated version of Blooms taxonomy* (Anderson, *et al.*, 2001)

Table 3.1 *Revised model of Bloom's taxonomy based on Anderson & Krathwohl's work in 2001* (Forehand, 2010).

Creating	Put elements together in a new form
Evaluating	Make judgements and critique
Analysing	Break material into parts, organise or recombine
Applying	Carry out or use a procedure, implement
Understanding	Interpret, classify, summarise, compare and explain information
Remembering	Recognise and recall facts

These levels have been adapted and used as a framework to support reflection.   An example of this would be Peter Pappas taxonomy of reflection which poses questions useful at every level (Pappas, 2010). This is included on the Google sites website (Barrett, 2012). The questions posed should generally support or guide the reflective process and encourage deeper exploration of ideas and values.

What should I do next ?	
Create	What should I do next ?
Evaluate	How well did I do ?
Analyze	Do I see any patterns in what I did ?
Apply	Where could I use this again ?
Understand	What was important about it ?
Remember	What did I do ?
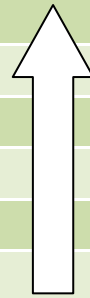
Fig. 3.5 *Peter Pappas taxonomy of reflection* (Pappas, 2010)

Gibbs model of reflection is based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. It outlines six stages and poses a question for each one (Gibbs, 1988). Again these questions are intended to lead the person in the reflective process.
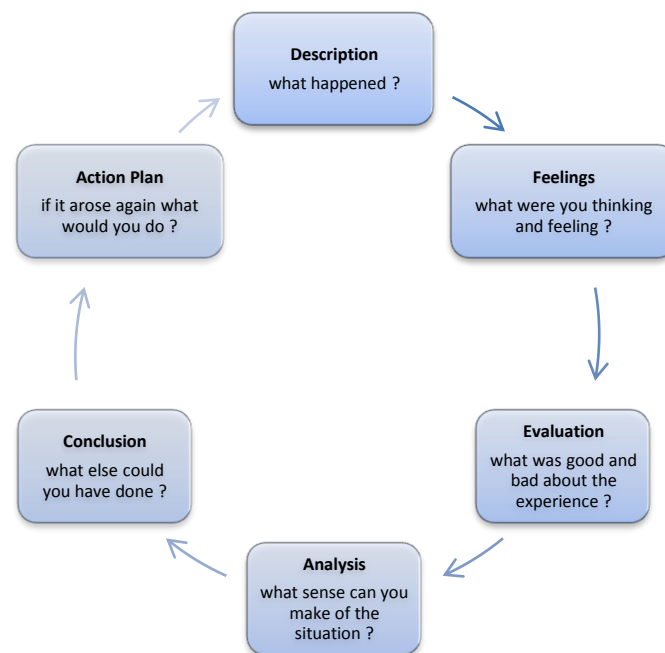
Fig. 3.6 *Gibb's model of reflection* (Gibbs, 1988)

According to Dewey, there were five phases to reflection. These were explored by Nona Lyons in 2010 who stated the first one is *"suggestions, in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution"* the second one where the problem is felt or experienced; the third a suggestion to solve it; the fourth where the idea is explored and the fifth the hypothesis is tested (Lyons, 2010*b*).

In *"Reflection in Teacher Education"* Hatton and Smith propose sequential levels of reflection that go from non reflective to critical reflection. The first level is descriptive writing where the text provides a straightforward account of the events in question, remaining descriptive and setting out the context but it does not consider or question any aspect. The second level is descriptive writing with some reflection. The written piece is mostly descriptive in nature however there is some analysis of events contained within. The third level of reflective writing is that of Reflective or Dialogic Reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995). In this mode, there is a sense of the person stepping back from events and a sense of them considering and discussing events from a number of perspectives; there is evidence of building on prior experiential learning and making links between events. The deepest level of reflection is critical reflection and this piece of writing will present text where the person can stand back from events taking a metacognitive stance; the reflection will be self questioning and consider their prior experience in light of the event. There will be narrative discourse and they will consciously frame the issue within the wider social/cultural/historical or political arena within which it is framed (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Descriptive
- sets the context
- describes what happened

Descriptive with some reflection
- mostly descriptive
- little analysis of events

Dialogic Reflection
- analyses elements
- questions and considers; willing to be critical or explore; stepping back; discourse with self

Critical Reflection
- metacognitive stance; emotions relate to writing; linking of ideas;
- multiple perspectives noted; conscious framing of ideas in wider social/cultural/political or historical arena

Fig. 3.7: *Levels of reflection adapted from Hatton and Smith* (Hatton & Smith, 1995)

Helen Barrett includes reflection in her Kolb based learning cycle on many of her presentations and website material (B. Barrett, 2010; Barrett, 2008, 2009, 2011*c*). The

model highlights the reality that reflection occurs in a number of cycles as events unfold. The reflection itself is influenced by what precedes it and adjusts or changes to take account of emerging information as it arises.
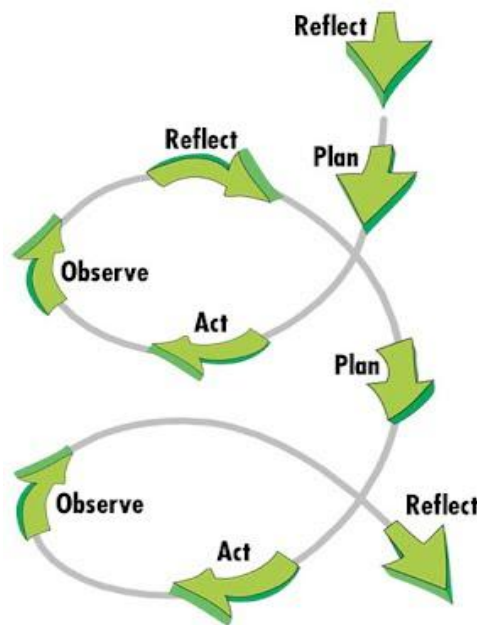
Fig. 3.8 *Barrett's Kolb based model of the learning cycle includes reflection* (Barrett, 2012)

In the 2005, *'White Paper Researching Electronic Portfolios and Learner Engagement'* Barrett referred to the work of James Zull who provided evidence that the learning cycle naturally reflects the actual structure of the brain (Barrett, 2005; Zull, 2002). Barrett continued by linking this proposal with the work of Jenny Moon who explored the importance of reflection in promoting actual deep and meaningful learning (Moon, 1999*b*). Moon elaborated on the tasks that promote reflection as those that are:

> "ill-structured, 'messy' or real life situations, asking the 'right' kinds of questions...tasks that demand the ordering of thoughts, tasks that require evaluation" (Moon, 1999*b*)

Her model of reflection has been adapted and used widely (King). There are seven stages, with the first three stages representing the basic steps, namely; 'purpose', 'basic observations' and 'additional information'(Moon, 1999*a*). The following four steps take the reflection to a deeper level and begin with 'revisiting', 'standing back' then 'moving on'. This can be revisited again as shown in the following diagram:
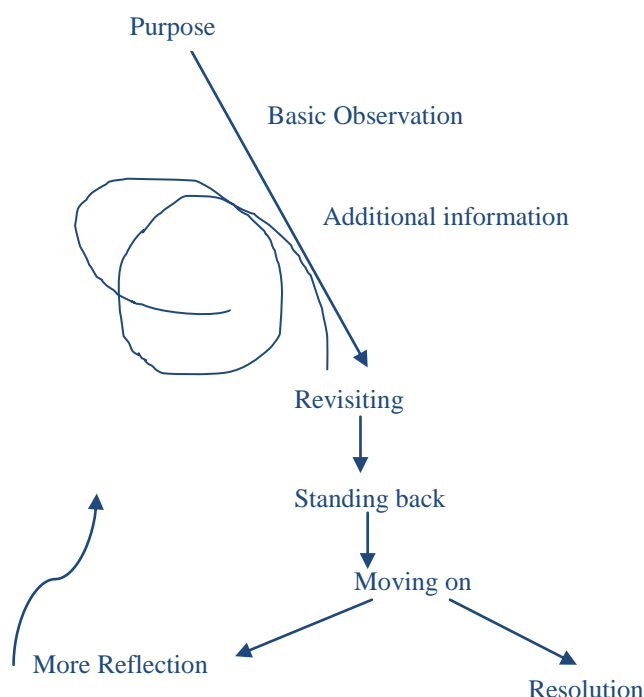
Fig. 3.9: *Stages of reflection, adapted from Moon* (Moon, 1999*a*)

3.4 Why reflection matters for RPL

Reflection is at the heart of preparing an RPL case. The very core of the task is building a portfolio to showcase knowledge, skills and competencies as they relate to a particular area of learning. This must be presented in such a way that an assessor can clearly see what the person is claiming credit for. So in practice they must present their work against a particular set of learning outcomes, normally they belong to a module(s); or a stage of a programme.

Clarity in case preparation requires careful reflection in order to present appropriate material against each learning outcome. Careful consideration needs to go into selecting appropriate evidence to support the claim. The individual needs to consider what they are including and what this piece of evidence shows about them. In all of this they have to keep the following criteria in mind; currency; sufficiency; validity, reliability and quantity.

The very act of portfolio preparation and compilation allows for reflection over the period of the task. If this is maintained over a longer period of time (maintaining a portfolio to

support a learning development plan, for formative purposes) it encourages the skills and habits that promote critical reflection (Zubizarreta, 2009).

The portfolio environment is one in which we must order and organise items or products that result from messy real life situations and present them with reflection as to how they are relevant or meaningful to a particular situation. This act promotes reflection as supported by Moon who highlighted tasks that demand putting order on thoughts, and tasks that require judgement or evaluation as those which actually promote reflective thought (Moon, 1999*b*).

In building an RPL case the candidate must reflect on previous experiences sift and select through their key learning events and consider what matters and why ? This internal discourse must be appropriately supported to result in good quality RPL cases for assessment in Higher Education.

3.5 How to encourage reflection with RPL case preparation

As reflection is a core aspect of RPL case preparation; supporting the ability to reflect appropriately is central to supporting good quality RPL provision for any college or Institute. Candidates need to be supported with their task to ensure they put together a properly documented case for assessment (Brown, 2012). This in turn should lend to them having a positive experience with RPL. Positive experience with the task in turn lends to the RPL service having a good reputation; which then in turn promotes RPL within a formal third level setting.

In a time of increasing demand for RPL with the number of cases being prepared steadily increasing in the past five years it has become essential to organise the provision in such a way that caters for this demand. RPL services are increasingly using the web to support its provision (Brown, 2011). Dr. Sara Leiste influenced this research with her paper on promoting a positive experience for RPL case preparation (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). The paper had a practitioner based viewpoint that I readily identified with. It presented practical steps on how best to use resources to help the learner and I could visualise how these steps would help in my workplace. Posting quality material online makes good use of

available resources. Using the internet to support RPL case preparation allows for a range of good quality support material to be readily available to students. It is possible to present examples of case preparation; video clips of what to do; testimonials of other students etc. can be made available to all (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012*a*). This material can be used as backup material for workshops where students are provided with a practical forum supporting their own preparation. As mentioned by Lyons, reflection does not come automatically or easily to many and students will benefit from support and training in class time to develop this reflective ability (Lyons, 2010*b*). Specific class time to work on reflection and build an understanding of what is required provides the students with the tools to become reflective practitioners (O'Leary & Goggin, 2010).

It is possible to provide a web space to specifically promote reflection within the act of prior learning case preparation. There are examples available (Barrett, 2012; Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2011; Brown, 2011; Kaemingk, 2008; SEEC, 2012). By articulating the how and why of case preparation it is possible to highlight to the candidate the reflective steps they should be considering as they gather and prepare their prior learning case. Such a space would be supportive and provide reassurance that they are on the right track with their preparations. Adult learners are task focused and benefit from real support (Leiste & Jensen, 2011; Moores & Parkes, 2010).

3.6 Summary of Chapter

This chapter considered definitions and theoretical roots of reflection. It briefly reviewed the work of John Dewey, David Kolb, Donald Schon and Paulo Friere and also that of Jenny Moon and Nona Lyons. The chapter considered how reflection is central to RPL case preparation, to support the learner with reflection while they are preparing their prior learning case.

Chapter 4
Harnessing Technology to Support RPL Case Preparation

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at how to use the internet and other web 2.0 tools to support RPL case preparation. The piece will begin with a consideration of how to promote a good experience for the student. This is followed with an exploration of what web supports could be most effective for the student as well as a consideration of the web as a sustainable resource that can support increasing numbers of users. The concept of e portfolios is introduced at the end of this chapter.

4.2 How we use technology is changing

The use of information technology and how an individual accesses information has had a huge impact on how we live, work and learn today. Learning has changed and how the learner engages with the process of learning has shifted to reflect these changes. These were summarised in 2007 by Dinevski and Psunder as follows:

"from linear to hypermedia learning

from instruction to construction and discovery

from teacher-centred to learner-centred education

from absorbing material to learning how to navigate and how to learn

from school to lifelong learning

from one-size-fits-all to customized learning

from learning as torture to learning as fun

from the teacher as transmitter to the teacher as facilitator"

Fig. 4.1 *How the learner engages with the process of learning; adapted from the work of Dinevski and Pšunder* (Dinevski & Pšunder, 2007).

Learning is more tailored to the needs of the learner now. RPL is highly relevant in this context where the learner is central and the education provider is responsive to the individuals changing needs over a lifetime of learning. Lifelong learning policy has resulted

in a broadening of the basis of provision to include increasingly diverse learning modes in Higher Education today. Amongst the many ways to access education today are flexible learning models; e-learning; distance learning; part-time modes; return to education initiatives; labour market activation and continuing professional development courses. Each of these approaches is designed to attract the non-traditional student who may have knowledge relevant to a particular field of learning and who would benefit from RPL.

4.3 Encourage a positive experience

People engaging with RPL tend to be the non traditional student with significant life experience. It is reasonably common for the returner to have previously had a poor experience with education and carry these misgivings with them. However the adult returning to education is purposeful and focused on the outcome of their actions. They see the bigger picture where they gain in a professional or personal way as a result of the programme they are enrolled on. This focus enables them to accept the gamble of returning to learning as one worth taking. Many within this cohort have previous qualifications or significant relevant life experience and so RPL becomes apparent to the learner as a suitable step to incorporate within their studies to free up time or to advance them within the programme where relevant modules or stages can be RPL'd and accounted for. Higher Education has embraced RPL as an instrument that supports lifelong learning and promotes the spirit of the education frameworks; that of mobility and transparency in learning, which is available over a lifetime. Within the context of returning to education; which is a huge experience in itself for the adult learner, RPL can be seen as a high stakes *'leap of faith'* to take. Providers must organise their RPL provision to be motivating and enable success (Leiste & Jensen, 2011).

Setting up an institutes infrastructure to provide efficient support with RPL is a core requirement in a time of change for education (Hunt, 2011). Once policy and procedures are in place there is still the significant task of building an efficient system where both the learner is guided through the process and staff are confident of their own ability and that of other colleagues to support such provision. The potential diversity of experiential learning is immense when considered in relation to the range and scope of the programmes delivered by an average Higher Education provider. However direct experience dealing with

experiential learning cases one at a time, as they arise, builds confidence and ability with the mentoring support and subsequent assessment required (O'Leary & Coughlan, 2011). The passage of time embeds RPL within Higher Education and it has become an accepted norm of regular provision. However this picture is complicated by economic recession, with the tightening of education finances in a time of increasing demand for RPL. In order to properly support RPL in a time of increasing demand it makes sense to harness the capabilities of the internet and web 2.0 to support RPL case preparation. Web 2.0 is that webspace which allows for interaction and collaboration with the end user and for virtual communities of practice to develop. In America, the *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning* have set up *'Learning Counts'* an online service to provide RPL (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)) for those colleges who cannot provide such a service (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2011). As outlined more recently:

"web 2.0 technologies have become part of our culture" (Duvall, Jooskelainen, & Pasque, 2012).

4.4 Use the web to provide supports for students

Adding to the existing material available on a colleges website in a web-space devoted to RPL is both a cost effective and an efficient way to present good basic information in accordance with policy and procedure. The web is easily accessible at any time or place and when support material is put online it can be a considerable support resource for students. Increasing student engagement and support through the use of the web is a highly relevant approach to take today (Williams & Chinn, 2009). When redesigning a website the perspective of the end user must be the central focus in its design. Initial primary research pays dividends resulting in the subsequent redevelopment being user informed (O'Leary & Coughlan, 2011). The following schematic suggests suitable steps which can be taken when redesigning a web space for learners.

Decide what is needed

How should the overall space look ?

Use images and videoclips to add value to site

Improved website for RPL

Simple layout with basic information

Include examples and testimonials

downloadable templates
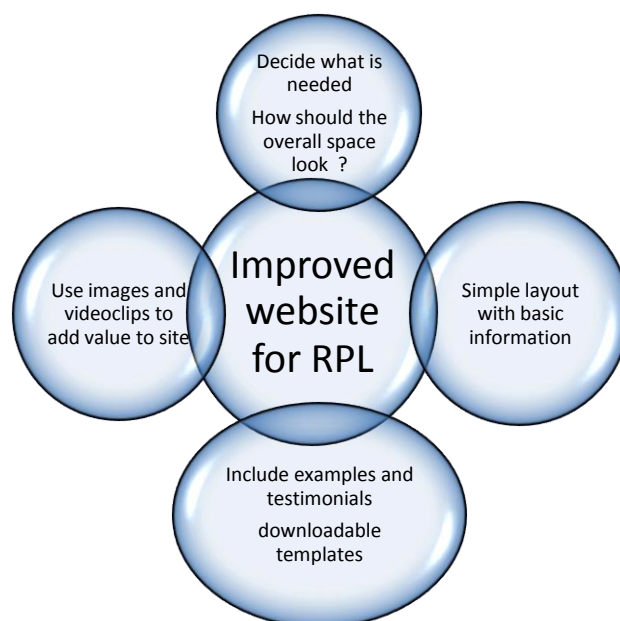
Fig. 4.2 *Key aspects to consider when upgrading website for RPL provision*

The initial needs analysis should consider how the overall space is to look; the overall structure should be built and this then populated with text and images. A simple layout with basic information is the main requirement to support the learner. Populating the site with images and videoclips adds value to the supporting text. The use of downloadable templates; examples and testimonials also supports an information rich web space (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012*a*).   In practice this web resource should be supplemented with real engagement with the learner. This can take the form of workshops and mentoring timeslots which are devoted to supporting the individual with their task.

4.5 The sustainable use of RPL resources

To adequately support the learner a broader system should be in place, one element of which is the website. It makes sense to supplement limited resources with well designed online materials providing key information as to how the individual should build their prior learning case.

Most colleges have a dedicated resource, a person who acts as a contact point for queries and general support for those engaging with RPL. This role is pivotal in influencing whether a candidate goes ahead with their task of preparing a prior learning case. The competencies

of those professionals involved in supporting the RPL process were investigated in the EuroguideVAL project and involve the ability to deliver information, support with the identification of competencies and provide clear feedback after the assessment (Duvekot & Konrad, 2007). In practice this person can point to the website initially while arranging for workshops to provide mentoring support for case preparation. It helps too to have staff nominated from each major discipline who understand RPL; in practice they can act as a guiding hand in interpreting learning outcomes as needed (Popova-Gonci, 2009). Structuring RPL to operate within a timeframe for case preparation improves the overall system in a formal educational setting. This allows adequate time for assessment of the material and return of judgement to the candidate.

4.6 Introducing e-portfolios and other tools that capture knowledge skills and competence

Promoting a positive experience for the student is as important as building a good quality prior learning case (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). This positive experience in turn will reflect well on the RPL service. Quality RPL cases are neatly presented and clearly signposted against the relevant learning outcomes of a given module or a programme area. The process of preparing these portfolios is reflective in nature and this should also be apparent in the final product. When an assessor considers the prior learning case they are looking to see what the candidate knows about the area; ideally against the learning outcomes and they want to see clearly what they are using as proof and why it is relevant. Harnessing innovations on the web and related technologies to help the individual capture what it is they know and promote reflection on this learning should be investigated. The steady march of technology and web related innovations can support the learner in showing us what it is they know. It can allow creative opportunity for the learner when gathering and presenting their case. Education providers must support and explore the uses of technology and consider novel ways to capture and present knowledge, skill and competence.

An individual's digital footprint gives significant insight as to their abilities and interests. This viewpoint was not available ten or fifteen years ago and yet it presents a unique picture of a person's interests. This can be harvested to support a prior learning case whereupon the person showcases this activity to support or prove their informal learning. For instance

it is possible to use Facebook, Twitter or 'Linked In' to capture the social and professional networking skills of an individual. When carefully selected this data has the ability to support a prior learning claim.

Another useful tool to support the individual are blogs which can be used to capture ideas and thoughts as a person writes them; indeed they can represent reflection on action and in action over time. Blogs are an ideal tool to use to build a learning journal (Barrett, 2011*a*). They support the creation of a space or learning environment where the opinion or train of thought is available to a group and presents a forum for mutual support and learning. Well known blogging tools in use are Blogger on Google, WordPress and EduBlogs. Recently blogs were shown to be a useful tool for increasing cooperation between students and promoting a learning culture within a classroom (Kan, 2011). How we are interacting with new technologies is changing how we approach problems and our approaches to learning. There is an increasing emphasis now on creating communities of practice, on collaboration and sharing around a particular subject. Online communities form and share ideas and innovations around any particular interest or subject.
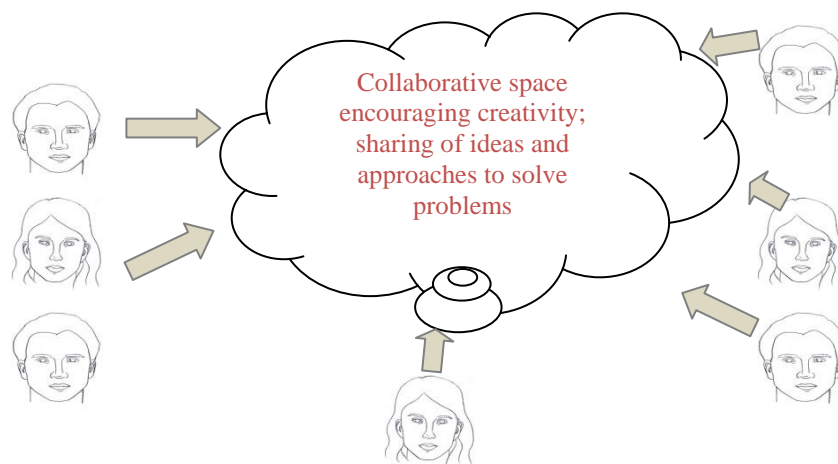
Fig. 4.3 *Online communities share ideas and solve problems together*

This collaboration is also apparent in the business sector. The EU project *Netknowing 2.0* supports SME personnel sharing informal learning and promotes collaboration between parties to support innovation and networking in the workplace (Netknowing 2.0, 2012).

Wikis are a webspace which is made by a collective input from a number of people each with access to contribute to the content. Wikipedia is the most famous Wiki. In 2007 Edward J. Maloney investigated the use of wikis and blogs as tools which supported student learning in higher education (Maloney, 2007). He maintained that the more we use these web 2.0 tools in higher education the greater will be their likely impact in the way people teach and learn. The way we interact with the web and with each other on the web has significantly changed; now online content can be created by anyone as described by Maloney there is a focus now on;

> *"innovation, creation and collaboration, and an emphasis on collective knowledge over static information delivery, knowledge management over content management, and social interaction over isolated surfing"* (Maloney, 2007).

Online videos such as YouTube are increasingly used in Higher Education today to add value to class time and encourage active engagement of students with regular class material (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Similarly YouTube has a potential role when it comes to capturing and presenting knowledge skills and competence. These clips have the potential to form part of an e portfolio supporting a claim for credit through RPL. Higher Education can promote the use of such media by making explicit what is acceptable in its promotional literature or websites supporting RPL and lifelong learning.

Reflection journals are useful in promoting self-reflection and learning (Ning, Law, & Schmidt, 2011). The very act of keeping a learning journal encourages a student's critical thinking and self reflection skills. Reflection journals are also known as learning logs or learning diaries and can be used to capture a person's learning journey over a semester or longer. These tools provide a useful basis on which to reflect as to what worked out or what did not. The act of maintaining such a journal or diary promotes a reflective mindset (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). As described by Miller *et al.* the learning log encourages reflective practice;

> *"Reflecting retrospectively ('reflecting-on-action') on any encounter can be valuable, and often leads to future 'reflection-in-action"* (Miller, *et al*., 2012).

Higher Education can and should support the idea of digital archiving of significant events in a learners life. This skill should invoke a lifelong learning mindset and is explored fully in

chapter 5 and 6. Higher Education needs to activate the motivation of the learner by demanding such a skill of learners.

E portfolios can capture and document learning over time and provide a platform for reflective thinking in relation to this learning (Garrett, 2011). They support self evaluation throughout a career and can help the learner identify gaps in knowledge or strengths they may have. The use of e portfolios was investigated from a lifelong learning perspective (Gray, 2008) where their use was considered for continuing professional development (CPD) and for appraisals in the workplace. The report also investigated a project named the *East of England Lifelong Learning Support project (*EELLS), which considered the use of an e portfolio system independent of any educational institution (Piper & Gamble, 2011). The use of technology has developed dramatically and supports the learner now in ever more innovative ways and also underpins and supports RPL provision. Helen Barrett outlined how e-portfolios can become;

> *"dynamic celebrations and stories of deep learning across a lifespan"* (Barrett, 2011*b*).

There are a wealth of existing systems and packages available to support e portfolio creation. It makes sense to use existing systems where the learner can focus on building their case and not the technology in use.
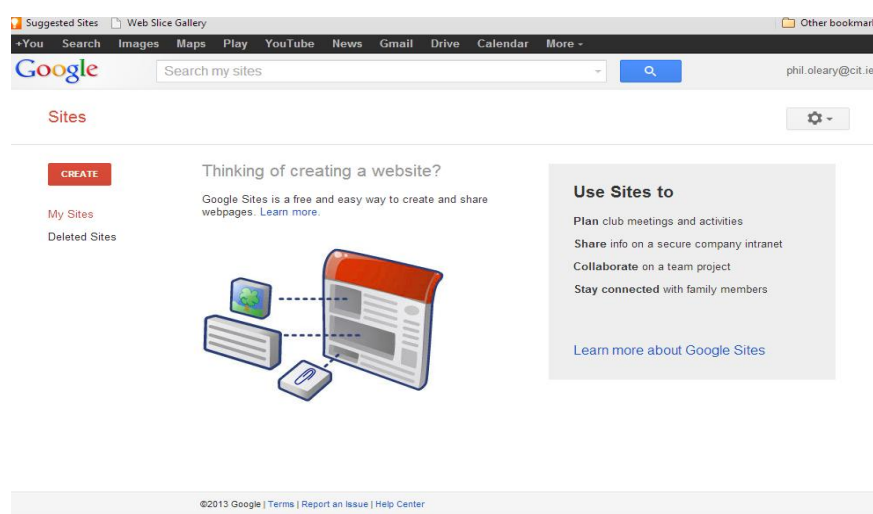
Fig. 4.4 *A screen capture of Google sites*

In creating their own web space the learner is claiming ownership of their own learning, they must think about what is to be included and why it is significant for them (Moores & Parkes, 2010). Again Higher Education providers have a key role to play in the acceptance of such systems. E portfolios can be particularly useful for learners in transition (Herman & Kirkup, 2008); similarly this cohort are often the most likely to avail of RPL.

Mobile technologies can be used to support the knowledge economy in that they have potential to promote the ownership of learning; and they are in use everyday by learners. Using media such as mobile phones, tablets or MP3 players to record and capture events can subsequently be presented online, on a presentation webspace or in a report (McCaffrey, 2011). Similarly other technologies can be harnessed to support reflective practice such as the use of video which was used in a community based youth group in Scotland (Cosh, 2011). The piece described video enhanced reflective practice and how it was used effectively to support effective communication skills. The video was used to reflect on and explore practice. In another paper video was used as an aid to reflection two weeks after the submission of an initial piece by students undergoing teacher training in Texas (Pena & Leon, 2011). The students used the video to revisit their original work and presented a further reflection, deepening their viewpoints and further exploring their work.

4.6 Summary of Chapter

This chapter begins with a consideration of the importance of encouraging a positive experience with prior learning case preparation for the learner. The chapter then considers the use of the world wide web to provide supports for students and followed this with a discussion as to sustainable ways which RPL resources can be used. It highlights the significant demand for RPL services which are apparent in times of economic uncertainty. The chapter finishes with a brief introduction to e portfolios and other tools that can be used to capture learning and suggests that Higher Education should embrace these technologies as they present novel opportunities to capture the knowledge, skills and competence of an individual.

Chapter 5

Lifelong Learning and the Importance of Valuing Learning

5.1   Introduction

This chapter begins with a consideration of what is lifelong learning and its significance over the past 40 years. It considers the main organisations engaging with lifelong learning and compares a number of definitions of the term. The chapter then considers the term valuing learning and how it links to lifelong learning and RPL before discussing the benefits of Higher Education promoting the idea of digital archiving. The chapter then highlights the importance of 'activating the lifelong mindset of the learner' as an essential skill in today's mobile ever changing world.

5.2 Lifelong Learning defined

It is no longer enough to attend school or college with the resulting static role in the workplace, a 'job for life' as it was known. Significant changes in how we live and work have resulted in returning to learning many times over a lifetime in the guise of further education; continuing professional development; in-company training or professional qualifications. Huge developments in science, technology and information technology related fields have changed how we access technology and seek information. We have adjusted our lifestyles to incorporate useful innovations and subsequently must acquire the capabilities to understand them as users. This occurs as incidental learning many times over a lifetime, for varying reasons. Significantly, too there has been a shift in mindset as to where learning happens, from that of the traditional classroom based model to one where learning occurs in many modes, i.e. formal, non formal and informal learning. Indeed, learning is now considered to be a lifelong and life-wide activity that occurs in many settings and for many purposes (European Commission, 2010).

In 2010, the *European University Association* reported that lifelong learning is still seen as a being outside of normal education provision and called for Higher Education providers and national authorities to implement policies promoting the lifelong learning agenda such as those which allowed *"accessible, flexible and transparent student-centered learning"*

However an increasing number of providers are rising to the *"challenge of attracting and teaching a more diversified student body"* and are implementing policies to support this (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). To summarise, it is continuing learning and development after formal education finishes. To quote Jarvis, lifelong learning is a process that happens over time involving the whole person, their mind, body and behavior where they transform information and combine this with their prior experiential learning to bring about a *"more experienced person"* (Jarvis, 2006).

Lifelong learning is a priority policy area for Europe. In 2000, the European Commission defined lifelong learning as;

> *"all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic social and/or employment related perspective"* (European Commission, 2000).

There have been significant European policy and funding initiatives to promote lifelong learning, including the ET2020 the *Strategic Framework for European Co-operating in Education and Training* which structures the policy framework for progressing lifelong learning (European Commission, 2011*c*).

In Ireland, the 2003 NQAI document on *'Policies Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners'* described the implementation of a national approach to credit and linked lifelong learning to recognition of prior learning resulting in opportunities for learners through the recognition of non formal and informal learning (NQAI, 2003*b*). In the UK the British Council says lifelong learning is that which;

> *"takes place after a young person has finished formal education and training"* (British Council, 2012).

It is designed to meet the needs of both the community and society at large. The Collins English Dictionary defines lifelong learning as;

> *"the use of both formal and informal learning opportunities throughout people's lives in order to foster the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfilment"* ("Collins English Dictionary," 2012).

The Australian Qualifications Framework included a Qualifications Pathways Policy in 2011 specifically building lifelong learning into their framework by supporting progression and

recognising the many ways individuals gain qualifications including formal, non formal and informal learning. They have defined lifelong learning as:

> *"any learning activities that are undertaken throughout life to acquire knowledge, skills and the application of knowledge and skills within personal, civic, social and or employment-related contexts"* (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011).

Interestingly in New Zealand it is the *"capabilities for living and lifelong learning"* that are emphasised; naming five key areas of competence that influence how we work and live and relate to others in everyday situations (see Figure 5.1 below).
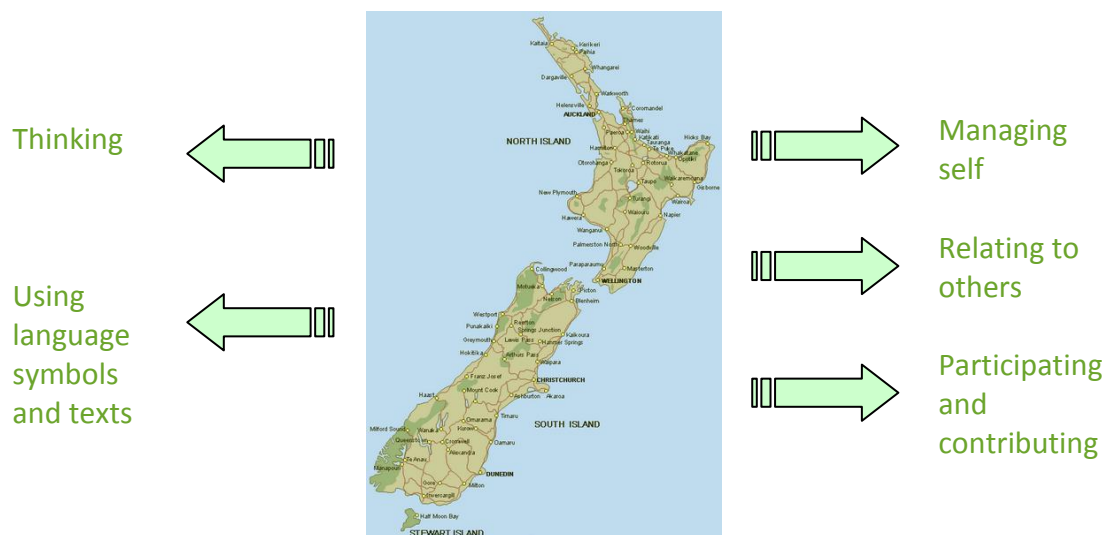
Fig. 5.1 *New Zealand's five key competencies for living and lifelong learning* (Ipurangi, 2012)

This standpoint serves to highlight how these key areas of ability are valuable in supporting a lifelong learning mindset.

According to the Oxford Handbook of Lifelong Learning builds on previous prior knowledge;

> *" as it expands knowledge and skills in depth and breadth"* (London, 2011).

Lifelong learning arises because; it is not possible to equip learners fully at school, college or university with all the knowledge and abilities that they will need to live successfully over their lifetime (London, 2011).

5.3 Key organisations supporting the Lifelong Learning agenda

Lifelong learning is a concept that has become more significant over the past forty years as highlighted by the UNESCO Report in 1972 (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, & Champion-Ward, 1972) and again in 1996 which was entitled "*Learning The Treasure Within*" where he outlined his vision of a knowledge driven society underpinned with learning opportunities throughout life. His intention is to support our ability to adapt to changes in the workplace to encourage active participation in society (Delors, 1996).

