

# Can lifelong learning be revisited?

## An analysis of the potential contributions of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyse how lifelong learning can be enriched and develop a different perspective based on the experiment involving the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) conducted in France at the university level. The French system for the accreditation of prior experiential learning, called Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE), accredits prior learning from past experiences (professional and otherwise) and can lead to full university degrees or diplomas.

Studies on VAE in France in higher education show that a thorough analysis of prior experiential learning: (i) improves the quality of the experience as a potential source of skills; (ii) may provide ways to improve the candidate's experiential learning, and (iii) may help define the direction for lifelong learning. Therefore, recognition of this experiential learning could be a key catalyst for lifelong learning.

The findings support two main arguments advocating a central role for the recognition of prior experiential learning in the lifelong learning process: potentially individualized learning paths, personal empowerment and shorter training times; and a focus on experience - and not just professional experience - that is in tune with today's societal changes and the aspirations/constraints of each individual.

**Key words:** Lifelong learning - APEL - VAE - Higher education - France

### INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is recognized as having a vital role in employment and education policies. Although it represents different things in different countries depending on their orientations and cultures in terms of learning, the objective is clear: to develop knowledge and skills in a context of globalization, constant technological revolution and the emergence of a knowledge society (Centeno, 2011; Tuschling & Engemann, 2006).

Lifelong learning can take many forms in different countries: learning through courses, work-based learning, experience

gained through leisure activities and volunteer work, etc. Since the 1970-1980s, a new direction has emerged, namely the recognition of prior learning or prior experiential learning. This involves the recognition, validation and accreditation, in the form of a certificate or a degree, of knowledge and skills acquired primarily through work experience (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Duchemin & Hawley, 2010).

In this paper, we will analyze and discuss how accreditation of prior experiential learning can support and strengthen lifelong learning, in a university context, based on the French system of Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) established in 2002. An analysis of this system provides food for thought about the place of work experience in lifelong learning, the links between work experience, higher education and lifelong learning, and finally the meaning and organization of lifelong learning.

In the first section we present the research questions and problem statement. In the second section, we analyze the major issues that have emerged from the French VAE experience in higher education, focusing on three themes: guidance [accompagnement], accreditation and experience as a source of learning. In the third section, we discuss the recognition of experiential learning as a central and potentially defining component of lifelong learning.

### 1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the early 2000s, France introduced the Validation des acquis d'expérience program (VAE). Specifically, the Law for Social Modernisation (Loi de Modernisation Sociale) offered a new path to degrees and diplomas of all levels, along with initial training, alternance work-based training, and continuing education. This new possibility of obtaining a degree by the mere accreditation of professional and non-professional experiential learning was something of a revolution in France, due to the paramount importance of degrees, even if this notion dates back only to the early 1980s. Both in the French educational system and on the labour market, having a degree can open all doors. However, the law now states that professional and non-professional experience has the same

value as formal education and recognizes that knowledge and skills can be obtained otherwise than via the traditional education systems.

In this paper, we analyze and discuss lifelong learning in connection with the accreditation of prior experiential learning based on the VAE experiment conducted in France at the university level. Many APEL experiments in Europe in higher education underscore the importance of questioning the relationship between recognition of prior experiential learning and lifelong learning (Armsby et al., 2006; Ben Moussi-Le Gall, 2008; Ansart et al., 2010; Pinte, 2011). This research provides food for thought about (i) the place of work experience in lifelong learning; (ii) the links between work experience, higher education and lifelong learning; and (iii) the meaning and organization of lifelong learning. Based on these questions, we will analyze how the recognition of prior experiential learning can contribute to lifelong learning, and identify any limitations there may be in the system.

