

So what does “being qualified” really mean? A critical perspective on a growing trend of “credentialism” and its relevance in workplaces in 21st century

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Abstract

With the growing understanding and acceptance of the concepts surrounding informal and workplace learning, the meaning of the term “qualified” is becoming unclear. This is particularly relevant in complex work environments, where individual performance/competence may be less important than team, group or organisational performance/competence. “Qualified” can encompass individually or in combination, credentials, experience, performance, reputation and personal/team attributes /qualities and may be focused more on complexity of operations than individual knowledge and skills.

This paper explores old and new understandings around what it means to be qualified, reviews the growing trend toward “credentialism” and challenges conventional views and assessment methodologies and suggests more meaningful strategies for workplaces in 21st century.

Introduction

During a recent focus group at which engineers were exploring their qualification needs, an interesting trend emerged. The people in the early phases of their career were keen to have formal qualifications that credentialed their knowledge and expertise. The senior practitioners were not interested in such qualifications. They asserted that their reputations and performance track record were all that was required at this point of their careers. They were clear that these were the required qualifications at their level and were not interested in any formal credentials.

This scenario has been replicated in several other workplaces in which CIL has been undertaking recognition of current competence processes towards the award of formal national qualifications. “Why do we need pieces of paper, when everyone knows we can do the job?” has been a regular question. Why indeed? We started asking ourselves, colleagues and our clients what being qualified actually means.

As we contemplated this question, it seemed that with the increasing complexity of constantly changing work, training and education, and life patterns the answer is not an easy one, particularly given the push toward credentialing through national qualification frameworks (NQF). Over 17 countries now have such NQFs and there are discussions in process about establishing international qualifications frameworks such as a European Qualifications Framework.

When we asked the people we were working with, what “being qualified” meant to them, it soon became apparent that there were as many answers as people and these were predicated on the social constructions of the respondents in relation to the purposes of assessment/qualifications. These purposes signal strongly differing value bases in relation to technical, political or social expectations. For example:

1. A manager wants qualifications to affirm that a person is able to do a particular job and usually expects an innate transfer from one context to another (technical expectations).
2. The person who has the qualification often wants it as a passport and/or advantage in accessing good jobs (technical and social expectations). However it can also provide recognition of the knowledge and skills required for competent workplace performance that have often been gained through informal learning. In this case the qualification serves an emotional and non material purpose (social expectations).
3. The education system itself, for its own integrity, wants qualifications as a means of validating the comparability of its credentials – in essence credentialing of a credential system (political expectations).

All of the above have internal agendas that impose different imperatives on how qualifications and or credentialing systems are designed, managed and validated. All are legitimate. None are value free and all impose the need for trade offs in a never-ending cycle as they are simultaneously a function of social and cultural norms and precursor and/or reflection of emerging ones.

The other part of this question is, “why is this important?” The answer to this lies in the complex work environments and the rapidly changing perceptions and expectations around individual and team relationships, workplace learning, professional competence, and the ownership of teaching /learning and training.

Moreover, the increasing access to the formal acknowledgement of knowledge and skills in workplaces where this has never happened before has offered people tangible recognition that is transparent and portable. As a practitioner, one only has to see the expressions of delight that such awards engender in people who have never succeeded in formal education to see the benefits.

Thus with the growing focus on workplace learning and competence, ways in which people gain and assess qualifications are changing, and challenging former perceptions about learning, training and teaching. Indeed questions are also emerging as to the validity of many qualifications as a measure of competence. For many professional groups, whilst a formal qualification is a required entry point, measuring competency, and ensuring current competency, is more important in the long run, than a qualification.

Given these issues it is understandable that adult education and workplace learning and assessment practices have moved beyond the traditional model of teachers/trainers as purveyors of knowledge and learners as passive recipients. The concept of life long learning, whilst often paid lip service to in the past, is gaining new currency as technical advances outstrip “old” ways of imparting knowledge and building skills, and requirements for uptake of new knowledge becomes imperative for all in a skilled society, rather than a luxury for the intellectually and socially advantaged.

