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To cite this article: Philipp Assinger (2023) Recognition of prior learning in workplaces: exploring managerial practice by the means of a heuristic conceptual framework, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 45:3, 378-395, DOI: [10.1080/0158037X.2022.2109615](https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2022.2109615)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2022.2109615>



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Published online: 30 Aug 2022.



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Recognition of prior learning in workplaces: exploring managerial practice by the means of a heuristic conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

The focus of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) on assessment and credentials has ambivalent implications regarding research on workplace RPL. This article presents and empirically tests a heuristic conceptual framework to support the analysis of workplace RPL and its relation to learning at work. RPL is defined as a practice of workplace pedagogy with two modes of recognition attributed a performance, a developmental, and an occupational orientation. The framework is applied to analyse data from an interview-based study with managers in Austrian wood-processing companies. The analysis reveals a strong orientation towards performance, adaptive learning, and immediate use of skills. A strength-based view of staff development and awareness of the importance of support positively influence occupationally relevant and developmental learning. When recognition is a part of everyday management practice and workplace participation, there are even greater opportunities for developmental learning. This article offers conceptual perspectives and empirical evidence to researchers and practitioners. The implications for practice suggest an intensification of support for managers to help them appreciate the potential benefits of RPL. For future research, it is indicated among others to further develop, strengthen, and empirically validate the heuristic conceptual framework.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 October 2021

Accepted 28 July 2022

KEYWORDS

recognition of prior learning; skills assessment; workplace learning; workplace pedagogy; conceptual framework

Introduction

Recognising what a person has learned outside of formal education is a critical issue in workforce development discourses all over the world (Cameron 2014; Halttunen, Koivisto, and Billett 2014; Villalba-García 2021). Especially people in transitory, low paid or socially low status employment would benefit from having their knowledge, skills, and competences being fully recognised by educational institutions or employers. At the same time, receiving credentials or qualifications upon an assessment of learning

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at work is expected to compensate for impoverished, inaccessible, or non-existing educational provision (Singh 2015).

Concepts such as Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL), Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refer to practices in which various methods and instruments can be combined to identify, document, and assess learning and learning outcomes at work and in non-formal education (Joosten-Ten Brinke et al. 2008). These practices can have a summative or formative intention and include the award of credentials recognised by educational institutions or employers. Credentials can be used by candidates to gain admission to educational programmes or vocational qualifications, to enter employment, or for career progression purposes (Cedefop 2015; Werquin 2012).

Learning at work is in itself embedded within goal-directed activities maintained in workplaces (Billett 2004; Coetzer, Kock, and Wallo 2017). Performing in accordance with these activities is routinely subject to immediate evaluation and acknowledgement by colleagues, supervisors, or managers. Recognising learning, skills, and performance is, hence, an integral part of everyday workplace activities (Billett 2005). The practice of recognition in workplaces, therefore, is very different, multifaceted, and in a more complex way related to learning at and for work than projected in the established concepts of RNFIL, PLAR or RPL (Berglund and Andersson 2012; Harris and Wihak 2014).

Measures of RPL have been extensively researched with a focus on vulnerable groups such as the unemployed, early school leavers, or migrants, and their transition between contexts of work and education (e.g. Andersson 2020; Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris 2017; Klindt 2021). Conversely, the literature on RPL in workplaces is scarce (Cameron 2014). Only few empirical studies and hardly any theoretical work exist, leaving a marked research gap. This article assumes that this research gap is maintained by a conceptual inadequacy, namely that if applied to the workplace setting, the concept of 'traditional RPL' does not lend itself well to comprehensively analyse 'workplace RPL' (Berglund and Andersson 2012) and its relationship to learning at work. To address both the research gap and the conceptual inadequacy, this article presents a conceptually framed exploration.

After discussing previous research, a heuristic conceptual framework will be presented. Recognition is defined as a practice of workplace pedagogy (Billett 2016) inviting participation in goal-directed activities, i.e. learning at work. Two modes of recognition: *validation* and *interpellation* (Weiß 2018), and three orientations: a performance, a developmental, and an occupational orientation (Billett 2005; Ellström 2001; Wallo et al. 2021) will be introduced. The framework will then be tested on data from an interview-based study with managers in wood-processing companies in the region of Styria, in Austria. Two questions are posed: (1) how do managers and supervisors recognise learning and skills of workers; and (2) in what way does this afford learning opportunities?

This conceptually framed exploration offers conceptual perspectives and empirical evidence to researchers and practitioners in the fields of continuing education and workplace learning with the hopes of encouraging a lively discussion on the topic of RPL in workplaces.