These reports were followed with others in 2001 (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001) and 2009 (UNESCO, 2009*b*) and have been further supported with the formation of the *UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning* from what was the *UNESCO Institute for Education*. Linking RPL with lifelong learning, UNESCO maintains a programme area called *Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. The recent report entitled '*UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning'* was published as a result of the 2009 Belem Framework for Action arising from the 6th International Conference on Adult Education in Brazil (UNESCO, 2009*a*, 2012).

Significantly, the European Commission has combined its education and training initiatives under a single entity. *The Lifelong Learning Programme*; encourages lifelong learning for individuals across the many stages of their lives and has four sub programmes, Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig (European Commission, 2012*f*). The programme supports the modernisation of European education and training programmes by supporting policy makers, providing tools and information to both the citizens of Europe and to those providing the education and training (European Commission, 2011*b*).

Interestingly, the *EC* has developed tools or *"lifelong learning instruments"* to support understanding about qualifications or knowledge arising from learning opportunities between communities and countries. These include the *European Framework of Key Competencies* which supports policy makers by articulating the key competencies needed by people. *The European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF) provides a scaffold of eight levels each defined by descriptors linking qualifications to learning

outcomes at a specific level to help promote understanding about qualifications across borders (European Commission, 2012*d*). These and other tools are presented in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1   *Lifelong learning instruments developed in Europe*

Instrument	Area of Support
European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)	A scaffold of eight level descriptors linking qualifications to learning outcomes at a specific level.
European Framework of Key Competencies	Articulates key competencies of individuals.
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Educational and Training (EQAVET)	Supporting Vocational Educational and Training sector
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)	Promotes periods of study in other European countries
Diploma Supplement	Provides standardised information about Higher Education diplomas.
Europass	Provides a standardised CV template supporting the understanding of qualifications and experience
National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC)	Supports recognition of foreign diplomas and periods of study abroad.
EC site provides portals to support the learner	With career advice and for recognition of non formal and informal learning
Strategic Framework for Education & Training (ET 2020)	Supporting lifelong learning

This proactive range of initiatives makes a real difference in terms of activating lifelong learning in a very real sense across the European area. It is envisaged by European Commission that these tools will be used and relied upon over time by the ordinary citizens of Europe to make lifelong learning a reality (European Commission; European Commission, 2012*a*, 2012*b*, 2012*c*, 2012*e*, 2012*g*, 2012*h*).

Showing that lifelong learning is still firmly on the Irish agenda the NQAI hosted a conference on the 15th April 2010 on the role of the frameworks in supporting lifelong learning. The conference concluded by saying that mutual trust and understanding between stakeholders involved in providing frameworks will promote the agenda of lifelong learning (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2010).

In 2010, CEDEFOP published a *European Lifelong Learning Indicator (ELLI)* documenting indicators for lifelong and lifewide learning based on the UNESCO framework where learning is categorised as learning to know (formal learning), learning to do (vocational learning), learning to be (personal development) and learning to live together (for social cohesion). The report presents a tangible tool to measure a countries progress implementing lifelong learning as well as highlighting the outcomes and benefits of learning.

(Hoskins, Cartwright, & Schoof, 2010)

Learning is lifewide and lifelong

Lifewide formal non formal and informal learning in different contexts

Learning to know
Learning to do
Learning to live together
Learning to be

Lifelong childhood and adult learning

Dynamic interplay

- learning activity
- Human capital

Competences   Skills

and   attitudes

- learning process
- Social Capital

Wider Outcomes or Benefits of Learning

Individual monetary

Social Monetary

Individual non-monetary

Social non-Monetary

Monetary (economic) benefits and non-monetary benefits

Individual and social benefits

Fig 5.2 *The outcomes and benefits of learning, adapted from Hoskins, et al.* 2010

In 2007, Patrick Werequin suggested mechanisms to promote lifelong learning, including RPL and the use of learning outcomes. He suggested linking education and work as appropriate policy response to support lifelong learning (Werquin, 2007).

5.4 Valuing Learning

A key theme in the lifelong learning movement is that learning is valuable regardless of how or where it is gained. All learning is valuable: past (prior), present and all future learning opportunities. UNESCO introduced the '*learning society*' and '*valuing learning*' in 1972 and said that learning must involve all of a person's life and all of society and that education systems must be overhauled (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovsky, Rahnema, Champion-Ward, et al., 1972).

The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning included valuing learning as one of its key components with the aim of promoting quality systems for Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) (European Commission, 2000). Valuing learning can encourage the individual to access learning opportunities throughout life depending on their needs. Valuation of prior learning (formal, non-formal and informal learning) is a key principle underpinning lifelong learning strategies. To quote Duvekot (2010) lifelong learning is;

> *"focused on empowerment and opening up individual perspective(s) by means of designing personal learning strategies"* (Duvekot, 2010).

CEDEFOP defines the valuation of prior learning as:

> *"The process of promoting participation in and outcomes of (formal or non-formal) learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning"* (CEDEFOP, 2011).

To quote Duvekot, valuing learning is '*activating*' or empowering the learner (Duvekot, 2010). Increasingly, an individual will have many roles and responsibilities over a lifetime. There must be a cultural shift to allow the ethos of lifelong learning to emerge, possibly from a young age, the learner should have the ultimate say as to their learning journey. This shift in power from the education system to the individual will realize the true learning society (Duvekot, *et al.*, 2007; Duvekot & Nilsen-Mohn, 2012). The onus is on the individual to gather over a lifetime a learning portfolio or reflective journal in a formative way and build a catalogue of knowledge, skills and competencies. The frameworks are in place now and RPL is a reality. We must consider how to transform society to a place where every individual takes ownership for their learning path throughout their lives.

All aspects of society have a role to play in promoting the valuing learning mindset. From a young age children can be introduced to the concept of capturing a picture of what they know about. This will promote confidence and a sense of well being as well as preparing them for a life of reflective practice. The workplace can support staff to build and maintain a portfolio of their workplace competencies and professional training attained overtime, this can be built into a personal learning plan, which will underpin their working life; encourage work-based learning and a valuing learning mindset (Duvekot, 2010). Finally, Higher Education providers can take a central role by promoting a valuing learning theme through their promotional literature and websites. This in turn will encourage learners to archive their learning over time.
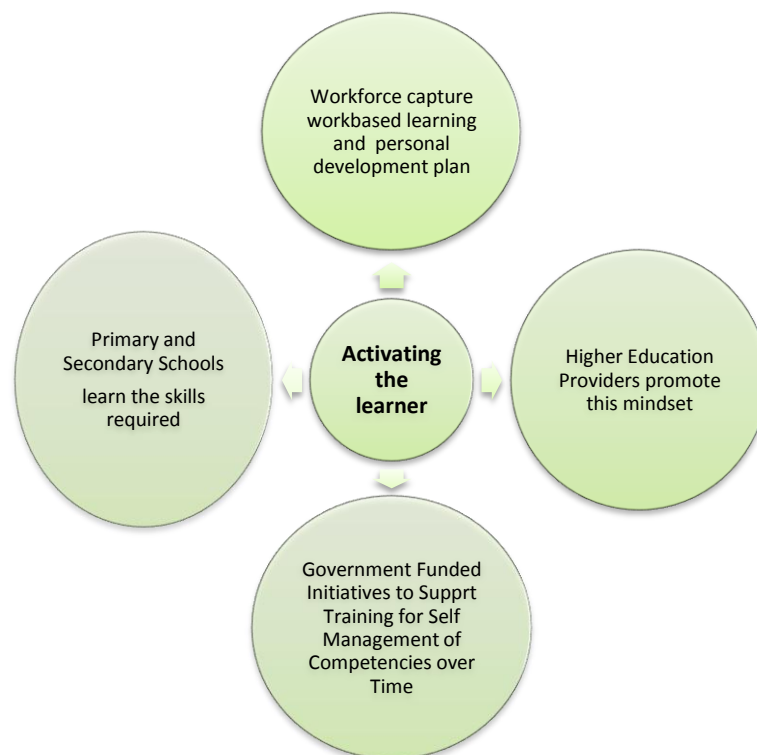
Fig. 5.3 *The systems involved in activating the learner* (adapted from Duvekot 2010)

The importance of documenting learning throughout life is of increasing significance in a society where all learning is valued (including prior learning). Traditionally, an individual kept a folder or file with significant learning events captured and stored for future reference. However key learning events are often incidental or perceived to be of no

significance at the time and are difficult to document when required to, at a later date in life (due to changing employment, or address etc.). However, documenting learning requires the learner to develop a certain mindset to enable the optimum return in terms of documenting all learning opportunities (paid and unpaid activities, formal, non-formal and informal learning). Developing this ability requires support and appropriate training. E portfolios are an emerging tool and will be of increasing significance to support an individual to document their learning in a digital manner throughout a lifetime. Indeed the development and practice of a lifelong learning mindset does not have to entail the use of electronic aids more the careful documentation of significant learning events, however the use of information technology will certainly play an increasingly significant role.

5.5 Promoting Digital Archiving

To focus on the role of Higher Education in supporting digital archiving there are a number of important aspects which deserve to be considered in terms of benefits to the learner; to the higher education provider; and the employer. Promoting a valuing learning message will encourage a positive experience when an individual approaches formal education with the express hope of validating non formal and informal learning. To quote Sara Leiste, preparing a prior learning case can be an intimidating experience for a student who in effect is taking on the might of the learning system by taking this step. If the provider includes a valuing learning space on its website; or prospectus or promotes digital archiving it shows the learner that they are 'RPL friendly' and ready to help document their case. This space then in turn supports RPL practice within an Institute or University. Prior learning cases well laid out and well supported with appropriate documentation are an easier task for an assessor to make a judgement on, as opposed to one which is poorly put together and lacking in proof to support the claim (Leiste & Jensen, 2011).

Higher Education must expect the learner to provide a digital record of what they know and this expectation in turn will encourage the learner to maintain this activity over time. The Institute or University is acknowledging that learning occurs everywhere by taking this step, and is in tune with the broader picture of where learning is gained today (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012*b*). This will in turn inform employers demonstrating Higher Education is

aware of the relevance of workplace competencies and skills. There is a need for society to create a culture where education actively engages with employers (Cork Institute of Technology, 2012*b*). Higher Education must be responsive to the ever-changing need for reskilling and upskilling of workers and be in a position to meet these demands in a flexible, meaningful way.

5.6 Why 'activating the lifelong mindset of the learner' is essential

Knowledge is valued now more than ever, and cutting edge or innovative ideas are ever changing and moving on. In real life situations, our input in solving a problem or adapting to a situation tends be very specific to a particular set of circumstances; however key learning can be extracted from any event with reflective ability (Schon, 1983). This experiential learning can be adapted and used again in another situation. Our role in life constantly changes and information or knowledge which is seen as significant is always moving on; with this comes a certain vulnerability. It makes sense then to foster this habit as a protective one to be self aware as we continue and identify the knowledge skills and competences which we possess and to put aside time to capture them as we go on an ongoing basis. It is good career husbandry to maintain this habit over time (Barrett, 2009). Indeed Tara Fenwick reported on mobile workers who maintain portfolios covering various roles, adjusting the presentation for the next set of contract work opportunities (Fenwick, 2004).

The question is how do we prompt this to happen in a real way ? Society needs to be supported to arrive at this activated learning state. Ideally this should happen early in life. It could even be a compulsory activity in school. The project, *'Managing European Diversity in Lifelong Learning'* (Duvekot, *et al*., 2007) considered this very question. According to Duvekot, the individual must be in charge of their own learning path through life. He suggested using 'how to' guides and training modules to support individuals and organisations in self management of competencies. He suggests the use of an annual publication to advise the individual and to promote these ideas (CHQ Foundation, 2012; Duvekot & Nilsen-Mohn, 2012).

According to Judith O Brown, Barry University Florida USA, seven generic competencies can be used as a scaffold to support the learner in building the portfolio or e-portfolio. These generic competencies can capture abilities in all areas of life; namely abilities in administration; communication; critical thinking; creativity; interpersonal relations; investigation and research; supervision and leadership. In Barry University this portfolio is combined with an autobiographical learning essay and a learning assessment worksheet as part of an overall process (Brown, 2012).

To go through life in this '*learner activated*' mode, is to be prepared for the very real eventuality of change and new work situations where a portfolio would be useful; on return to education one would be already halfway there in terms of documenting a prior learning case for RPL should that be an option (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2013).

The EU Lifelong Learning programme could be harnessed to provide funds specifically for research and delivery of training in the area of activating the learner and digital archiving. Employers and community based education could provide training initiatives and short courses on digital archiving of competencies over time and should provide training to support the individual with the task

5.7 Summary of Chapter

This chapter begins with a discussion on the significance of lifelong learning and provides a number of definitions before investigating significant organisations supporting it in terms of policy development. The chapter then considers what lifelong learning is and how it relates to the idea of digital archiving. The chapter finishes with a consideration of the importance of 'activating' the lifelong learning mindset of the learner, an essential mindset in order to realise the potential of lifelong learning.

Chapter 6

Using e-Portfolios to Scaffold RPL Case Preparation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates e-Portfolios and provides a working definition of what they are. The chapter then relates the use of e-portfolios to RPL case preparation and finally explores the concept of their use as lifelong learning support instruments.

6.2 Definition of e-portfolios

The last ten years have seen the use of e-Portfolios emerge as a significant tool for the individual. They support a broad range of purposes from education to procuring employment to the self-management of competencies. An e Portfolio is a digital version of a portfolio. According to Barrett:

> "an e-portfolio (electronic portfolio) is an electronic collection of evidence that shows your learning journey over time"(Barrett, 2011*a*).

Barrett maintains that e portfolios arise from two areas of literature that of portfolio development and multimedia development (Barrett, 2000). They are used by 40% of campuses now in the USA (Hager, 2012). Their use has evolved with the development of computers and information technology. They have developed from the days of CD and DVD formats to online environments with the emergence of web 2.0 tools (Barrett, 2011*a*).

Similarly in Europe their impact has been significant. The *European Institute for E-Learning* (EifEL) promoted the idea of every European having an e Portfolio by 2010; they defined e portfolios as:

> "any digital system supporting reflexive learning and practice by allowing a person (or an organisation) to collect, manage, and publish a selection of learning evidence in order to have one's assets recognised, accredited or plan further learning" (Ravet, 2009).

EifEL have a number of initiatives and strategies promoting the use of e-portfolios for individuals and organisations. Objective 2010 e Portfolio for all was a major objective. A broad range of projects are listed on their website www.eife-l.org They have also presented the conference proceedings from London 2010 and other conferences on e portfolios in

recent years and are a valuable resource in the European context. Another related project
was the *European Portfolio Initiatives Co-ordination Committee* (EPICC) which classified e
portfolios according to their functionality, namely; assessment portfolios, showcase
portfolios, development portfolios, reflective portfolios. With the assessment portfolios the
owner must present evidence of competencies for assessment. The showcase portfolio
holds the owners best work. The development portfolios present personal development
plans. Reflective portfolios are used to track the owners learning and development over
time (European Portfolio Initiatives Coordination Committee). The EPICC project is now
under the remit of the *Europortfolio Initiative* which is available at www.europortfolio.org
(Euro Portfolio), this initiative defines e portfolios as:

> *An ePortfolio is a purposeful (digital) selection of evidence demonstrating your achievements as*
> *reflective learner or professional. In other words, it is an electronic document presenting information*
> *about who you are as learner or professional. It may include information on your values, interests,*
> *educational route with achievements (what you have learnt from positive and negative experiences),*
> *learning, skills and competencies"* (Euro Portfolio).

Another significant contributor to the field of e portfolios is the UK's Government backed
body known as the *Joint Information Systems Committee* (JISC) they now provide resources,
knowledge and support on using e portfolios and digital technology for education and
research purposes. One of the JISC reports *"Effective Practice with e-Portfolios; supporting
21st century learning,"* highlighted the personalisation of e-portfolios as a key way to
motivate learners, along with encouraging them to use multimedia content to support their
achievements (Gray, 2008). Projects such as *'eP4LL:e-Portfolio for lifelong learning'* (Rees-
Jones, Smallwood, & Kingston, 2006); *'Student Reflections on Lifelong eLearning'* (JISC, 2007)
and *'Workforce Engagement in Lifelong Learning'* (JISC, 2009) and a wealth of others listed
on their website on provide significant insight to this field.

In Australia there has also been a wealth of research and reporting on e portfolios where
they are a key policy area. The *Australian Flexible Learning Framework* have invested in
significant research in the area in the last number of years providing reports such as
"Developing e-Portfolios for VET: Policy issues and interoperability" (Curyer, Leeson, Mason,
& Williams, 2007); *"The VET e-Portfolio Roadmap"* (Galatis, Leeson, Mason, Miller, & ONeill,

2009), in support of lifelong learning; and a report entitled *"e Portfolios for RPL Assessment"* in the same year (Perry, 2009). The *Australian Flexible Learning Framework* defined e-Portfolios as:

> *"a learner-driven collection of digital artifacts articulating experiences, achievements and evidence of learning"* (Galatis, *et al.*, 2009).

Portfolios (and e Portfolios) have a number of uses in education, one of which is a way of presenting knowledge skills and abilities. They allow for a collection of evidence to be provided to showcase a persons ability against a particular set of standards. As stated by Walti in 2004;

> *"Portfolios...are always a goal driven, organized collection of items (artefacts) that demonstrate a learner's expansion of knowledge and skills over time"* (Walti, 2004).

Portfolios and e Portfolios have multiple uses and functions. They can be categorised in terms of their use, i.e. e portfolios for students, for teaching or for institutional use. Their functions encompass career planning; for showcasing knowledge skills and ability or for capturing development overtime (Lorenzo & Littleson, 2005). E Portfolios allow people to create a personal learning space where reflection is possible. They offer a novel learning opportunity in that the student has the chance to create their own personal online space and manage it (Geiger & Arriaga, 2012). This provides a rich learning environment as it provides a space where reflective practice can be "*practiced and displayed*"(Moores & Parkes, 2010). However, Moores and Parkes followed this by saying that the students need to be guided to develop this skill effectively. This is worth noting in the context of any higher education provider introducing such a system, the quality of output is likely to be influenced by the type of support a learner gets as they acquire the skill to reflect appropriately on their practice.

A significant emerging theme within the e Portfolio movement as they are evolving now is that they can exist outside of the remit of any institute or organisation and are owned privately by the individuals themselves (Hager, 2012). This aspect of their development has significant potential to be really useful as the e portfolio is *'sticky'* (Herman & Kirkup, 2008; Jafari, 2004) in that it connects with the person and is significant to them. The portfolio in this mode is portable, travels with the person and has a prominence within their personal

lives where they regularly make entries; redevelop and rework the material within. Overtime the individual builds in a reflective aspect to cement new learning experiences and in doing so transform these events and make meaning of them. In this mode they are building on prior learning experiences as they make sense of events and construct meaning.

In 2008 Herman reported on e Portfolios being useful for learners returning to the workplace. The research reported that as well as needing to be sticky e Portfolios were adopted when they were easy to use and that a group situation was more conductive to learning the skills needed for their development and maintenance. The research maintains that women were more likely to maintain them over time when they were learned in a group situation (Herman & Kirkup, 2008).

Maintaining an e Portfolio supports student centred learning and develops the critical skills needed to select what is needed from the onslaught of information saturation (Hager, 2012).   The individual uses the space to track significant learning events, projects and personal development plans. Helen Barrett (see Fig. 6.1 below) provided a useful diagram showing the many faces an e Portfolio has (Barrett, 2011*a*), where it operates as a process in capturing or organising work or operates as a product to showcase ability.
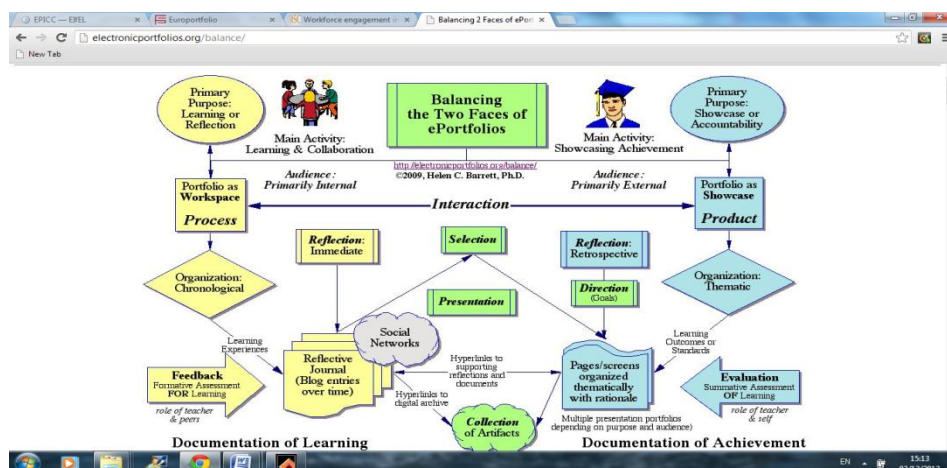
Fig. 6.1 *Helen Barrett's two faces of e-Portfolios* (H. Barrett, 2010)

Key features of a successful e portfolio system are: access rights controlled by the learner; e portfolios provide an overview of competencies and knowledge; they have a reflective dialogue; should incorporate web 2 tools such as blogs, wikis and YouTube clips (Maloney, 2007). E Portfolios are a useful tool to respond quickly to online job advertisements (Lathrop, 2011). E Portfolios can be used to draw together or integrate the broad themes between modules in Higher Education, or to track the learners development over a programme (European Portfolio Initiatives Coordination Committee).

E Portfolios are evolving all of the time with developments in technology. Users are constantly exploring what is possible and how these new possibilities can be usefully applied. Recent research has shown that user satisfaction was determined by how easy the e portfolio was to use; including peer learning through social interaction and allowing a sense of ownership (Garrett, 2011). Clearly new developments will be adapted and blended with current formats. Other work considered the factors that affect users take up of e-Portfolios and have found that attitude is one of the strongest and most significant effect on intention to use the e Portfolio (Chen, Chang, Chen, Huang, & Chen, 2012). There is scope for more research in this area exploring the processes that make for successful e portfolio adoption.

6.3 e-Portfolios for RPL case preparation

Portfolios have been widely adopted by many disciplines as they have inherent flexibility in terms of how they are structured. The portfolio is a collection of documents showing what an individual knows about a particular area. A key pedagogical feature of the portfolio is that they support reflective thinking (BECTA, 2007). The actual construction of the portfolio in itself lends to reflection. The person has to consider what they are including in the portfolio, and what it demonstrates about their abilities; they must consider how the piece is structured and presented.

Using e-portfolios for RPL case preparation is one of their well established functions. In the USA the *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning* (CAEL) launched *'Learning Counts'* a national online service to support prior learning case preparation for credits (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2011). This resource was created to provide RPL services for those colleges

who did not have them. E portfolios are used to deliver this service. Another example in Canada was developed to provide RPL for nurses who were educated overseas. On the whole they found the process to be user friendly and they did not experience any difficulties with the online environment (Mina *et al.*, 2011). A third example relays how the e portfolio is used as an instrument to capture learning in degree courses in the University of Oldenburg, Germany (Zawacki-Richter & Hanft, 2011).

The process involves the candidate *"making learning visible"* and then reflecting and choosing evidence to support this learning (Hager, 2012). The structure of the e portfolio should reflect the purpose for which it is prepared. Recent research recommended e portfolio systems should incorporate three levels of presentation, those of; *"personality driven", "reflection-based"* and *"strategically organised, goal-orientated."* (Tzeng & Chen, 2012) Where the purpose is for presentation of a prior learning case for assessment for credits, the portfolio should be structured around the learning outcomes. Prior learning cases should keep *"learning and knowledge as its foundational tenets"* building the case around the key learning requirements of the module or a programme (Conrad, 2008). This focused approach supports the preparation of a strong case; cuts down unnecessary documentation while highlighting the abilities of the learner in relation to the learning outcomes or programme outcomes of a particular module or area.

Diane Conrad claimed that the attributes Daniel Pink listed as essential for success in a *'communications rich world'* are also the skills needed to produce a learning portfolio (Conrad, 2008; Pink, 2005). These abilities are presented as *'design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning'*. Appropriate supports must be in place to enable this task which is both *'high stakes'* creative and reflective in both its origin, development and culmination (Conrad, 2008).

Preparing the e portfolio is a process which is normally well supported by a Higher Education provider. When done appropriately these supports ensure a positive experience for the candidate (Leiste & Jensen, 2011) and consistent, quality documentation for the assessor.

RPL case preparation on e portfolio

- Reflect on prior learning and identify significant relevant learning events

- Consider case preparation, how to present learning, set context, text preparation

- Identify suitable evidence of this learning, upload evidence

- Consult again with mentor, is evidence appropriate and adequate ?

- Build case; reflect; amend and finalise material and evidence

- Core task is to build case

- Support use of technology

- Support during case preperation

- Structure e portfolio around learning outcomes

- Candidate gets a general Introduction and process overview

- Support system orientation at start

Fig. 6.2 *RPL Support Requirements for cases built on an e Portfolio*

Judith O Brown contests that prior learning case preparation is helped by the use of information and communication technologies where the candidate can *"demonstrate knowledge visually and audibly"* while presenting and selecting their relevant experiential learning (Brown, 2011). She maintains in this paper that how we articulate learning is changing as we adapt and use emerging technologies to support RPL case preparation (Brown, 2011); this finding is further supported by research done for this thesis and was presented as a poster for the Learning Innovation Network conference in Dublin (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2012*a*).

Building an RPL case is a significant undertaking where the learner benefits from appropriate support throughout the process. Where the case is to be build on an e portfolio system the interaction with the e portfolio itself must be straightforward (Herman & Kirkup, 2008). Examples should be available for the candidate to see the standard that is required of them (O'Leary & Coughlan, 2011). Where a prior learning case is to be presented for a particular module on a programme the e portfolio should be structured around the learning outcomes specifically.

Building the e portfolio is an act of construction aligning with constructivist theories where the learner builds their own piece and takes charge of its creation, editing and growth over time (Brown, 2011). The candidate should strive for clarity in their case presentation, in terms of the e portfolio being a piece that is assessed for academic credits.

There are requirements on the part of the college to provide clear dates or 'windows of preparation' followed by a submission date and submission requirements for the candidate. The candidate will engage in reflection as they prepare and build their case, the process of selection will require them to sift through their learning experiences, make sense of them and to select the most appropriate (Garrett, 2011). The candidate should be encouraged to explore the significant elements of what they are including in their case. They must explain the context around their experiential learning and show what it demonstrates in relation to the learning outcome(s). They should consider why it is a significant learning event for them. RPL cases are improved when the provider highlights the importance of clearly signposting the evidence. Clear labelling as to what the evidence is and what learning outcome it is supporting, is the hallmark of solid RPL case preparation.

Finally, the introduction or personal statement should be reflective and be done as the final piece of the e portfolio. This would normally be the Home Page; it should introduce the portfolio and the prior learning case generally and give a sense of the person and of what comes next. It is a good idea to include a YouTube or other videoclip on the homepage where the learner can introduce themselves and the RPL case at the front of the piece. Multimedia adds another dimension to the e portfolio, allowing the candidate to come across in a very real way (Barrett, 2011*a*). Using these emerging resources as tools for learning is very real test for education providers and one which we should be responsive to (Sherer & Shea, 2011).

A successful e portfolio is an online personal record of learning maintained over time, it allows for reflection on that learning and can support the student by making their lifelong learning pathway visible.

6.4 e-Portfolios are purpose built Lifelong Learning support instruments

As outlined in the previous chapter there are enormous benefits to maintaining a personal archive of competencies over time. In 2004 Cohn and Hibbits outlined an image for EDUCAUSE where everybody should be allowed a lifetime personal webspace where they could document their learning and record achievements (E. Cohen & Hibbitts, 2004). Now this dream is certainly possible in reality where free webspace is provided for anyone who wants to access it. Embracing web 2.0 tools allows the individual to maintain an e portfolio for any number of purposes; for reflection; to showcase their learning; to store documentation; for marketing their skills to would be employers. However a key reason for maintaining an e portfolio is to support themselves in their lifelong and life wide learning journey over time. Indeed there are benefits to maintaining and using a number of e portfolios (Litoiu, 2009), each with a purpose of its own, possibly with overlapping elements but certainly with different audiences and purposed in mind. Lori Hager maintains e portfolios provide a distinctive learning environment in that they encourage self sufficiency and enable the learner to steer their own learning path where the e portfolio can *"serve as a compass"* (Hager, 2012). This analogy compliments the work of Bob Barrett who looked at e portfolios in the context of graduates entering the workforce and having to prepare for job interviews and subsequently for maintaining and showcasing real world skills (B. Barrett, 2010). He maintains that education providers who incorporate e portfolios into their programmes are encouraging diversity in the student population as e portfolios are supportive of a population who are constrained in terms of their job or family commitments etc. Certainly e portfolios provide a support buffer in times of change; where the individual has ready access to their own personal digital archive.

Helen Barrett is a significant contributor to the literature on the use of e portfolios in education generally and also in the context of lifelong learning. Her many conference papers outline the possibilities for using e portfolios. Barrett maintains a significant digital footprint providing resources such as blog.helenbarrett.org entitled *"e Portfolios for learning"* and also supports the use of GoogleApps for e Portfolios (Barrett, 2008). The 2005 *White Paper on e Portfolios and Learner Engagement* set the benchmark for research and development in this area (Barrett, 2005). In her 2009 paper on *Using e Portfolios for Lifelong and Lifewide Learning,* she outlined the following steps to create and maintain an e

portfolio; the first was to create a digital archive of material; followed by the use of various tools to support interaction or reflection, and lastly to showcase or presenting the work in presentation portfolios (Barrett, 2009). In a conceptual paper penned in 2009 Barrett and Garrett outlined a space where the individual could harness the potential of cloud computing over a lifetime from a very young age to the elderly (Barrett & Garrett, 2009). Recently the question of linking e portfolios and Facebook to showcase the social networking ability of the user has been posed (Tzeng & Chen, 2012). This question underlines the ever changing nature of information and communication technologies and how they might be harnessed to benefit the learner in today's society.

6.5 Summary of Chapter

This chapter begins with a definition of e portfolios as outlined by a number of organisations around the world. It explores how e portfolios can be used and then investigates the use of e portfolios for RPL case preparation. The chapter finishes with a consideration of the e portfolio as an instrument to support lifelong learning.

Chapter 7

Methodology

7.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the different types of educational research paradigms and considers which approach is most suitable for the research in this study. Each research method has its own strengths and weaknesses resulting in greater or lesser suitability. Qualitative and quantitative research methods are introduced and the types of data generated from each. Action research is a main focus of the chapter as this methodology was deemed most suited for this study.

7.2 The research paradigm; positive or interpretative ?

There are two main paradigms in research. Positivist research is research which is based on an objective reality where the researcher aims to explain and understand certain things, how events happen and predict certain outcomes (L. Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2007). Positivist research seeks to observe and experiment in the scientific tradition. The researcher takes an observer role and is detached from the subject of the research. Data collected tends to be quantitative (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Positivism can be traced back to the French philosopher August Comte and the research involves the generation of a hypothesis and testing of this hypothesis. Objectivity is important with the aim of generating results which are value free and repeatable. The researcher takes a hypothesis and looks at cause and effect. Scientific method is said to be positive in nature (Wellington, 2000). This research paradigm can generate valuable statistics and other quantitative data but is less valuable where research in the social sciences is concerned. It is possible to predict a chemical reaction in a test tube or other laboratory bench-top situation but this approach is less successful when predicting the reaction of human beings in real life situations (Wellington, 2000).

The opposite paradigm is an anti-positive or interpretative one, where the researcher sees reality as a human construct and where he or she is not removed from the situation being researched. The researcher interacts, explores ideas and immerses him/herself in the world

being researched. They *"see knowledge as personal, subjective and unique"* (L. Cohen, *et al.*, 2007). Qualitative data is more often the main type of data emerging from this paradigm and the data will be gained through participant observation, focus groups, transcripts of conversations or narrative enquiry. The researcher is looking for an insight or understanding to a particular situation. This insight will be context specific and must be interpreted (Wellington, 2000).

7.3 Qualitative research

Qualitative research seeks to understand human behaviour and the reasons behind such behaviour. Qualitative research is traditionally used in the social sciences and tends to look at the why and how of a situation. It uses smaller sample sizes than quantitative research and is context specific. Qualitative research has the following characteristics;

> *" it is interpretive... it is experiential...it is situational...it is personalistic...When qualitative study is done well, it is also likely to be...well triangulated...well informed"* (Stake, 2010).

Data is collected from real-life settings and trends or themes emerging must be captured and presented. Qualitative research is used to generate new hypotheses. Qualitative data commonly takes the form of transcripts from interviews or focus groups, questionnaires, case studies, notes from observations, personal and participant observation (Wellington, 2000).

There are different approaches to qualitative data analysis depending on the purpose of the research. Commonly qualitative data analysis can be interpreted in a number of ways. In terms of fitness for purpose, it helps to have a clear idea of what is wanted from the research which implicates the analysis to be undertaken (L. Cohen, *et al.*, 2007). Focus groups were used to gather qualitative data in this study.

7.4 Quantitative research

Quantitative research uses mathematics or statistically based methods to explain phenomena or events. Often quantitative research takes the form of a statistical data collected on a large scale designed to represent a population as a whole. As defined by Hoy;

> *"Quantitative research is scientific investigation that includes both experiments and other systematic methods that emphasize control and quantified measures of performance"* (Hoy, 2009).

Quantitative data collection takes the form of surveys, questionnaires or the population census. The data is then represented in charts, tables or statistics. Quantitative data is used to answer the *"how, what, and when"* of a question, resulting in useful data for providing general information which then may need further investigation in a qualitative or in-depth sense. Quantitative research is suited to answering the following types of research questions: those where we are asked to quantify (how many ?); numerical changes, an increase or decrease in a situation; help explain phenomena and finally hypothesis testing (Muijs, 2010). Quantitative data is often processed with specialist predictive software such as SPSS, which helps with data interpretation and decision making. This research includes questionnaires which yields quantitative data.

7.5 Action research

In 1946 Kurt Lewin was first to use the term action-research when he wrote:

> *"The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice"* (Lewin, 1946).

Lewin described the research occurring in steps such as: planning, action, consideration of the result of the action and amending further future steps in light of this. In 2009 Lin Norton, citing Janet Masters (Masters, 1995), described action research as having;

> *"two distinct traditions: 1 a British tradition that links research to improvement of practice and is education orientated. 2 An American tradition which links research to bringing about social change"* (Norton, 2009).

On its website, INFED (an online informal education resource) reviewed the development of the different traditions of action research describing it as;

> *"located in the realm of the practitioner - it is tied to self-reflection"* (Smith, 1996; 2001; 2007).

McNiff and Whitehead defined action research as;

> *"a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work"* (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

In 1986 Carr and Kemmis defined Action Research as:

Action research allows a process of communication between parties who want to improve or change a situation. In this instance the action was to explore the learner's experience of preparing a prior learning case in an Institute of Technology setting. The action research process normally occurs in a spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the outcome followed by further cycles of planning, acting, observing etc. until the group are satisfied that the changes have been implemented in the optimum way.

