

Instruments of trainers' activity: the use of referentials in processes of recognition and validation of prior learning^I

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Abstract. In Portugal, recognition and validation of prior learning has emerged as an important training practice. Since 2001, it has been possible to obtain an academic certification by valuing learning, regardless of its origin. The current study was conducted with trainers and adults who were involved in processes of recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC). This research study, using qualitative research methods, described and tried to develop the comprehension of the use of referentials as instruments of trainers' activity. This analysis focused especially on three aspects: (i) the organization and development of RVCC processes; (ii) trainers' role in these processes; and (iii) the use of a referential as an instrument of activity. The findings suggested that the referential used in these processes mediates trainers' activity, functioning as competences identification guides. After an initial appropriation, trainers reconceptualize the referential by creating their own grids. There is clear variability in the use of this guiding document. Trainers revealed ambivalence towards the autonomy that they have in their work activity. Although they assess the opportunity to individually and freely create their work instruments in a positive way, they also lack a collective support and validation.

Keywords: trainers, instruments, usages of referentials, activity

1. Introduction

In Portugal the recognition and validation of prior learning has been mostly used as a way for adults to get academic certification. Anyone who is over eighteen and has not completed compulsory schooling (of nine years), or even the secondary level (of 12 years), can ask for academic certification through the recognition of prior learning. In Portugal, since 2001, it has been possible to obtain an academic certificate, through a process of recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC). Since 2006 it has also been possible to achieve professional certification through the same process. The RVCC process, both academic and professional, is developed by Centers of New Opportunities (CNOs) which are

located in different structures (schools, companies, private and public associations and others).

Trainers, whose main instrument of activity is the referential, play a central role in these processes because of their inevitable participation in all the phases of the process, among other aspects. This study, carried out in the context of a doctoral research, tried to describe and understand the use of referentials as instruments of trainers' activity. The analysis started by the comprehension of how RVCC processes are organized and developed. This comprehension was enriched by the contact with the real context through the observation of two processes. The three stages of this process – recognition, validation and certification, as well as the trainers' prearranged role in each phase have been described in this study. Moreover, the use

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of the referential as an instrument of (each) trainer's activity has also been analyzed. The main research questions may be summarized as follows: What is the role of a referential in RVCC processes?; How do trainers use this referential?; and, Is the use of the referential by trainers stable?

2. The RVCC process in Portugal

RVCC has been a widespread training practice in many countries which share the same principles and practices. However, in Portugal this process has many singularities, such as: the nature of the referential used, the trainers' role and the type of certification achieved.

2.1. The foundation of a RVCC system in Portugal

The RVCC system was established in a context of low school levels among the Portuguese population and a huge gap between our schooling rates and the European average. In 1999, when the establishment of this system was being prepared, 67% of the Portuguese population had concluded pre-primary and primary education, contrasting with 33% who had finished higher levels of education [8]. These data indicated that, by that time, Portugal was the second OCDE country with the lowest educational attainment [8]. The influence of other countries, which had already developed this system, also seemed to play an important role in the foundation of the Portuguese RVCC system. The process of recognition and validation 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 [5]. In these nations, this process has focused on the professional and academic field (higher education) [2]. Portugal innovated by creating an RVCC process that gives access to school diplomas at the basic and secondary education levels [5].

Since its beginning, and as shown in Figure 1, the RVCC process is organized in three stages - recognition, validation and certification. CNOs range of action is not limited to the centre itself, as its intervention also reaches companies which decide to give their workers the opportunity to recognize and certificate the skills they have acquired. In these cases, although the process is developed at the partici-

pants' workplace, the procedure and methodology are the same.

In Portugal, the conceptual matrix of the methodological elements which support the development of the RVCC processes are the following: life story; balance of competences (from the French "bilan des compétences"); and learning reflexive portfolio [6]. The recognition is oriented towards adults' personal analysis of prior learning, according to personal, social, training or professional objectives, aiming at one's enhancement [5]. This analysis is promoted in individual and collective sessions and portrayed in an individual portfolio. Validation is related to the analysis of the portfolio by the team and consists in the comparison between the competences shown and the ones required by the referential. Whenever the competences shown by an adult in recognition phase are insufficient, he/she can attend up to 50 hours of additional training, in order to acquire or to improve competences he/she lacks. This process is concluded when the expected competences are shown, through recognition or/and additional training, and this work is presented to a jury of certification (composed of the adult, the team and one element recognized by the Ministry of Education) [1].