Previous research

RPL has long been a domain of educational and labour market institutions, but there are indications that RPL is ‘slowly becoming more accepted in workplace contexts’ (Harris and Wihak 2014, 14). This suggests that RPL is no longer confined to programmes for the accreditation of prior learning but rather has gained relevance in relation to workplace management (Davies 2014).

According to Berglund and Andersson (2012), recognising learning and skills is of relevance to workplace management when newcomers enter the workplace (recruitment, onboarding), in relation to the skills developed through work (human resource development, career development, licensing), and when people leave the organisation (succession planning, knowledge management). In larger companies, RPL is more structured and systematised and mostly associated with assessments. Assessment methods include CV screening, portfolios, psychometric tests, workplace observation, appraisals, 360-degree feedback, or training evaluation. In small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), recognition is often part of everyday management practices such as the distribution of tasks or the formation of work teams (Beleckiene and Vaitkute 2007; Cedefop 2014; Deutscher and Winther 2022; Wallo et al. 2020).

Workplaces as a specific context for RPL

Workplaces ‘are contested environments’ (Billett 2004, 200). What counts as learning and skills, who gets access to learning opportunities, how learning is facilitated, and who and what is being recognised is contingent on formal and informal power relations (Felstead and Unwin 2016). This means that within companies, RPL is not free from specific interests; in other words, it is not entirely accepted in its goals or afforded equally to all employees or workers. A European cross-country study revealed that the skills of employees in knowledge-intensive positions are significantly more often recognised than the skills of shopfloor workers (Cedefop 2014). Similar results are reported by Böse and Münchhausen (2017), based on case studies in Germany.

Business strategies, production regimes, and consumer demands have an impact on the purpose of recognition and, thus, its manifestations in workplaces. Companies perceive RPL as an effective and cost-efficient non-traditional pathway to qualifications, since employees do not have to attend courses with low occupational value and the costs spent on these external courses can be economised (Collins 2011). They use RPL as means to gain information for systematic staff planning and to acquire the ‘right person at the right time’. The chances for employees to use assessment results for accreditation or career development beyond the workplace, however, are often questioned and the acceptance of assessments might be low (Strauch 2008).

Informal relationships and the company culture (Sandberg and Kubiak 2013) play an important role since recognition practices are often not explicitly labelled nor acknowledged, rather are used informally within the workplace (Davies 2014). Beleckiene and Vaitkute (2007) noted that companies use RPL, yet they are often not aware of it. Being given new responsibilities such as mentoring a newcomer, receiving a promotion, or presenting ideas at a meeting do not result in credentials, however, they still display that the skills are recognised (Davies 2014). Berglund and Andersson (2012) argue

that workers receive attention and acknowledgement for their skills from supervisors, colleagues, and even customers yet under certain conditions it is inappropriate to make skills visible at all. It might even turn into ‘a trap for the employer and the worker’ (Berglund and Andersson 2012, 81), if workers want to protect their skills from being exploited, or if employers fear that claims about pay raises or task promotion will be made by the workers.

RPL and the promotion of learning

RPL is considered a catalyst for individual learning and development (Romaniuk and Snart 2000). People who have completed an RPL process report an impact on their personal learning curve and occupational development as they were able to reflect on their learning experiences, which boosted their confidence and encouraged further learning activities (Andersson and Fejes 2012; Miguel, Ornelas, and Maroco 2016). Especially the expressive and reflective elements of communicative assessment settings have been attributed an inherent learning potential (Fejes and Andersson 2009), indicating that RPL is not just about the assessment of learning in the past (Werquin 2012), but also relates to learning in the instance of and from the assessment process itself (Andersson 2014).

Strong evidence in support of a linkage between recognition and learning comes from Evans, Kersh, and Kontiainen (2004). They explored the relation between ‘expansive workplaces’ (Fuller and Unwin 2004) and recognition, skills development and engagement in non-formal learning. The study participants, who were observed prior and while re-entering employment, reported that having one’s skills and abilities and one’s personal situation acknowledged by tutors’ or supervisors’ small gestures encouraged learning at work and improved work performance. The authors concluded that ‘learning processes are negatively affected where recognition and deployment of tacit skills of an adult is low or negative. Conversely, positive deployment and recognition of these skills sustains learning and contributes to learning outcomes’ (Evans, Kersh, and Kontiainen 2004, 70).

