

Recognition and Validation of Competences: Process and Practices

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Abstract:

The recognition and validation of prior learning is an emergent training practice. In Portugal, since 2001, it has been possible to obtain an academic certification by valuing the formal, non-formal and informal learning. The current study was conducted with adults and trainers who were involved in the recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC). This research study, using qualitative research methods, analysed the way how these processes are developed and organised. This analysis was specially focused on three aspects: (i) the comprehension of how RVCC is developed; (ii) the role of learning in this process (iii) the exploration of the concept of competence. The findings suggested that validation was established through the resolution of standard activities created by the trainers.

Keywords: recognition, validation, certification, competence, life story

Over two thirds of Portuguese people, aged between 25 and 64, have not completed secondary education. From these, the youngest age group, 25 to 34 years old, is the one that presents the highest percentage (44%) of non completion of the secondary level (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OCDE], 2009). The association between low school levels and the growing transformations and demands caused by globalisation allows understanding the negative impact of low school levels in individual, organisational and social terms (Carneiro, 2009; Silvestre, 2003). Simultaneously, the learning experiences developed outside the formal systems of education/training have become an increasingly valued field of training practices (Aspin & Chapman, 2007; Barbosa, 2004).

The process of recognition and validation of acquired knowledge traces back to the post-war period, in the USA and in the 70's in Canada. Other countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, followed them by creating procedures of recognition. In these countries, the process of recognition and validation has been focused on the professional and academic field (higher education) (Pires, 2005). Portugal innovated by creating a process of recognition and validation of prior learning that gives access to school diplomas at the level of basic and secondary education. The designation of recognition of acquired competences comprises those certifications that, while not framing within the field of official validations, can be recognised as learning experiences regardless their origin (Liétard, 2001). The recognition is oriented towards the personal analysis of the acquired knowledge and

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competences, according to personal, social, training or professional objectives, aiming at one's enhancement. Conversely, validation refers to the institutional side of validation, which means the recognition from the others (Pires, 2005). Usually, trainers are responsible for this validation. If the adult does not have all the competences validated, he/she can attend up to 50 hours of additional training, in order to acquire or to improve competences at fault. Different actors participate in this process. At least, one who carries the learning experiences and seeks recognition, and another one who validates them. In Portugal, after recognition and validation, there is certification. The certification involves the adult's presentation of the portfolio for about 30 minutes and its discussion with the trainers who guided the process and an external evaluator. The professional of recognition and validation of competences and trainers also play an important role in RVCC. The professional of recognition and validation of competences monitors and assists adults in building portfolios, in close liaison with the trainers, through specialised biographical methodologies, such as the balance of competences and the life stories. Trainers recognize adults' competences through the explanation of their life experience and problem-solving. They also validate competences by comparing adults' skills to the referentials.

The foundation of a system of RVCC in Portugal

The creation of a system of RVCC in Portugal was supported on several grounds. Above all, there is the belief that many adults carry more competences than their education attainment shows, as well as the scenery of low school levels of Portuguese adults. Additionally, it was established the possibility to articulate the different learning contexts (informal, non-formal and formal) and to attribute equal value to them (Gomes, 2006). In Portugal, the first practices of RVCC emerged in 2001, when the net of centres of recognition, validation and certification of competences (CRVCC) was established. The mission of these centres was to admit and guide adults over 18 years old who had not completed the ninth school year, for processes of RVCC. These centres aimed at improving levels of school certification and of professional qualification. This was fulfilled within a perspective of lifelong learning. This process of RVCC has enabled the access to certifications of B1 (first cycle), B2 (second cycle) and B3 (third cycle) levels^{1*}, on the basis of the four areas presented in the referential of the key-competences of adult education and training from the National Agency for Adult Education and Training (Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos [ANEFA], 2001). The four areas which structure this referential are: (i) Language and Communication; (ii) Mathematic for Life; (iii) Technologies of Information and Communication and; (iv) Citizenship and Employability.