The nature of modern qualifications

In exploring the term “qualification” it became apparent that formal definitions were quite varied:

- The dictionary definition (Concise Oxford, 9th ed), is “...an accomplishment fitting a person for a position or purpose”.
- The New Zealand Qualifications Authority glossary term “*requirements for certification established by a recognised standards setting body or an education provider*” is the definition most widely understood when people are talking about qualifications.
- Department of Statistics official definition is:
 - A qualification is a formally recognised award for attainment resulting from a full-time (20 hours per week) learning course of at least three months, or from part-time study for an equivalent period of time or from on the job training.Formal recognition means that the qualification is:
 - awarded by a New Zealand secondary school or institution as defined by the Education Act; or
 - awarded under the auspices of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), i.e. by a registered qualifications provider; or
 - awarded by a publicly recognised New Zealand authority of a profession, academic discipline or trade; or
 - awarded by a New Zealand recognised overseas authority of a profession, academic discipline or trade.
 - Category of attainment is an indication of the amount and type of learning required to gain a qualification

There is also an implicit understanding by most tertiary (and secondary school) providers that a qualification follows a course of study that is directed towards a particular purpose. In some

instances, a qualification is a legal requirement for entry into a profession or career path. For instance, in health care or teaching, the law requires certain minimum qualifications. For many other qualifications, however, there is no particular defined career path, although standards for achievement may be defined.

What has tended to stay the same, however, is the perception of qualifications as being the pieces of paper we get at the end of a course, and without which we may as well not bother to apply for that desired job.... Or has it?

Understanding around the meaning of qualification from an informal survey of people at work seems to focus on a number of features. Our informants identified qualifications as

- a credential
- an accomplishment
- a passport
- recognition of knowledge and skills
- reputation

Furthermore they suggested qualifications:

- must be verifiable and trustworthy to have meaning
- should be comparable to other bodies of knowledge and practice
- must provide some base understanding of the relevant knowledge area
- can be formal or informal
- do not necessarily equal competence

They also noted that there are a range of benefits from, and reasons for obtaining qualifications for the individual, including:

- legal requirements
- developing a greater understanding of jobs
- to “get ahead” -by updating and improving skills, both important in terms of complexities of modern work patterns and skills required
- to gain respect with peers and managers
- development of ongoing learning patterns and reflective practices
- improved job performance
- greater willingness to change
- a chance to ‘catch up’ for early school leavers

and from an organisational point of view:

- legal compliance and managing risk (e.g. workplace health and safety compliance)
- acknowledging the value of employees
- motivating – ‘competence breeds competence’
- providing for succession planning
- building organisational skills and knowledge

However there was also feedback about the nature of qualifications in complex work environments, where individual performance/competence may be less important than team, group or organisational performance/competence. “Qualified” can encompass individually or in combination, credentials, experience, performance, reputation and personal/team attributes /qualities and may be focused more on complexity of operations than individual knowledge and skills.

Qualifications and competence

Implicit in the above discussion is also a significant difference between the understanding of “qualification” and “being qualified”

First and foremost was the issue around competence – “being qualified” implied “being competent”, although levels of competence were not necessarily defined. As noted, however, a qualification did not necessarily equal competence.

For example, a study in relation to the Early Childhood sector (Bowen-Clewley, Farley and Russell) suggested that while there was a (weak) correlation between qualification and competence in this profession; being competent was seen as far more important than having a qualification.

Secondly, “being qualified” was not necessarily a formal qualification process; many respondents spoke of being qualified in terms of their informal and on- job learning.

Thirdly, having a qualification did not necessarily mean that a person was qualified for a particular job, or that skills gained in a qualification were useful or transferable. There was nearly always an expectation of additional on job learning and personal development before this was the case.