RPL also has effects on the provision of learning opportunities by supervisors. Andersson and Fejes (2012) observed supervisors, who joined their employees in a ‘learning conversation’ with assessment as part of in-service training. The supervisors gained a much greater interest in, and awareness for, in-service training, the variety of training methods, and the effectiveness of such training after having recognised the experiences and skills of the employees.

Implications for empirical research

It seems problematic to reduce workplace RPL to assessment of prior learning outcomes and the acquisition of credentials. This view tends to ‘fall into the trap of artificially separating learning that is an embedded part of everyday work from its social context’ (Fellstead and Unwin 2016, 20). For analysis, the established concept of RPL, therefore, needs to be reconsidered. Some authors have introduced alternative approaches (Berglund 2014; Evans, Kersh, and Kontiainen 2004). Notably, Berglund and Andersson (2012) used ‘workplace RPL’ instead of ‘traditional RPL’. This distinction, however, was not

grounded in theoretical considerations but abducted from the empirical observation that various forms of formal and informal assessment practices accumulate to bring about a system of recognition.

In summary, there is a demand for a conceptual approach to ensure that contingent and contested formal and informal instances of RPL can be addressed, i.e. those instances in which prior learning and skills are (not) assessed and those in which future learning opportunities are (not) afforded through assessment, feedback, or other forms of workplace organisation and managerial support.

Heuristic conceptual framework

The following envisages RPL as a practice of workplace pedagogy meant to afford learning at work (Billett 2016). Learning at work is understood as an intra- and inter-psychological process occurring in the circumstances of active workplace participation (Billett 2004). During participation in goal-directed activities, a person performs tasks, acquires and applies knowledge, solves problems, develops skills, and through the enactment of these skills progresses to become recognised as a member of the workplace community. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013, 354) put forward: ‘participation in practice enables recognition by providing opportunities for the enactment of abstract abilities through labour and activity, which enables individuals to be recognised as competent in their contribution to communal goals’.

Workplace pedagogy, being one among three elements of learning at work (Billett 2016), encompasses practices intended for increasing or extending learning experiences at work. In other words, it addresses how managers, supervisors, or colleagues afford access to work activities and thereby afford new or alternative learning experiences to employees/workers. Workplace pedagogies are, thus, ‘means by which experiences can be enriched or augmented to promote particular kinds of learning’ (Billett 2016, 621). It must be acknowledged that the promotion of learning can have different orientations (Wallo et al. 2021) and, consequently, learning at work takes on different forms (Ellström 2001).

Borrowing from Wallo et al.’s (2021) work on ‘learning-oriented leadership’, workplace pedagogies are attributed a performance or a developmental orientation. This corresponds well with Billett’s (2005) account of the RPL orientations towards workplace practice and individual development. The orientation of RPL towards occupational practice, also mentioned by Billett (2005), must be added to establish links towards the accreditation and transfer of learning and skills.

The *performance orientation* favours *adaptive learning* according to Ellström (2001). Such learning aims at persistent and efficient work performance through participation in standardised work practices, in which the workers’ scope of action and decidability, i.e. the discretion, in relation to tasks, methods, and evaluation of results is restricted. The *developmental orientation* relates to Ellström’s (2001) *developmental learning*. Such learning aims at reflective and creative work performance, which emerges from the participation in a workplace environment that can be understood as ‘expansive’, extending the workers’ individual ‘learning territory’ (Fuller and Unwin 2004) and increasing the degree of discretion. The *occupational orientation* refers to occupational learning within continuing education and training (CET). Such learning should ensure

that workers meet occupational requirements such as those stated in national curricula, industry-wide standards, or qualification frameworks.

For the remainder of this article, workplace RPL is defined as a practice of workplace pedagogy applied by managers, supervisors, mentors, or colleagues. Affordances are extended to workers with a performance, developmental, or occupational orientation as an invitation to participate in goal-oriented workplace activities, i.e. learning at work. This might lead to adaptive or developmental learning or the participation in CET. For the purpose of analysis, recognition is further subdivided, using slightly adapted terminology from Weiß (2018), who defines two modes of recognition in relation to learning at work: *validation* and *interpellation*.¹

Validation refers to the practice of assessment (identification, documentation, and evaluation) of learning and skills. Managers, supervisors, mentors, or colleagues validate learning and skills as part of their everyday interactions or observations, or in a specific setting such as an appraisal, where instruments like psychometric tests, conversation guidelines, or qualification matrices are used. Then, validation is an invitation to reflect on, discuss, or negotiate workers' skills, learning, performance, or progress.