Subsequently, in 2006 the first Centres of New Opportunities (CNOs) emerged and replaced the CRVCCs. There are some differences between the CRVCC and the CNO. The CRVCC guided adults exclusively to the process of RVCC, while the adults attending the CNO have the chance to choose from a range of training practices

^{1*} Currently, in Portugal, the minimum compulsory education is nine years. Basic education is organised into three cycles. The first cycle consists of four years, the second cycle of two years, and the third cycle of three years

(RVCC, Education and Training of Adults, System of Learning, Technologic Specialisation). The CRVCCs could only certify the basic education, whereas the CNOs certify both basic and secondary education. The school certification of secondary level became possible through the approval of the Key-Competences Reference Framework for Adult Education and Training of Secondary Level (Direcção-Geral de Formação Vocacional [DGFV], 2006). The three areas which structure this referential are: (i) Culture, Language and Communication; (ii) Society, Technology and Science; and (iii) Citizenship and Professionalism. After publication of the National Qualifications Catalogue (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação [ANQ], 2007), professional certification became possible for some professions.

The research studies that have been carried out on the practice of RVCC in Portugal (Carneiro, 2009; Centro de Interdisciplinar de Estudos Económicos [CIDECE], 2004, 2007) are mainly focused on the analysis of its impact in personal, social and organisational terms. However, scientific evidence on how these processes were developed is scarce. These studies provided data on the evolution of unemployment and employment rates; the effect of certification in career progression; the effect of certification in studies pursuance, among others. In these studies, the statistics presented were globally positive concerning involvement in training, especially at the level of the effective personal gains. This is useful information, however, it tells us little about how these training processes were developed, as well as the way they were organized.

Conceptual matrix of the methodological elements that support RVCC

In Portugal, in the conceptual matrix of the methodological elements that support the development of processes of RVCC, the option was found for: (i) life story; (ii) balance of competences (from the French "bilan des compétences"); and (iii) learning reflexive portfolio (Gomes, 2006).

In historical terms, the emergence of life stories appreciation is explained by two reasons: The evolution of the methods and the principles of scientific creation and the emergence of an "unconscious logic of collective memory" (Clapier-Valladon, Poirier & Raybaut, 1995, p. 9). In processes of RVCC the (self) biographical approach is being used as a mean to collect information of self and hetero-discovery and of clarification of competences (Gomes, 2006). Clapier-Valladon, Poirier and Raybaut (1995) have emphasised that only may be called (self) biographies those that are freely produced by the individual himself, without the participation of any intermediary. Josso (2002) has stressed that in the construction of the life story, the author is the subject, since it is him/her who reflects upon his/her temporal whole, his/her acquired competences and, in consequence, he/she considers his/her projection in the future, that is, in all his/her past and present existence. Therefore, life story portrays individuality and reveals a certain "social lived" (Clapier-Valladon et al., 1995, p. 45). Thus, life story turns out to be a process of discovery and not of confirmation, enabling the construction of a new look upon reality, being the adult in the process of training seen as an "active and reflective learner" (Falzon, 2007, p. 598).

In the beginning of the 80's, the concept of competence was welcomed by fields of training and employment, its contribution being emphasised for the inversion of the scenario of workers' low qualifications, by the

displacement of the intervention of the qualification towards the competence (Santos, 2004; Stroobants, 1993, 2006). The notion of competence is difficult to define, not only because it is integrated in several domains, but above all because of its sensitivity to the subject, to the moment and to the context. Pastré (2002) defined the competent person as someone that knows how to do and that understands and analyses what he/she does. According to Jobert (2002), the competence has lost its trace of stability of theoretical knowledge and of prescription. Although the notion of competence is object of varying definitions, according to the several authors, it is possible to find some stability regarding some features (Bellier, 2002; Pastré, 2002; Pires, 2005; Stroobants, 1993). One aspect refers to the articulation between competence and action. The competence is dependent from the activity and it is shown from it. Another trait refers to the connection with the context; hence, it is associated to a given professional situation, being contingent to it. A third attribute regards the fact that the competence integrates diverse sorts of knowledge. Bellier (2002) has stressed that this knowledge is not convened in action in a merely cumulative logic, but rather through construction and integration.