7.6 Characteristics of Action Research

Action research involves the practitioners themselves investigating and amending aspects of their practice in order to work more effectively and in line with their beliefs and educational values (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). It is a cyclical process which involves the participation of the researcher with some aspect of their practice that they want to improve. Through a process of acting and observing, reflecting and amending; the practitioner, acting as researcher leads their own research, and amends as they see fit. Part of the process involves keeping records of what was done, how it worked (or not), tracking progress by keeping a reflective journal, an oral account of what happened or a logbook (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Norton, 2009).
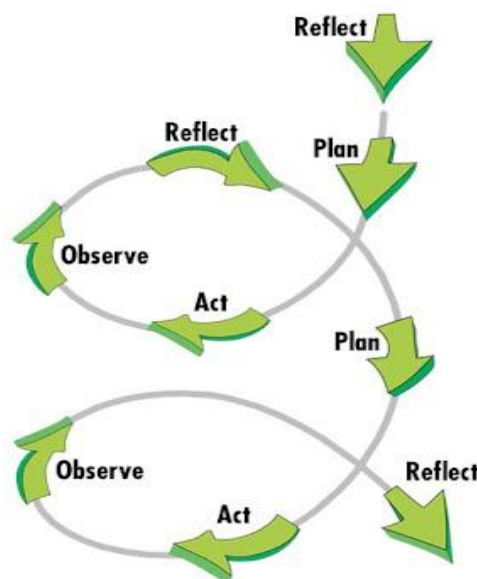
Fig. 7.2 *The action research cycle* (Barrett, 2011*b*)

Action research allows for current practice to be reviewed in any workplace setting. Any aspect which needs to be changed is identified (this is the research question) and the researcher decides (with others normally) how the question should be addressed. This is then tested and the results are examined. A reflection should happen next where the action can be amended or tweaked as necessary. The cycle goes on with more planning, acting, observing and reflection for a number of cycles with the lessons learned from previous cycles are incorporated with each cycle. Action research literature, often gives the impression of there being clear well-defined steps through the process, but in reality this is rarely the case. There can be overlap between the stages and progress can be both forward and backward, non-linear or chaotic (Cook, 1998). Indeed mess or chaos is an important part of action research where chaos allows for new learning leading to transformation in practice. Unexpected events can change the emphasis of an action research project or new issues, opinions of participants can bring about unexpected turns of events. The process of action research (observation and reflection) is an ever evolving approach where practice involves learning and reflection till the researcher is satisfied (Cook, 1998). Action research as a process *" is ongoing because as soon as we reach a provisional point where we feel things are satisfactory, that point itself raises new questions and it is time to begin again"* (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

7.7 Setting the context of this research

Research Question

When RPL policy and practice are embedded in an organisation, what additional supports should be put in place to help with RPL case preparation from a student's perspective ?

The area of RPL case preparation is complex in that no two cases are ever the same and the onus is on the individual to consider and finalise what material is essential to support their case.

The research question considers how to improve the experience of the student who is within an education system and looking to prepare an RPL case. The following elements come to mind in terms of questions that might be considered;

- What supports are most effective ?

- Does it help to have real examples of RPL cases laid out for the students to see, or is this too prescriptive ?

- In a time of high demand and finite resources how do we get to support every student equally while maintaining quality RPL submissions ?

- Does it make sense to put materials up on the web ?

- What else can be done to effectively support the student?

While students are normally mentored through the task of building the portfolio, the student must be able to reflect on and review their own learning and decide what is key to supporting their claim. This lends to the following question:

- How does reflection tie in with RPL ?

This is the second aspect which was investigated; Enactment 2.

The first step in the overall process was to capture a picture of how RPL case preparation was perceived in 2011. This is the first Enactment of the research.

The group asked to inform this question were chosen from those who had prepared a prior experiential learning case in the previous year. Thirty students took part in the study. It was decided to contact them by email and to include a questionnaire. The intention was to use the recommendations of the learner to improve the overall RPL preparation process. The research is carried out following the steps outlined in Fig. 7.1

Investigation of RPL case preparation
Questionnaire with thirty students

Exploration of reflection and how it is perceived by students
Focus groups held with twenty five students

Redevelopment of RPL website for the Institute
This step will be informed by the initial questionnaire

Subsequent research steps will occur and will be informed by the results of first two steps

Fig.7.1 *The research process*

The initial interview with the student was part of the RPL preparation process and thus was not included in the data of this thesis. A questionnaire was used to capture the opinions of each of the participants and emerging themes were captured from this data. The action research approach was used to bring change to the system improving it from the perspective of the learner.

The ability to reflect is central to the RPL process therefore it was also important to explore this consideration as to how the individual can develop as a reflective learner. The second Enactment explores the reflection process and uses a focus group approach to gather data.

7.8 Why Action Research was chosen

Action research was chosen because it is a practice based form of research. It engages with the learner on a daily basis and mentors them through the portfolio preparation process in order to present experiential learning for assessment. It allows one to listen to the learner and explore how to make their prior learning preparation smoother and less daunting a task. As a practitioner, I am interested in looking at the practical side of my mentoring practice. I want to improve and refine the learner's experience and am willing to listen to the student's voice to see how the process can be improved for them.

In a time of recession, there is a significantly increasing demand for RPL. This has resulted in more pressure on the service where I am dealing with increasing numbers of requests from individuals who want to present prior experiential learning cases for assessment. I want to make the RPL the process smoother and more user friendly while still adhering to the rigorous quality assurance aspects demanded in a Higher Education institute. Quite often the learner will have a different perspective or insight as to how to refine the prior learning preparation task. They may be able to come up with new or easier ways of presenting material. Quite often, innovation can come about in a time of pressure. This opportunity can be used to listen to the learner, to explore their experience with a view to implementing any ideas or suggestions which might help the process run more smoothly.

I am also interested in helping students develop as reflective learners. The ability to reflect and to use this reflective process to engage with the learning process, in order to promote deep learning is an evolving process. Reflection in and on action and the importance of thinking on ones feet applying previous experience to new situations is a key life skill (Schon, 1983). Reflection is a central aspect of preparing a prior learning case. The ability to consider what to include and why, against the learning outcomes is central to preparing a good case and having a successful outcome.

As a research method, action research appeals to me; following through with an idea, seeing where the journey takes me, while all the time trying to improve practice. The collaborative aspect of action research (where I am a participant as well as researcher) is attractive as I can work with both learners and colleagues to improve RPL in CIT. This approach should enrich understanding of RPL in practice. Keeping a reflective journal and using this space to record and reflect on a regular basis, for the duration of the research, supports my journey, helps put perspective to the work in hand.

7.9 Action Research as a methodology

In this study, action research encouraged reflective practice in the workplace. When the workplace is Higher Education, action research can be a powerful tool for change allowing for an examination of the values, principles and practice to which one works. Using action

research as a methodology for this research it was possible to explore the learners perspective of preparing an experiential learning case and the approaches needed to develop as a reflective learner. To quote Norton, it can;

> *"bring about more radical change in which the very nature of higher education should be open to critique and fresh perspectives"* (Norton, 2009).

This approach complements that called for in the *'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030'* which requires a flexible responsive approach from higher education in order to meet the changing demands of society for education (Hunt, 2011).

Taking from the readings of Burrell and Morgan the methodology of this work will tend to the subjectivist or anti-positivist side of the research spectrum. The methodologies used will be adopted from the Idiographic perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The emphasis;

> *" is placed on the explanation and understanding of the unique and particular individual case rather than the general and universal"*
> (L. Cohen, *et al.*, 2007).

A qualitative, interpretative approach will be taken with the research question in order to better understand the subjective world of human experience. The interpretative model seems to be the most applicable model to choose for research in a higher education setting. However, like positivism it still has the shortcoming of having the research directed by the researcher while acting as *"expert"* (Wellington, 2000). However the quantitative aspect of the work through the questionnaires should offset this tendency with statistics resulting in a picture of how RPL is perceived by students in 2011.

7.10 Sample selection

7.9.1 Sample selection; Enactment 1 Questionnaire

In 2010, thirteen students were asked to complete a questionnaire asking about their experience of preparing a prior experiential learning case. In 2011, a further seventeen students completed the questionnaire. This was a total of thirty students across a broad a range of disciplines and levels. I chose this approach because I wanted to consider the range of evidence a student would have to present along with the task of preparing against the learning outcomes from as broad a range of disciplines as possible.

7.9.2 Sample selection; Enactment 2 Focus groups

The BA in Community Development uses alternative assessment methods throughout its programme with little or no summative assessments. I chose to work with this group because the programme emphasises development of reflective practice from the very beginning. These adult learners were asked to participate in a focus group in September 2011. Participants were informed of the opportunity to contribute at a class induction session in September 2011. Twenty five participated in the focus groups. These class groups had in the previous two years completed a module '*Portfolio Methods for RPL (EDUC6004)*'; where they were given the policy and procedures for RPL. Part of the assessment of the module involved completing a sample portfolio.

7.11 Data collection and analysis

The following methods were used to collect data.

1. Candidates who had been through an RPL process in CIT, for an experiential learning case were invited (by email) to participate in answering the questionnaire in Enactment 1.

2. For Enactment 2, students on the BA in Community Development programme were asked to participate in a focus group exploring reflection. These students had previously completed the module '*Portfolio Methods for RPL (EDUC6004)*' so had good basic knowledge of what RPL was and how it was used. Each one had completed a sample prior learning portfolio.

3. A reflective journal was used to capture my thoughts as the research progressed.

4. Email correspondence was used to question students and gather data.

The data was physically collated in the following ways:

1. Results from questionnaires were tabulated in Word.

2. Focus group data was recorded and transcribed in full.

3. E mail correspondence was collected and archived.

4. A reflective journal was used throughout the research to document the progress of the results.

1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a series of questions asked to a number of individuals to obtain information on any given topic. In this instance, the questionnaire was used to establish the student's experience of preparing an experiential learning case. Each of the candidates was known to me as I had previously mentored them through the portfolio preparation process for presenting experiential learning for assessment in CIT.

In designing the Questionnaire, open format questions were chosen to allow each participant respond freely. It was a quick and easy way to get a snapshot of their experience. These students are mainly part-time and have family and work commitments. It is difficult to get them together or to meet individually.

Students were asked if they would like to participate in this study. In designing the questionnaire the guide for questionnaire construction as set out by Cohen, Mannion & Morrisson was followed. Elements such as question content; wording; and order of questions was considered while preparing questions. Open ended questions were chosen as I wanted to allow the individual to respond freely, without prompting (L. Cohen, *et al.*, 2007). Before finalising the questionnaire, it was piloted with two colleagues in two different Institutes of Technology one of whom returned it complete with data.

Table 7.1 *Enactment 1 Questionnaire*

Module:

Level:

Programme:

Basis of Case (Briefly):

Date Process Started:

Date Completed:

Date Sent for Assessment:

Outcome of Assessment:

1. How did you find out about Recognition of Prior Learning ?

2. How did you find the process of preparing your prior learning case ?

3. What made you decide to take this option ?

4. Did it save you time ?

5. Would you take this option again ?

6. Were you able to reflect on your life's experiential learning and use it to prepare a good case for assessment ?

7. How did you find the task of answering the learning outcomes ?

8. Did you find this difficult ?   What was difficult, can you say ?

9. What did you think of the learning portfolio and its structure ?

10. What would you change about the RPL process in general ?

11. What would you change about the Learning Portfolio ?

12. How did you find the task of organising evidence to back up your learning ?

13. What would you change about the task of finding evidence now ?

2. Focus group

A focus group is a form of group interview where a group discusses a topic and delivers a collective view (L. Cohen, *et al.*, 2007). These are useful for capturing a range of opinions, but have the drawback that one or two outspoken individuals (if present) could dominate

proceedings and thereby influence the data collected. It is the interaction of the group with each other which yields the data. The researcher must set out initially what is required so they will not interfere once proceedings are underway. I conducted a focus group with students from the BA in Community Development programme in CIT. I was interested in their opinion on the benefits of reflection; barriers to developing the ability to reflect and the practice of reflection in everyday activity.

3 Reflective journal

A reflective journal is a document used to record thoughts and observations throughout the research process. Quite often the entry can be brief and informal, notes to self, observations, thoughts about progress (or lack of it), a tool to help with planning or consideration of difficulties. The use of a reflective journal was essential to record my own learning journey with this research. Reflection throughout the process helped me to make sense of the data and to explore emerging issues and themes. It allowed me make my thoughts and position on a number of issues explicit. The reflective journal was also useful to provide evidence of issues arising and to document key findings as they emerged.

Further reasons to take this approach were to encourage my development as a reflective practitioner; to increase my confidence through better insight; to aid the recording of events and reactions and to provide data on which to build discussion.

4. Email correspondence

I used email to support my collection of data. Email is used everyday to interact with students and has the advantage of being stored as digital data.

Data analysis

Analysing the emerging data to yield relevant, reliable results upon which to build a discussion follows in chapter 10. Generating units of meaning from the data was the first step. Data was subsequently categorised and I then explored each of the units of meaning and described what they were and how they might be interpreted.

Chapter 8

Enactment of Research

8.1 Introduction and context

RPL is widely available at third level yet there is much work to be done to develop and research its provision. The reality of lifelong learning and the learning society; where each individual takes active responsibility for their own learning journey throughout life has yet to be realised in practice. This research explores RPL and the preparation of an experiential learning case from the perspective of the learner. It uses an action research methodology to see how the learner can be supported through the task. It considers how technology can be harnessed to support the learner with portfolio preparation.

Fig. 8.1 *Illustration of the work undertaken*

8.2 Enactment 1; RPL in 2011

8.2.1 Introduction and context

This research explores RPL and the preparation of experiential learning for assessment while asking how to improve supports for the learner as they prepare their case. Often learners are daunted by the prospect of building a case against the learning outcomes and can find the task of supporting their claim with appropriate evidence difficult. In order to understand how to support the learner it was decided to investigate what it was actually like to prepare an experiential learning case for the learner in 2011. I wanted to see how learners found the RPL process as it is.

8.2.2 Method

A broad range of students from multiple disciplines, who had prepared an experiential learning case in 2010-2011 were invited to partake in this study. Thirty students (thirteen students in March 2011 and seventeen students in September 2011) from a range of backgrounds and disciplines were asked thirteen questions:

Table 8.1 *Student sample for Enactment 1*

Student	Module	Level	Programme	Basis of case
1	Customer care	6	Higher Cert in Financial Services	Worked in customer care
2	EDUC 9009 Art & Des. Studies for Primary Teaching	9	MA Teaching Visual Arts for Primary and Early Years Education	Worked as teacher
3	PLAC 6010 Work Placement	6	Higher Cert in IT Support	Worked in the area
4	COMP 6020 LAN Switching & Wireless	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Worked in the area
5	MMED 8004 Broadcast Media	8	Higher Diploma in Arts in PR	Broadcast journalist for 9 years
6	NAUT 8018 Shipboard Operations	8	BSc (Hons) in Nautical Science	Working in shipping now and chief mate masters

7	COMP 6018 IT Service Support	6	Higher Cert in IT Support	Working as IT Support Engineer and as process analyst for helpdesk
8	COMP 6018 IT Service Support	6	Higher Cert in IT Support	3 + years working in IT service support
9	ENVI 7002 Environmental Management	7	BSc GMP & Technology	15 years working in sector
10	COMP 6018 IT Service Support	6	Higher Cert in IT Support	Worked in area
11	SPRT 7025 Professional Development	7	Bachelor of Business in Sports & Rec. Mgt.	Self employed in sector
12	SOFT 6001 Algorithmic Problem Solving	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Worked as auto technician
13	COMP 6019 IT Training	7	Higher Cert in Computing	Worked as corporate trainer for 10+ years
14	Put in for 5 modules in Higher Cert in ITS (CIT, IT Service Support, IT Training, Systems Admin, Work Placement)	6	Higher Cert in ITS	Works in IT industry
15	CIT module	6	Common Engineering	Had worked before now
16	MMED9006 Media Design Project	9	MA in Media Design	Working in area and had published papers
17	Networking Fundamentals, CIT, Comp. Architecture, Routing Protocols & Concepts, Computer Hardware, LAN Switching & Wireless, Intro to Bus Systems, WAN technologies	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in area
18	Web Development	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in the area
19	Programming Fundamentals and others	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in the area
20	7 different modules	6	Higher Cert in ITS	Working in the area
21	Object Orientated Programming	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in the area
22	CIT module,	6	Higher Cert in	Working in the area, lots

	Communications		Business Studies	of experience
23	CIT module	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in the area, lots of experience
24	Work Placement, CIT, Professional and Personal Development	6/7	BA in Early Years Education	Working in the area, lots of experience
25	IT	6	Higher Cert in GMP	Working in the area, lots of experience
26	CIT module	6	Higher Cert in ITS	Worked for a few years
27	CIT module	6	BEng Civil Structural and Env Engineering	Worked in team environment and problem solving situations
28	Web Development Fundamentals	6	Higher Cert in Computing	Working in the area, lots of experience
29	IT Training	6	Higher Cert in ITS	IT training courses and worked as a trainer
30	Auto CAD	6	Higher Cert in Civil Engineering	Work experience

A Questionnaire was used to collect data (Table 8.2)

Table 8.2 *Questionnaire for Enactment 1*

1. How did you find out about Recognition of Prior Learning ?

2. How did you find the process of preparing your prior learning case ?

3. What made you decide to take this option ?

4. Did it save you time ?

5. Would you take this option again ?

6. Were you able to reflect on your life's experiential learning and use it to prepare a good case for assessment ?

7. How did you find the task of answering the learning outcomes ?

8. Did you find this difficult ?   What was difficult, can you say ?

9. What did you think of the learning portfolio and its structure ?

10. What would you change about the RPL process in general ?

11. What would you change about the Learning Portfolio ?

12. How did you find the task of organising evidence to back up your Learning ?

13. What would you change about the task of finding evidence now ?

Responses from these questions will be presented in Chapter 9.

8.3 Enactment 2; An exploration of reflection

8.3.1 Introduction and context

One of the core aspects of preparing an RPL case for assessment is the ability to reflect. By reflecting the student is critically evaluating their prior learning and considering how best to present a case against the learning outcomes which must then be appropriately evidenced to support their claim.

8.3.2 Method

The benefits of reflective practice are many. I chose the BA Community Development to participate as I had delivered a module '*Portfolio methods for RPL (EDUC6004)*' for this group in year 1. In this module the students learn about RPL and prepare a sample portfolio. This serves as a foundation module where the students first reflect and build a sample portfolio. The class uses this approach again several times throughout their programme to capture the learning gained in work placement with the learning portfolio. In these later stages the ability to use reflection to impart the abilities of a reflective practitioner is central to the task (O'Leary & Goggin, 2010).

In May 2011, an initial Questionnaire was prepared to look at the reflective process from the perspective of the learner. This was posted to the BA in Community Development, 2nd years (17 students). The Questionnaire had the following questions:

Table 8.3 *Questionnaire for Enactment 2*

1. How did you find the process of preparing a learning portfolio in semester 1 ?

2. The semester 1 module EDUC6004 Portfolio Methods for RPL introduced the class to the learning portfolio and provided a first opportunity to explore prior learning, experiential learning and what it means for each of us. Was this first module useful when reporting on Work Placement later ?

3. Was the learning portfolio a suitable method/tool to capture the range and diversity of the

There was a very poor response to this questionnaire therefore it was decided to hold focus groups in September 2011 instead. The focus groups were held with year 2 and year 3 BA Community Development as this group use portfolios in a reflective way to capture their learning in the work placement element of their programme. Careful selection of questions followed and the focus groups were held in late September 2011. These explored what the student thought of reflection and if it was perceived as difficult. The following questions were explored:

Table 8.4 *Focus group questions*

The focus groups were recorded and the dialogue was transcribed. Emerging themes were noted and categorized.

8.4 Enactment 3; Improvement of Institute website for RPL to support case preparation

8.4.1 Introduction and context

The third piece of research work was that of improving the existing RPL website for the Institute. The initial website had the following configuration:
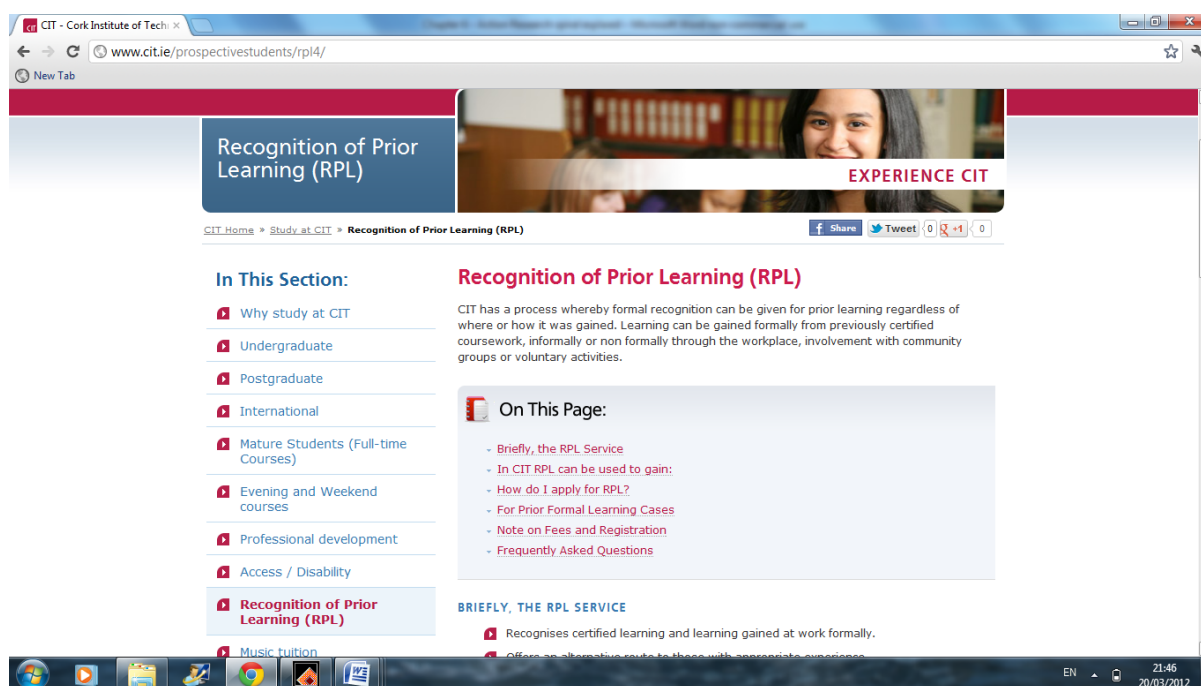
Fig. 8.2 *CIT website on RPL in 2011*

The site had basic information on RPL but there was very little use of images and no graphics or videoclips were embedded within. In addition, the site was not included in a separate space in the CIT website, but was hidden in a sub page on the main layout.

8.4.2 Method

I reviewed the literature and the web to see other examples of RPL websites. Initial research in 2010, revealed only eight of the thirteen Institutes of Technology in Ireland mentioned RPL/APL specifically. Significant among these were Athlone IT and Waterford IT.

Internationally, Middlesex University and the Dutch Knowledge Centre for RPL were comprehensive. After reviewing the literature I made contact with key researchers in the

RPL field and sought advice on how to proceed (Duvekot, 2010; Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Initial information was set out in December 2011 with help from colleagues to proofread and edit text. I came up with a strategy. I decided on key areas within the website that needed development. They were as follows:

- Different types of learning

- Forms of recognition

- Submitting my case

- Assessment of my learning

- When do I get feedback ?

- Testimonials

- Popular modules 'How to' guide

- Useful links

- Frequently asked questions

A page was created for each of these areas, text was prepared and images chosen. There was significant input from technical staff who supported me with training and video clip preparation. The work was complete by the end of January 2012and the site was live in time for semester 2 which began in February 2012.

8.5 Enactment 4; Evaluate web portal for RPL

8.5.1 Introduction and context

The new website was evaluated to measure its effectiveness in supporting the learner.

8.5.2 Method

Students evaluated the new website and their feedback was collated using a simple
Questionnaire. 20 students out of 93 responded to the Questionnaire.

Table 8. 5 *Website evaluation questions*

> 1- Do you find the current RPL site useful ?
>
> 2 - Can you suggest any changes ?
>
> 3 - What else would you like to see on the site ?

An evaluation of their responses was carried out.

8.6 Enactment 5; Develop a Valuing Learning space within RPL website

8.6.1 Introduction and context:

As we go through life all activities are potential learning environments and it is up to the individual to be aware of this and to value each experience and learn from it. Experiential learning will allow an individual to build a range of competencies, skills and knowledge in an area over time. The learner can support the journey towards lifelong learning by actively documenting their own life's learning arising from experiences in all spheres of life over time. This collection of artefacts will grow and change; depending on the use it will be edited and presented for a particular purpose.

8.6.2 Method

I wanted this space to promote the idea of documentation of competencies over time. I consulted with RPL practitioners in the field who informed me as to what should be included in this space. Ruud Duvekot, of NV Holland advised a stand alone space on the self management of competencies. I set out the Initial text and images. I next consulted with the staff of the institute and showed them the draft website. I asked them to select useful examples from their discipline that could be used to document informal learning. These examples will prompt the student to consider the full range of evidence they might draw upon to support their claim. It was intended to include this diverse range of documentation under each staff photo to support the students.

The web space was built to highlight the message that learning occurs everywhere; at work; through hobbies; voluntary commitments and through sporting and community activities. The page was complete in April 2012 and added to the main RPL site (www.cit.ie/rpl/valuinglearning/).

8.7 Enactment 6; Trial of e-portfolios

### 8.7.1 Introduction and context

e-Portfolios can be used to build and present a prior learning case for assessment. It was decided to pilot the use of digital tools in portfolio preparation using software that was readily available and easy to use. Up to this point the portfolio was prepared as a word document and submitted as a traditional paper based portfolio. It was intended to take advantage of the significant developments with the emergence of the cloud computing; web 2.0 and e portfolios over the last five years.

8.7.2 Method

Timetabled class time with the BA in Community Development programme gave me the opportunity to trial e-portfolios in September 2012. The module in question is called '*Portfolio Methods for RPL (EDUC6004)*'. This module has been delivered since 2000 and involves the class preparing a portfolio so they gain an appreciation of RPL and of how documenting non formal and informal learning can be valuable for the adult learner.
After initial research as to what system to use I decided to use Google Sites to host the e-portfolios as the Institute already used Google as a platform for student email.
To familiarise myself with e portfolios I prepared a sample e-portfolio. I learned how to navigate the site, upload evidence, how to insert pictures, page design etc. The front page of this site is presented in Fig. 8.3 below:
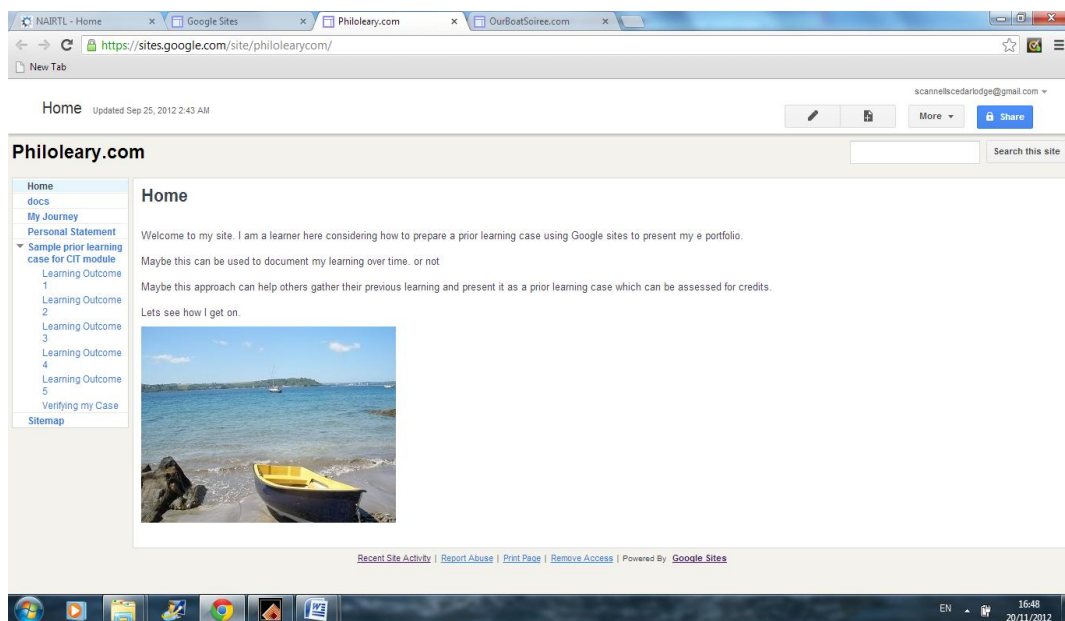
Fig. 8.3 *Initial e portfolio prepared using Google sites*

I learned how to prepare an e portfolio with this first example, the content and tone was too personal for use with students. A second generic was prepared. This second example was linked to the Cork Institute of Technology RPL Valuing Learning space to support the trial (https://sites.google.com/site/priorlearningexamplecom/). This is presented in Fig. 8.4:
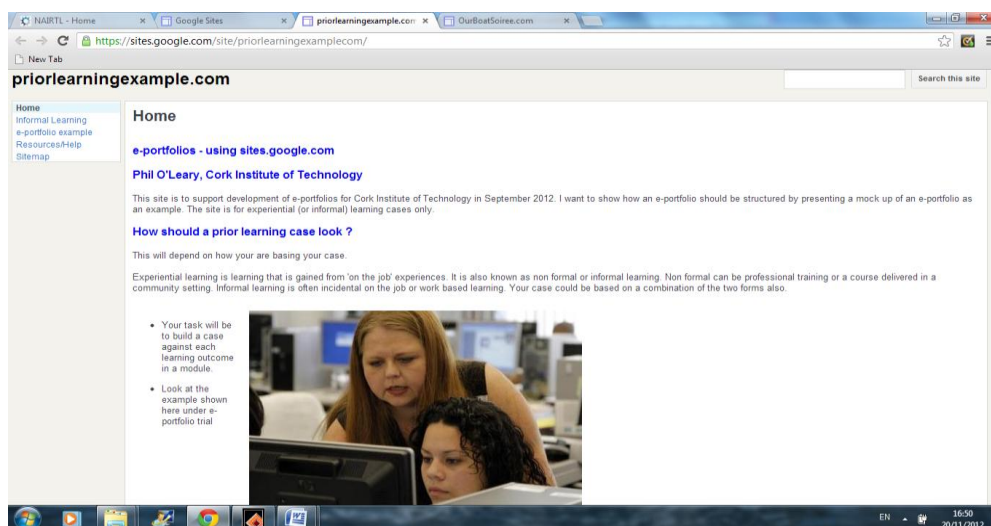
Fig. 8.4 *Generic example of e portfolio prepared to support the trial*

It was then decided to set up a third site to use in class time specifically to demonstrate how to build an e-portfolio step by step. This site was changed and reworked over the weeks to support the class and demonstrate this user friendly medium. A screen grab of week 10 is presented in Fig. 8.5 below:
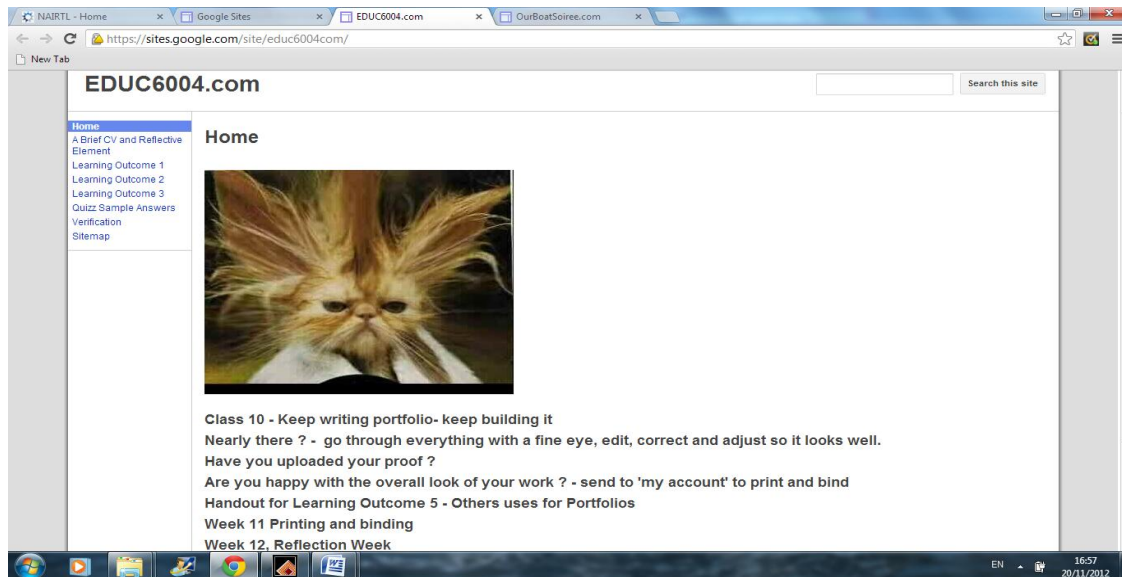
Fig. 8.5 *Screen grab of class support material for week 10 of semester*

Every week the class group built up the portfolio in a two hour workshop. Collaboration was encouraged.

8.8 Enactment 7; Evaluation of e-portfolio trial

8.8.1 Introduction and context

The e-portfolio trial was evaluated to assess the suitability of using an e-portfolio system to capture a prior learning case for assessment purposes in a Higher Education setting.

8.8.2 Method

Once all of the portfolios were complete and returned to be assessed, each of the participants were given a questionnaire. This is presented in Table 8.6

Table 8.6 *Questionnaire for evaluation of e portfolio trial*

1. Did you enjoy the experience of preparing the e Portfolio

   Yes/No

   Explain
2. What would you change about the experience ?
3. What positive aspects were there with the task ? (list 3)
4. What challenges were there for you ? (list 3)

The Questionnaires were collected and the responses themed and analysed.

Chapter 9

Results and Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

The results of each of the actions on the research spiral are presented here. As outlined previously action research comprises several steps namely to; plan, act, observe, reflect and plan again and so on in a spiral continuously building in response to what emerges. The following Figure summarises the Enactments in this thesis.

Enactment 1

The first action was to explore how RPL was as an experience at the beginning of this thesis. This is the Questionnaire investigating prior experiential learning case preparation in 2011.

Enactment 2

Focus groups to explore reflection.

Enactment 3

Improvement of existing RPL website for the Institute.

Enactment 4

Evaluation of the website

Enactment 5

Creation of Valuing Learning space on RPL website

Enactment 6

E Portfolio trial

Enactment 7

Evaluation of e portfolio trial

Fig. 9.1 *Illustration of the work undertaken*

9.2 Enactment 1; RPL in 2011

9.2.1 Results

To analyse the data, the response from each participant was considered against each question. A pie chart was made out for each set of responses to see the trends emerging. This is available in Appendix G.