Interpellation means that the skills of a worker are called upon and the enactment of the skills is enabled through the provision of opportunities and the demand for active participation in goal-directed activities. This occurs when someone is given a new task or responsibility, is provided with the chance to contribute to discursive forms of organisational development, or is given access to new experiences whether within his or her familiar workplace or in a new work team or department.

Methodology

The empirical part draws on a publicly funded study, which explored the practices of and chances for positioning RPL as a strength-based approach (Wijekuruppu, Coetzer, and Susomrith 2021) to workplace learning and CET in the wood-processing industry in the region of Styria, in Austria. The project proposal underwent a two-step selection process with a panel of experts from the region deciding upon a review of the quality and suitability of the proposal. The wood-processing industry is an important industry of the region and has risen in importance with the digitalisation of production. While the workforce is largely in the middle or lower qualification levels, and more than 40 percent of the workforce is in positions of unskilled work, the supply of potential job applicants is drastically declining. Up- and re-skilling the workforce has, thus, become imperative to the companies (Assinger [forthcoming](#)).

Based upon insights on RPL measures awarding vocational qualifications to low-qualified workers in other regions of Austria (Eichbauer 2016), the aim of the study was to support the creation of an industry-wide RPL measure. This was done on the premise that first 'it is important to understand the pre-existing "system" of assessment and recognition in workplaces and the logic for its existence' (Berglund and Andersson 2012, 81).

It was initially intended to apply an embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007) combining expert, management, and worker interviews with workplace observation. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, observation at the workplace was only partly possible in two cases and interviewing workers was not possible at all. The

study was consequently modified into an interview-based study including semi-structured ‘conceptual’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2018, 79) interviews conducted face-to-face and via online video conference tools. In addition to six interest representatives and two validation experts, owner-managers, executive managers, human resource managers, production managers, and employee representatives from 15 companies were interviewed (Table 1).

The sampling strategy was designed purposefully together with the regional partner, an interest organisation at the intersection of research and industry, who took over a gate-keeping role, to capture the diversity of companies within the two factors of branch and company size. In the region of Styria, there are 170 sawmills and 50 companies for industrial or manufacturing finishing. Of these 220 companies, 150 have fewer than 10 employees, while only 15 have more than 100 employees. Sampled companies with more than 200 employees have human resource managers, whereas SME’s do not have an individual directly responsible for education and training matters. Here the owner-managers take over this function (Coetzer, Wallo, and Kock 2019) and were, thus, selected as interviewees.

To comply with research ethics and to ensure informed consent and confidentiality, a one-page study description was sent to the interviewees to inform them about purpose, methods, practical consequences, and dissemination of the study. After having agreed, interviewees were informed about the main interview questions and given a data protection agreement based on the principles of the European General Data Protection regulation which was then signed by them and the involved researchers. No sensitive data was gathered during the research process. Each interview was conducted by the author together with another member of the research team. Audio recordings were transcribed word-for-word in MaxQDA by a third team member and the first wave of coding was completed by the author in consultation with the research team. Interview transcripts were returned to the interviewees for a member-check validation; however, feedback was minimal, and a few requested minor changes which were then integrated to ensure integrity of the research (All European Academics 2017). Four of the interviewees (Table 1 marked with *) participated in a second wave of interviews where the

Table 1. Overview of the interviews.

Industry branch	Company size	Interviewees (gender)	Case identifier
Sawmill and timber processing*	(>250 emp.)	HR-Director (f)	C1
Sawmill and timber processing	(>250 emp.)	CEO (m)	C2
Wooden frame houses and carpentry	(>250 emp.)	Union Rep (m)	C3
Wooden frame houses and carpentry	(>250 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C4
Parquet production*	(>250 emp.)	HR-Director (f)	C5
Parquet production	(>250 emp.)	CTO (m), HR-Assistant (f)	C6
Window production	(>250 emp.)	Union Rep (m), Production Manager (m)	C7
Window production*	(51–250 emp.)	HR-Director (f)	C8
Sawmill and timber processing	(51–250 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C9
Sawmill and timber processing	(<50 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C10
Sawmill and timber processing*	(<50 emp.)	Owner Manager (f)	C11
Carpentry, materials supplier	(<50 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C12
Carpentry, special furniture	(<50 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C13
Carpentry, special furniture	(<50 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C14
Carpentry, special furniture	(<10 emp.)	Owner Manager (m)	C15

preliminary results were reported back to countercheck the analysis and interpretation and to discuss the development of RPL measures.