## **2. VAE IN FRANCE: FRAMEWORK, EMERGING ISSUES AND CONNECTION TO LIFELONG LEARNING**

### **Recognition of prior experience/learning and lifelong learning**

From the 1970s, a new concept appeared in the field of lifelong learning, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The US experimented with the idea of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) which led to the creation of the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning between 1974 and 1977 (Evans, 2000). The idea then spread to several English-speaking countries, under different names: APL (accreditation of prior learning) / APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning) in the UK; RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa; PLAR (prior learning assessment and recognition) in Canada, VAP (validation des acquis professionnels) and VAE (validation des acquis d'expérience) in France. Many European countries now offer or are experimenting with recognition of prior learning experience programmes, with four main objectives: officially accredit skills that are not formally recognized; improve employability in tight labour markets, compensate for the preference given to degree-holders in some countries, allow people without easy access to education to obtain degrees and certifications (Konrad, 2000; Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Duchemin & Hawley, 2010).

In Europe, in the past two decades, two countries have implemented major initiatives on the recognition of prior experiential learning. The UK, with the NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications) and France with the VAE, which is unique in that it allows individuals to obtain a full degree for most officially recognised degrees and diplomas (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Duchemin & Hawley, 2010; Charraud, 2010; Pougeta & Osborne 2004; Ansart et al., 2010). These innovative approaches are based on the recognition and assessment of prior experiential learning as an extension of or substitute for adult higher education (Trowler, 1996; Michelson, 1996; Andersson & Osman 2008).

### **The framework**

VAE is included in the French Labour Code (Article L.900-1) and Education Code (Article L.335-5) as an individual right to

the recognition of prior learning. Accreditation of prior experience had been possible through the Validation des Acquis Professionnels (VAP), established by the laws of 1985 and 1992 - but it was limited to accrediting levels or just part of the degree, and was based solely on professional experience.

VAE introduced a truly novel idea in French society, namely the idea of competence and its social uses in areas such as continuing education, corporate policies, business relations and initial training. This movement, initiated by employers, focuses on experience and achievements in the workplace, and was thought by some to delegitimize academic knowledge and academic certifications (Géhin & Auras, 2011).

The stated aim of VAE is to reduce social inequalities in education, allowing greater access to degrees, especially for those experiencing the most difficulty on the labour market. The lack of a degree is seen as a barrier in France, where some sort of diploma is required for virtually every job. VAE should remedy this issue and be an additional element supporting the idea of lifelong learning, which is taking hold among academics, the social partners and policy-makers in France, Europe and worldwide.

### **Emerging issues**

Various themes have emerged in light of the VAE experiment in France. We will discuss two issues involving the importance of experience: for the candidate, the issue of turning experience into experiential learning; for the certifying institution, the issue of identifying the milestones involved in the recognition and accreditation of experiential learning. We will focus our discussion on VAE at the university level.

#### **From experience to experiential learning, the key role of guidance**

Turning experience into experiential learning is primarily the responsibility of the VAE candidate. The candidate engages in a specific process, described by Ansart et al. (2010), as:

- taking his/her professional and personal career - and to some extent his own person - as an object of thought;
- developing an ability to analyse his/her own practices;
- combining this analysis with critical thinking in such a way as to project his/her experience in the future;
- formulating and formalizing in writing the analysis of his/her experiential learning;
- and developing a justified confidence in his/her experience and experiential learning.

The support of another person in this process seems indispensable. Some authors refer to the process as "co-production" (although the execution remains the responsibility of the candidate), or an externalisation of the experience. "The experience does not develop itself, one must question it and make it speak", to use the words of Pinte (2011: 109). Lainé (2005: 137) speaks of a "(...) dialectic between the explicit expression of pre-existing material and its re-development as it relates to the degree (...). Experiential learning is revealed above all when formalized and discussed with another person. This support that the candidate needs to carry out his/her VAE process involves guidance issues, which are widely reported in the literature. The role of the VAE adviser (accompagnateur)

requires further discussion in terms of his/her fields of action, the specific characteristics of this particular role and the skills and challenges involved (Mayen, 2004; Orly, 2004; Vial, 2004; Lainé, 2005; Pinte, 2008, Ben-Moussi Le Gall, 2008).