The results were as follows:

1. **How did you find out about Recognition of Prior Learning ?**

    RPL is very well embedded in the fabric of CIT. 61 % of candidates first hear about RPL through Lecturers, course co-ordinators and Heads of dept. The remaining 39% of people find out about it through the CIT website (13%) , the RPL Co-ordinator and other students.

N = 30
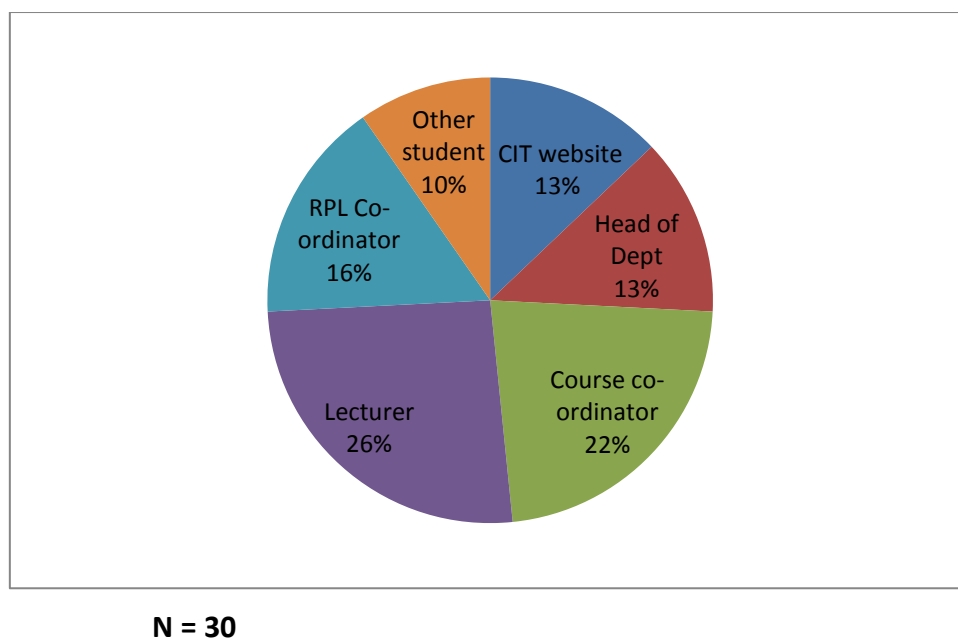
Fig. 9.2 *How did you find out about Recognition of Prior Learning ?*

2. How did you find the process of preparing your prior learning case ?

66% of candidates found the process straightforward or understandable once they had support. 31% found it time consuming or tedious though.

N = 30
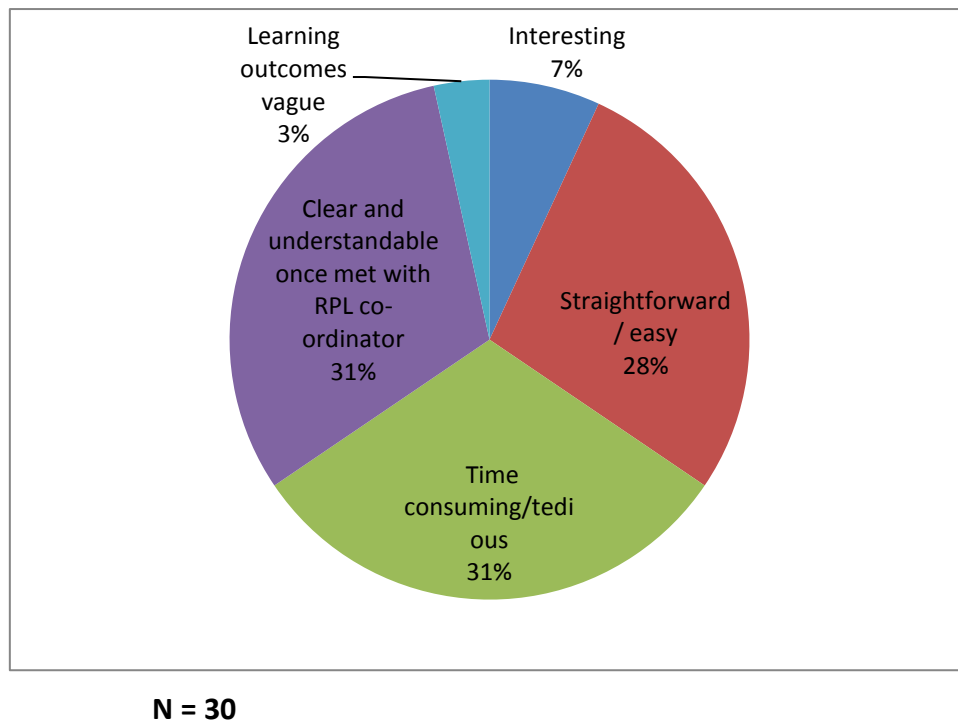
Fig. 9.3 *How did you find the process of preparing your prior learning case ?*

3. What made you decide to take this option ?

There was a variety of reasons for taking on the option of RPL. For 38 % it was to save time, and for another 38% it was to gain recognition for what they knew or that they had significant number of years in a field, for 14 % it was to focus on more difficult subjects or to reduce the workload, and significantly for 10% it was the only option to complete the module. This shows how RPL is relied upon by staff for suitable cohorts of students.

N = 30
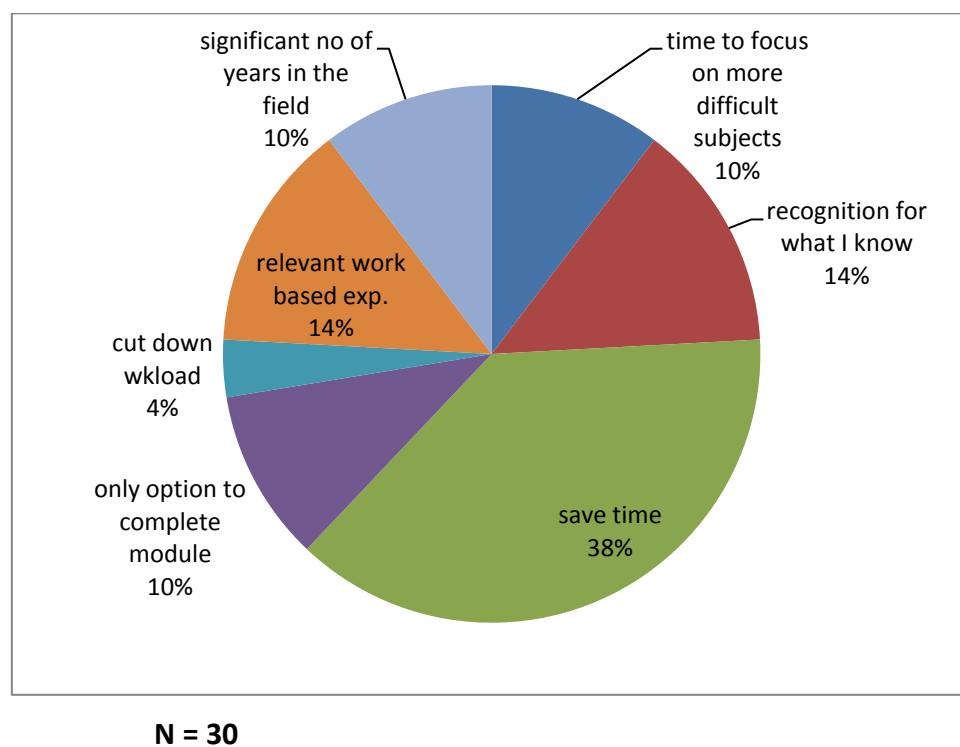
Fig. 9.4 *What made you decide to take this option ?*

4. Did it save you time ?

93% of responses said it definitely saved them time.
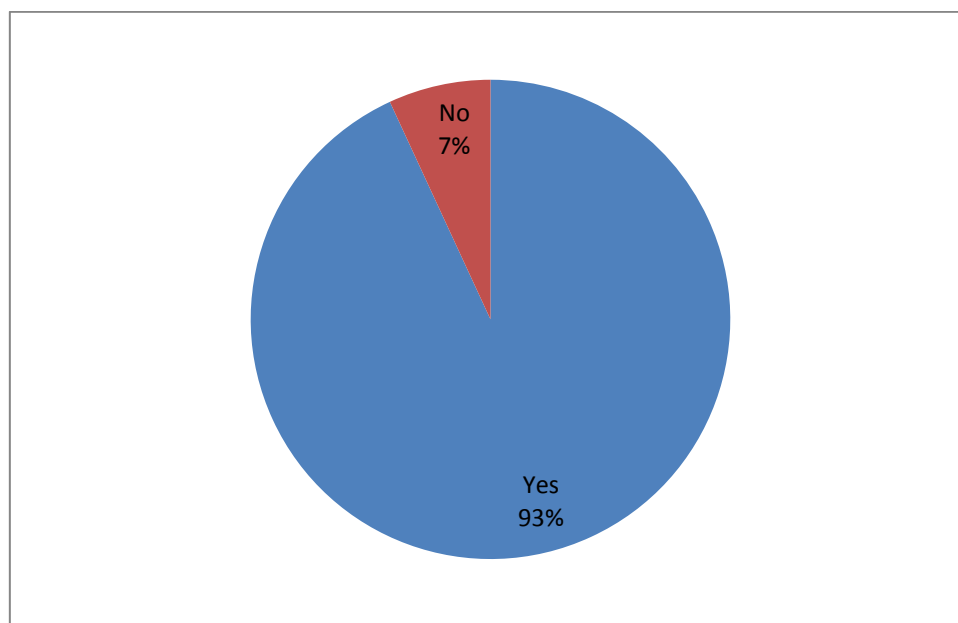
N = 30

Fig. 9.5 *Did it save you time ?*

5. Would you take this option again ?

97% of responses said they would take this option again. The one student who responded in the negative has since returned to prepare two other RPL cases for Spring 2012.

N = 30
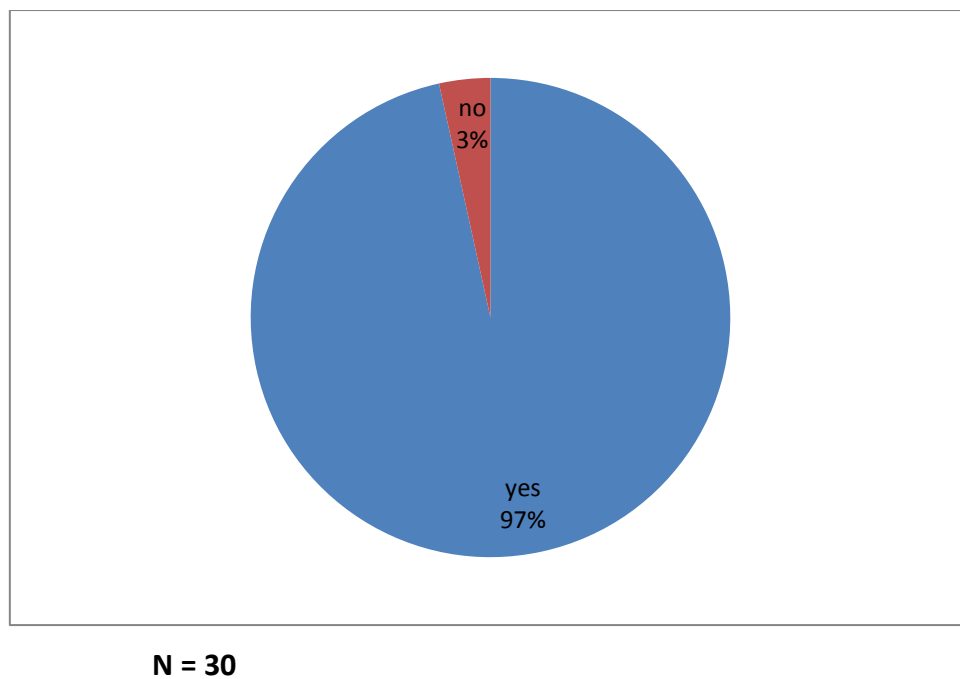
Fig. 9.6 *Would you take this option again ?*

6. Were you able to reflect on your life's experiential learning and use it to prepare a good case for assessment ?

91% of students were able to reflect and used their life and work experience to good effect. A minority (3%) said no they could not reflect, another 3% said they could but it required thought and effort and the remaining 3% found it difficult to get supporting documentation.

N = 30
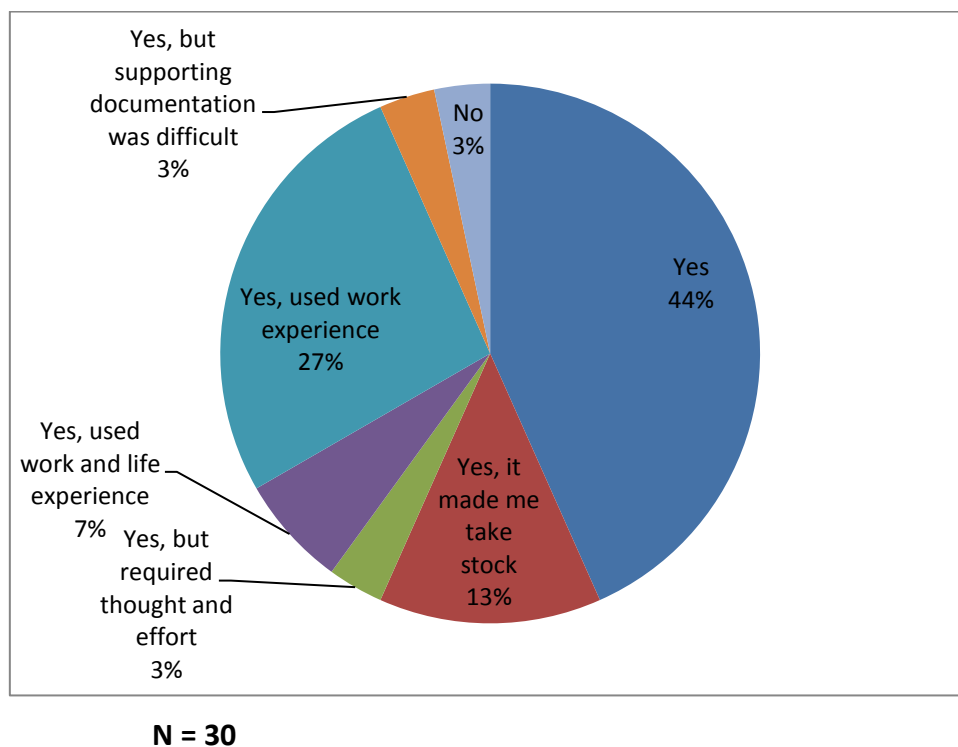
Fig. 9.7 *Were you able to reflect on your life's experiential learning and use it to prepare a good case for assessment ?*

7. How did you find the task of answering the learning outcomes ?

62% of students were satisfied with answering the learning outcomes; 38% found it difficult with 10% saying it was frustrating or took some time.
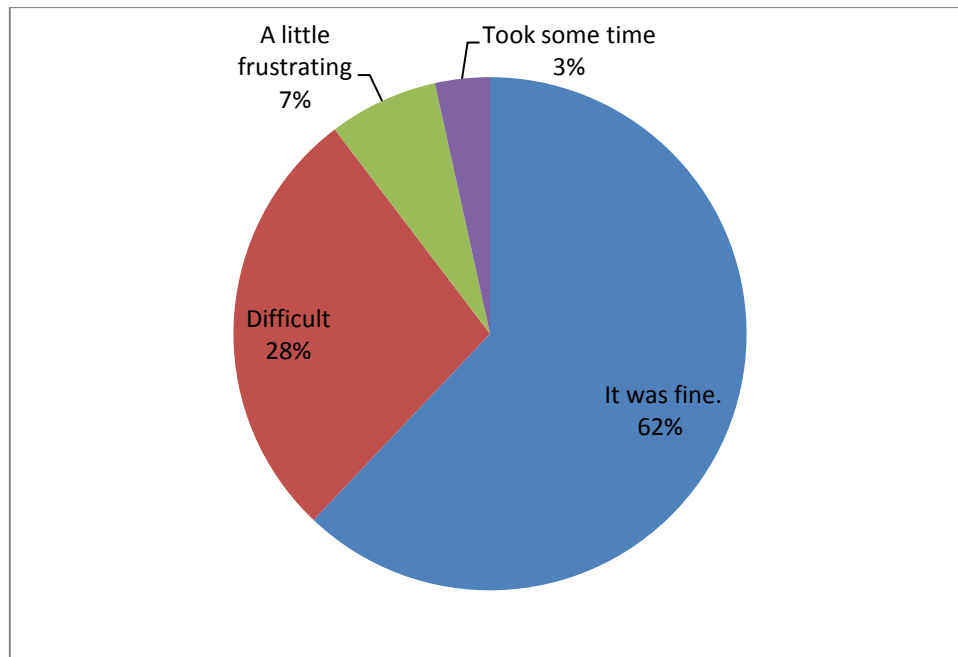
N = 30

Fig. 9.8 *How did you find the task of answering the learning outcomes ?*

8. Did you find this difficult ?   What was difficult, can you say ?

Equal proportions of students found it difficult, challenging or straightforward to prepare.

N = 30
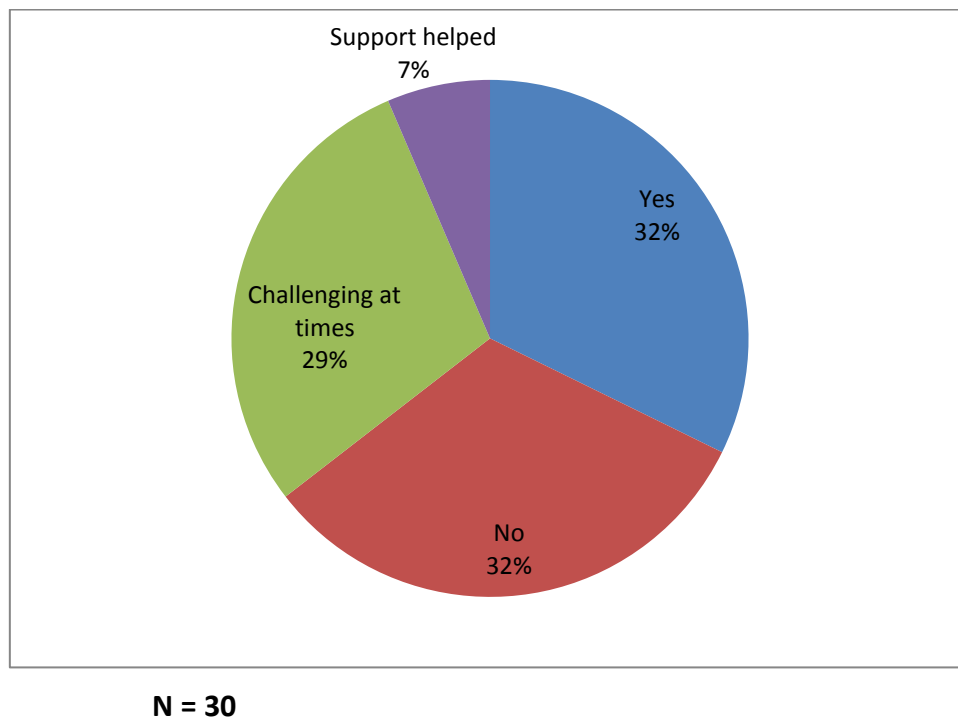
Fig. 9.9 *Did you find this difficult ?   What was difficult, can you say ?*

9. What did you think of the learning portfolio and its structure ?

A large proportion of students (82 %) found the structure of the learning portfolio to be good or straightforward as it is. The remaining few (18 %), found it tricky to edit, daunting, a bit tedious and wanted clearer guidelines.

N = 30
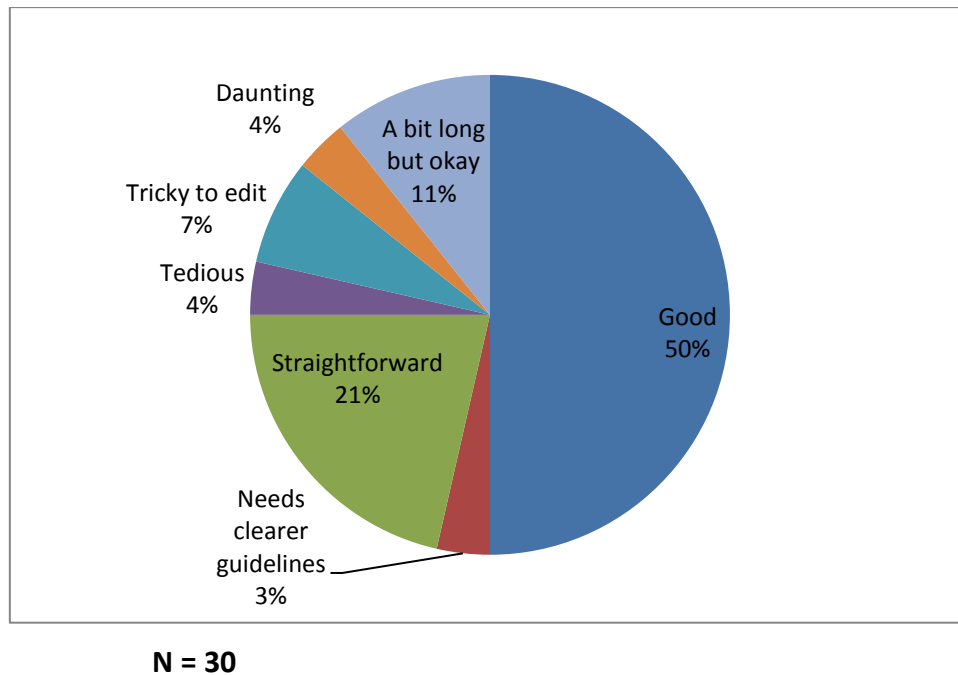
Fig. 9.10 *What did you think of the learning portfolio and its structure ?*

10. What would you change about the RPL process in general ?

When asked what would they about the process the students had a large variety of responses. They were as follows:
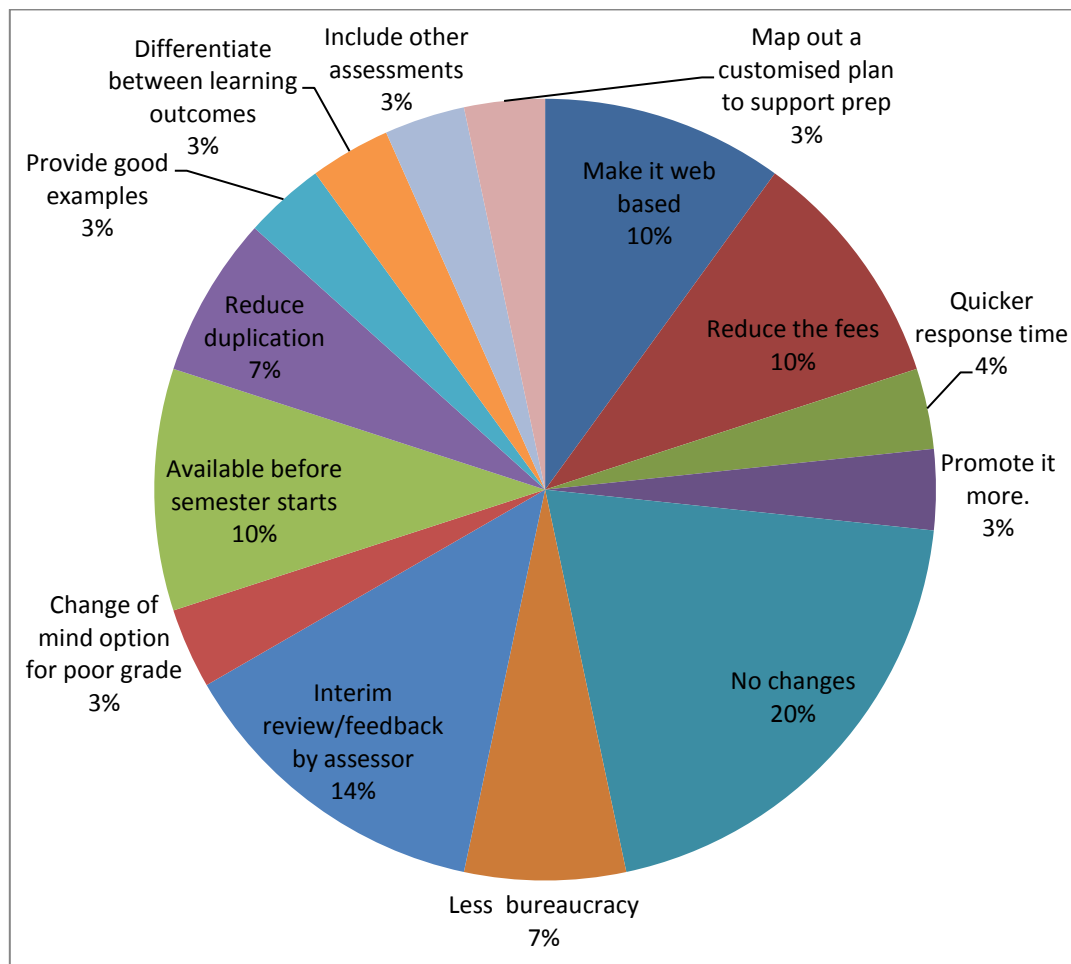
N = 30

Fig. 9.11 *What would you change about the RPL process in general ?*

11. What would you change about the Learning Portfolio ?

Less than half (42%) said that the portfolio was fine as it is and that no changes were needed. However 13% were looking for more guidelines and examples 3% wanted good examples and 8 % were looking for the option for an online submission and improved navigation with hyperlinks, this comes to a significant 24 %. As a result of this I decided to develop the RPL web-portal to better support the student. Many recommendations came out of this question.

The following are some of the ideas the students suggested:

- To include an interview
- Provide guidelines and good examples
- Have an online submission
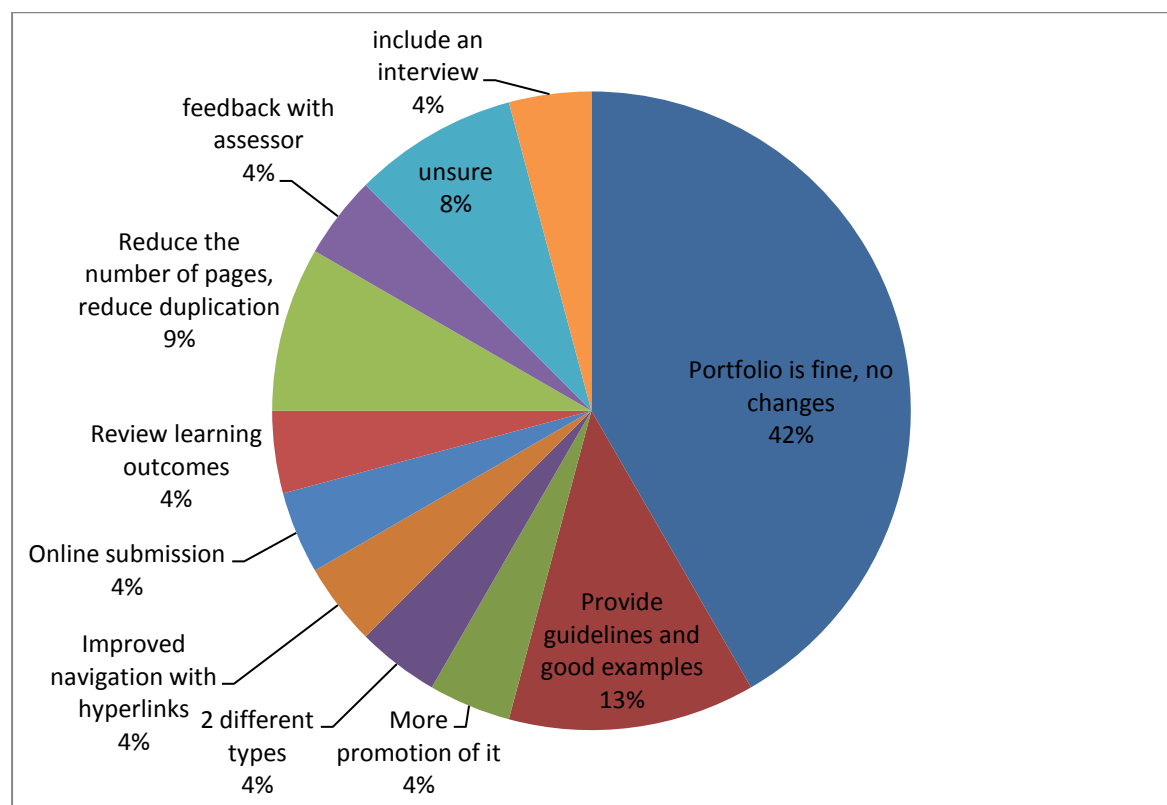
N = 30

Fig. 9.12 *What would you change about the learning portfolio ?*

12. How did you find the task of organising evidence to back up your learning ?

55% of students found organising their evidence was either very easy or fairly easy or interesting. However 17 % found this to be a difficult task and 14 % found it hard to prove or backup.
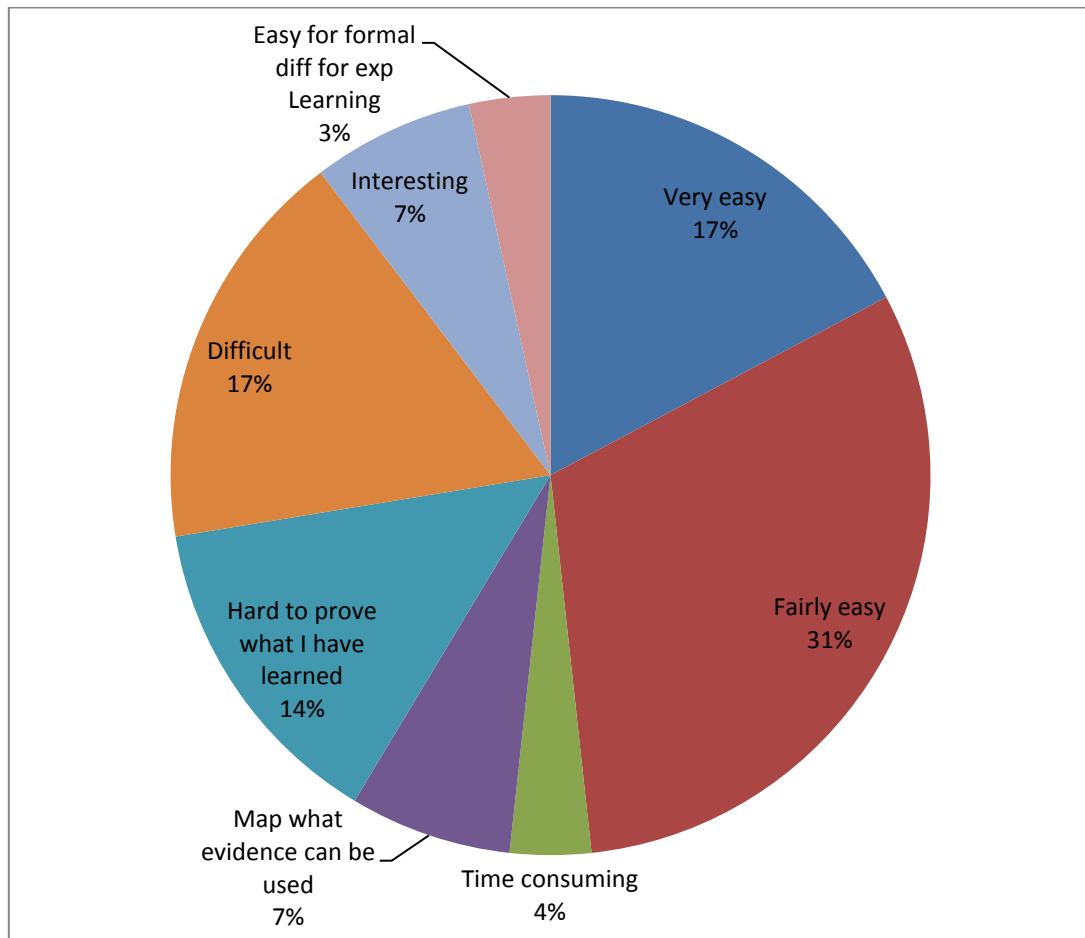
N = 30

Fig. 9.13 *How did you find the task of finding evidence now ?*

(What would help with the task of finding and presenting evidence ?)

13. What would you change about the task of finding evidence now ?

42% of students wouldn't change anything about the task of finding evidence. 11% suggested including an interview to support the verification of the prior learning case. Other respondents mentioned using good examples from other students to support current students (8%). Another 8 % mentioned the difficulties a person would have if they had multiple employers, and 4% mentioned keeping records of everything.