During the study, a data corpus of 189,308 words was gathered, including data on several topics related to learning at work and CET. For the analysis presented below, a specific data-set was drawn (Braun and Clarke 2006) to address two questions: (1) how do managers and supervisors recognise learning and skills of workers? and (2) in what way does this afford learning opportunities? A conceptually framed data analysis as 'bricolage' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2018, 132) was applied to the drawn data set in two major steps. First, the data was coded to identify practices of validation and interpellation. Several practices, such as assessment, promotion, job enlargement or job enrichment, or input systems, could be identified whereby they were either related to an appraisal or could be interpreted in terms of the interpellation mode of recognition. Second, the codified examples were again interpreted using the concepts of performance, developmental, and occupational orientation.

Findings

To equally address generalisability and individuality of RPL practice, the next sections provide an overview of findings and selected case vignettes. First, employee appraisals will be addressed as validation settings and qualification matrices as validation tools. Second, it will be shown how interpellation serves to afford learning through participation in workplace activities.

The validation mode of recognition

In larger companies, appraisals are not always conducted by managers but by specialist supervisors, because they are closer to the workers and can, therefore, relate better to their work activities. Smaller companies generally do not have appraisals at all. The owner-manager of a small sawmill admitted, she had been trying to implement appraisals, but team leaders and workers resisted and even ridiculed the idea (C11). In larger companies, team leaders, quality managers, and administration staff are afforded appraisals more often than shop floor workers (C1; C8). Only one interviewee confirmed having appraisals for all employees including those in production (C2) and another also appraises machinists (C5).

Most interviews suggest a very functional, performance-oriented or a rather unstructured form of conversation. A developmental orientation and a strength-based approach, however, was emphasised by the HR manager of a family-owned manufacturer of windows.

For me, the appraisal serves to identify potentials. Like, which unknown potentials lie within a worker maybe to take on new tasks? Finding a workplace for the future, development of potential. An employee appraisal should actually go in this direction. Not just the status quo und what was in the past, what can we make better, but really ask where the hidden competencies of the worker are. (C8)

This strength-based approach might be time-consuming, and some workers might perceive it as a control mechanism, the interviewee admitted, but in the end, it would

increase their motivation and self-confidence. Learning opportunities in this company are manifold ranging from inter-generational group-work to extra-work events and coaching by an external specialist.

Matrix applications are used as an assessment tool during appraisals in the larger companies. Their use is susceptible to an objectification of workers as it primarily serves to classify people. This was implicit in several interviews. An HR assistant of a large parquet producer explained:

We want to assess every employee in our company and want to document competences to identify critical points in the company. That means, where is information, data, know-how et cetera tied to individual employees or small groups. Where in the company are we firm and do not need to encourage development (...) Then we will probably encourage development measures where someone leaves or retires, and we lose much know-how. (C6)

Vignettes on validation

At a large industrial window producer, a qualification matrix is used as a substitute for systematically planning on-the-job training (C7). Based on daily observation, a supervisor assesses workers' skills, ticking boxes to mark who can take over tasks in the various production units of the just-in-time production. The employee representative pointed out:

Obviously, when we see that at a machine or an area where we don't have enough workers, we just set up something internally, we say two or three people are moved there and we give them some guidance because if one or two are sick or on leave, we can't produce. But we don't have any training plan or say 'go through this training program' or so; that we don't have. (C7)

The matrix is built around a simple logic: for each worker and each task, a classification according to skills requirements is made using an A to D grading system. 'A' means the worker is fully competent in operating a machine and can advise other colleagues on the machine and 'D' means the worker has operated the machine occasionally and can support colleagues but is not able to handle the machine in a self-sufficient manner. If a worker is rated C or D, he or she receives guidance from an advanced colleague.

A large saw-timber processing company uses a qualification matrix for workers and a competence matrix for higher qualified staff (C1). The first includes merely machine operating skills while the later includes also social or personal skills. Both are based on a combination of supervisor assessment and self-assessment to discover where workers'/employees' self-perception differs from the supervisor's perception. The matrix is supposed to help identify whether management measures have been successful and if the worker/employee is on track or in need of additional support. Asked about the challenges involved, the HR manager mentioned the tense communicative situations that emerge in a double assessment. To reflect on one's own skills was considered challenging and even more so when one is simultaneously assessed by another person. The double assessment usually involves quarrels when it comes to comparing, where both sides need to articulate demands, wishes, or assessment results.