### **Accreditation issues for the certifying institution**

Once the experience has been transformed into experiential learning, it must be accredited. Let us examine accreditation from the standpoint of the certifying institution. There are two lessons to take away from the French VAE experiment: issues involving standards (for the degree or diploma being sought), juries, and deliverables.

Traditionally, a degree or diploma is obtained in France by satisfying a number of requirements generally involving tests on theory and sometimes practical work (e.g. internships), that correspond to the knowledge, levels and methods of evaluation for the degree. The standards for each degree were traditionally formulated primarily in terms of knowledge. In some cases, they were not formulated at all, and instead, the academic process and regulations defined the degree. With the development of VAE and the notion of skills, the need to create standards for a degree has become essential. These standards are expressed either in terms of knowledge or in terms of skills. Degree standards in terms of knowledge are proving to be more logical since they are in line with prevailing practices in education based on knowledge acquisition. Developing standards in terms of skills is difficult, as it breaks with the usual design of study programmes. What is the best way to translate knowledge acquisition into equivalent skills? VAE exacerbates the tensions and questions surrounding the development of degree standards, since it makes it essential to define degree courses in terms of skills. VAE is based on the development of skills through personal and professional experiences. Consequently, the VAE degree process seems more in line with standards based on skills rather than knowledge.

The differences between academic issues (based on knowledge) and professional issues (based on skills) are also found when it comes to the assessment panels, known as juries. Composed of an equal number of professionals and academics to ensure both an understanding of the candidate's professional knowledge and skills and an understanding of the degree level, the jury expresses these tensions. And, even before expressing a tension, it expresses a misunderstanding, a destabilization for both professionals and academics. VAE is a new process that breaks with the classic vision of what a diploma is, of what it is supposed to represent, and how it is granted. This vision is fairly common because everyone has attended school and has an image of what education and training are. Therefore, it is difficult for the members of these new juries to understand just what the evaluation criteria are. The academics must distance themselves from their usual knowledge assessment practices and identify in the experiential learning of the candidate the skills that match the knowledge required to obtain the degree. And the professionals must refrain from doing what they normally do: it is not a job interview, it is not an annual review, it is not a performance assessment. The jury must be explicitly aware of the evaluation criteria.

### **Experience as a source of learning**

We have seen that the French VAE system is based on the principle that experience is a source of learning. The underlying assumption raises three questions:

- What is experience in the practice of VAE?
- How is experience understood, knowing that it is polysemous because it is at once a product, a process and a trajectory?
- What is the conception of learning as it relates to experience?

The French legislation on VAE does not strictly speaking give a definition of experience. The educational sciences consider the notion of experience as polysemous and open to debate. French VAE holds that experience may be gained in a personal, professional or non-professional context, and that it takes three years to acquire. By not limiting experience to professional contexts, VAE echoes the positions of the US education philosopher Dewey, considered one of the founding fathers of thinking on experience and education. As early as the 1930s, he stated that experience is life itself. Volunteer, linguistic, sports and parenting experiences are recognized as contexts for skills development (Dewey, 1938).

VAE considers experience above all as a product. VAE candidates must review their past to extract their experiential learning and transform it into skills. VAE analyses a material: the candidates' past and prior experiences. It does not have an educational objective based on experience nor does it attempt to link experience to knowledge, as is often the case in an educational process. However, the literature emphasizes a process of building new learning for the candidate throughout the VAE process, and a result that goes far beyond the mere accreditation of a degree (Armsby et al., 2006; Ben Moussi-Le Gall, 2008; Ansart et al., 2010; Pinte, 2011).

It is also a true personal development process that involves:

- The construction of an identity: new interpretation and understanding of one's life path, the ability to talk and to define oneself based on one's skills, not just based on job positions or activities;
- The emergence of a certain self-confidence;
- A (better) ability to define one's preferences (through aptitudes), and needs in terms of skills and knowledge;
- Development of new capabilities and a new identity: that of a learner, explainer, and self-reflective individual (Ansart & Sanseau 2012, Ansart et al., 2010).