N = 30
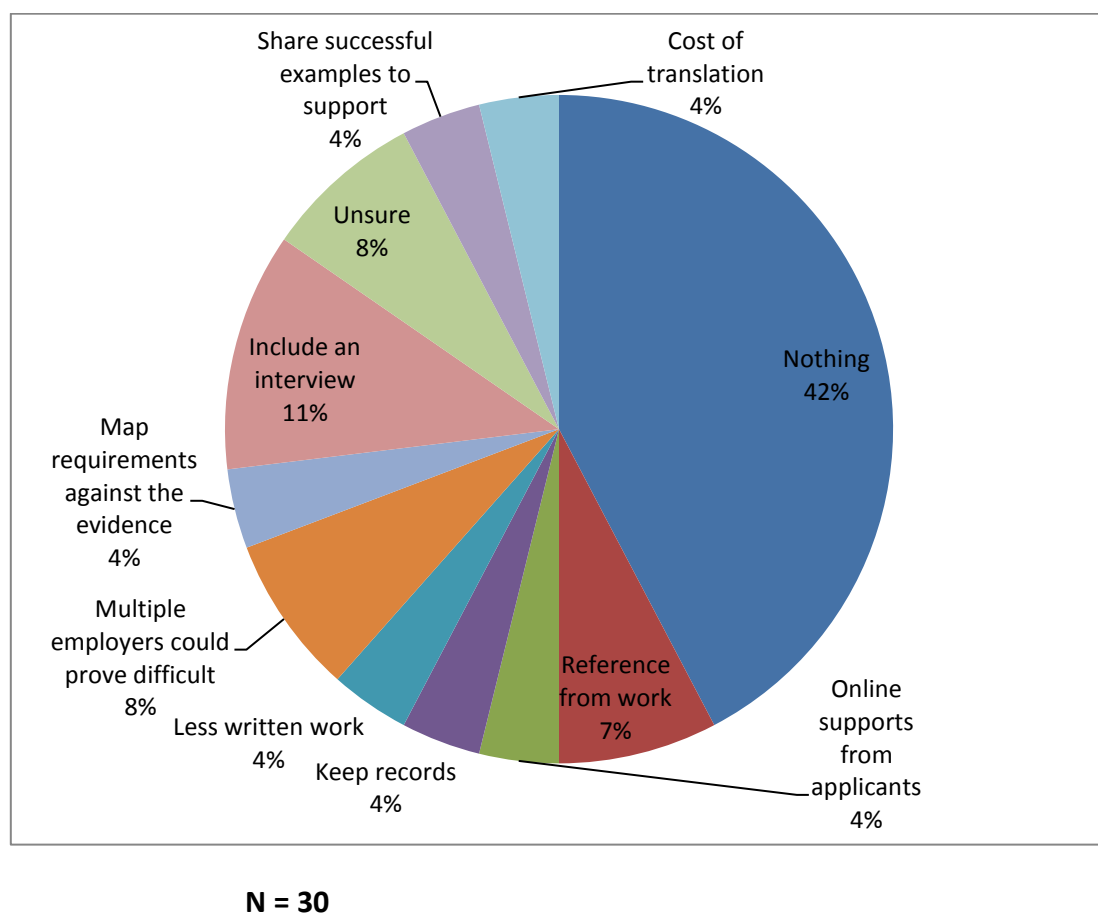
Fig. 9.14 *What would you change about the task of finding evidence now ?*

9.2.2 Reflection on Enactment 1

Questionnaire to 30 students – RPL in 2011

November 2010

*I have been supporting RPL provision for staff and students in CIT for almost fifteen years now. This is such a fascinating area that has changed and grown over the time that I have been involved beyond measure. No two days are the same and I am often surprised by what people come up with or present when they finally submit their case. **If I can review current RPL practice at this starting point, I will let this research be informed by the views of the learner.** I have nurtured RPL from the early years of its provision in 1996, dealing with 45 students to a situation where 589 RPL cases were returned in 2010. It works now across all levels and disciplines. I have seen changes in demand for RPL in recent years and there are significant increases in numbers. The type of candidate has also changed which reflects the downturn in the economy. **There is an increasing incidence of more complex cases based on experiential learning across the levels and disciplines of the Institute. Several candidates have returned to education as they were after losing their job and considered a return to education a positive move to make. Often they would say that they, "were at a crossroads" in their life.** Overall there has been an increase in the number and complexity of experiential learning cases presenting for assessment at the higher levels too. These candidates take significant time when mentoring them through the portfolio preparation process.*

I decided on a questionnaire as it was the quickest way to get questions administered to a cohort of students that are difficult to get access to given that they all work by day and only study in CIT by night.

Questionnaire sent out in December 2010.

I was hugely encouraged by the positive response rate (100%).

January 2011

The responses enlightened me. Even though the responses were individual and context rich I could see themes emerging from what people said. This set me thinking. Some of the insights included:

- ***RPL must be promoted more***
- ***RPL site needs a more obvious presence on the CIT website***
- ***More effective use of the RPL website to support the learner***

I must harness the capability of the website more effectively.

I was reassured by the answers to question 1 which confirms that RPL is well embedded in the fabric of Cork Institute of Technology. Students mostly hear about RPL from the Institute staff (in 80% of cases) namely from the course co-ordinator; module lecturers; RPL co-ordinator and from the Heads of Department. The website and other students account for 13 % and 10 % respectively. It was also reassuring to see that 56 % of the students found preparing the RPL case to be a straightforward , easy task or clear and understandable once they had met with an RPL mentor; however 33 %, a third found it time consuming or tedious. It was a good result in one way, however you could also say that a third was a lot to have in the negative camp. There is definitely work to do to improve matters. It was reaffirming to see that a third wanted RPL to save time. Learners are under pressure with course work, therefore, it makes sense to see that they would want to focus in on the new areas of a programme where they need to spend time to acquire new knowledge. This whole survey is so information rich. It was reassuring too to see that in practice the responses to the survey said that the RPL did save them time and that they would reapply again. Also an astounding 84% were able to reflect on past learning experiences and were able to prepare a case for assessment. Almost two thirds of the students (62%) said answering the learning outcomes was fine, although 34% found it difficult. Everyone agreed that it was difficult to answer the learning outcomes (Question 8), when asked 66% found it difficult. I wondered why this is the case ? From this I concluded that people need support with RPL case preparation, real examples that they can draw or use as inspiration might be useful. 82 % found the structure of the learning portfolio to be straightforward. This was reassuring. When asked what changes they would propose to the RPL system there was a large variety of responses with some interesting trends emerging. Amongst the responses were 10% who asked to make it

web-based and 7% who wanted less bureaucracy and 20% who did not want any changes to the process as it was. When asked about changing the portfolio 42% said that the portfolio was fine as it was however a significant 24 % were looking for an online option or better examples on the web. This was a significant result for me, and one that I can act upon. I've realised now that I must develop the RPL site to become a web portal which can better support the student. When asked about the task of organising evidence to back up an RPL case 55% of students found it an easy straightforward task, however 17 % found it difficult and 14 % found it hard to prove or backup. I wonder what I could do to help the student here ? If I gave more examples of how to back things up would that be helpful? Alternatively would it be enough to prompt them earlier to document everything that they know which might be relevant to a course or programme ? Or does this only occur to us at the last minute in reality ? The last question I included was what would students change about the task of finding evidence ? In response, 42% of students wouldn't change anything about it although 11% would include an interview as part of the evidence.

*In response to Question 11; what would you change about the learning portfolio ? **I think it is significant that 24 % were interested in an online example and better support from the RPL website.** This is an area that I can contribute to and develop to good effect because I understand the area and would know how to gather material to upgrade the site. I know that if I put effort into redeveloping this site that I can make a difference to the quality of support available.*

Key learning for me
*An obvious step is to revisit the RPL website. It makes sense from a number of perspectives; the increasing numbers mean its increasingly difficult to support everybody and a lot of the questions people ask me are similar anyway. Also it wouldn't cost a whole lot to restructure the website, so it would give a good return on the investment. **A well structured web portal would be an excellent resource for students and staff for RPL. It could be a real showcase for what we offer.** A lot of the students and staff access CIT resources from home and work so it will make sense to have downloadable paperwork and printable examples. I should make it as relevant as possible with testimonials from other students who have been through the process. The more I think about it I am convinced that it is a valuable step to*

take. I can receive training in web design and work with staff on the production of video clips. The timing is good really as it is in between semesters. I could have this up live on the site for new semester in the New Year 2012.

9.2.3 Conclusion Enactment 1

Significant insight is available from the questionnaire as to how students are finding RPL case preparation in 2011 in an Institute of Technology setting. A number of the students requested an online presence for supports to prepare their portfolio. In a time of increasing demand for RPL it makes sense to redevelop the RPL website to include material to specifically support the learner with the preparation of their prior learning case. This was evident from a number of responses as to what changes could be made. This step is carried out in Enactment 3. The website could include testimonials from other students; downloadable templates and real examples of RPL cases laid out in an easy to follow format.

9.3 Enactment 2; Exploration of reflection; can a student develop as a reflective learner ?

9.3.1 Results

The focus group transcripts revealed the following seven themes:

1. Reflection is difficult, it does not come easy, it was difficult to get started.

   "I think I found it difficult. Once it was explained more why they wanted you to reflect and how it can help you as a community worker, in the future then I think I understood it and when I put it together ... I think it all linked in." (Student no. 1)

   We all found it difficult in the beginning ... because I would have thought of all of the things I did over the years and then I thought, what kind of a community developer was I ?" (Student no. 2)

2. The learning environment was important and allowing the opportunity for shared experiences/learning from each other was very valuable.

   "But I have to say, listening to my classmates, listening to what they were saying and then I would say, Oh I have that, I need to go back there ...the actual relaxed atmosphere of the classroom helped ... it was a learning environment." (Student no. 27)

   "Its the shared experiences, you know. Listening to everybody elses experiences which will help you to remember your experiences or maybe you've had a similar experience, so you know, thats as much part of the learning environment as anything else, shared experiences." (Student no. 18)

3. Learning journal was useful to map learning and provide a foundation for reflection. Other useful tools were an extended CV, learning portfolio, the mindset to capture any event in a word or two on a scrap of paper and revisit it later.

"The learning journals are excellent like in that if you are doing a six day workshop or a seven day workshop of something that at the end of every workshop you are supposed to write a page of your reflection of the day and then you'd look at it." (Student no. 11)

"The learning journal, this worked for me." (Student no. 16)

4. Providing examples or guidelines of real reflections to show what was expected as it was a core element of the programme would be very helpful.
"Could we see a sample one ? ... Having to reflect on practice in a professional way, having never done that before, maybe to see a sample of how one is done." (Student no. 18)
"You know clear guidelines on what ... the reflection was supposed to be." (Student no. 8)

5. Regular feedback would help – providing proper feedback to each student to show where and how they might improve their own approach to reflection would be valuable.

"Just for feedback even for one class ...for an hour in the morning, if everyone of us had been given 10 minutes ... that would cover the modules this year." (Student no. 9)
"We are in third year now and we got absolutely no feedback." (Student no. 7)

6. Reflection in itself is a valuable process where you gain self awareness of all you have achieved over the years and of how current practice builds on that.
"I think its actually acknowledging your achievements ... recognising that you have done a lot ... so if you can look back from the beginning right to the present there is a lot that each individual here has achieved and just acknowledging that da'ya know ?" (Student no. 24)

"and then that builds into your self esteem and your self worth in the end by capturing it." (Student no. 20)

7. To quote; *"Document everything as you go through life. Capture every experience no matter how small or insignificant. Get into the lifelong learning mindset and build a portfolio of all you have achieved"*(Student 21, 2011).

   "We were looking backwards but the crowd now can look forwards and the recording of information and stuff ... its arsenal to yourself ... its a different type of learning like ..gives you a map. All you have achieved, hmm." (Student no. 25)

   "I'd get them to document everything. Every single thing that they did, no matter what it is, just write it down, cos somewhere along the line you'll come back to it." (Student no. 21)

Full transcripts are presented in Appendix H.

9.3.2 Reflection on Enactment 2

The Importance of Reflection ? Focus groups with 25 students; September 2011

September 2011 – just after the focus groups

I was disappointed with the poor response to the initial questionnaire, but I realised that my timing was poor. May is a pressure time for students and they were not going to be responsive to my demands for information. I decided not to lose heart and to wait for the next window as education is a cyclical process. I learned a lesson too though; research is all about timing. September proved better when I ran the two focus groups. I was anxious beforehand but heartened by both events. It was challenging to get the best out of them and to get them talking, interacting and expressing themselves; but then the opinions started to flow as they warmed to their task

Focus Groups - My response to the event.

I was overawed by the goodwill in the room and how the group gave their opinions so freely and without worry. It was amazing really and very insightful too.

*It is such a privilege to be in this situation, it makes me look at myself – almost with a third eye and I am disbelieving of my reality. I think, "how did I end up here ?"; " who would have believed this ?" When I am over the disbelief, next comes the sense of duty and responsibility. **I owe it to these people and to my employers to make a difference; to improve things; to smooth the path for learners; to build reflective capability into the average learner.** How am I going to do this effectively ? I must use the tools they suggested; the learning journals; the real examples that I can show to a class to let them see what is expected. I must set the standard and provide them with the tools to prepare material that is genuinely third level. I will study the transcripts from these focus groups and act on them. I will build this into my research and see where it takes me.*

*There is a great deal of information here. **What stood out for me firstly is how personal reflection is for everybody.** They all feel strongly about it, everyone has an opinion about getting started, and what works for them. Reflection poses difficulties for many. However having said that I certainly get the sense that it is a very valuable exercise in itself lending*

insight to how we are with our practice and what different situations mean for us. I get the sense that it helps build on what we know, making sense of our emotions or our reactions later on.

*When I look at myself in this enactment; I can see the state of flux, how the outside world is impacting my daily life, the increasing demand for RPL; the collapse in the economy is having a real effect in the type of learner coming in the door to me. **I like the freedom and practical fluidity that action research as a methodology is allowing me. The uncertainty as to the outcome of research does not bother me at all; maybe its because I have been active with RPL for so long and I know that any changes I will make will be tempered by my own prior knowledge as to what will or will not work in reality. Eitherway its a good idea to thoroughly explore the reflective aspect as its such a core part of building a case. Lets see where it takes me.***

Late October 2011

*The transcripts took time to prepare. Some of the comments were difficult to decipher as some of the accents were varied. Still I persisted. I colour coded the comments by theme. My themes were self explanatory. 'Document as you go' was an emerging recurrent theme. One of the students said that in reality they were reaching back to document and build a case from learning gained in the previous 30 years, that it should be the young twenty something students that begin documenting their abilities and work forward and see where it brings them over time. They stressed how it would support their career path too. **"Document as you go"; is certainly linked to RPL, and it makes me reflect on Ruud Duvekots paper on "The age of APL" with his concept of "the glass is half full"; the idea is certainly linked to lifelong learning too (Duvekot, 2010). Should an individual maintain a digital record of his knowledge, skills and abilities it will pay dividends on return to education should this learning be relevant to a field of study.***

9.3.3 Conclusion Enactment 2

The emerging themes provide a useful insight to the to the students experience of reflection. Reflection is an essential tool for the adult learner who must make sense of material and place it in the context of previous knowledge in order to truly acquire new learning. The theme of "*document as you go*" through life is the one which is significant in the context of this research. It has implications for the area of lifelong learning; for RPL and prior learning case preparation. It lends to the question of activating the learner and the transition from a knowledge to a learning society. Higher Education providers should support this message by asking learners to maintain a digital archive of their competencies. This could begin in year 1 of college. The research focused on this theme and considered how it might be used to promote the idea of valuing what we know already. Further developing this research theme will encourage a lifelong learning message and will have implications for how RPL is promoted within an institute setting.

9.4 Enactment 3; Improvement of Institute website for RPL to support case preparation

9.4.1 Results

The web portal is available at www.cit.ie/rpl and in March 2012 the home page had the following appearance:

Fig. 9.15 *CIT web portal for RPL; Homepage in March 2012*

On the left hand side of the home page a menu with sub-pages was inserted for ease of navigation. Under each of these pages, further information important to the understanding of RPL was included. For instance under *'Under Different Types of Learning'*: the following breakdown of information is laid out; learning is categorised as formal, non formal or informal. Photographs are used to convey what is meant by these categories along with text to support the message.
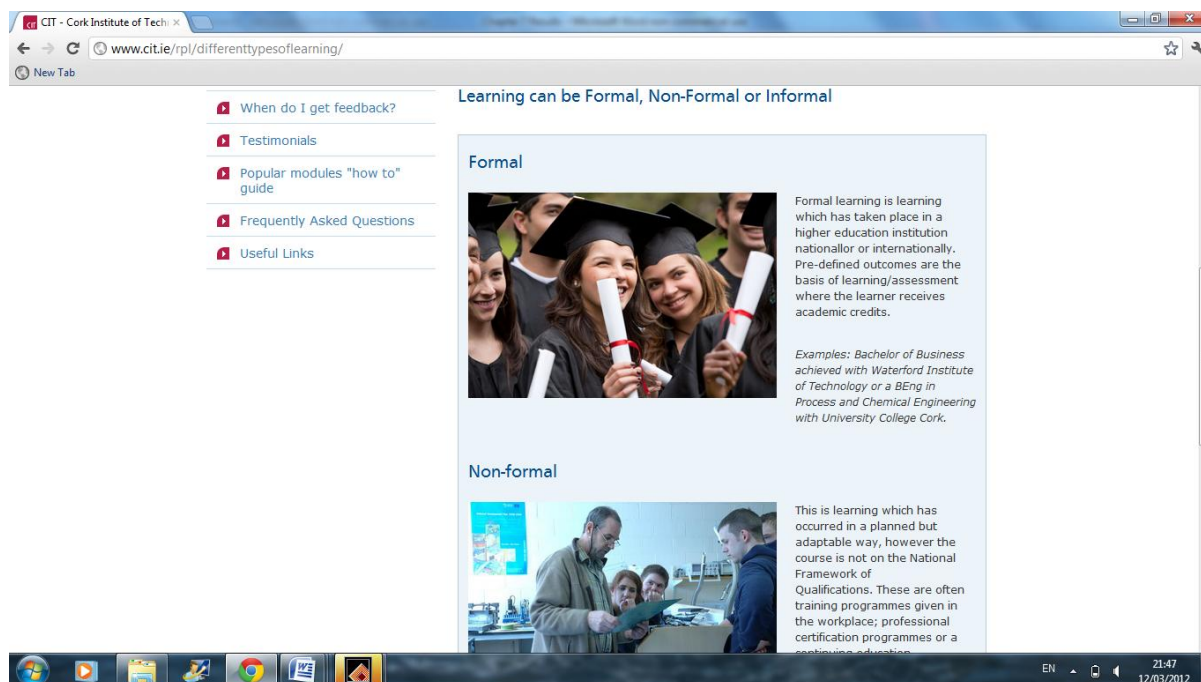
Fig. 9.16 *Sub page; Different types of learning*

Under Forms of recognition the different ways RPL can be used to help a learner are explained with an easy to use illustration. This illustration is then carried on through the lower pages in this section to support the learners understanding of the concepts involved.

Fig. 9.17 *Sub page; Forms of recognition*

Under submitting my case, the information was further broken down or categorised to explain clearly to the learner what was needed depended on the type of RPL and the type of learning.
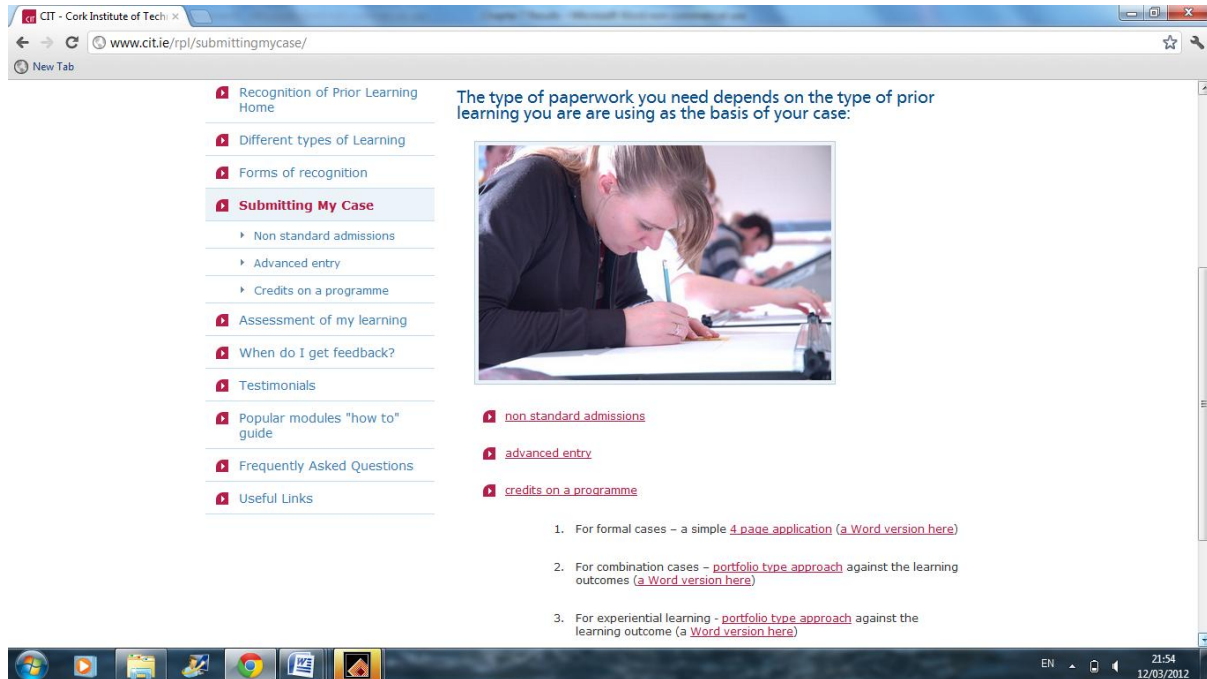
Fig. 9.18 *Sub page; Submitting my case*

Under 'Assessment of my Learning' the assessment steps are broken down into simple stages. A graphic is used to convey these steps and text is included to support the page.
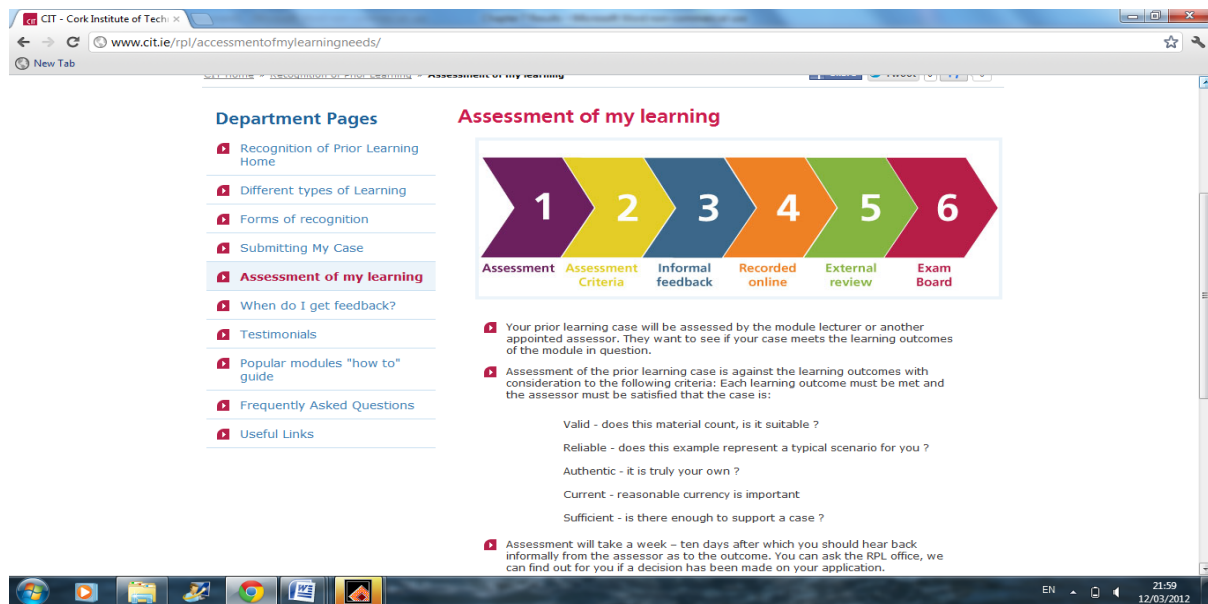
Fig. 9.19 *Sub page; Assessment of my Learning*

The section on 'When do I get feedback' provides information on getting the outcome of the assessment process.
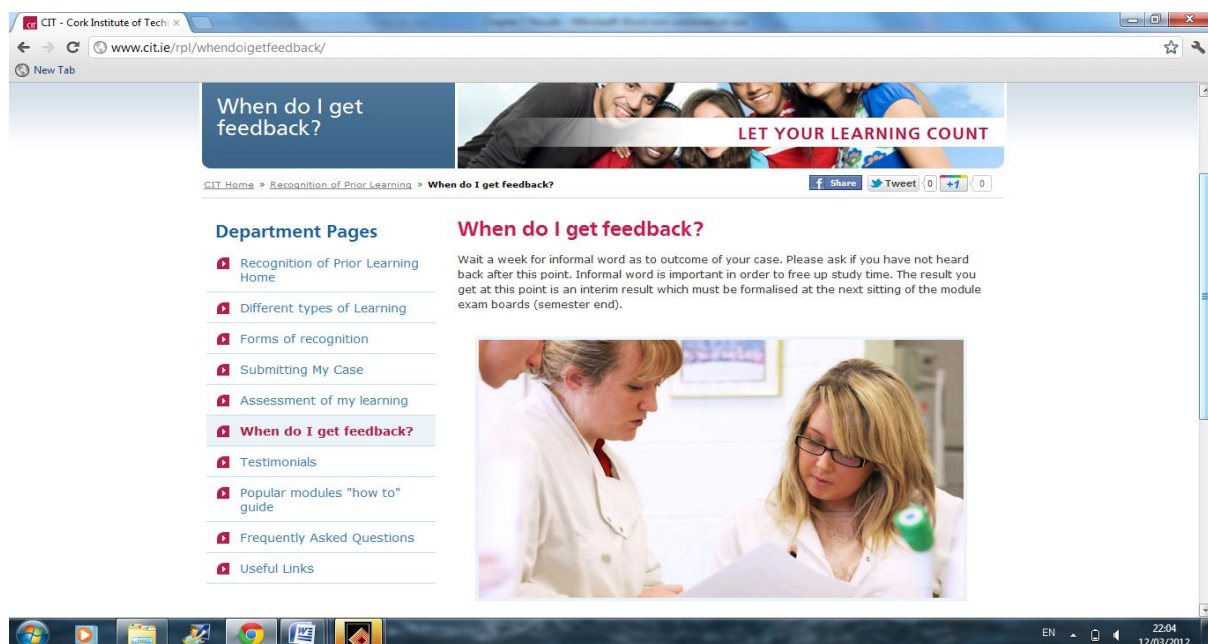
Fig. 9.20 *Sub page; When do I get feedback ?*

The 'Testimonials' section provides a mix of videoclip and written statements by a selection of learners from all disciplines of the Institute.
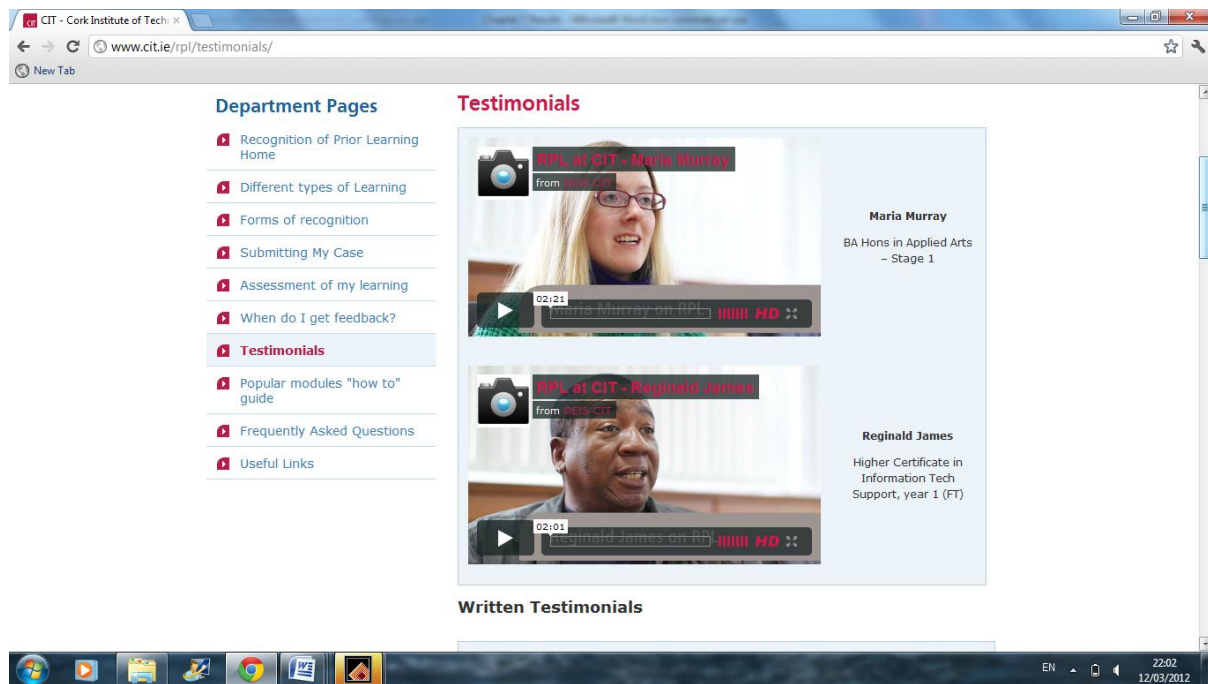
Fig. 9.21 *Testimonials of students*

The 'Popular Modules "how to" guide' uses two actual examples of how to prepare and build a learning portfolio. The modules chosen were '*Creativity Innovation and Teamwork(CMOD6001)*' and '*Work Placement(PLAC6010)*'. These modules are two significantly popular choices with students.
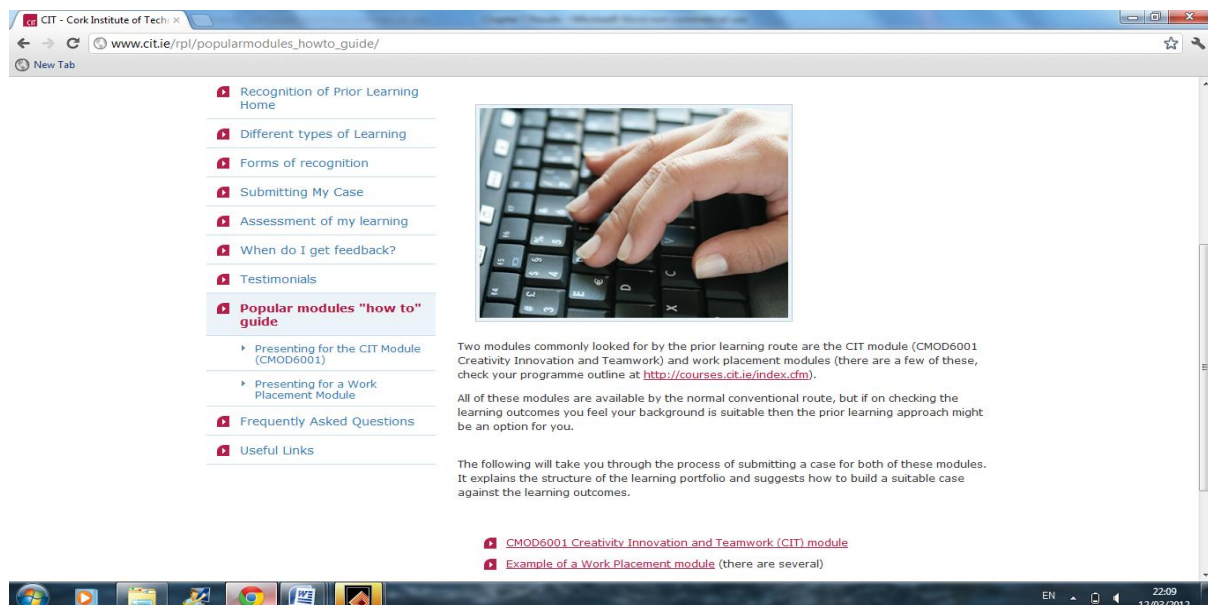
Fig. 9.22 *Sub page the 'Popular modules "how to" guide'*

This section of the site is further broken down into the stages of preparing a prior learning case based on experiential learning. Real examples of students work were incorporated into the text to support the learner in seeing what they must prepare.
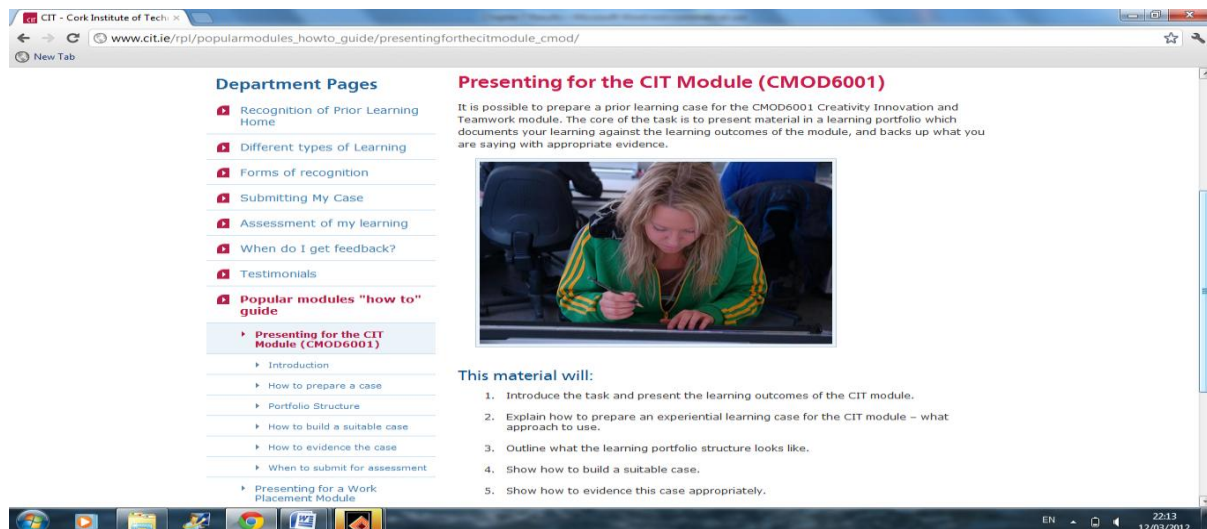
Fig. 9.23 *Example of CIT module broken into stages*

A second example of the work placement module is also presented in the same format.
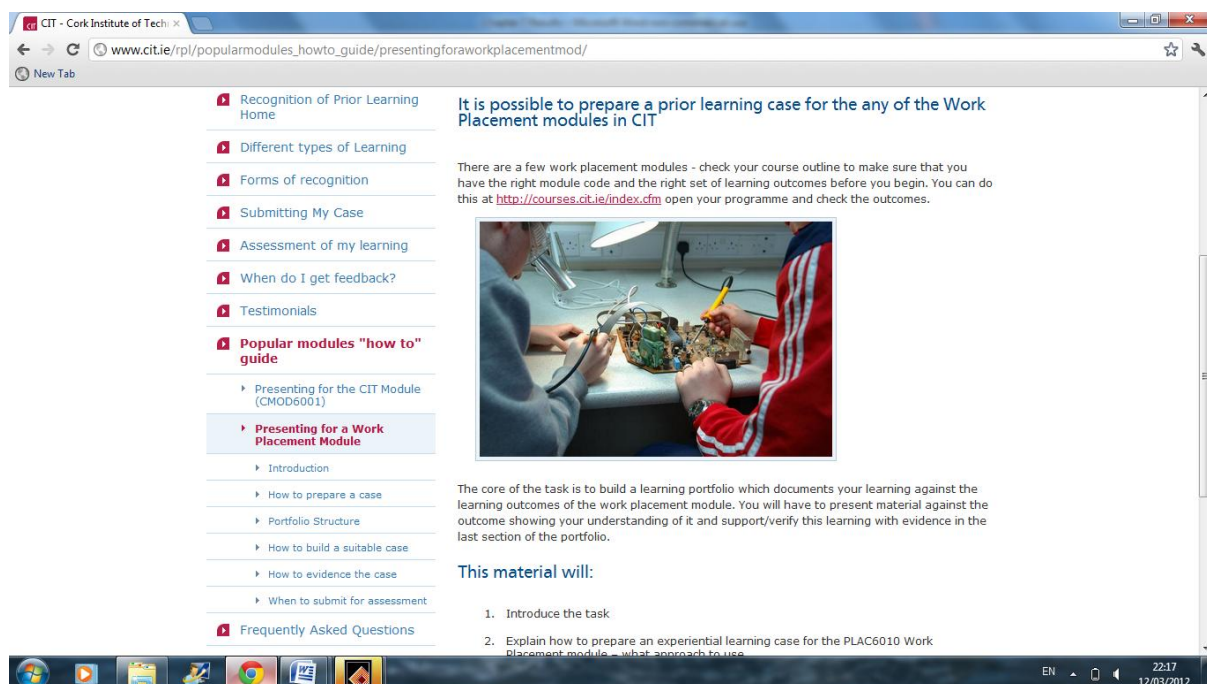
Fig . 9.24 *Example of Work Placement module broken into stages*