It is important to not just articulate in a way that the other or both totally misunderstand but also accept feedback. Well, one aspect is that the employee assesses the supervisor.

Supervisors like to ignore this and say, 'my employee did not want say to anything' and end the appraisal. (C1)

Another example of a matrix application was reported by the CEO of a large saw-timber processing company (C2). Here, the matrix is combined with directed guidance and participation in varying workplace activities. New workers are supported by a mentor, who is an experienced colleague and becomes responsible for advising the newcomer to improve performance. This process of mentoring is supported by a matrix application, in which skills demanded by the workplace and perceived workers' skills are compared. A schedule is agreed upon, determining by when the workers should be ready to independently handle the work tasks. The mentor supports performing everyday tasks and solving problems. The progress defined in the schedule is regularly assessed in a triadic setting by the worker, the mentor, and the direct supervisor, who is usually the head of production.

Validation and CET opportunities

Connected with the use of appraisals and matrices are two major findings concerning the occupational orientation. It was confirmed that sometimes workers aspire an upward mobility and enrol in tertiary education or CET to gain occupationally recognised qualifications. Such aspirations are communicated in appraisals where support is secured, however, except for one case (C8), generally neither appraisals nor matrices are explicitly applied to promote the acquisition of additional qualifications. It was reported in one case (C2) that the current plant manager started out in the company in the position of an unskilled worker because he quit the electrician apprenticeship training started at another company. Over the course of twenty years, through workplace learning and CET, he progressed to acquire credits and the wood-technician vocational qualification and was promoted to plant manager.

CET to meet industry standards is seldom discussed in appraisals. Participation in these trainings is usually driven by the supply of courses on the market, by concrete workplace demands imposed by new regulations, or by the implementation of new production plants. Several interviewees mentioned that they do not support any training except for those, which serve the immediate workplace demands or directly improve performance. One owner-manager spoke openly:

There is no purpose, if I send a worker to a bandsaw training, because we do not have a bandsaw. And why should he take part? And it is unlikely that we will get one and I do not want to send him there because he will get the idea to look for another sawmill with a bandsaw. Well, this is certainly not the right course. (C11)

A reason for the ambivalent occupational orientation might be the low skill levels required of job applicants and the low complexity of work-tasks confirmed by several interviewees. Interviewees argued that lacking skills or learning progression is not an issue, but rather the lack of self-confidence and willingness to work (C2; C7; C9; C10).

The interpellation mode of recognition

Interviewees talked about flat hierarchies encouraging increased participation (C15), trial periods in which newcomers are given the chance to get familiar with the workplace before starting work tasks (C8), rotation schemes used to help workers find their

preferred area of responsibility (C10) but also as means to deploy skills flexibly within the context of just-in-time production (C5). Workers are sent on business trips to learn from suppliers upon picking up materials and from customers when assembling furniture on site (C13; C14; C15). Six out of the fifteen companies have a system for input, inviting workers to bring in ideas for improving processes and practices.

Vignettes on interpellation

An example of participation across departments was presented by the CTO of a large parquet producer (C6). The company had a sales meeting with Polish customers where none of the salespeople could speak the language. By chance, it was communicated to the management that an employee working at the sorting machine in the production area could support. She was then invited to join the sales meeting as an interpreter and intercultural mediator. It worked out so well, that she kept participating in a series of meetings and was eventually offered an internship in the sales division to assess for a transfer from production to sales. According to the CTO, such an internship had been used several times to expand the experiences of workers; some of these accepted the new positions, while others returned to production.

A small saw-timber processing company uses a 'blackboard' to discuss and gain insights regarding workplace improvements (C10). Several times a year, the owner-manager announces an issue such as how to improve the storage of lumber in the drying chamber or how to better organise the sorting of the saw-timber. Workers are encouraged to add their ideas to the 'blackboard' and, after some time, a meeting is set up where the workers' ideas are presented and discussed in the team and the results are documented. The owner-manager considered this a very useful practice to support workers' development and organisational commitment.

And very important: what everyone actually said will be noted on the shop floor blackboard. And very important also, when the whole thing is implemented, we tick it off on the list of topics, ok this problem is solved. And who came up with the solution has sort of the feeling that 'ok, I am important in this company and what I say is heard. (C10)

In a medium-sized carpentry and trading company, a workplace learning scheme called 'fit at work' was presented, where heads of division support a 'lunch seminar' (C12). Encouraged by specific incidents such as customer claims, new products or the implementation of new processes, the employees present their learnings in front of the team. This was referred to as 'training a colleague'.