VAE, because it is itself "experience", is also a source of learning as well as being formative. Certain authors describe it as self-formative. Again, there are similarities with Dewey's approach, who, according to Balleux (1999: 275), believed that "experience acquires a cumulative and unending character that becomes meaningful in the life of the person, because he believes every experience should lead to desirable future experiences". One might think that reflecting on and analysing experience requires a focus on the past, but when seen as a formative process and not just a means to a degree, it also causes candidates to focus on their future.

### 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The lessons learned from VAE in France at the university level can provide valuable input for lifelong learning programs. French VAE recognizes and even officialises experience as a source of learning, training and education. Traditionally, lifelong learning refers essentially to the acquisition of additional knowledge. We are obviously dealing with adult learners and adults are known to have experience. This should be included as food for thought when considering knowledge taught.

Based on the VAE experiment in France at the university level, we can say that a thorough analysis of prior experience (i) improves the quality of the experience as a potential source of skills; (ii) may provide ways to improve the candidate's experiential learning, and (iii) may help define the direction for lifelong learning.

Therefore, this recognition of prior experiential learning - with the level of detail required by the French VAE system to obtain a degree or diploma - could be the gateway, the catalyst and the vector of lifelong learning. What factors justify this statement? What are the potential difficulties and limitations, and what precautions should be taken when implementing it?

#### **Recognition of prior experiential learning as a catalyst for lifelong learning**

Two main arguments support a position advocating a central role for the recognition of prior experiential learning in the lifelong learning process:

- Potentially individualized learning paths, personal empowerment and shorter training times;
- A focus on experience - and not just professional experience - that is in tune with today's societal changes and the aspirations/constraints of each individual.

The first category of arguments may seem unrelated to the candidate's concerns and interests. This is not the case, or at least not fully the case.

Let us first recall that the recognition of prior experiential learning is a source of learning and progress for the candidate. Thoroughly analyzing prior experience is very enriching. For candidates, analyzing life experiences involves transforming a material, creating a distance between themselves and their achievements, distinguishing the subject (themselves) from the object (the experience), which they tend to confuse when examining their experiences.

Recognition of prior experiential learning also specifically echoes the trends of societal needs in general (including businesses and government, and sometimes the individual himself/herself). The approach to adult education has gradually evolved into an individual responsibility for building skills and knowledge, learning, becoming employable and achieving a secure a life path.

Recognition of prior experiential learning may also meet the growing need to reduce training times. By recognizing prior learning, some training components could be revised or eliminated as irrelevant or already learned. The accreditation of

prior learning can thus promote individualized learning paths, leading to reduced training time and lower costs. This is obviously of interest to the Government and businesses. However, individuals would also benefit from shorter training times, which would allow them more time for work and personal activities, and enable them to embark on a program that would otherwise be impossible.

The second category of arguments is a feature of societal changes, namely the place of work in our lives. In France in 1800, men spent 70% of their lives working; in 1900, it was 50%, and just 20% in the early 2000s (Viard, 2002). This means that an individual's life experience is primarily personal and social rather than professional. This has had three major effects that relate to our discussion:

- The consideration of non-professional experience is inevitable;
- This trend toward social and personal activities can promote or discourage individual investment in lifelong learning: if the learning is considered a non-professional activity, it will benefit; however, if the learning is considered a professional activity, it may suffer;
- Recognizing non-professional experience can also raise the question of whether it should be taken further, by providing training programs that do not focus exclusively on knowledge for exclusively professional purposes.

#### **Difficulties and limitations**

Integrating a process of recognition of experiential learning in lifelong learning, or even, as we mentioned, making it a central element of the process, raises at least four potential difficulties, some of which came up during the French VAE experiment.

First, integrating the recognition of prior experiential learning in lifelong learning can be challenging for some groups of learners, especially poorly qualified learners whose experience is primarily technical or relational. They may find the process of expressing it in writing too difficult. They may also not see the value of the recognition of prior experiential learning, since they often undervalue their own experience. While lifelong learning may be of interest to them, it is likely that the development of their knowledge through a standard education process will seem more relevant and will lead to the recognition that they often find particularly lacking.