It is envisaged to extend this section over time to include additional popular modules or other modules requested by Heads of Department etc over time. Each section is set out in the format of a module including learning outcomes and easy to follow steps. The 'Frequently Asked Questions' section of the webpage provides answers to thirteen common questions in a drop-down format.
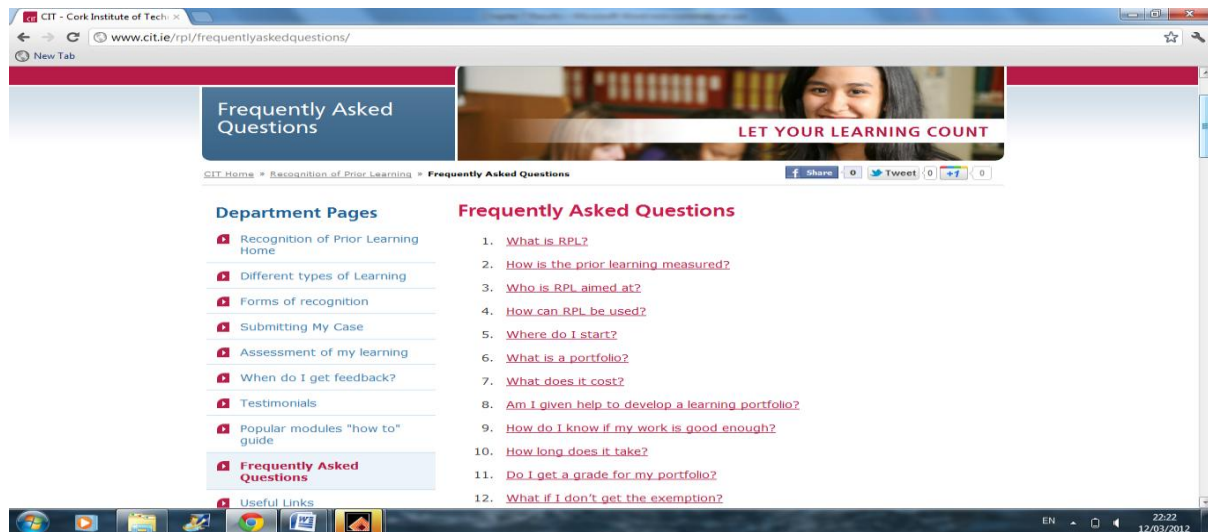
Fig. 9.25 *Frequently asked questions section*

The 'Useful Links' section of the website provides links to additional information which may be of interest to learners or other practitioners.
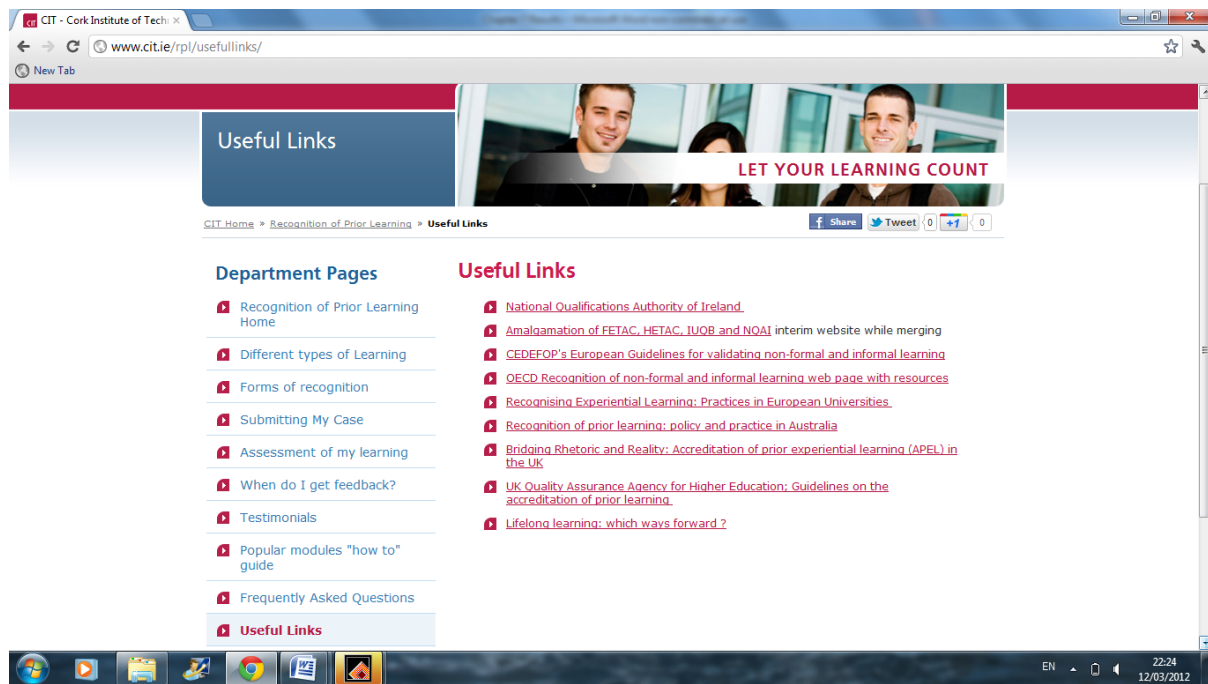
Fig. 9.26 *Sub page, Useful Links*

9.4.2 Reflection on Enactment 3

January 2012

Develop Improved Web Portal with Examples

Looking now and navigating through the RPL website, I am pleased with the work. It was well worth my time and effort overhauling the whole site. It is a big improvement on what was there previously. **I see it now as a real resource which can be tweaked over time as our needs change with RPL.**

There is still more that I can do with it though, I know that. I had tried to get the rugby player Donnacha O'Callaghan to do a piece to camera for the site, he agreed to it but then was caught with commitments so I missed that opportunity. He has previously presented an experiential learning case for two modules on the B Bus in Recreation & Leisure. If the opportunity arises again I will ask him. There are other high profile students too I could ask.

I think our RPL site is as detailed and as visual and effective as other colleges RPL sites Nationally and Internationally. I was encouraged by the contact with research colleagues active in the field overseas, namely; Sara Leiste from Copella University and Judith O. Brown in Florida and Ruud Duvekot in NV Holland University who's work I rate highly. I asked them for advice and feedback on the site and was encouraged by their responses.

Final Thoughts

Simplicity is the way to go with a website. Once you set out the main information in terms of structure, a lot of the text can be reduced with a video clip instead, or a picture. We are all very visual; we expect interactive, media rich spaces now. In future reviews of the site, I will reduce text and incorporate more media and images.

9.4.3 Conclusion Enactment 3

Expanding and redeveloping the RPL website is a worthwhile task. The site is a valuable resource now for students with the with added value content. For students that are often accessing programmes in a part time mode and often with work, family or other life commitments; a well designed website is a core support. Being able to access real examples; download the paperwork needed to prepare a case or being able to see how others got on in the testimonials section is worthwhile and supportive of them.

9.5 Enactment 4; Evaluation of website

9.5.1 Results

In March 2012, the following questions were asked to ninety three students using the RPL web portal to prepare for the CIT module.

1 - Do you find the current RPL site useful ?

2 - Can you suggest any changes ?

3 - What else would you like to see on the site ?

Twenty of the students responded.

Appendix I presents the complete text of the students responses. The following three tables presents extracts from this data against each of the three questions posed.

Table 9.1 *Extracts from evaluation data presented against Question 1*

	Did you find the current site useful ?
A	
B	The Site is very Useful on the steps that need to be taken to apply for an RPL
C	The site is clear and informative; it communicates what is required to the student in an easy manner- the short video was a better choice than trying to explain on the webpage. It is good to see you there; it relaxes the formality of preparing a submission, and reassures the student that you are available for advice. The video explanation is short, and shows how to easily approach a submission. Showing examples of previous CIT applications is useful
D	Checked out your website, there's more than enough on that site to keep anyone happy about the information on RPL's, the interviews you have on the testimonials page is a great idea I think Regi's one is the best in my opinion
E	The website looks great, couldn't suggest anything to improve it.

F	Looks good ... And now you're famous!! The video is very good as it answers questions not covered in the text
G	I find the current site to be very informative - once you know that it is there.
H	
I	It's very well done. No changes needed as far as I can see.
J	Just had a look at the website. I think that it is really well laid out. Very interesting to read, especially with the intermittent colour diagrams. It is also easy to read and navigate through. It also gives enough detail without being an overwhelming amount of info. The testimonials give a diverse range of opinions and positive support to encourage future RPL applicants.
K	I have looked at the RPL website and it looks fine, very informative.
L	Yes!... I love the addition of the testimonials. And, if you wish to use it, here is my contribution:
M	I had a look through the RPL website and found it to be extremely informative. I enjoyed the testimonials as all the participants had such diverse backgrounds and each person's story was different. I found the website easy to navigate and it had all the information that was required and only took minutes to work through...I would honesty give it 10 out of 10,
N	Congrats on the site. I think it is a excellent resource and repository of information for anybody thinking of undertaking the RPL process.
O	The video looks great, you come across very well and very approachable.
P	Congrats on the update, looks good in general... Easy to navigate site, looks well and should be a valuable resource for people. Well done
Q	I reviewed the site and think that is very informative and helpful, especially your VT, it makes the process much more user friendly. I don't have any suggestions to improve as it is very clear.
R	I found the website informative and easy to navigate.
S	When submitting my Rpl I found the website very helpful and I think this update looks great.
T	Yes it is a useful, well designed site.

The feedback from the first question is very positive in general. All respondents found the updated website to be very useful . Comments ranged from finding it clear and informative;

easy to navigate; well laid out and the testimonials were well received. The signposting of the site was an issue mentioned by 15% of the students. This could be significant in that a stream of students may not be aware of RPL until later in the semester which may impact their choosing RPL as an option or not. It might be worth considering raising the profile of RPL through one of the following mechanisms; use of the college calendar; announcement on the student email system at the start of semester; or advertising it as an option on Blackboard.

Table 9.2 *Extracts from evaluation data presented against Question 2*

Can you suggest any changes ?	
A	Create a video where I demonstrate how to fill in one. Use You Tube to demonstrate. Do out each of the steps of filling in a formal one, a non formal one, an experiential one, a combination one.
B	I would like to see maybe a Full PDF version of an RPL Case, so people could get an idea of what is involved in the case,
C	There is the potential to extend this site towards preparing for employment. The CIT module, rather than being done and dusted once submitted, can become a living repository for portfolio/CV management, for current and past students. The CIT module in particular has the potential to be used for 'Reflective' analysis on course work, issues emerging, and an honest appraisal of how they were handled. The student should not be obliged to do so; they would simply be encouraged to see that self-reflection is useful in both employment and life-skill. The student can see that mishandling an issue is as valid a learning experience as handling it well, provided they have the ability to reflect upon it...I think the student should be encouraged to document, not only successful outcomes, but times when 'hindsight is a wonderful luxury'. Not in the way of humiliating myself or confessing my weakness, but to demonstrate that through failure, we learn.... In terms of work and personal life, deliberate self-reflection is a useful technique.
	I think that no matter what the student is graded on in their formal submission, that the process should continue informally throughout college, and these skills improved upon. ..To extend the site in this way, the student should be enabled to:
	• Log in, to access their own document repository
	• Store journal pages, where thoughts on how issues are handled can be stored
	• Store and improve CV versions (different versions of CV are useful in different circumstances)
	• Store the student's opinion on what they actually achieved in each module- experience

	and skills gained/improved.
	• To prepare a portfolio of college (and other) work
	• To be sure that this was private to them, and not assessed or visible to others. For own use only
	• That assistance on, say CV or preparing for interview is available, and works with the documents they are preparing
	• That their work remains available to them when they leave college
	This functionality could be added in the future. It would be necessary to consult with both Careers Guidance and Course Lecturers, so that all are coming from the same place with the module.
D	
E	
F	
G	I think it would be good if all students were made aware of it on entry. The process probably applies mostly to evening students who may have prior qualifications or experience so it would be important that they are informed at the start.
H	I think you need to add some sample document.
I	
J	
K	
L	While the non-formal (e.g. Cisco certification) learning is perfectly outlined on this different types of learning page the relevant application form could possibly appear on this submitting my case page.
M	Maybe sign post it better……
N	I could only find information on the price of submitting an experiential learning, formal learning or mixture in the FAQ section, perhaps this could be included in the main body?
O	My only difficulty with my RPL application was actually finding you in the first place! I may be wrong but I don't recall much talk of RPL at the Mature Student Orientation days I attended and it wasn't mentioned in CIT (the very module I eventually got RPL for) until maybe seven or eight weeks had passed. It was Sinead that told me about going to see you in relation to an RPL application, and there does seem to be a lot of word-of-mouth recommendation about the great work that you do to help students.
P	One or two points, lot going on the opening page, those revolving images can do your head in after a while on the page. One or two repeats is more than enough, otherwise it's distracting. Sound on your piece to camera seems a little out of sync? Maybe it was just my computer on the day I played it.
Q	I don't have any suggestions to improve as it is very clear.
R	

S	The hardest part for me was the learning outcomes and knowing what situations I could use to be suitable. I found the examples on the website helpful but I think a couple more would be useful and make it a lot easier
T	One thing I noticed is under the 'CIT Modules and Programmes' list is that when you click on some courses e.g. Continuing education and Educational development the modules aren't centred , you need to scroll up to view them.

The responses to the second question were comprehensive. It was satisfactory to see the range and variety of opinions on the matter. In all, there were six main ideas suggested: to include a video demonstration of actually preparing a case; using a document repository system for reflection for the CIT module to promote reflective practice; provide a complete sample case as an example; improve the signposting of the RPL site; specifically mention fees in relation to RPL and provide more examples.

The first suggestion, to upload a video demonstration of the correct way to prepare a prior learning case (one for each of the main types of cases) is certainly a very useful suggestion and one which could significantly reduce the amount of text on the site. This is a good suggestion and it is a step which will be carried out in the near future.

The second suggestion was supportive of the idea of lifelong learning and e-portfolios in general and is very significant. While the comments were made with the first year common module (CIT module) in mind, the overall intention behind the comments was supportive of the idea of developing ability as a reflective practitioner and to provide the opportunity to maintain a space where documentation of learning over time would be possible. This is developed further in enactment 5.

The third suggestion was that of adding a whole sample document of a successful experiential learning submission to guide students. This was suggested by 15% of the students. This would have added value if tips or notes were added highlighting what was good in the submission and why. It might be an option for some of the more popular modules chosen to present experiential learning cases for. On the other hand it could be argued that such an approach would be too prescriptive and directly influence the reader. Every candidate has individual learning arising from experiences and putting a whole case

up might result in future candidates work having a sameness or similarity about them. The huge diversity of learning and variety in case evidence is surely a strength of RPL submissions. This idea would benefit from a broader debate, possibly with the RPL working Group, a sub group of the Academic Council tasked with policy and procedures.

The fourth idea was to improve the signposting of the RPL site on the overall CIT website. The outcome of this has resulted in the relocation of the RPL site. It has been relocated to the main webpage under 'Study at CIT' and is clearly visible once that menu is highlighted. This should improve matters, however other measures could be added to this to raise the profile of RPL such as directly emailing every registered student and adding the RPL workshops to the college calendar.

The fifth suggestion was to explain fees in relation to RPL. This is a reasonable suggestion and can easily be worked into the main structure of the existing website without much difficulty.

The last suggestion was to provide a broader range of examples to support students from as many disciplines as possible with their RPL case preparation. This is a good suggestion and one which can be built up over time by extracting and reworking samples from real submissions with the students permission.

Table 9.3 *Extracts from evaluation data presented against Question 3*

What else would you like to see on the site ?	
A	Put a link on each module which explains the core requirements to pass a module or suggest which type of evidence of experiential learning would be suitable. Do you think you know this material ? have you the following ? list them all – what experiential learning would be seen as suitable ? what type of evidence to use ?
B	Inside the site you only have a blank PDF for the CIT Module. It can be very tough to think what could I place inside this Case against what are they looking for, it states on the site it doesn't have to be just paid work, but a lot of people fail the CIT module on the grounds of lack of paid work.
C	Google hosts the college email system. They also provide 'Google Sites' (sites.google.com). This provides an easy way for gmail/mycit account holders to create their own websites with both

	public, private, and invitation-only areas. To set up such a site requires minimal computer skills, and their help tutorials are outstanding. Students should be encouraged to learn how to use this while at college. It ties in with what I was saying about maintaining portfolio and CV.
D	
E	
F	
G	
H	
I	
J	Finally the Valuing Learning section is excellent as it shows the importance of all elements of a persons interests and abilities that can be utilised within the RPL. I think you have captured everything thats relevent.
K	
L	I found this completed pdf application , which you emailed me, very valuable in making out the application. Could you link to it from the RPL pages? I realise there are personal details on it that may need to be blurred or blanked before it is made widely available, but it was very helpful to see this and use it as a guide.
M	
N	Perhaps there could be a Contact Us listing under the Department Pages detailing your contact details and location?
O	
P	
Q	
R	
S	
T	

There were additional ideas generated from the last question. These included prompting the learner by showing what was needed to pass a module by providing a link behind every module. This link would detail the key requirements to pass the module and suggest relevant experiential learning that would evidence this. This is an interesting concept and one which could provide considerable added value to the modules database in the future. Again the concept would have to be debated by academic council to determine its suitability for the Institute.

Another suggestion made was to include prompts or suggestions as to the range of acceptable learning which could be relevant for the common module, the CIT module. This suggestion will be taken on board as it will be useful to prompt the learner to consider and include as diverse a range of evidence as possible to support their case. This should lead to better evidenced prior learning cases.

An interesting idea was to include the use of Google sites (www.sites.google.com) to prompt the learner to create and maintain their own website with the purpose of documenting their learning over time. From this emerged the potential use of Google sites for the e-portfolio trial. Again the prompt here shows the value of an action research approach where each of the participants informs the other. Another related comment from was supportive of the 'Valuing Learning' section of the RPL site. Their comments were appreciative of the space where it is explained that learning can be gained in a diverse range of situations and not just paid work.

The final comment asking for a clear 'Contact us' space is reasonable and was included on the site. The following recommendations were suggested and will be considered in future developments of the site.

Table 9.4 *Key suggestions for improvements to RPL website*

Suggestions for Improvements to RPL Website
1　　　　Include a video clips demonstrating how to prepare prior learning cases
2　　　　Promote the idea of document repository to support reflective practice
3　　　　Provide more examples of cases
4　　　　Improve signposting

5	Explain fees as they relate to RPL
6	Provide 'Contact Us' details at the front of the site
7	Provide database linked to each module showing what learning or evidence was relevant to allow a prior learning case
8	Show the diverse range of learning and evidence that could be used for the CIT module
9	Use Google sites to maintain e-portfolio over time

9.5.2 Reflection on Enactment 4

Web Portal is Evaluated

March 2012

It was a huge relief to have the RPL website up and active for the new semester. To assess its effectiveness I asked the users for feedback. I asked everyone that put together an experiential learning case in 2011 (93 such cases) and received 20 responses. The responses were returned against three open questions which were designed to get as broad a range of opinion as possible.

I was pleased with the 90 % positive response to the first question. It was a good reflection on the work done on the site. *I know that I will be constantly tweaking and adjusting the content to keep up with policy changes and in response to shift in demand for modules which is a normal part of RPL.* ***There were some interesting suggestions for change made by the contributors. One of these was by student C who described keeping a store of documentation which could be maintained by the learner over time. He mentioned building in a reflective element to capture learning arising out of significant events, even when things go wrong. This argument was later developed when he suggested using Google sites to keep an e-portfolio.*** *I checked out Google sites, along with other e-portfolio systems and I liked the user friendliness and ease of use and function as an e portfolio tool. They must certainly be considered. In my opinion e-portfolios are purpose built lifelong learning support instruments. What a good idea to support individuals in economically uncertain times.*

How can higher education take on the mantle of supporting the development of a lifelong learning mindset in the individual learner ? What methods or models are appropriate and would make a difference ? A colleague overseas active in the area of RPL research, Dr. Ruud Duvekot of INHolland University mentioned giving the learners a module which developed their ability to self manage competencies over time. Would this work in my Institute ? Could it be presented to an Institute as an elective module which people may or may not choose ? Would this work in reality; or would it be better to put it in as an assessment element of the

first year common module the CIT module, thereby allowing every student the opportunity? It is certainly an interesting idea and one that I may act on. Creating such a module would be a straightforward task and I could liase with Dr. Duvekot for advice as necessary.

I also was pleased with the idea of presenting a video clip to demonstrate how to prepare a prior learning case. It would be almost me repeating what I'd normally say to a student only it would be available now virtually to help anyone. This was a good idea. I could show a colleague and fellow researcher in RPL, Dr. Sara Leiste, of Capella University in Minnesota, USA. She took a great interest in the redevelopment of my website on RPL and the work complimented her paper in 2011 'Creating a positive prior learning assessment experience'. It might be a good idea too to prepare a video clip for each of the types of prior learning cases. I know what to say and what to show people in terms of how they should prepare and build the case and what to look out for. The challenge was would I be able to bring the message across clearly. Would my videoclips give enough information and deliver this in a professional way?

I have my doubts as to the practicality of the suggestion made by student A to in response to question 3; namely to provide information behind each module as to what would be allowed in terms of an RPL case on the modules database. I have two reasons for doubting the practicality of this step, the first one is the modules database's primary purpose is to set out the detail of each of the modules for each of the programmes in CIT. That is its primary purpose. It could be argued that putting a layer of RPL material behind each of these modules is inappropriate here as that is not the purpose of this space. The second reason is that putting examples in behind each module, showing what would be allowed is too prescriptive an approach and would unduly influence the learner resulting in other learning that was equally valuable being discounted as inappropriate just because it was not listed. There is the very real concern too as to who would maintain all of this information in terms of resources ?

Overall, I was pleased with the suggestions and the general response to the RPL website. The changes made were very well received and the suggestions on the whole were all good ideas which I will endeavour to make over the coming months.

9.5.3 Conclusion Enactment 4

The evaluation gave insight to very interesting comments that will be considered and implemented if possible. The most significant one for now is the suggestion of prompting the learner to maintain an archive of competencies over time. This could take the form of an additional page on the RPL website which will prompt the learner to value what they know already. It will be called Valuing Learning.

On the whole, comments made will lend to value-added steps such as video clips done in the form of "how to" to keep the RPL website up to date and informative for the learner. The intention is to host a web portal that will provide quality information for the learner; supporting their prior learning case preparation.

9.6 Enactment 5; Develop a Valuing Learning space within RPL website

9.6.1 Results

The Valuing Learning webpage was prepared in April 2012. The screen capture below Fig. 9.27 shows the front of the Valuing Learning webpage.
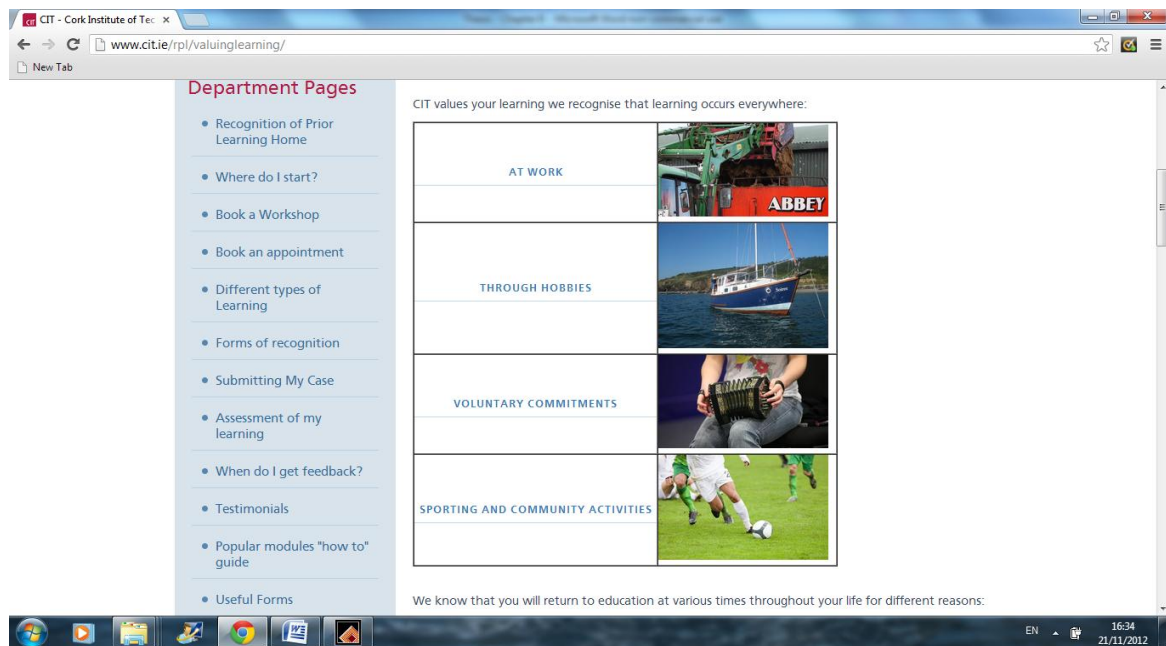
Fig. 9.27 *Valuing Learning web page at www.cit.ie/rpl/valuniglearning/*

The website provides the message that learning occurs as a result of engaging in activities in all aspects of life and that these resulting personal competencies may be significant on return to formal education where they could be used to gain credits through a process of Recognition of Prior Learning.
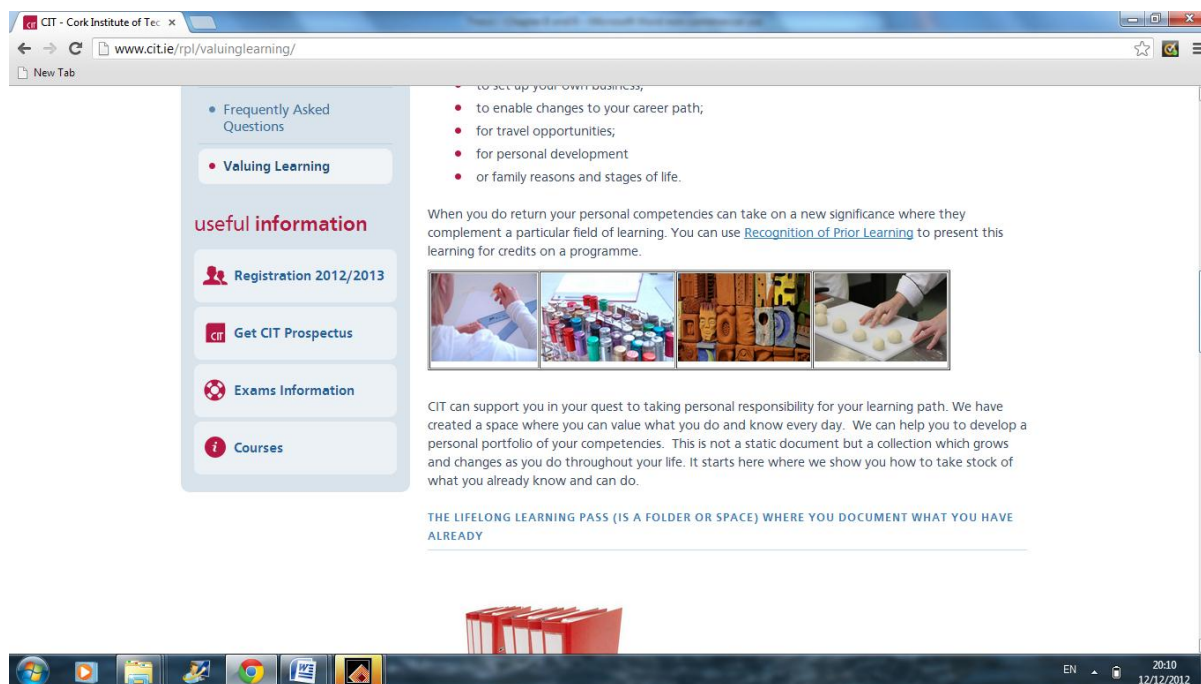
Fig.9.28 *Valuing Learning web page at www.cit.ie/rpl/valuniglearning/*

The webpage introduces the idea of a Lifelong learning pass as a folder or a space where a person develops a personal portfolio of their competencies. It suggests the following areas such as generic competencies like communication and problem solving skills, work related skills, hobbies voluntary work, travel, creative competencies and those arising from significant life events. The site provides a link to Google sites and the e-portfolio trial outlined in entry 6.

Another key aspect of the site is where staff of the Institute provide suggestions of evidence of informal learning which they consider as suitable from their discipline. It is hoped that this feature will act as a useful prompt for the learner and get them to consider the full extent of the range of evidence he/she can use to back up their experiential learning case. This is another step in nurturing a culture where well documented prior learning submissions are the expected norm.

| Staff | Bernard O'Callaghan

Mechanical Engineering | John Wood

Chemistry | Ann Toebes

Good Manufacturing Practice | Vivion Gough

Nautical Studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What might be useful to collect | work experience

projects completed

entries to competitions (formula 1 schools | Involvement in RDS Young Scientist Exhibition

Holiday or part-time work in a science-related industry or workplace

Visits (either personal or school-related) to science industries | Certificates for course attendances and course completion

Letters from organisations where the student has been worked

paid /voluntary | Watch-keeping certs;

Completed voyage plans;

Completed draft survey forms and calculations |

Fig.9.29 *Staff of the Institute provide examples of evidence of experiential learning*

9.6.2 Reflection on Enactment 5

Valuing Learning Page is Added

April 2012

I believe a Higher Education provider can and should prompt the learner to 'document as you go' over time. This will help capture key learning events; significant achievements and responsible roles held. *This is more than a CV but should be lifelong learning space where the learner puts aside time and space to capture what it is they know in terms of generic knowledge, skills and abilities. Keeping a portfolio over time will support the individual in terms of articulating a learning plan; it will act as a showcase document for employment opportunities and for Recognition of Prior Learning purposes on return to education. It is a simple but an important step for Higher Education to take.* ***It sets the bar for what we in education expect of learners and I believe people will respond and act on this prompt.***

Change is the only constant; we are newly vulnerable; the world we live in is changing constantly and knowledge is changing too. Innovation and new ways of doing things are highly prized. We are all only as good as our last piece of work where we can show how we were creative or how our problem solving saved the day. Why wouldn't anyone want to capture their input in key roles or at significant moments ? ***Because of the pace of change now there is a new vulnerability; no job is for life anymore and no longer is it enough to hold a primary degree and expect that to suffice in terms of education or training. To keep pace with these changes is a very real pressure for the workforce. We should temper this demand by harvesting or banking the knowledge we possess because of these roles and abilities by building a lifelong folder or pass.*** *It can be a physical box or folder; or it can be an e-portfolio space where we nurture the habit of articulating what we know and do in order to capture these abilities.* ***Getting Higher Education to prompt or demand this activity could be a very small but effective step in making lifelong learning a reality for society.***

I want to include the staff in this too. They know what material might be used to document informal or experiential learning. Including the staff on the website creates a feel good factor and lets them know that their opinion is valued. Their prompts will encourage the learner and show them the range of material that they can use; its a win-win all round.

I was encouraged too by Dr. Ruud Duvekot's (an active researcher in the RPL field) reaction to this web page and by the papers he showed me. In his opinion, we could consider making a module to support the valuing of learning. This module could be taken as an elective option by the student and would equip them to think as a lifelong learner. This is possibly something I can do. For now, I am happy to have added the page and will include some links to other lifelong learning material to add value to the site. This is such an interesting area.

The idea of valuing learning lends naturally to e-Portfolios too. It made me look at the work of Dr. Helen Barrett and consider her ideas. This is such a valid way for people to take stock of all that they know and to decide too where they want to take it, so an e-Portfolio would support someone's learning plan too. There are so many valuable aspects to it. This is a key research area and one I was keen to investigate more.

9.6.3 Conclusion Enactment 5

Adding the Valuing Learning page to the RPL website was an important step to take in this research. By doing so, the Higher Education provider is promoting a lifelong learning mindset. This step is significant in that the Institute is prompting the learner to consider documenting knowledge, skills and abilities as they go through life. This will influence potential students who access the site with a view to engaging with Higher Education. They will see that education values learning gained within the workplace or through other activities such as community involvement or sport. This is a subtle but significant culture shift and a step along the way to realising the learning society of the future. When Higher Education promotes a message of lifelong learning and valuing learning gained in all aspects of life it sends a clear signal to the wider population. What is asked for will be responded to by the population as they adjust to meet these new demands.

9.7 Enactment 6; Trial of e portfolios

9.7.1 Results

The e-portfolio trial was carried out in September 2012 over the thirteen week period of semester 1 of the academic year. It was made available to two class group; one of which was the BA in Community Development year 1. This class had to build an e-portfolio as the major assessment piece of the module, worth 65%, which is called *'Portfolio Methods for RPL (EDUC6004)'*. There were fourteen students in the class.

The second class group were given the option of completing either an e-portfolio or a traditional portfolio presented in a word document for the common module in year 1, *'Creativity Innovation and Teamwork (CMOD6001)'*. Only one student chose the e-portfolio option to complete the task.

The e-portfolios were individual pieces developed by each student and reflected the breadth of experience, variety of personality and mix of cultures within the room. The objective of the module *'Portfolio Methods for RPL(EDUC6004)'* is to outline how prior learning is given formal recognition on assessment for credits. The learners prepared a sample portfolio based on their own prior experiential learning and learned how this portfolio is relevant in Higher Education and in the community.

As it was a sample e-portfolio and not actually to be assessed as a formal RPL case, the students only had to present a case against a selection of three learning outcomes from any mix of disciplines that suited their own learning profile. The students accessed the Institute's modules database (www.cit.ie) to pick the selection of learning outcomes that best suited them. In a standard RPL case, the learning outcomes of the module are pre-assigned and each one must be answered adequately in order for the exemption to be allowed. Normally there are five learning outcomes.