And that actually works very well because the people do not have pressure but it's simply that a colleague trains a colleague (...) and in fact he shows his colleagues what he does and how he does it and what he is thinking when doing it and so on. (C12)

The owner-manager emphasised that to him learning at work is much more effective than structured training. When asked how this manifests, he added that every employee gets enough time during work to learn online, read, and discuss with colleagues to improve performance.

Well, my opinion is that everyone, regardless of the position, fundamentally should have time to reflect in the first place during workhours (...) and if they do not at least invest, I

Table 2. Overview of findings in the modes of validation and interpellation.

Recognition as workplace pedagogy	Validation mode of recognition	Interpellation mode of recognition
Manifestation	Appraisals, qualification/competence matrices, performance observation	Problem solving group work, cross-departmental experiences, micro-teaching, rotation schemes, business trips, input systems
Performance orientation, adaptive learning	Strong with a tendency to reproduce uneven access to learning opportunities, learning to keep production running, learning to meet changing demands	Drives learning affordances and skills enactment explicitly, managers want learning for business purposes
Developmental orientation, developmental learning	Weak but possible with a strength-based view of staff development and awareness of the importance of support	Is rather implicit but learning through skills enactment is likely to have developmental consequences
Occupational orientation, occupational learning (CET)	Weak since not explicitly on the assessment/appraisal agenda but possible on worker's initiative	Could not be identified

would say between eight and ten percent of their work activities in performance development, then they will eventually lose. (C12)

Table 2 provides a brief summary of findings. In the next sections, the findings will be discussed in relation to orientations and learning affordances, the limitations of the study and the implications for practice and research.

Discussion

In what way does recognition afford learning?

To conceive of workplace RPL as a practice of workplace pedagogy was useful but, against the data, it requires qualification because arguably not all practices codified as recognition would classify as workplace pedagogy, according to Billett (2016). For instance, when supervisors ignore workers' feedback in appraisals, this certainly does not extend learning experiences. Settings in which learning and skills are validated, however, can theoretically afford learning in many ways. Just as with assessments in institutionalised education, there can be instances for validation of/for/as learning.

As concerns task allocation, workplace training, or CET discussed and agreed upon, or imposed in appraisals, there is a strong tendency towards the promotion of adaptive learning or – in a few companies – towards occupationally relevant learning. In this regard, the findings confirm that the purpose of workplace RPL is immediate skills utilisation rather than worker's mobility through the acquisition of credentials (Berglund and Andersson 2012). The findings also correspond with studies that identified an unequal access to measures for assessment and recognition (Böse and Münchhausen 2017; Cedefop 2014). It was clear that the contested character of appraisals negatively influences the learning opportunities afforded to the workers. Employers interests dominate, appraisals are not equally afforded to all workers, they sustain established power relations, or are viewed ambivalently by workers (Davies 2014; Strauch 2008).

Vignettes on the use of matrices imply that it might not be the matrix itself that renders the workers objects of workplace organisation and adaptive learning. More

importantly, if the manager's or supervisor's actions address individual strengths, or provide additional support, the learning opportunities emerging from the matrix usage could very well be extended.

Examples codified with the interpellation mode of recognition display the intention to afford learning opportunities. Workers' skills enactment in cross-departmental experiences, in problem solving group discussions, or in micro colleague-to-colleague teaching sessions is interpellated in a way that is performance driven but suggests a developmental character and potentially serves developmental learning rather than just adaptive learning. The vignettes indicated that workers' discretion in relation to tasks, task handling methods, and assessment of one's own task performance might be increased and, thus, the potential for developmental learning. This is arguably the case with the problem-solving group discussion and the micro colleague-to-colleague teaching sessions. In these two instances, recognition is not just the condition upon which one is afforded learning opportunities, but skills enactment in the situation is itself object to immediate assessment, acknowledgment, and recognition by managers, supervisors, and colleagues.

On the grounds of data gathered throughout the study, it is valid to say that those companies with a strong drive for innovation, creativity, or interdisciplinary knowledge, as well as those – mostly SMEs – with close cooperation and a management style based on family values are more prone to display a developmental orientation and a strength-based view in the mode of interpellation. The latter confirms that learning support in the SMEs is rather informal and contingent upon the SME's distinctive characteristics (Coetzer et al. 2022; Wijekuruppu, Coetzer, and Susomrith 2021).