Fourthly, the notion of “being qualified” in terms of staff selection is an interesting one. Do we rely on the references they received from their last job? Do we expect all staff to have a formal credential? What happens when staff have a qualification but are not competent? What happens when employers demand a qualification as a pre-requisite for a job, and the position suffers high turnover because the qualification is not the right fit? The “trade off” referred to above becomes increasingly apparent.

So how do we move from paper-based, institution based qualifications, to being qualified and competent in the workplace?

Informal / Workplace learning

Much workplace learning occurs inadvertently, in response to problems on the job and a need to do things differently, or external pressures putting jobs or industries at risk. (Ellinger, 2004).

Research on how people learn in the workplace demonstrates that what is taking place is situated learning. Studies of practitioners in several professions (Farmer, Buckmaster, and LeGrand 1992) cited in Kerka (1997) show that what helped them most in learning to deal with ill-defined, complex, or risky situations is having someone model how to understand and deal with the situations and guide their attempts to do so. Theorists such as Lave and Wenger (1991) extend this. They contend that learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning.

Activity it seems is a key factor in knowledge construction and participation in everyday work activities "forces" learners to access higher-order procedural and propositional knowledge. Repeated experience adds to their index of knowledge, and active engagement in routine problem solving reinforces learning. In the constructivist view, reinforcement is the internal satisfaction that results from making sense of new stimuli (adapting them to existing knowledge structures), in contrast to the behavioural approach of reinforcement from external sources.

These contentions are supported by the work of Albert Bandura (and others), who developed ‘social learning theory’. This theory stemmed from reinforcement theory and argues that learning occurs by continuous interaction between our behaviours, personal factors, and environmental forces and takes place by observing, imitating, and interacting with the social environment.

Social learning theory further argues that three cognitively related processes are important to explain behaviour. These are: symbolic processes, vicarious learning and self-control.

Symbolic processes include (in short) the use of; (a) imagined and (b) verbal symbols to process and retain the experiences offered through images and words. There is a cognitive component within the symbolic processes too – self efficacy or self belief – i.e. a belief in our ability to successfully complete a task or tasks, based on the words and images, (for the present).

Vicarious learning also understood as observational learning is when we use our abilities to learn new things (behaviours) through observing those new things and or assess outcomes that may result (from the observation). Closely related to observing is of course modelling where by copying others enables us to put into practice those things we have observed and which reinforce the image and verbal processes.

The final stage (in this model) is self control / regulation of self – here we control our own behaviours by setting standards (and provide consequences) for our own actions.

A very significant factor in social learning theory is that it can markedly assist in accelerating learning.

Social learning theory describes what happens in a workplace – the workplace places learning in a context, and it may happen without people being aware of it. It is making knowledge conscious, however, where the power of workplace learning lies.

Billett (1996) suggests that the workplace has a number of strengths as a learning environment:

- authentic, goal-directed activities;
- access to guidance--both close assistance from experts and "distant" observing and listening to other workers and the physical environment;
- everyday engagement in problem solving, which leads to indexing; and
- intrinsic reinforcement.

However, he also warns that there are also potential limitations to workplace settings:

- construction of inappropriate knowledge (e.g., racist or sexist attitudes, unsafe work practices);
- lack of sufficient or more challenging authentic activities;
- reluctance of experts to participate or restrictions on their assistance.

Ellinger's (2004) study points to several factors that impact on workplace learning in context of two major catalysts; external catalysts such as industry change, and internal catalysts, such as new technology, new processes and restructuring. Further, the contextual factors identified support research by others in the potential to achieve a successful learning environment.

Tannenbaum (cited in Denton, 2003) suggests that a successful learning organisation;

- provides people with opportunities to learn new things.
- assigns people to positions to stretch them.
- tolerates mistakes when someone is first learning a new task or skill.
- views new problems and work challenges as opportunities to develop people's skills.
- monitors to see that people continue to develop and learn throughout their careers.
- expects everyone, not just management, to solve problems and offer solutions.
- provides paid release time for employee development purposes.
- rewards employees for using what they have learned in training on their job.