Second, it is a mistake to think that the recognition of prior experiential learning can be an inexpensive form of lifelong learning. The recognition of prior experiential learning is not necessarily less costly than education. One of the major cost components is the guidance provided. For recognition of prior experiential learning to deliver its full potential in the context of lifelong learning, and make individuals responsible for their life path, guidance is essential. And high quality guidance requires financial resources. Thus, while individualized learning pathways based on the recognition of prior experiential learning do reduce training times for the different stakeholders, they do not reduce the cost of lifelong learning for funders. Therefore, the arguments for introducing a process of recognition of prior experiential learning should not be based primarily on cost issues.

Third, one may ask whether it is necessary to link the recognition of experiential learning to a degree or diploma. This

question makes all the more sense in the Anglosphere where degrees and diplomas are much less important than in France. Linking the recognition of experiential learning to a degree or diploma has advantages and disadvantages.

Let us start with the disadvantages that have been widely seen by the French experiment: difficulties in the definition of standards, debate on the place of academic knowledge, difficulties in the definition of training programs and degrees, difficulties for candidates to immerse themselves in an approach based on standards of knowledge. Not linking prior experiential learning to a degree or diploma may avoid some of these difficulties. This might result in lower requirements in terms of the deliverable, which would probably be detrimental to the analysis of the experience and to the expected effects on individuals.

Our fourth and final point is the risk that lifelong learning may become overly "professionalized", through the introduction of recognition of prior experiential learning and its potentially central role. Recognition of experience could support an extreme position calling into question the value of academic knowledge. Indeed, despite the fact that non-professional experience is eligible for recognition of prior learning, it is quite possible that the areas developed will be centered primarily on professional experience.

The purpose of this paper was the study of a new way to get diploma in France in higher education by the recognition of the professional experience and the adaptability of such a new process in a North American country, Mexico. Our main conclusions are the followings:

- The transfer of educational models are risky considering historical, cultural and social differences but it appears that each country or educational system should be aware of the potential of foreign experiments in the field of education. Analyzing other practices is a good way to question itself and to improve a system, which most of the time is not revisited very often.
- It should be interesting to test in real situation the transfer of the APEL from France to Mexico, as it's started in 2008 for Canada. Mexico as Canada is part of the NAFTA and a continental approach of the APEL could be developed and then implemented for the three North American countries: USA, Canada and Mexico. It would also highlight the proximity and the fundamental differences of these countries social and educational systems. It also would help to progress in the context of the social and educational issues of the NAFTA.
- Finally, the purpose of this paper was also to focus on a European experiment which is quite recent, not yet very popular worldwide, but which could help many countries in the world and its education specialists to improve their way to recognize experiment in order to maximize their work force and offering their economy certified and recognized competences.

## CONCLUSION

Lifelong training is a concept that we believe must remain extremely vibrant and dynamic. It is a key factor for success in developing a knowledge society, which is an aim of many countries worldwide. In this paper, our goal is also to encourage

actors concerned with lifelong learning to look at the issues from a different perspective. Indeed, it seems safe to continue on the known and well-travelled path. History shows, however, that in the field of education and training, the risks of doing so are significant.

The French VAE shows how a system for recognising experience in areas such as work, labour unions, volunteer organizations, linguistic endeavours, etc. can provide food for thought and reconfigure the predominant approaches to lifelong learning. Turning experience into experiential learning has enormous potential as a source of learning. We have seen that experience is a source of learning and therefore it is formative. But it goes much further than that. This learning that brings forth a new actor from the individual is not neutral. Indeed, it goes far beyond an accreditation of knowledge and/or skills and learning. It is the process, the journey of the candidate who achieves a new vision of himself/herself that gives lifelong learning a different perspective.

For countries that have already established systems for the recognition of experiential learning, there seems to be a strong incentive to enhance or even reorient their approaches to lifelong learning. This would give them greater flexibility during periods of economic turmoil and high unemployment, and provide new resources in terms of information and knowledge for the future.

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