Limitations

The findings must be assessed with the study's limitations in mind. Even though the regional partner facilitated access to the companies, it was challenging to acquire interviewees. The Covid pandemic certainly impacted the companies' willingness to participate as their immediate business needs were prioritised over an involvement in an education and training study. The purposeful sampling still allowed control of the diversity of companies. However, the small numbers of companies for each branch compromises generalisability as there are arguably marked differences concerning work organisation and, thus, also concerning purpose and support for learning and CET. Retrospectively, it would have been beneficial to focus on company size and reduce the diversity of branches in the sample to increase generalisability.

Statements from the interviewees are subjective and might have been presented in an idealised manner, potentially compromising internal validity and leaving it open for speculation whether they do what they say. Issues concerning internal validity also arise from the managers' reports of supervisor behaviour since they have first gone through an interpretation by the managers. Accounts by HR managers are valid as concerns the validation mode, as they are involved in the process, but restricted concerning the interpellation mode. Clarification and verification of statements was attempted through immediate checks during the interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2018). Interviews conducted with representatives from interest

organisations, a few second wave interviews, and the team-based coding served to reflect veracity, to counterbalance validity limitations, and to qualify the findings through member-check validation.

Implications for practice and research

The findings suggest that few managers and supervisors in the wood-processing industry are aware that recognition through validation and interpellation of learning and skills can promote developmental learning and skills development, strengthen organisational commitment and, thus, contribute to the company's desired performance. It is, therefore, indicated to provide them with leadership trainings or training on andragogical or perhaps even counselling knowledge to sensitise them in this regard. Moreover, they need to receive instruments and guidelines that would help them implement learning-rich and strength-based appraisals. Given that especially the SMEs do not have staff for human resource development (HRD), and managers or supervisors are busy with daily routine work, there is certainly a need for extended cooperation with CET providers, HRD, or RPL agencies so that workers can be afforded opportunities for non-formal learning, accreditation through RPL, or be trained, coached, or assessed at the workplace by an external specialist.

Regarding research, the notion that RPL is a form of retrospective assessment of learning outcomes and skills acquisition needs to be discussed critically. While research on traditional RPL measures has emphasised the emergence of new learning as a result of RPL (Andersson 2014), the workplace literature, which focuses mainly on assessment and measurement, has yet to address this issue seriously. Workplace learning research certainly needs to discuss assessment of informal learning more intensively (Wallo et al. 2020; Deutscher and Winther 2022).

In this respect, it must be acknowledged that within workplaces, work, recognition, and learning cannot be viewed as separate as this would ignore that they are situated within the social, everyday, goal-oriented practice of work (Coetzer et al. 2022; van Kleef 2012). The heuristic conceptual framework that was presented might be helpful in reframing workplace RPL and its relation to learning at work. It is not exhaustive, fully developed, nor rigorous, yet it serves its purpose well to address perhaps otherwise overlooked aspects of workplace RPL. The definitions are arguably not yet precise enough in terms of assessment and recognition theory, to comprehensively address affordances extended to the workers when they are provided with opportunities to participate in workplace activities.

In the light of 'the fact that (...) managerial influence becomes pedagogic, even if there is no learning intention' (Döös, Johansson, and Wilhelmson 2015), it needs to be assessed whether the notion of workplace pedagogy is useful and legitimate to address issues of workplace RPL and their relation to learning at work. Future research needs to further develop or empirically validate the heuristic conceptual framework. Work by Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris (2017) on 'RPL as a specialised pedagogy' or by Souto-Otero (2021) on covert and overt validation in higher education settings, might add further conceptual depth. Empirical investigation of when exactly recognition leads to adaptive, developmental, or occupational learning is demanded. In this regard, workers must be interviewed as well. In relation to the implications for practice, it might also be valuable

to address the question of whether individual values or rather contextual factors influence managers' and supervisors' practice of RPL.

Note

1. Weiß (2018) uses the German 'Adressierung', which translates as 'addressing'. The term 'addressing', however, is not appropriate for transporting Weiß' intention. I therefore use the terms 'interpellation' as a call upon someone and 'recognition' as the intersubjective acceptance of the content of this call as defined by Althusser and Butler (cited in Ikäheimo 2017).

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their generous and helpful comments. The author would also like to thank Una Ponsold, Philip Webersink, and Irem Zararsiz for their support during the interviews, transcription, and coding, and the Styrian Wood Cluster for enabling access to the companies. Many thanks to Eva Seidl and Chiara Biasin for feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Regional Government of Styria, Austria, Zukunftsfonds [grant number Valid Holz PN 1213].

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