The process of making workplace learning conscious, and valuing the skills that are developed, is a crucial part of workplace learning. It should be noted that qualifications, formal learning, and informal learning have their place in the workplace. Cofer, (2005) refers to a metaphor of formal learning as the bricks and informal learning as the mortar, *facilitating the acceptance and development of formal learning*. He also points out the dangers of informal learning in being too narrow or superficial, and the difficulty of accrediting it to formal qualifications. This leads to the

view that a planned approach to informal workplace learning can enhance capabilities and competence.

Thus, workplace learning can be a powerful tool in lowering some of the barriers to obtaining a qualification and/or becoming qualified, providing there are systems in place to ensure it is encouraged, formalised and recognised.

Communities of Practice

What is needed, then, is a model that takes workplace learning into a different level of engagement, and a candidate for this is the concept of communities of practice.

The idea of a community of practice is based on the argument that learning takes place better in groups, yet not just any group. Ten or a dozen people cannot be taken off the street, as it were, put into a room with all “mod cons” and expect them to learn something.

Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice along three dimensions:

- what it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually negotiated by its members
- how it functions – mutual engagement that bind members together in a social entity
- what capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles etc.) that members have developed over time.

He emphasises the aspect of participation, as opposed to official status as being the key to a community of practice, and that it defines itself in the “doing”, or practice, leading to many opportunities for learning through exposure to new ideas and people with greater or lesser levels of experience or involvement.

Various groups in organisations form a community of practice; these might include the R&D team, IT specialists, sale persons, and of course the management team.

This is where a very important principle can be found between formal and informal groups. A community of practice most usually does not have an agenda, or any specific deadline dates and often times doesn't even have goals, or objectives. Formal groups such as a formal meeting of the management team do have such administrative and necessary requirements. They do have goals, deadlines and agendas.

Steward, (1997) says the thing that draws community members together, is ‘enterprise’, or a common need to seek out and to learn more. Communities of practice are where ideas and first thoughts can be put forward without fear of retribution and away from the heavy hand of management. What better place to learn? The original team at Apple Computers operated with a pirate flag flying full mast above their location. Look what they achieved and learned on the way.

Relationships of the community of practice to an organisation can also vary depending on the level of involvement, from unrecognised by the organisation, to transformative, where expert knowledge is capable of redefining the environment and the direction of an organisation

Wenger states that communities of practice can share and diffuse tacit knowledge in an organisation, and this is facilitated through:

- Exchanging and interpreting information – through understanding what is relevant to communicate and how to present the information
- Retaining knowledge in living ways – even in dealing with routine tasks and processes, they can be responsive to local circumstances – unlike more formal systems (providing the *why* behind the *this is the way we do it*)
- Stewarding competencies – keeping the organisation at the cutting edge by discussing problems, solutions, new developments, and collaboration. People want to invest in forward-looking communities

- Providing homes for identities – this helps us sort what we pay attention to, regardless of the organisational structure we operate in. (a good example of this is a Maori interest group within a government department, which provides staff with a particular perspective and appropriate practice on provision of service that is culturally “comfortable” to all, and supports development and advancement of staff)

Further, Elek, Wilkins and Cairnduff (2003) relate the ideas of communities of practice and the collaborative learning it encourages to action learning, or translation of research and theory into collective integration of new ideas into work practice. Part of this process involves reflective practice, or critically examining past and present practice to facilitate development of future action.

Encouraging communities of practice within organisations can contribute to the development of learning of individuals, then, as well as leading to improvement of existing practices within an organisation.

One of the drawbacks of a community of practice is that it may not offer any formal accreditation, as it is based around learning through relationship. As with other types of informal or workplace learning, there is no guarantee that the learning is structured in a way that is meaningful to the greater needs of an organisation. This can be addressed through using formal mechanisms to assess and, where appropriate credential workplace learning

Assessing workplace learning

We would argue that using the mechanisms of recognising current competence can provide a process by which workplace learning can indeed be formalised.