In Portugal, the whole process of recognition and validation of prior learning is oriented towards the identification and clarification of competences. The competences to explicit and to evidence are those that are stably defined in the referential. However, Stroobants (2006) has emphasised that the possibility of anticipating the learning product does not allow anticipating the process itself. The referentials of competences, by formulating competences, provide references for the analysis, but they do not clarify the process through which the daily experiences give rise to the evidence of the concepts in the referential. Due to the difficulty in understanding this translation, referentials may reduce this process to an odd and vague identification of competences. In this sense, Gomes (2006) has stressed the need for a conceptual domain and for a careful involvement on the part of this process's mediators. Boterf (2002) has claimed the recovery of an original meaning for the referentials, resembling them to music scores to be read and interpreted by each one, being the competent answer specific to each person and situation. Considering the multidimensional and multifunctional nature of the competences that characterise professional activities (Falzon, 2007), it may be important to understand how referentials integrate such a richness.

In this research, we tried to understand how the national system of RVCC has been developed in Portugal. The analysis was built up from two points of view: the trainers' – and the work they developed in order to articulate referentials and life paths – and the adult's – who sought the training offer. Finally, we have studied the methodologies used in the development of these processes. The conceptions of competence that are on the basis of the recognition and validation devices have also been analysed.

The main research questions may be synthesised as follows: How is the process of recognition and validation developed?; Which is the role of learning in this process?; Which conceptions of competence are on the basis of this process?

Method

Participants

Participated in this study 17 adult men ($M_{age} = 36.2$, age range: 20-56 years) who were attending the RVCC's process and nine trainers (seven women, two men, $M_{age} = 32.7$, age range: 25-41 years). The 17 adults were organised into two groups: one took place in a company of metalwork (group A) and the other one was developed in a company of car components (group B). The option for a comparative analysis is traditional in Work Psychology and reflects the aim of understanding the specificities of each group.

Group A included 13 men aged between 20 and 56 years ($M = 36.2$; $SD = 12.1$), all of whom worked in the metal field, ranging in work experience from one year to 38 years ($M = 21.8$; $SD = 11.4$); and lived in the surroundings of Porto. Four participants (30%) completed the first cycle and nine (70%) concluded the second cycle. The participants dropped out of school early, ranging in duration from leaving school from six years to 43 years ($M = 22.2$; $SD = 11.7$). Regarding the reasons for giving up school, two adults quit because of bad results; three participants pointed the need to work in order to support the family economically; six referred the disinterest for school and two adults wanted to be financially independent from their parents. Group B integrated four men aged between 41 and 55 years ($M = 49.8$; $SD = 6.1$), all of whom were workers of a car components' company, ranging in work experience from 22 year to 32 years ($M = 27.5$; $SD = 4.1$); and lived in the surroundings of Aveiro. One participant completed the first cycle and three concluded the second cycle. The participants dropped out of school early, ranging in duration from leaving school from 19 years to 44 years ($M = 22.2$; $SD = 11.7$). All the participants of this group gave up school due to the economic disadvantage of their families and the need to support them financially.

Data collection

Data were collected through observations in RVCCs sessions and interviews due to the richness of information provided by real context. All the recognition sessions of the two groups were observed. During all sessions speeches from adults and trainers were registered. The trainer's interview contemplated several areas of RVCC development in companies. The interview included questions about adult involvement in training and the methodologies used in RVCC processes, comparing the processes developed in companies and in centres of New Opportunities. The interview was recorded after trainer's authorization. In addition to observation and trainer's interview, a document review was conducted on adults' files, including training certificates, and a background interview. Supplemental data were also collected through field notes, activities developed during sessions and adults' life stories.

Procedure

Regarding the procedures for selecting participants, initially a contact with a CNO was established. The responsible for the centre received an explanation of the study and authorised it. Then the responsible identified two companies interested in participating in the study – a company from elements of group A and a company from

elements of group B. Although we did not participate in the groups formation, we were informed about the selection criteria: (i) to have professional and personal experience; and (ii) to have not completed the third cycle. The observation days were established by the RVCC's schedule. All the sessions occurred off the working hours, immediately after leaving work (group A) and before start working (group B). The first contact between researchers and participants was established in the first session of each group. During observation, notes were taken and subsequently organised and summarised. Subsequently, an interpretative analysis was used to identify general themes that united two groups' different sessions. This methodology was used to give meaning to the diverse data. NVivo8 was used to analyse the data. The audio recording tape from the interview was also totally transcribed and analysed using NVivo8.