2.2. The use of a referential as an instrument of trainers' activity

The team developing these processes is composed of: a director, a coordinator, administrative support technician, trainers and RVCC professionals. The number of administrative support technicians, trainers and RVCC professionals of each centre depends on its targets (the more ambitious the targets are, the higher the financing of each centre is and the more numerous the teams are). To become a trainer of RVCC processes, the person has to possess qualification for teaching according to the areas of the referential and respecting the rules of the ministry of education. Whenever possible the trainer should have professional experience in education and training of adults. In these processes trainers are supposed to support the development of the recognition of competences and guide the preparation of a portfolio. In collaboration with the RVCC professional, each trainer validates the competences acquired by the trainee and is in charge of the organization and development of additional training. Trainers, as well as other members of the team, take part in certification juries [7].

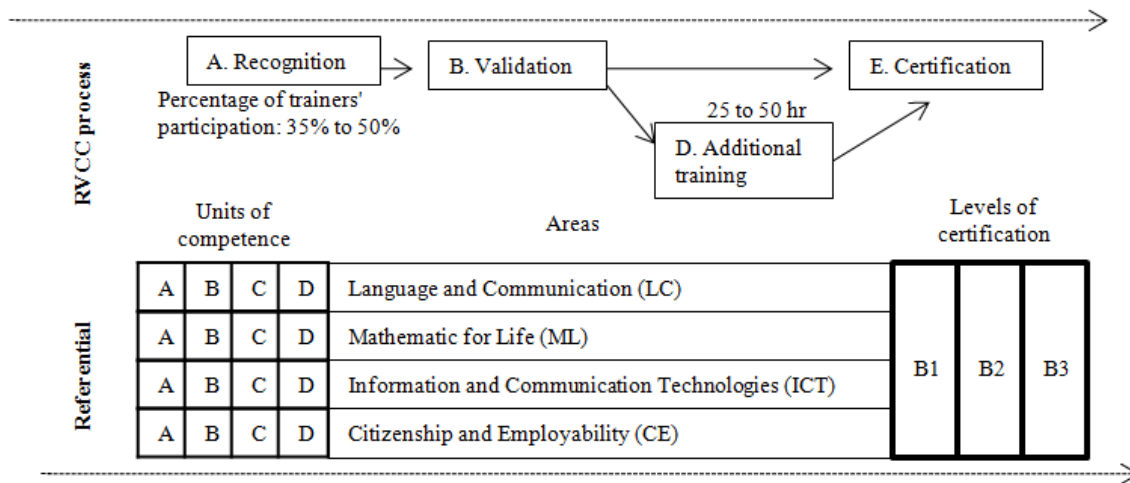


Figure 1 - Axes of RVCC processes [1] and the referential structure [3]

The referential use which was analyzed in this research was the *referential of the key-competences of adult education and training from the National Agency for Adult Education and Training* [3]. This referential is used for RVCC processes, and other training offers, at a basic level. As represented in Figure 1, this referential is structured in four areas, divided in four units of competence, and gives access to three levels of certification. For example, ML area for the B3 level is divided in the following units of competences: (a) to interpret, organize, analyze and communicate information using mathematical processes and procedures; (b) to use Mathematics to analyze and solve problems and problematic situations; (c) to comprehend and use mathematical connections in life contexts, and (d) to ratiocinate mathematically, both inductively and deductively. The level achieved by each adult depends on his/her initial educational attainment and the competences shown during the RVCC process. This process enables the access to certifications of B1 (equivalent to the first cycle attained at formal education, representing four years of education), B2 (second cycle and six years of education) and B3 (third cycle and nine years of education) levels. The referential is used to identify the skills, presented as scientific concepts, which each adult must demonstrate to achieve certification.

Other studies [4] indicated that, both trainers and adults seem to characterize this process as complex, since, among other aspects it is centered on competences (considering the difficulty of identifying and evaluating them separately from the context where they are used). Teams find it difficult to identify adults' competences accurately and in order to over-

come this complexity, they try to diversify the sources of information and the sort of instruments used [4].