As discussed above, workplace learning occurs through development of communities of practice, reflective practices, on- job courses and seminars, observation, mentoring and participation on work both routine and new, planned and structured workplace learning and through recognition that the tacit can be and indeed is required to be made explicit. The challenge, then is to promote an active learning environment within an organisation, and provide accreditation to the individuals involved so that they can gain recognition of the benefits of “being qualified” or competent and remain keen to continue learning in their jobs. In this way, credentials become equally available through academic and workplace based learning.

There are a number of approaches to assessing workplace learning and or competence. These range from assessment an on-going basis towards qualification for entry level learners to a process of recognition of current competence (RCC)¹, usually across a whole qualification for people who have experience and performance history in the workplace.

The former may be supported by formal off job training whilst the later is focused on actual performance/competence in a role or function. The processes of on-going assessment are well known.

The latter, RCC, is a formal assessment of a candidate’s performance in relation to specified standards or learning outcomes. However such assessment usually encompasses integrated performance and the process must be characterised by best practice elements. Devereux (1997) suggests, amongst others, the following key features of RCC assessment processes are:

- outcomes (results) are crucial, but often the way things are done is the outcome - thus, processes followed or utilised can be considered as assessment evidence
- assessment is holistic - not the ticking off of dozens of items on a checklist but lumping activities together
- candidates and assessors are equal partners in the evidence collection and consideration processes

¹ This concept is called by a number of names including RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) and APL (Assessment of Prior Learning).

- the assessment partners are required to think critically at all times
- assessment is a short process.

It is usual for the RCC to focus on actual performance, usually at higher levels of performance in the workplace and to require a collection of evidence approach to assessment. However the variable nature of the evidence in this model has created some challenges particularly in specifying evidence requirements. In these circumstances professional conversation offers a methodology whereby the purpose of the assessment and the interpretation of the results in a workplace context are integral to the actual assessment process.

What is professional conversation?

Professional conversation is an assessment method that has its origin in two social science methodologies – discourse analysis and behavioural interviewing. It is not, however, merely a different way of asking questions, but is a very powerful form of assessment that allows a candidate to demonstrate their understanding and give examples of their skills and attitudes. It is, essentially, an exchange between two equals, led by the candidate and supported by other types of evidence that have been collected by the candidate. Candidates' conversations are supported with documentation and verification.

Professional conversation is now an accepted assessment methodology for assessing workplace learning through the recognition of current competence both in New Zealand and overseas. It overcomes the difficulties of traditional assessment approaches to assessing high-level integrated performance, particularly in the professional sectors. It has the added advantages of self-reflection by the candidate and the identification of training needs to assist with the development of targeted training/bridging programmes. Whilst people using the methodology need to be trained and skilled, this is true of all assessment procedures.

Conclusion

It is clear that while formal learning and qualifications and workplace learning are complementary, there is a strong case for formal accreditation and recognition of workplace learning, as a measure of "being qualified". However, in some contexts, reputation is as powerful a qualification as any formalised credentialing and needs to be recognised as such and valued accordingly.

The different ways in which people achieve competence, or respect, or qualification to do their jobs, are both varied, and valid. It is critical that the credentialing industry that has emerged with the implementation of NQFs does not create a uniformity of approach that once again excludes the very people such systems are seeking to recognise and value.

There are significant benefits to individuals and organisations from considering alternative approaches to qualifications and "becoming qualified". As workplaces become more complex and the need for constant upskilling become more intense, mechanisms for providing learning opportunities and assessing workplace learning need to become less cumbersome and more learner focussed.

A word of warning however needs to be sounded. Attitudes to qualifications/credentials are determined by cultural and historical experiences. The growth of the availability of credentials is not always welcomed by those whose power and authority have been derived from such credentials in the past. There is a tendency by such groups to diminish the value of such credentials by challenging their very availability, the assessment methods used and credibility of the awarding authorities. Great care needs to be taken to ensure that the value of credentials is maintained by rigorous practice in their design and assessment and the availability of credentials to a wide range of people does not become its own poisoned chalice.

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