The structure of each of the portfolios mostly followed the following format:

1. Home Page –Introducing the portfolio

2. A Life Story or Brief Curriculum Vitae and reflective piece

3. Learning Outcome 1 – Sample learning outcome and answer

4. Learning Outcome 2 – Sample learning outcome and answer

5. Learning Outcome 3 – Sample learning outcome and answer

6. Verification – Proof is listed and uploaded here

In order to appreciate the task in hand, I decided to build my own portfolio. This was completed in early July 2012. This was followed with a second more generic portfolio being built to support the students with their own preparation. This is available at the following URL: https://sites.google.com/site/priorlearningexamplecom/informal-learning/e-portfolio-for-informal-learning/my-journey-1

The screen capture below shows the front page of the e-portfolio example. This example was treated as an 'open book' sample by the class to guide their own preparations.
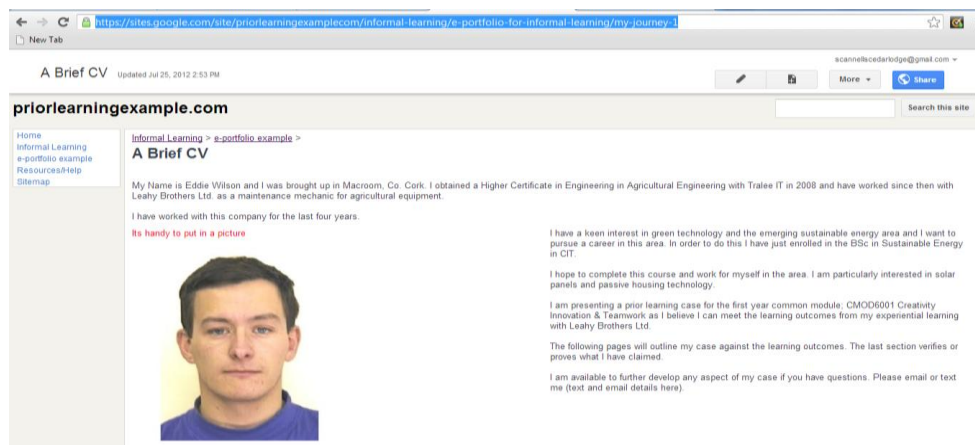
Fig. 9.30 *e-Portfolio example used to support the BA Community Development class with e-portfolio development*

Each of the portfolios were presented for assessment for a grade on week 12 of the term. A sample of the portfolio's are presented in Appendix J reflecting the range and diversity of each of them.

Each of the student's portfolios had a front page, the *Home page* to introduce their work. Two of the e portfolios uploaded YouTube clips to the home page. The following screen-capture show a selection of the Home Pages in Fig. 9.31.
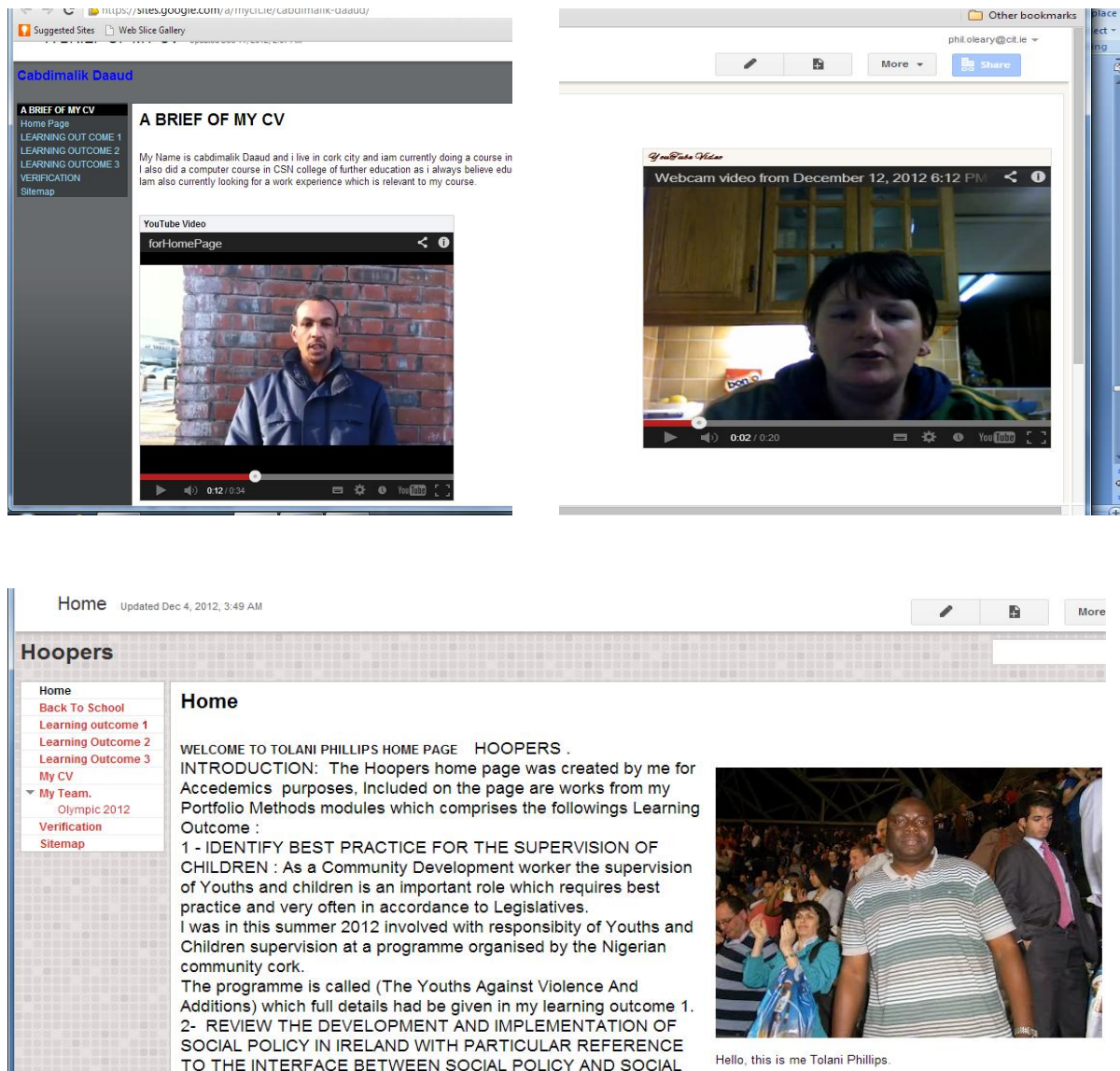
Fig. 9.31 *Three Home Pages presented in various ways*

The second page was a CV and a reflective piece where the students presented information about their life and their interests. Some gave a sense of what preparing the portfolio meant to them, others gave consideration to their return to education; one student presented a picture based CV covering twenty two years at work. The following Fig. 9.32 shows some of the work presented in the CV. section.

A range of CV's
and
reflective elements
were presented.
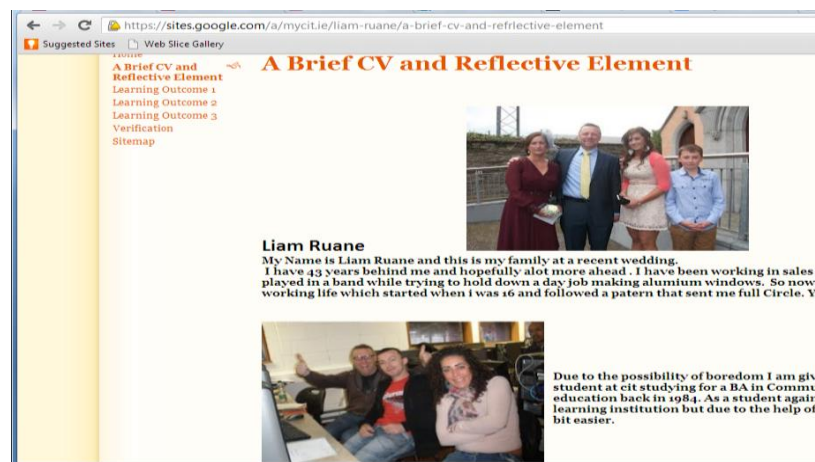
Fig. 9.32 *Sample of CV pages with reflective elements*

The next part of the e portfolio presented the students responses to three sample learning outcomes. A broad range of learning outcomes were chosen to reflect the many interests of the students. Each person presented three sample learning outcomes and three sample

responses to these statements. The following Fig 9.33 shows some of the work presented in the learning outcomes section.

Sample of learning outcomes sections presented against a range of learning outcomes
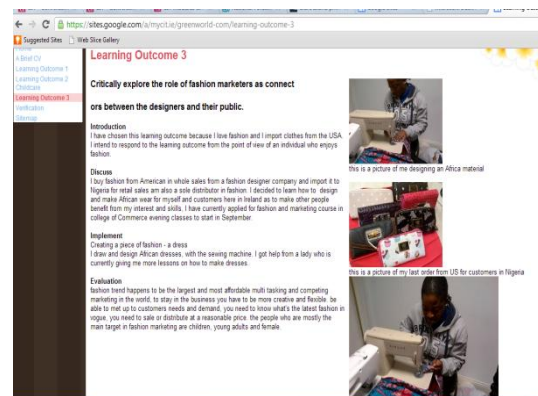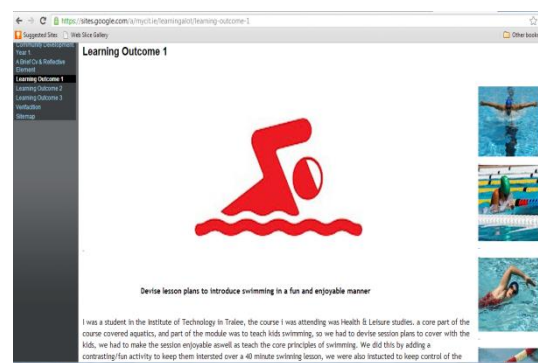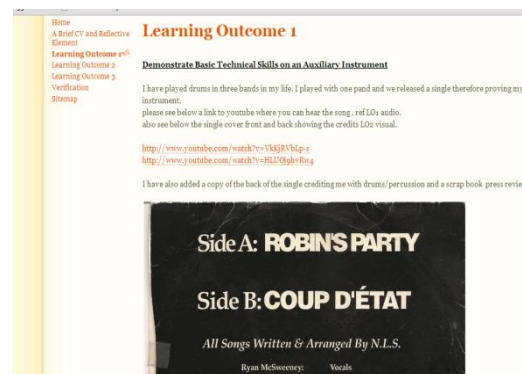
Fig 9.33 *Sample of Learning Outcome pages*

The final part of the e portfolio was the verification page where the students presented proof of their learning against the learning outcomes. The page is presented as a list of items against each learning outcome. Underneath this list the various documents are uploaded. They are labelled with care to allow the assessor and extern understand what the

item is and where it fits into the overall picture of evidence provided. The following example in Fig. 9.34 represents a typical example.
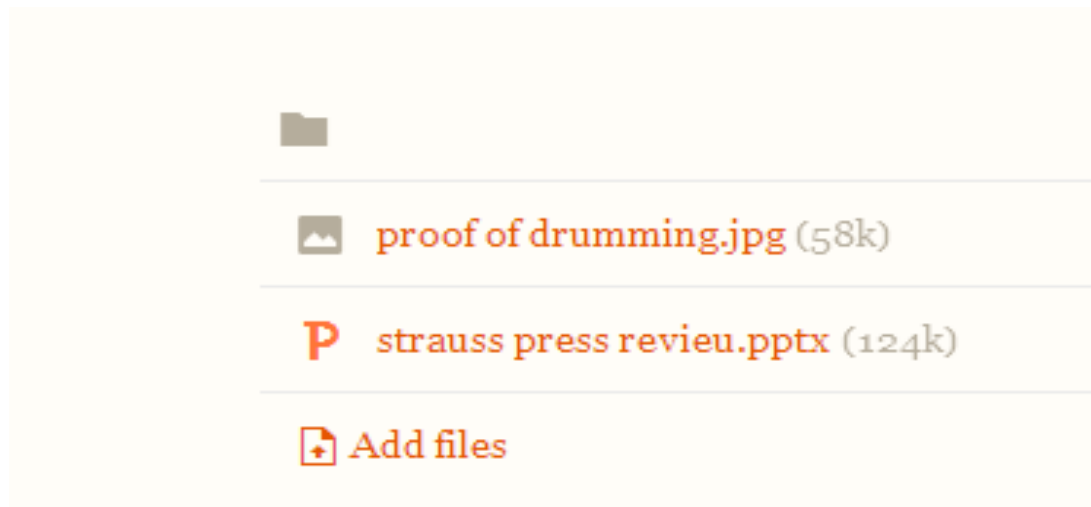
Fig. 9.34 *Example of how uploaded files are labelled to explain what they represent*

There is a distinct variety in the approaches used by the various individuals. Each person's proof is unique to them and their own previous history. It reflects the range of situations where the learning was acquired. Each person constructs their own unique footprint of evidence in their own way. Items such as letters; email, documents, diaries and photographs proved invaluable. The following shows some of the verification sections of the e portfolios:

Examples of

How the verification

Sections were

Presented
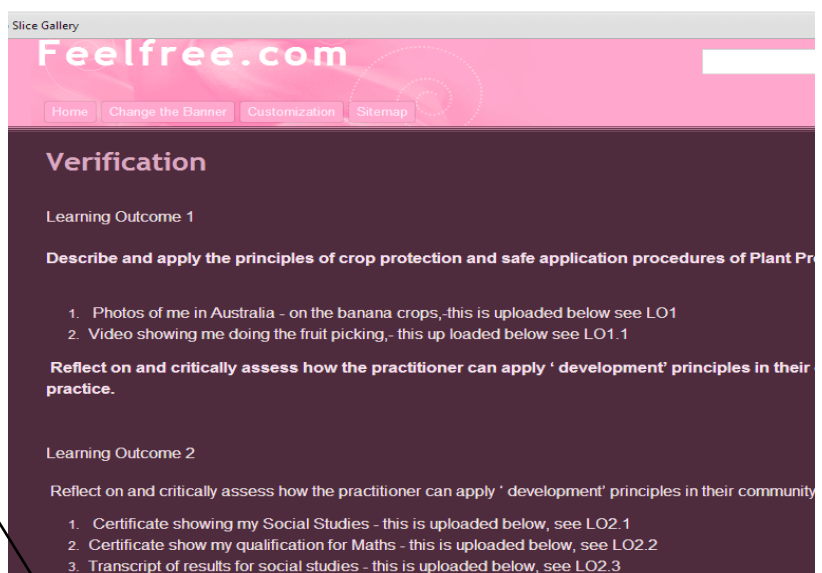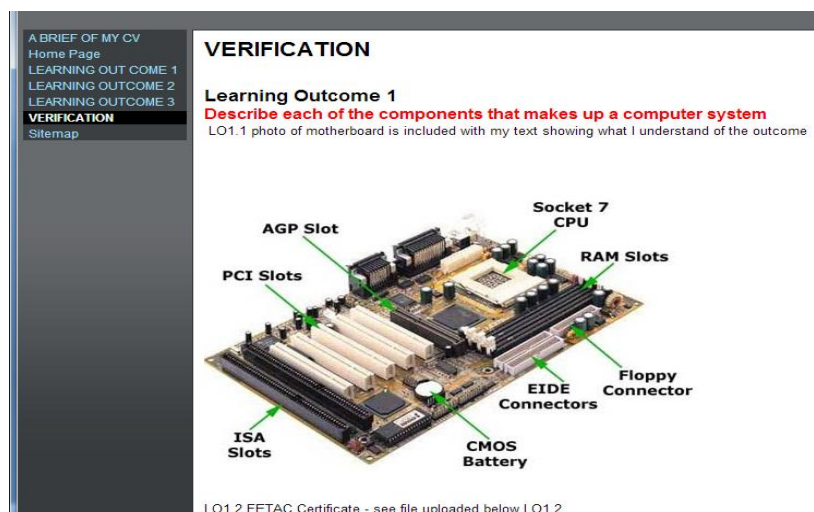
Fig. 9.35 *Examples of Verification Section*

The assessment protocol is appended in Appendix K

The use of Google sites was found to be intuitive and user friendly. Peer support was evident in the class with students learning from each other. The class worked well together and were well able to complete their task in week 11 and make time available for the reflective element of the module then. Appendix J presents a sample of the e portfolio's.

9.7.2 Reflection on Enactment 6

e-Portfolios are Trialled

Trialling the e-Portfolios has been a wonderful journey for me. This began last summer when I decided to experiment with e-portfolios. This was partly a response to encourage my research supervisor who has a keen interest in the area but also because of the research results from enactment 1 (the questionnaire) and enactment 3 (upgrading the website) where the students had mentioned an interest in e-Portfolios and online submissions.

Initially the challenge was to decide on a suitable system to support the trial. I was confused by the array of options available and in the end decided to use Google sites which is part of the Google suite of products. The students of CIT already use Google to host their email, and therefore it was a good decision to go with something which was freely available and that the students were already using and trust.

Me as a learner
*I had to learn how to use the system myself and set myself this task in July 2012. It was like entering a new world; both the use of the technology which was intuitive and fun, but also the exercise of actually building an e-portfolio. **I've been involved in this work for sixteen years but had never actually prepared my own portfolio. I learned so much by doing this. It was an amazing experience; very valuable for me. Since then I have created three others. I can see the use for such a space for any number of purposes now**. I have created one for keeping all of my paperwork for my boat Soiree; I have one for preparing class notes; one for my own personal learning journey; and finally a sample portfolio to help other students. They are so useful. I have linked this last sample portfolio to the CIT website so other students can see what I have done and present their own work accordingly. They are using it as an open book example. It is very effective to present a real example to support their preparation.*

The class trail

The module 'Portfolio Methods for RPL(EDUC6004)' was run over a thirteen week period and they threw themselves into the task. Nobody was put off by the use of Google sites. They completely accepted that this was the way we were going to complete the portfolio. That surprised me as they are an adult group from a hugely diverse background. They listened and followed my lead and I made sure that the class had plenty of one-to-one time with me as we built the portfolios over the weeks. This was the easiest, most effective way as they were a small group but also because everybody's portfolio is so unique and individual to them it merited that contact.

I believe that developing an easygoing atmosphere is one of my more important jobs with the group. People wouldn't be able to relax and reach into their past if they were stressed about the module*. They have to be free to ask questions, laugh, show each other their work and generally get on with it in an easy manner. Building the e-Portfolio was an interesting experience for everyone, and I wanted them to be open to the purpose of the whole activity; to consider how e-Portfolios might be useful in life. Once everyone was making reasonable progress I was happy. By week eight, some people were seriously involved with their preparations; whereas others were still only building their case and choosing their learning outcomes from the suite of CIT modules. By week eleven, I was determined to draw a line under the activity and to get them to complete their task. It was only at this point could I get them reflecting on their work so far. A semester is a tight enough timeframe to turn around a piece of work and my instinct was to get them to complete the e-Portfolio with plenty of time on their hands (relatively) to relax, review and consider the work they had done and what it meant for them. **Its impossible to become reflective when there is too much time pressure at the end of term to have all of the assessment pieces in. As first years, they are still only finding their way and so need space and encouragement to learn how to reflect appropriately.***

9.7.3 Conclusion Enactment 6

The preparation of e Portfolios using Google sites was a valuable trial to do. The class delivered good quality work; each unique to the individual. Google sites proved a user friendly system. The class group were not daunted by the technology and were able to present unique and varied pieces reflecting their own particular story of their prior learning. Although the e portfolios were the main assessment piece for the module *'Portfolio Methods for RPL(EDUC6004),'* the approach could be usefully adopted to present regular prior learning cases for credits within a programme. The system is relatively flexible and allows for the student to present a page against each of the learning outcomes of the module. It is also straightforward to upload documents, photographs, videoclips and links to other websites to provide evidence of learning. Indeed the e portfolio is a purpose built scaffold for Recognition of Prior Learning case preparation.

9.8 Enactment 7; Evaluation of e portfolios

9.8.1 Results:

The following questions were asked on week 13.

1. Did you enjoy the experience of preparing the e Portfolio

    Yes/No

    Explain

2. What would you change about the experience ?
3. What positive aspects were there with the task ? (list 3)
4. What challenges were there for you ? (list 3)

Seven students provided answers to these questions. The responses are tabulated against each question below:

Table 9.5: *Students Responses to evaluation questions after e Portfolio trial*

Q 1	Did you enjoy the experience of preparing the e Portfolio
Yes/no	100% answered Yes
Explain	1. I really enjoyed preparing the e portfolio because it helped me to see my past experience and how I will be able to keep updating that into the future. 2. It was a great experience for me, I liked the fact that I chose my own outcomes. So it was all about me and what I would like to share with people. 3. It provides the knowledge on how to create and understand the process of an e portfolio within the conceptual of internet networks 4. It helps me to learn how to keep my work in order and to write in short sentences rather than giving a big paragraph 5. When I came to college it was my first form of formal education since 1984. I was overwhelmed and felt that I had nothing to bring to college. As another form of education RPL helped me to recognize my learning from my life experiences and that made me feel confident. 6. Well it was something new. I learnt loads – how to load a you tube video. The experience of learning how to create a google site was great. It can be used for all sorts I think. 7. This is my first time of preparing an e portfolio. Now that I have known something, and I am sure that I can prepare a portfolio on my own as I have the skills and knowledge to do it.

Q 2	What would you change about the experience ?
	1. I didn't have much to change about the experience because I actually really enjoyed it.
	2. There is nothing that I would change about it, instead I will be more creative if I can get another chance to do it all over again
	3. The experience provides my own internet access ability which makes me understand more ways of e portfolio
	4. Personally it will help me change the way I organise my college work and the paperwork I have at home in my files
	5. Nothing really. The only thing I would add is the use of computer word processors for written assignments. Spell check would be a good tool to use.
	6. Nothing really. I had a great time. Phil was ever so reassuring and helpful.
	7. Well there is a lot of things that have changed. Well my first day in portfolio class I was nervous and thought I cannot handle but at the moment I am confident and can prepare an e portfolio.
Q 3	What positive aspects were there with the task ? (list 3)
	1. Working with everyone and helping everyone out; finally getting the portfolio finished and being proud of it; putting the e portfolio together
	2. It has made me realise how important was my learning outcome; to me my first outcome was keeping kids physically active which is the most important to me as I have an overweight child in the house
	3. Insertion of video; creation of e portfolio; insertion of picture to works
	4. Rather than talking in a long way you can present your work into main points only
	5. The lectures were always done in a friendly helpful atmosphere, and you were never left feeling stupid at the questions you asked
	6. It brought us together as a class; it gave us an insight into our own selves; it made me realise my life may have some interesting aspects
	7. Learning how to do the portfolio; doing portfolio on own; knowledge to do portfolio on my own through attending my class
Q 4	What challenges were there for you ? (list 3)
	1. The only challenge I found was printing it off. But when I did that I was very happy
	2. Keeping up with the workload; coming up with a good piece of work
	3. Ability to work independently; understanding the e portfolio better; the learning outcomes inclusions
	4. The challenge was to put a sentence or a paragraph in a sentence; you have to think hard on how to put a paragraph into a sentence

Analysis of Data against each question

Did you enjoy the experience of preparing the e Portfolio

The response to this question was overwhelmingly positive. All of the respondents answered 'yes' to this question. In their explanation of why they enjoyed it they mentioned that it helped to review their past experiences and that it was good for their confidence. Another mentioned that they now have the skills to do up an e portfolio on their own. On the whole the explanations were very positive and all enjoyed the experience.

What would you change about the experience ?

In response to this question four out of the seven (57%) the majority of the group said they would change nothing really as they enjoyed the experience as it was. One person said they would be *"more creative with the portfolio next time round".* This was a positive indication of having enjoyed the creation of the first portfolio and showed a confident mindset towards preparing others in future. One of the comments mentioned that the experience would change how they now organise their college work and paperwork at home. The comment hinted that they would use it in future for other aspects of their life. One comment said the inclusion of a 'spell check' would be useful in the system. Student number 7 commented that he has changed since the experience and is now confident where he was apprehensive beforehand. Although the student misinterpreted the question it is a very positive outcome for them. They finished that they were now able to prepare an e portfolio with confidence.

What positive aspects were there with the task ? (list 3)

Several positive aspects emerge when the answers are analysed. The first element that comes to light was the group benefited from the positive friendly atmosphere that was generated during class time. They mentioned that working with everyone and helping each other out was positive. One commented that it brought them together as a class, which is significant. Many commented that they were satisfied and that they had increased confidence following completion of the task. One student mentioned being proud of the portfolio when it was finished. Several mentioned they enjoyed the actual act of creating and building the portfolio over the weeks. They enjoyed learning how to insert the YouTube clip and photos and the actual building of the e portfolio. This was very satisfying for me. The third theme that arose from the comments was that there was a value now on their prior learning; the learning outcomes chosen were significant to them; one commented that their life had interesting aspects and that building the e portfolio provided an insight to themselves.

What challenges were there for you ? (list 3)

When asked about any challenges, there were six or seven items that came up. One of the significant challenges which was mentioned twice was choosing the right learning outcomes from the college system. Each of the students had to choose three random learning outcomes from any area of learning that suited them and then present a case against the chosen ones. They were encouraged to pick areas across several domains of learning to give a spread of experiences and abilities. A second area that was mentioned as a challenge was printing the final piece for the extern; this was mentioned twice as was the actual preparing of the portfolio and making sure it was a good piece of work. One student mentioned it was a challenge to work independently while another mentioned the workload. To summarise the challenges were very reasonable and were those that might come up for any module. On the whole I was pleased with the feedback.

Evaluation of the e portfolio trial

On the whole it was an overwhelmingly positive experience for me and for the students. The class group were positive about using Google sites to build the e portfolio and embraced the use of the technology. Google sites itself was straightforward to use and did

not pose any problems. I was able to show the class the basic steps needed to get them started with their task and they were able to add their own creative touch depending on what they were saying. They were able to show me little tricks and steps which added to my learning. We enjoyed working in a positive atmosphere where all were supported as they compiled their e portfolio. The one regret that I have was that the sample group was so small. However the class was small to begin with at fifteen and then dropped to eleven for various reasons. One final thought, each of the eleven pieces submitted was of good quality and unique to each individual. The class completed the brief and will bring this learning with them and should build other e portfolios in the future.

9.8.2 Reflection on Enactment 7

Evaluation of e-portfolios

The sample size of seven to return the questionnaire out of the eleven was quite small but that was understandable as it was the last class and several students did not attend due to exam pressures. One rang in during the class to apologise saying he did not realise that there was a last class. **When asked the first question; "Did you enjoy the experience of preparing the e Portfolio ?"100% of the respondents answered yes. All the respondents found the e portfolio to be a useful tool, one that they would use in future**. *It was helpful for them to review their past experiences and it gave them a confidence boost on return to college.* **The building of the portfolio was a reflective act in itself. Each individual in the class had to take stock to see what they might usefully present in their portfolio and what previous experiences and learning represented for them**. *The workshop approach taken allowed each person to help each other; to compare experiences and express the learning that took place from these experiences. This approach was mutually supportive and promoted diversity in the templates used; the learning outcomes chosen and the material used to back it up. No two e portfolios were the same. I was happy that they all enjoyed the experience. This positive mindset should yield results in the future where the students have the skills now to create another e portfolio easily for any number of purposes where showcasing learning is important. This skill will be returned to the community too which should yield further benefits.*

In the second question 57% said that they would change nothing about the e portfolio, as they enjoyed the experience as it was.   Any comments that were given were supportive of the creation of e portfolios. I was encouraged by the student who said they would be more creative next time around. *It was great, that they were not afraid of using the technology and intended to create e portfolios again, and that the creation of the e portfolio was a confidence boost. It would be interesting if I were to ask them about e portfolios two years from now, how many would have actively used them in that intervening time ? It might be worth returning to this group when they are year 3 students and looking for the response to this question. It would give insight to see how 'sticky' the Google sites e portfolio system was in reality. I really got the sense from their comments that they were*

open to using e portfolios in the future; they all enjoyed the experience, it was creative and fun and they felt the chance to share and work collaboratively supported the building of; and the quality of the final e portfolios.

The one comment 'looking for a spell check' is reasonable and this can be included at a later stage. All of the students were comfortable with the technology and were open minded towards their task; thankfully it all worked out successfully and good work was returned. **Overall I felt that the students were open to their use in future. It begs the question; are e portfolios an effective way to initiate the activation of the learner over a lifetime ? If Higher Education were to support and demand their use as a normal method of documenting learning would e portfolios be adopted and supported generally by society? This would result in them becoming a mainstream tool to capture learning. What a thought. This made me think about the papers written by Dr. Ruud Duvekot on activating the learner; could e portfolios be used as a tool to support our conversion from the knowledge society to the learning society of the future ? e Portfolios may not be the only catalyst, but they could be a significant one.**

The last question was "what challenges were there for you ?" and on the whole there were very reasonable responses to this question too. One of the comments mentioned the positive atmosphere in the class where they all worked together. Another mentioned being satisfied with the e portfolio and proud of it when it was completed. One of the comments; that of printing it for the extern was an issue for a couple of the students, as it is a private piece of work. I reassured them that the external examiners were the only people to see the work, and their interest was only in confirming the mark. In reality though, the e portfolio if kept, as a private piece to support the learners journey through life would only be printed when some aspect of it needed to be showcased for a job interview or for credits on return to education.

The whole experience was something of a catalyst for me too. I knew I had to move forward from the old 'word documents' that we had been using to build portfolios for years. As a 44 year old I am a user of technology in an average way. However things are changing so rapidly now, everyday I am amazed and entertained by the changes in how we live, work

*and interface with information technology. These changes are happening at a pace all around us, and I want to be part of it. More importantly, given my position as a mentor for RPL practice in an Institute of Technology setting, I owe it to my employer to be informed by the latest innovations and to be able to promote the appropriate use of technology. The whole lifelong learning question is fascinating for me because again and again I see it everyday with RPL in a time of recession. So many educated and experienced/non educated but highly experienced men and women want a chance of a better future and desire to return to education to make this happen for them. So many of them have so much life experience behind them, indeed many have previous formal qualifications. RPL is a valid route for these people. It is something else entirely to be able to show them how to document their lifelong learning from this point on. E portfolios will be the tool of choice here. It is only with time that society adjusts and takes up these tools and makes them their own**. It is only with time I think that Higher Education will take up their use and influence the whole next generation of students***. In the meantime who knows what technological advances will influence the capturing of learning from life ? However it is a valid stance to take it that we will all be increasingly subjected to changing circumstances in the future.* ***Capturing and maintaining an archive of what we know will be a valuable and protective tool for the future.***

9.8.3 Conclusion Enactment 7

The e portfolio trial was a complete success with the students submitting very good examples of e portfolios and reporting a positive mindset to their use and the creation of others in the future. Indeed this class group will use the e portfolios to capture their learning in the work placement modules of their programme.

e Portfolios themselves are a significant tool to activate the learner and support them in capturing their prior non formal and informal learning. With this mindset it is possible to capture significant learning events as they occur and claim the learning in a reflective meaningful way. e Portfolios are useful tools to protect against the uncertainty of working life for the entire adult population. Higher education must promote their use to support their adoption by the wider population of students, including the non digital natives. The next generation will naturally use some form of them to support their learning journey.

Chapter 10

Discussion of Results

10.1   Introduction

This space revisits each of the research enactments and discusses the main findings. I want to highlight various aspects of the findings and consider how they might possibly impact the practice of RPL and how they might be useful to support the student and consider what future steps can be taken to further promote good practice with RPL.

The seven research enactments arose through an action research methodology. The practice of supporting RPL case preparation is linked in this research to a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting informing the provision of RPL for the institute, specifically focused on improved student supports (Norton, 2009). Each of the steps within the action research cycle has a place and purpose in that it allows for the enactments to be set out, considered or researched before being actually carried out. Similarly it allows for a reflective reconsideration of ideas in light of events after the work is carried out (Lyons, 2010*a*).

10.2   The methodology chosen

Action research is a powerful research approach to use because it is flexible. Although the methodology focused on a research question, action research allowed for a glance left or right at various issues as they emerged (Kember, 2000). Therefore the methodology provided a certain flexibility of approach as the results unfolded. It was useful that there was no fixed end point which in turn promoted a reflective mindset for task in hand. Action research allowed for exploration and consideration of the various issues that arose through the enactment as they unfolded. It was possible to consider a number of perspectives and reflect on the aspects arising from the work (Cook, 1998). Action research is a methodology that promotes change in the workplace; acting as a catalyst to further the aims of the research question seeking flexible, responsive supports, in this case for RPL provision for students (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010).

10.3 How this research has impacted the researcher

This research space has been a fascinating journey for me since September 2010. My efforts have been rewarded with valuable insight beyond the procedures and processes that operate to guide students and staff with RPL and into the very matrices of RPL case preparation. I have considered issues such as; what it is to prepare an RPL case; discussed the leap of faith the candidate must take when deciding to go ahead; considered difficulties with case preparation and what supports might help with their task. Other areas of consideration were getting into the reflective mode, what is enough with case preparation and if it is good enough; and how better to provide feedback with case preparation.

RPL is such a complex field to work with, the nature of a person's prior learning case is individual to them; the nature of experiential learning is unique to the person. Getting people to articulate what they know about something and to reflect on how they have come to know it has its own difficulties when this cohort of students tends to be the adult learner returning to education. There are no two prior learning cases the same. All we have as a guide are the standards laid out in the framework of qualifications which lay down the knowledge, skills and competencies at each of the levels. The individual must present against this framework showcasing what they know about a particular set of learning outcomes and backing up what they are saying with appropriate proof. Supporting people with this task takes clarity of purpose in explaining what is required balanced with an ability to grant them the space to delve into their previous lives and consider what is relevant to the prior learning case.

I began working with RPL cases in 1996 when CIT advertised for a project to develop and trial policy and procedures for RPL. I took the post primarily to be based in Cork; my immediate background was Science, namely Biotechnology, and more specifically the technology transfer of research opportunities arising from EU funded research. This was a considerably different discipline yet I liked the idea of trying to start something new and I could see the value of acknowledging a person's prior learning formally through granting of credits. In the early stages I worked primarily with the Biological Sciences and Electronics Department, fine tuning the approach and generally putting policy and procedure in place.

Gradually the practice of RPL broadened to other departments and schools within CIT to one where it operates now in every department and at every level (level 6-10) (Cork Institute of Technology, 2012*a*). My role has changed with time; I am dealing with increasingly bigger numbers; my confidence in my own knowledge of the area has grown; I can see the bigger picture within which we work and this research thesis has helped underpin my practice enormously; for which I am thankful.

Because of the increasing student numbers the pressure of trying to provide a quality mentoring service in support of the student forced me to look at alternative models. It was a natural step to look to the Institute's website to help support with my task. It was clear from the literature that RPL is supported through technology and I wondered if this could be applied to our work? (Brown, 2009, 2011; Hager, 2012; Leiste & Jensen, 2011) At the same time, I had misgivings about how I was going to set out the webpage. This was something I had not done before; there was pressure on me to get across to the user in a simple way, what RPL was and how it can be used. I knew it had to be done in a clear and easy to understand way.

I didn't consider the use of e portfolios to be part of this research at all in 2010 or in 2011 yet as the action research spiral unfolded these were a most obvious e-tool to try. I had misgivings about trialling e portfolios with students. I had fears about how the assessors would react to them and whether the structure of the e portfolio would be easy to follow; I had misgivings too about how the students would manage to create them. Yet when looking at the various e portfolio platforms available I could see they were worth a try. To see the benefits, it was necessary to do one myself. I created my own personal e portfolio using Google sites and I was happy with the result. I could see how they could be structured specifically with RPL in mind. This reassurance and realisation galvanised me into going ahead with the trial in September 2012.