Results

In this study 36 hours of RVCC sessions were observed. In group A, 20 hours of training sessions were observed, whereas group B's observation totalised 16 hours of observation. Each session lasted 120 minutes. All the sessions, which were guided by the trainers, were organised into four moments: (i) trainer's presentation (name and academic background); (ii) adult's presentation (name, age and occupation); (iii) presentation of correspondent area of the referential of the key-competences of adults education and training (ANEFA, 2001); and (iv) development of activities. From the 13 elements who finished recognition, 15% (N = 2) decided to participate in RVCC because they did not know how long this opportunity would be available; 8% (N = 1) participated because their work colleagues also decided to take part in the process; 31% (N = 4) wanted to finish the third cycle; 23% (N = 3) wanted to learn; 8% (N = 1) took the opportunity because it was developed in his company and 15% (N = 2) were searching for personal valorisation through RVCC. Although the process was developed at the participants' workplace, none of the trainers had access to information about the participants' work before it started.

Four common topics were found in the data: (a) Concept of Competence and Life Story; (b) Attitude towards learning; and (c) Activities Set. Regarding the concept of competence and life story, in none of the sessions adults were told what a competence or life story was. Adults were encouraged by the trainers to collect evidences of competences in their portfolio ("For example, you should put in your portfolio academic and training certifications; water and light bills [...]. These are evidence of competences."). In spite of the frequent use of the word competence, adults admitted that at times they did not know what a competence was ("Sometimes I don't know what competences are."). Trainers gave examples of daily life to exemplify the concept of competence ("For example, being responsible, to use mobile phone is being competent"; "You'll understand that waking up, going to sleep and working are competences."). There was also an attempt to focus on the importance of competences developed throughout life, especially the ones developed through personal experience ("As you might easily understand, we don't only develop skills at work, but also throughout personal life [...]. What is important is to understand that we daily develop new skills"). Interplay between competences and life story was frequently established. Adults were encouraged to write a life story, which reflected life events and correspondent competences developed ("When you begin to write your life

story you must follow this approach – associate life events to competences.”). Adults were told that the four areas of the referential guided the competences which must be evident in portfolio and life story, however these areas should be interrelated (“This isn’t a diary, the experiences must be demonstrated in four areas; this cannot be segmented, it must be interconnected; more than describing events, you need to reflect upon them; high school; driving license; troops.”).

Adults and trainers frequently referred to learning. Trainers recurrently explained that adults weren’t supposed to learn anything new from the process of RVCC, but just to recognise what they have already learnt in the past (“[...] you will learn nothing with this process but recognise what you have already learned in varied contexts (professional, personal, social). This is not a course, nor training.”; “You will just recognise what you have learnt through lifelong experience”). In both groups formal learning language was rejected (“[...] homework isn’t for adults.”; “Here we don’t have tests or worksheets [...]”), although at times there was a return to it (“Those who don’t finish here the activities, will finish them at home.”; “We’ll have homework.”). Adults expressed surprise by the role of learning in the process (“I thought that we were going to learn or at least update our knowledge. I thought we were going to learn subjects.”; “I thought we were going to learn more through his process. I thought it wasn’t like this.”).

Activities created by the trainers were used to guide the process, to explicit competences and to structure the writing of the life story (“These activities will help you write your life story.”; “This activity will help you identify your qualities, your flaws – they can help you start writing your life story.”).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to contribute to the understanding of how the RVCC process is organised and developed. The overall goal was to understand how adults’ life paths are portrayed in the referential, while attending to the notion of competence and to the use of life story. Generally, the interplay between adults’ life experiences and referential was established through the resolution of standard activities created by the trainers.