10.4   Discussion of Enactment 1; Questionnaire exploring RPL case preparation in 2011
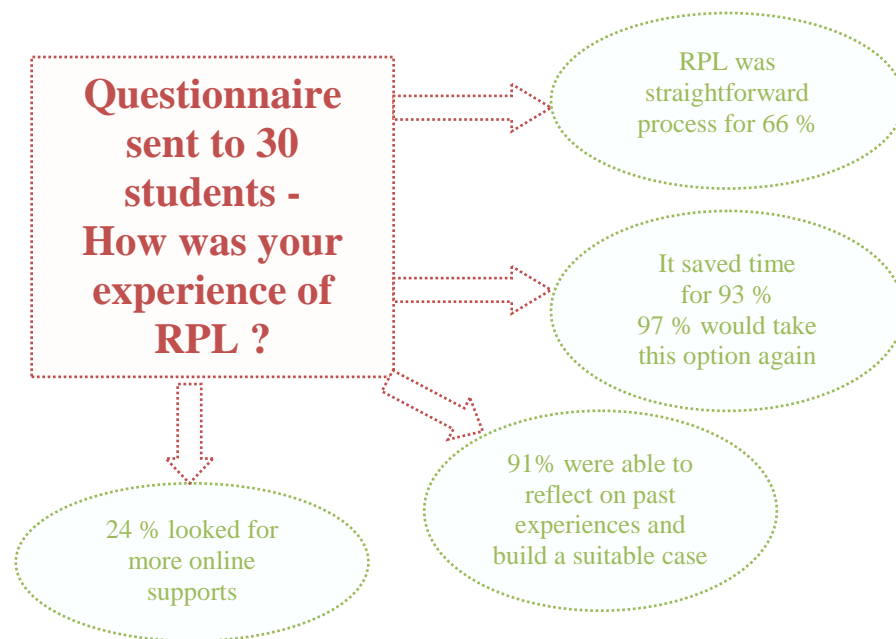
Fig. **10.1** *Key results from enactment 1*

Fig. 9.2 presents the results of Question 1 which asked how did the learner find out about RPL ? It is apparent that individuals hear about its existence from a broad range of staff and other students across the institute. Indeed it is encouraging to see how very well embedded RPL is within the institute. The majority of students had heard about RPL from the lecturers at the start of term (26%), *"A class lecturer told me of the RPL system."* Heads of Department accounted for 13% and course co-ordinators 22% of those that informed the students. This result is noteworthy in that it shows how well RPL is accepted by staff across all disciplines. The practice of providing for RPL is in keeping with government strategy to broaden participation and support the lifelong learner (Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011; Higher Education Authority, 2012; Hunt, 2011).

In response to Question 2, the majority of respondents (66%) found preparing the RPL case to be straightforward once they had support with the task. *"We went through what was required ... in order to achieve RPL in the module. Consequently I had a clear understanding of the need to give examples of where I had demonstrated the learning outcomes in my job."* This was positive in itself; however Fig. 9.3 showed 31% found it time consuming or tedious.

This result led to consideration as to what approaches could be used to improve the experience for the remainder. Later, I was influenced by the research of Leiste (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). I liked the hands on approach in her paper, I could identify with her work and I could see how her approach might work in my institute. I had to consider aspects within her approach to improve the experience for our students.

In response to the third question, that which asked what made them decide to take RPL as an option, 38% said it was to save time, *"It helped reduce down the course load as I was working fulltime, plus it was good to be recognised for my years of experience*." A further 38% said it was to gain recognition for what they knew about an area. These are two very reaffirming reasons to take the RPL option. This group of adult returners usually have to juggle work and family life and many of them have significant life experience (Dabic, 2008; UNESCO, 2009*b*). RPL is a valid option for this cohort of people. It is often the difference between coping with college life and actually enjoying the learning journey.

When asked if it saved time, 93% said it did (see Fig. 9.5); and 97 % said they would take this option again (Fig 9.6), *"Yes, I think it is a very valuable option for certain people who have the advantage of some of life's lessons, and good learning from previous work experiences"*. Interestingly, the one student who said that they would not take the option again, returned the following academic year and submitted a further two RPL cases for two other modules. These opinions imply that RPL is widely accepted as a valid means to take a module once a person has appropriate learning in CIT.

Question 6 asked about reflection in relation to preparing the prior learning case. In response to this, 91 % said that they were able to reflect on past learning and gather an appropriate prior learning case (Fig. 9.7), *"Yes, it was an interesting experience to have to write down my work in the real world and how it had covered the learning elements of the module. It made me think about the objectivity of my work and how it was performed and what theory underlay the mechanics of the process."* This was a very positive result. It implies that a person can normally look back through their prior learning experiences and pinpoint events or achievements that led to significant learning in relation to a set of learning outcomes. The remaining 9% found this task difficult. This result suggests that RPL

is generally a task that the average student can complete relatively easily. However the results of the next couple of questions put this result into question. When asked how did they find the task of answering the learning outcomes (Question 7), 62% said it was straightforward, the remaining 48 % found it difficult or frustrating (Fig. 9.8). This result seems to be reversed in question 8 when asked was it difficult (to answer the learning outcomes) 61% said that it was difficult (Fig. 9.9). It could be that the question was poorly phrased in that leading with the term *'difficult'* influenced or led the learner to agree (Gideon, 2012) ? This might certainly be a possibility.

There was a board variety of responses to question 10 which asked about suggesting changes to the RPL process (see Fig. 9.11). 10% wanted the option to be available before the semester starts. This was an interesting suggestion and has merit from the viewpoint of the learner. However arranging for RPL before a semester starts raises practical resource issues in that the individual lecturer is not assigned to a module until the start of term. To arrange for a second assessment step for every module is unlikely in a time of decreasing resources. 10% looked for the RPL process to be web based and 20% did not want to change anything about the process.

When asked what would they change about the portfolio in question 11, 42% said that it was fine as it was, *"I was very happy with the learning portfolio and especially the help and guidance I received".* However 24% looked for better online supports. This result led me to consider if an improved website would be a good research step. The literature suggests such a step would be beneficial (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2011; Brown, 2009; Ferrera, 2010; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Mina, *et al.,* 2011). I knew the step would support RPL and the increasing numbers returning and seeking the service.

Question 12 asked about the task of organising evidence. 55% of respondents said it was moderately easy, *"If you have the experience you are not going to have a problem organising the evidence. I enjoyed the process. As I was applying because of my job, all the information I needed was readily available,"* however 31 % found this step difficult (Fig. 9.13). This resulted in my considering how to help with this aspect of RPL case preparation. If it was common practice to actively maintain an archive of knowledge, skills and abilities

the difficulty would arise less frequently. Maintaining a digital archive protects the individual from change such as that experienced at work; through relocation to another country or when taking on a new role in life (Barrett, 2009; Duvekot, 2010). An immediate possibility is to present examples of good practice on the site where individuals could see how the evidence should be presented and what could be included. This would be a positive support.

When asked about evidence collection, and what would they suggest to change the task 42% said they were happy with the task as it was (Fig. 9.14), *"I wouldn't change anything regarding how I approached it or what I included as I feel my case was very strong and looked well."* However there were some interesting suggestions; 11% asked for an interview to support the case. This would support learners who found it difficult to present their learning in written format. This would also be a useful approach for those who had to present complex tasks or abilities, the interview format would help the learner bring across the various aspects in the conversation. Also responding to this question 8% mentioned the difficulty of having multiple employers; when they move onto another role in a different company it is difficult to source evidence as they no longer have access to the original company. Finally, 4% said they found it difficult keeping records of every competence. This theme becomes significantly important as the research goes on and has led me to consider exploring the theme of documenting of competencies over time.

10.5   Discussion of Enactment 2; Focus groups exploring reflection

The focus groups examined how the student developed as a reflective learner. The seven themes arising from this research enactment are presented again here in Fig. 10.2
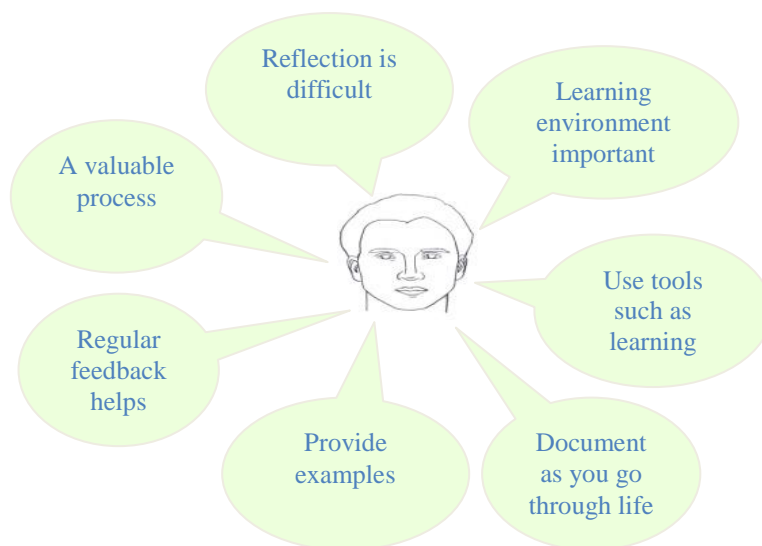
Fig. 10.2 *Themes arising from Enactment 2*

The emerging themes provided a useful insight to the student's experience of reflection. To truly learn something the adult learner has to place new ideas, theory or experiences into their matrix of previous knowledge and transform this new information, make sense of it, through reflection. Each individual will have a unique interpretation reflecting their own particular experiences, personality and ambition. The sample group of 25 adults were chosen as they had all prepared portfolios previously within their programme and had a good basic knowledge of RPL procedure and process. They used the portfolio approach to document their work placement at each stage of their three year programme so had direct experience of reflecting within an academic programme. The sample group were comfortable and at ease discussing their thoughts on reflection and reflective ability. The focus group sessions in themselves were lively and comment flowed freely. However despite the range and variety of opinions aired, seven themes were evident on analysis *(see page 117)*.

The first result, that reflection itself is a difficult task supports the findings of others (Lucas, 2012; Raval, McKenney, & Pieters, 2012). Comments such as, *"We all found it difficult in the beginning;"* or *"it was a bit hard for me to write down at the start ... its very hard because you have to tell the truth about your learning;"* were also in agreement with the following; *"Not terribly sure why, its like extracting teeth ... I just find it very difficult to express exactly what my thoughts are around certain things."* This led me to consider how education providers could support the learner with their reflective tasks. It is possible to look at different approaches which may be used. The literature has many references to the use of tools to aid with the actual practice of reflection. Learning diaries, learning journals or learning logs have been cited as useful tools to aid reflection and build reflective practice (Coughlan, 2008; Miller, *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, regular practice with reflection will perfect the skills of the learner and build their capability in terms of realising their goal as reflective practitioner (Coughlan, 2008). Another useful approach is the of pairing learners so that they can be mutually supported with their reflective task, supporting and mentoring each other and generally honing their skill towards reflective ability with their work (Prilla, Degeling, & Herrmann, 2012). This came across in the transcripts where the learners mentioned sharing opinions and thoughts as they worked helped them with their reflections; *"listening to everybody's experiences;"* and *"listening to the way people were ... we were able to pick up ideas from each other, it was a learning environment".* Other than pairing learners, another useful approach is to reflect on a task and revisit it again as a group two or three weeks later and reconsider new opinions arising at this later point as a group (Pena & Leon, 2011).

The other interesting theme is that of *"documenting as you go"* as a way to capture the range of non formal and informal learning experiences that we collect over time. This theme was evidenced in the transcripts with the following comments as significant; *"I'd get them to document everything, every single thing that they did, no matter what it is ... just write it down, cos somewhere along the line you'll come back to it;"* also *"its learning done and it could be valuable;"* and *"give yourself every bit of experience, because nobody else is going to give you credit for it;"* and finally *"no matter how small, just document everything."* This mindset was echoed by the work of Duvekot (Duvekot & Nilsen-Mohn, 2012) who's work considered activating the learner within the learning triangle (the other two

stakeholders in the triangle being the workplace and the education system). This was an interesting perspective because it broadened the remit from that of RPL; to one where Higher Education is promoting a message that reinforces lifelong learning. It prompts the learner to maintain an archive of personal competencies over time which in time may be used for credits should the person return to learning. Other than returning to education the skill of maintaining a personal archive protects the individual from broader changes in their employment or other personal circumstances (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2013).

One future possible step arising from this research is the possibility of building a webspace specifically to support the learner with reflection (Fleck, 2012). When using technology to enhance and support the learning experience of students, the focus must be on supporting the learning process itself rather than the technology in use (Kosnik, Menna, & Bullock, 2012). It may be possible to build a site that can take the learner through the stages of reflection. With careful design this could be a very simple and effective approach. Prompts in the form of simple questions could be used to take the learner through the stages needed to become reflective with their approach (Gibbs, 1988). This website would be a subpage of the main RPL menu and support the learner as they prepared their prior learning case. It would act to reassure the learner when delving into their reflective mode to roughly scaffold or guide the piece with generic questions that might serve as prompts.

10.6 Discussion of Enactment 3; Expansion and redevelopment of RPL website

The redevelopment of the RPL website (www.cit.ie/rpl) was a worthwhile task which has resulted in a valuable resource for students. Having readily downloadable templates; testimonials and examples along with general advice on RPL is helpful for the students who combine their studies with work, family and other life commitments.
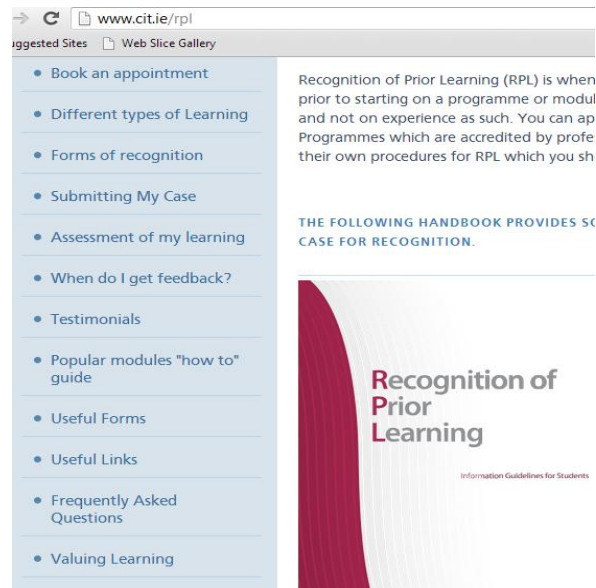
Fig. 10.3 *Homepage of RPL site* www.cit.ie/rpl

In a time of increasing demand for RPL, it makes good sense to use the web to support regular mentoring provision with easily accessible, quality information on how to prepare a prior learning case.

It took time and considerable reflection to get the original layout right. RPL is a complex area in that it is used for a number of *purposes* within education, namely; non standard admissions; advanced entry onto a programme and also for credits within a programme. In addition to this, care had to be taken to categorise the *different types of learning*, those of; formal, non formal and informal into straightforward, easy to understand categories. Using carefully selected images helped to convey the message. In addition to the forms of RPL and the different types of learning, it was important to show the learner the *variety of types* of cases that can occur. RPL cases can be based on experiential learning only; or those based on prior formal learning only; or those cases based on a combination of prior formal and experiential or non formal. The challenge was to take these categories which may become confusing for the learner and relay them simply and clearly so it can be seen what is required for assessment and so the learner can place themselves within the categories and clearly see where they fit within the overall perspective.

One of the more rewarding occurrences was being able to show the website to colleagues who had published in the field of RPL overseas. Their support and encouragement was invaluable and bolstered my conviction that further developing the RPL site was a valuable step to take. In April 2012, contact was made with Ruud Duvekot, InHolland University, Netherlands, Sara Leiste, Capella University Minnesota and Judith O. Brown, Barry University, Florida. Each of them responded positively to the work being done and offered to keep in touch in the future. Ruud Duvekot sent on material in support of self management of competencies and offered to be a second reader for this research. Judith O. Brown sent on material which she uses to support her own students preparing their own portfolios. This contact served as affirmation of the relevance and value of the research; and reaffirmed that support was available should I need a second opinion in the future.

The redevelopment of the www.cit.ie/rpl site is ongoing. This initial platform will be edited, simplified, have aspects of it redeveloped or added to as time progresses. The site will have less text and will be simple for the learner to navigate to (Issa & Turk, 2012).

10.7   Discussion of Enactment 4; Evaluation of RPL website by students

The web-evaluation gave insight to several interesting comments that will be acted upon to keep the site up to date in the coming months. This part of the research was carried out in March 2012 after the redeveloped website went live. The 20 students that provided opinions gave of their opinions freely and provided a sound base from which to draw up the evaluation.
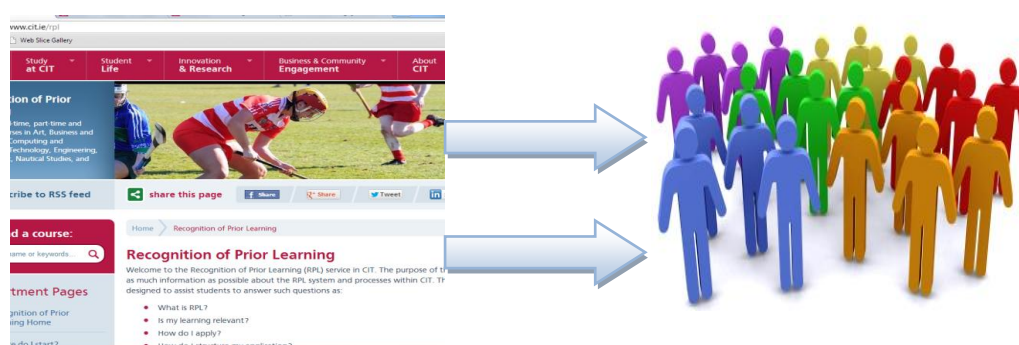
Fig. 10.4 *Evaluation of RPL website by students from a broad range of disciplines*

One of the most significant opinions was that person who suggested the site should prompt the learner to maintain an archive of competencies over time; another suggested a digital document repository. These comments mirrored those arising from enactment 2, the focus group on reflection where one person said we should *"document as you go",* gathering and documenting competencies over time. This theme was emerging as significant again (Baris & Tosun, 2011; Canter, 2012; Laal & Salamati, 2012; Loureiro, Messias, & Barbas, 2012) and ties in with the e portfolio trial as a complementary theme.

I had to address this emerging theme so after careful consideration I implemented another research step which was that of adding the "Valuing Learning" webpage to the

www.cit.ie/rpl site where the promotion of a lifelong learning mindset could be set out (Duvekot & Nilsen-Mohn, 2012; European Commission, 2012f; UNESCO, 2012; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012).

There were various other comments which will inform the ongoing updating or refreshing of the site www.cit.ie/rpl. The intention is to host a web portal that will provide quality information for the learner; supporting their prior learning case preparation (Williams & Chinn, 2009).

I liked the idea of including more video clips on the site where we take the learner through the stages of completing the paperwork. This could be done for each of the types of prior learning cases; formal; non formal; informal and combination cases. We could tailor make simple clips of the paperwork being completed. This is an activity to be completed in the near future and should reduce the amount of text which is needed to support the learner.

There were practical suggestions too those such as those asking the site to provide more examples for students to compare their own case to especially for the first year common module '*Creativity Innovation and Teamwork (CMOD6001)*'. Other suggestions were to improve signposting to the site; to present information on fees more clearly; and to have contact details on the home page. These are all practical suggestions which will be implemented over the immediate future of the site.

One of the outside ideas was to provide a link behind each module on the Institute website showing what would be allowed as an exemption against the module; across the range or types of learning formal; non formal and informal. This would prove to be an immense task and in reality the current demand for RPL combined with the budget restrictions in providing additional resources means it is an unlikely idea to be implemented.

Finally, there was the specific suggestion to use Google sites to provide an e portfolio service for students of the Institute. The student made the suggestion that it could be linked to the maintenance of competencies over time; that it could inform their preparation for the workplace and future career orientation. The effort that this student went to bring this message across to me was significant. They called by and then followed this with a two page email outlining their opinion. I was deeply humbled and touched by their consideration and the time they gave to this. It prompted me to look at Google sites properly. Even though I had a fear of e Portfolios and the unknown in terms of technology I already knew about Google and trusted the service. I liked that it was freely available and that it was also used to host the email service of the students. I resolved to investigate Google sites and consider it as a platform for the e portfolio trial.

10.8 Discussion of Enactment 5; Addition of Valuing Learning space

Adding the Valuing Learning page to the RPL website was an important step to take in this research. It broadens the message that the institute gives to the learner; it relays the importance of documenting competencies over time as a matter of course. This is important in a time of downturn in the economy where active documentation of competencies by the learner protects from job loss; provides a learning plan to support future continuing professional development; and promotes sound RPL case preparation on return to learning should the experiential learning be relevant. It promotes the active documentation of competencies by the learner of non formal and informal learning.

It is a significant step for a higher education provider to promote such a message. By doing so, the provider is promoting a lifelong learning mindset. This step is significant in that the Institute is prompting the learner to document knowledge, skills and abilities as they go through life outside of any particular course or programme.
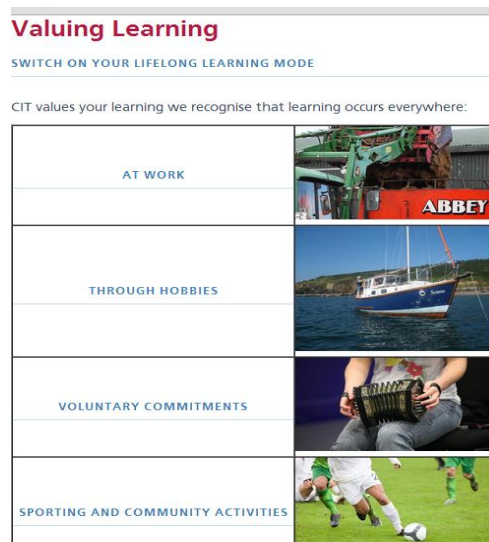
Fig. 10.5 *Valuing learning website*

Potential students will see that education respects learning gained within the community through involvement with sport; or learning arising from involvement in the workplace. This culture shift is a significant step towards realising the learning society of the future. When Higher Education promotes a message of lifelong learning and valuing learning gained in all aspects of life it sends a clear signal to the wider population.

This page also presented the opportunity to link to the next enactment of the research which was the e portfolio trial. E Portfolios themselves support the maintenance of a lifelong learning mindset where the learner actively documents achievements and events where they acquire learning. I was pleased to include the aspect where staff contributed to the web-page mentioning discipline specific examples of evidence of experiential learning; as a means to prompt the learner when gathering evidence. This inclusion reinforces the message that RPL is an Institute wide commitment which has been embraced by all and that the staff are open to non formal and informal learning once it is properly presented for assessment.

10.9   Discussion of Enactment 6; E Portfolio trial

The e Portfolio trial began in July and was complete in December 2012 during thirteen weeks class time. The group used in the trial were the BA in Community Education, all adults active in the field of community development and from a broad range of backgrounds and cultures.
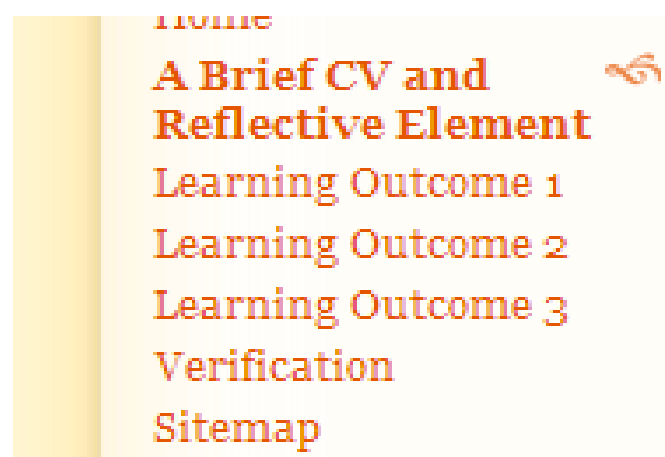

Fig. 10.6 *e portfolio trial; September 2012*

Previous classes taking this module in the past, would have created their learning portfolio using a word document to scaffold the case. Trialling Google sites was a new departure and although I had concerns about how the adults would manage the technology I was quietly determined to see the trial through. The rapid pace in technological innovation and its adoption by users influenced me. I can see how quickly things are changing and how technology is impacting how we live and work. It is also influencing how programmes are being delivered and assessed. Younger users, the 'digital natives' are using technology everyday in ways that continue to amaze me (Prensky, 2012). It made me want to see if an older group would take to an e portfolio system and wonder if it would benefit them during the subsequent terms where they could capture their work placement and other experiences over time (Herman & Kirkup, 2008).

In July 2012, while on summer break, I created my own e portfolio. I have been employed by CIT for sixteen years to deliver RPL for the Institute and I had never made a complete portfolio before this point. It was a complex task, although I knew what I wanted to put into it. I decided to prepare a prior learning case against the common first year module '*Creativity Innovation and Teamwork (CMOD6001)*' as it was such a popular choice for RPL. I

really enjoyed putting it together; preparing the text; uploading photographs and gathering the evidence to support what I was saying. The Google sites system was easy to use and I was very pleased with the end result. Looking at the work though, I knew it was too personal to show to any group of students so I decided to make another more generic example.

In August, a second e portfolio 'prior learning example.com' was prepared (https://sites.google.com/site/priorlearningexamplecom/) this was a sample prior learning case against the '*Creativity Innovation and Teamwork (CMOD6001)*' module again. I took time to create examples that would show others what type of learning and evidence would be valid against a set of learning outcomes. It was important to include photographs, to present the e portfolio structure in a clear and easy to follow way and to clearly label any proof so people could follow what I had uploaded as evidence (Huang, 2002). I knew that the open book example would be a real benefit to the adult group who benefit by having an example to go by (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Mezirow, 1991; UNESCO, 2009*b*). I could see at this point that e portfolios are powerful tools to support the creation and scaffolding of a prior learning case (Brown, 2011; Ravet, 2009). It was straightforward to present a page as a CV, then a page against each learning outcome and finally a page to present the evidence supporting it all.

Fig. 10.7 *Example of e portfolio structure; each subtitle is a page supporting the prior learning case*

The trial commenced in September 2012 and the group took thirteen weeks to complete their task. It was key to achieve a positive atmosphere where they could create their e portfolios and support each other with this task. This would also help with the reflective aspect of the task where they reached back into their previous lives and considered various significant aspects which might be included. As they worked they collaborated with each other; the experience brought the group closer together. The short questionnaire completed in week thirteen revealed they all really enjoyed the experience and were proud of the completed work. They were positive about creating additional e portfolios and were pleased to have a new skill. This was a significant outcome for me.

It was a privilege to have imparted a skill that will help people document their competencies overtime. I am confident that they will maintain the spaces and add to them (Jafari, 2004). It would be a significant step to get the full cohort of first year students across the institute to create an e portfolio. I am convinced of the value of such a step. To do so, would be to enable each student with the ability to document their competencies and reflect on their learning journey over their college years (Brookfield, 2010; Hager, 2012; Knowles, 1980). It would be a more powerful step to provide them with a system that was outside the remit of the institute; one that can travel with them as they grow as professionals (Hager, 2012). E portfolios are a significant tool to activate the learner to document their knowledge, skills and competencies over time.

10.10 Discussion of Enactment 7; Evaluation of e portfolio trial

The themes arising out of the evaluation of the e portfolio trial were significant; they are as follows:

Creating an e portfolio is a new and worthwhile skill to have
It was encouraging to see that the group valued gaining this new skill. They could see how e portfolios are useful to document non formal and informal learning and how they can be easily maintained once the learners mind is tuned to seeing and capturing their knowledge, skills and abilities. As such, they value their own skills and competencies and are activated

in the sense of maintaining an archive of digital material over time. This archive once in place can be added to or amended depending on the purpose; for example for a job interview or to showcase learning. The e portfolio supports the individual as they go through life (Barrett, 2009).

E portfolio site is a tailor made personal space – 'by me, about me'

This theme captures the very essence of what an e portfolio is. The creation of a personal space to support the individual has deeply personal resonances. Depending on the purpose of the space; whether it is to create a personal archive; for RPL purposes; or to showcase ability for the job market, the person will structure and populate the e portfolio in a particular way. This very act is both reflective and creative in itself. The individual takes stock of their task; they prepare the structure; reflect and select material needed and populate the site with their purpose in mind. They then amend and change the space as they contemplate the results in front of them.

Preparation was challenging – the reflective aspect

Getting into the reflective mode or being confident with reflection was not an automatic process for the learners. For these adults returning to education, the immersion process is fraught with many stresses; understanding timetables; what is required in assignments and collaborating with each other. There is a period of significant adjustment while the individual learns how to function in this mode. There is enormous learning in this their first term; just keeping up with the material and timetable is challenging enough. Presenting them with the opportunity to acquire a new skill; that of preparing the e portfolio, required patience and purpose. Using the 'openbook' e portfolio example and encouraging a collaborative atmosphere where people contributed freely and supported each other helped. They could see by opening up with each other and discussing examples what was required.

Creation of positive classroom environment was important

The group benefited from having a relaxed atmosphere; although purposeful and set in a computer lab they were encouraged to collaborate freely. This supported the purpose of their task; allowed them to be creative and to enjoy building the e portfolios. This

supportive atmosphere helped the learners maintain a positive mindset towards their task; it kept them building their sites; purposefully working towards the endpoint of the module while allowing the freedom to express themselves.

The importance of the individual having choice in how the space should look
This final theme complimented the first one that of 'by me, about me' and explored how the learner would bond with their online space if able to personalise how it should look. There is something in the human condition that takes comfort from adjusting a thing; making it their own, personalising a space both real and virtual. It helps the individual to connect with it. An e portfolio is a unique personal space, it is individual to the person, no two are the same (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2013).

Chapter 11 Recommendations for future action and research

11.1   Introduction

The recommendations from this research are presented with two perspectives in mind; the macro and micro picture. The macro picture is the bigger national or international context, Higher Education as a sector. The macro picture is outside of any one invididual college. By the micro picture I am focusing on recommendations that would be applicable within CIT or any other individual higher education provider. They are presented in no particular order of importance and some of the micro recommendations will also tie in and complement the macro initiatives.

11.2   Recommendations at the macro level

1.   Nurture ability to articulate knowledge through training initiatives

We compete on the basis of knowledge both as individuals and in the workplace. Nurturing the ability to articulate this knowledge is central to functioning effectively as an individual in 2013. Developing a habit of actively documenting what we know is essential. Knowledge is ever changing or mobile and regularly tracking how we work and adapt to key situations in our lives must become a regular habit. It is to culture a mindset akin to that of the reflective practitioner. National or European initiatives to specifically fund research and delivery of training in the area of activating the learner and in support of digital archiving will promote lifelong learning. Starting the activation of the learner early in the school years where creating an e portfolio is a compulsory activity in the curriculum will establish such an approach and provide a useful tool for young people where they document competencies as they go through life.

Employers and community based education providers could deliver training and short courses on digital archiving of competencies over time so the individual is supported with this task. The general media (radio and TV) should promote this theme in its lifestyle and career themed articles or programmes.

2. Promote the mindset of the reflective practitioner

We should work and live as reflective practitioners, developing our ability to continually learn and consider our practice as we work. Providing training initiatives to support our ability with reflection would support such development. We could provide modules in the first year of Higher Education supporting the development of the reflective practitioner mindset.

3. Collaborate across communities of RPL practice

The good work of the SIF funded projects should be continued and links made between colleagues active in the field of RPL in the various institutes and universities should be nurtured. A toolkit to provide for the basics in RPL delivery and support could be created and shared between the providers. This toolkit could be supported by the relevant authorities such as the NUI and the QQI.

4. Supporting the step before RPL (i.e. the lifelong learning mindset) is worthwhile

RPL is of significant importance to education providers where there is increasing demand for its provision. It makes sense to promote the very idea of documenting knowledge, skills and abilities in an uncertain economic climate. Higher Education should promote this mindset because it ties to the preparation of material for RPL should the individual's learning be comparable with a particular programme or module. Providing a simple online space such as 'Document your abilities' or 'Valuing Learning' promotes this as an idea. In reality this is promoting the step before RPL. With this mindset it is possible to capture significant learning events as they occur and claim the learning in a reflective, meaningful way.

11.3   Recommendations at the micro level

1   Use creative approaches to support the student

Use creative approaches to support the learner with prior learning case preparation. By taking this stance the higher education provider is acknowledging the complexity of the individuals task and is displaying an awareness of the field. This is reassuring in itself. The provider must explore aspects with the stakeholders (assessors and students); and be informed by their suggestions. With this approach they show that they are open to RPL;

they trust the frameworks and the standards in place. They are promoting a lifelong learning message (CEDEFOP, 2004; European Commission, 2012f; Werequin, 2010*b*). The stakeholders understand the nuances involved and have insight as to the potential difficulties with the task of gathering and presenting a prior learning case. It is their perspective that can bring creative insight as to how to support RPL in new and creative ways.

2   Create a space to support reflection with RPL case preparation

Preparation of a portal specifically to support reflection with RPL case preparation would further support the individual. By providing guidance with this central aspect the provider is delving into the very core of the task with the learner. They are not left on their own with the part that is the most difficult to get right. This is reassuring for the adult returning to learning who can gauge whether their own case is measuring up to the required standard or not by following the guidance of the mentor and the steps on the web portal. By putting this space online the learner can access the material anytime. This space is not meant to replace the one-to-one consultations that happen with the more complex RPL cases but to support this process and provide the guidance and examples necessary to maintain standards where resources are constrained.

3   Introduce e portfolios as part of the first year experience

Incorporating e portfolios as part of the first year experience would establish them as a tool to support the learner on their journey through the college years and beyond. The creation of a reflective space where the individual can capture and maintain their achievements; interests and learning plan for the future would be a highly effective means of activating the learner. The most effective way to include e portfolios would be build them into the assessment protocol of the common first year module '*Creativity Innovation and Teamwork(CMOD6001'*. Taking this approach would build e portfolios very simply into the heart of the first year experience. e Portfolios are useful tools to protect against the uncertainty of working life for the entire adult population. Higher education must promote their use to support their adoption by the wider population of students, including the non digital natives. The next generation will naturally use some form of them to support their

learning journey. Their adoption now is good preparation for the future of higher education.

4   Use e portfolios to scaffold RPL cases

E-portfolios are valuable asset to RPL when the learner is properly supported with case preparation. E portfolios themselves are a significant tool to activate the learner and support the capture of non formal and informal learning. It is simple to structure an e portfolio specifically against a set of learning outcomes allowing for a page for each one, preceded with a page to set the context and finalised with a space specifically presenting proof against each claim; the verification space. The e portfolio allows for the individual nature of case preparation and their ease of use would appeal to adults who are often cautious with use of technology. This research finalises by saying e portfolios are purpose built scaffolds for RPL case preparation (O'Leary & O'Sullivan, 2013); and I look forward to their adoption in the immediate future.

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