Contrarily to what has been suggested by several authors (Clot & Prot, 2003; Pastré, 2002; Santos & Lacomblez, 2007) work situations do not seem to be used as a support for training and for the recognition of competences. Both processes were developed at the participants’ workplace, however, trainers did not have access to information about the participants’ work before it started. Additionally, during the process less attention was paid to work, including professional background or current work activity. The competences developed through work seemed to be underestimated, comparatively to the ones developed exclusively through personal life. This element strengthens the conclusions of a previous study developed by Carneiro (2009), which referred that the gains were more personal than professional. It was unexpected to identify an ambivalent attitude towards learning. Although RVCC is supported on the valorisation of learning regardless its origin (Aspin & Chapman, 2007; Barbosa, 2004; Liétard, 2001), formal learning seemed to be consecutively denied. Simultaneously, trainers used formal learning language and praxis. The frequency of RVCC was denied to be a moment of learning, but only recognition of prior learning.

The interplay between adults' life experiences and referential seemed to be developed by standard activities created by the trainers. Additionally, the personal analysis developed in the recognition phase (Pires, 2005) appears to be mainly supported on these activities. Trainers recognise adults' competences, not through the explanation of their life experiences, but through the resolution of these activities. Adults do not seem to understand the translation of their life paths into the competences required in the referential. The referential was used in a unique direction, from its scientific concepts to adults' life paths. This means that the referential does not seem to be used with flexibility (Boterf, 2002) and that adult life experiences have to fit the referential, and not the reverse. Through this process, adults appear to have the chance of formalising their competences, although they did not seem to understand which life experiences were related to the competences required in the referential. Consequently, the referential may have contributed to the reduction of adults' prior learning, and resignation to a vague identification of competences.

Several authors (Clapier-Valladon et al., 1995; Falzon, 2007; Josso, 2002) emphasised the importance of the autonomous development of the life story. Data suggested that the life story was not freely produced by adults because trainers intermediate its construction. Consequently, the understanding of the training offer did not seem to be developed by the adult's approach (Falzon, 2007; Josso, 2002), but rather by the trainer's point of view. In RVCC processes, the life story seemed to be used as a device of competence collection and explanation. The life story, in these processes, does not portrait individuality (Clapier-Valladon et al, 1995), but the competences required in the referential. Thus, construction of a life story does not seem to be a process of discovery and active learning (Falzon, 2007), but rather confrontation with a referential. In spite of the importance of the notion of competence in RVCC, both trainers and adults had difficulty in the application of this notion. Competence was frequently associated to action, while its relation to understanding, intentionality and reflection seemed to be ignored. Additionally, the connection between competence and context also seemed to be disregarded.

Although further work is required in order to gain a more complete understanding of how the RVCC process is organised and developed, our findings seem to indicate that the interplay between life paths and referential is established by activities. The current study provides further information about the use of the life story as a methodological support of the process. A triangle became visible during this study: the adult with his/her life experiences; the trainer's speech (which considers the possibility of free explanation of competences by adults) and the practice of the trainer (who guided the process in a standardised way and not anchored in the adults' everyday life). The current study emphasised the need for a conceptual domain on the part of this process's mediators.

The current study presents limitations regarding the sampling construction. Our sample consisted entirely of men, who worked in the metal and car industry. A sample with a different gender composition and that would include other types of professionals may have resulted in different findings. Because all adults in the study sought third cycle certification, further research could analyse possible differences between basic and secondary level in RVCC processes. The groups which processes were analysed belong to the same CNO. Additional research could also include groups from different CNO. This study, as well as previous studies developed, did not contribute to the

comprehension of cases of failure, such as dropouts. An important way in which this study could be extended is by comparing scholar and professional certification through RVCC. The findings also suggest that additional research is needed to address other issues related to the RVCC process, such as its duration, methodological support and the employer's role. Further research could also include other data collection strategies, such as the focus group interview, for example, to have access to trainer's representations towards structural elements of the RVCC.

The current study emphasised the need for a conceptual definition of structural elements of the RVCC and a conceptual domain on the part of this process's mediators. The growing importance attributed to school certification by the RVCC might be accompanied by the consolidation of methodologies that support this process.

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