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The academic RVCC processes of two groups were observed. One of the processes took place in a company of car components (group A) and the other one (group B) was developed in a metal work company. Both companies were located in the North of Portugal. The two groups were comprised of 17 adult men ($Age = 39,4$, $SD = 12,4$, age range: 20-56 years). Ten ML trainers (one man, nine women, $Age = 33,8$, $SD = 5,37$, age range: 28-46 years), ranging in work experience in these processes from 1 to 5 years ($M = 3,5$; $SD = 1,27$), also participated in this study. The option for ML, and the subsequent contact with ML trainers was based on the aim of understanding the use of the referential, regarding the most concrete and tangible examples. Concerning the trainers' academic degree, 50% were graduated in Mathematics (teaching of Mathematics) and the rest in Engineering.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through the observation of RVCC sessions, due to the richness of information provided by real context. In this study 47 hours of RVCC sessions were observed. In group A, the ob-

servations of 23 hours of training sessions occurred between April and December 2010, whereas group B's observation took place between March and December 2010 with a total of 24 hours. Each session lasted 120 minutes. All recognition sessions with the RVCC professional and ML trainers' sessions (of recognition and additional training) were observed. In every session there was a record of the speeches from both adults and trainers. The need to understand and ground some of the data collected in real context, revealed the necessity of developing collective interviews with other trainers. Five collective interviews, each one with a pair of trainers from different CNOs, were conducted from April to July 2011. In addition to the observation of sessions and trainers' interviews, supplementary data were also collected by means of field notes, activities developed during sessions and an analysis of adults' files.

3.3. Procedure

As far as the procedure for selecting participants is concerned, first an initial contact with a CNO was established and then the study was explained and authorized. The two companies were selected by the CNOs. The observation days were established by the RVCC schedule. During observation, notes were taken and subsequently organized and summarized. In this study, from the observation of the processes (A and B) were only included data related to the use of the referential. The selection of collective interviews' elements was established by the contact with different CNOs. Four from the five interviews were conducted with trainers from different centers. Subsequently, an interpretative analysis was used to give meaning to the diverse data.

4. Results

Regarding the research goal of describing and understanding the use of a referential as an instrument of trainers' activity, three common topics were found.

4.1. The referential and its reconceptualization

All the process, from recognition to certification, is represented in Figure 2. Collective interviews led to the conclusion that trainers had an initial contact with the referential, when they first became trainers, by reading it. However, they quickly created their own grids, as their version of the referential. From

this moment on, this instrument, in its original version was not used anymore. The new documents and instruments created as reconceptualization of the referential were then considered by the trainers as essential to develop their activity because they found it incomprehensible to adults and unintelligible in its original version. The collective interviews and the observation of groups A and B revealed that these new instruments vary according to the different trainers. The grids, which are a personal synthesis of what they consider to be the main areas of the referential and a reduced version of the document (what adults need to demonstrate to achieve validation and certification), were very different from one another. The analysis of the grids of ten trainers confirmed that they required dissimilar competences and in different number. For example and as indicated in Figure 2, to validate MLA (unit A of Mathematic for Life at B3 level) EC9 trainer requires the demonstration of all the competences required in the referential, while EC7 trainer requires 63% of them. Regarding MLD, EC10 trainer demands 83% of the competences and EC8 trainer none of them, because this trainer considered that this area is diluted in the other three. Trainers made these grids individually or, in four cases, counted with the professional experience of other ML trainers of the centre.

4.2. The RVCC process and the use of the referential

In groups A and B the processes were developed in the following sequence: recognition (trainers participated in 50% of the sessions), validation, additional training and certification. However, through collective interviews it was possible to understand that 50% of the trainers who participated in the collective interviews described and developed the process in different sequences. For example, some trainers began the process with additional training, instead of beginning, as supposed, with recognition.

Concerning the recognition axis, all the trainers identified the need to clarify the competences that each adult must demonstrate, according to their personal grids. Different instruments and strategies were used to communicate this adapted version of the referential: (a) selection of scientific concepts of the referential; (b) selection of life events; (c) selection of scientific concepts related to life events. Whenever trainers selected only scientific concepts of the referential (type A), they communicated using only the concepts of the referential. There were also trainers (type B) who shared the referential by selecting life

events, which they considered to be related to the scientific concepts and adults' lives. In this case, the scientific concepts were submerged in the examples of life events. In addition, there were trainers whose communication of the referential was based on both scientific concepts and life events. For example, "To read and interpret graphs" is one of the competences required. In type A, the trainer asked the adults to demonstrate this competence using the language of the referential and in type B, adults were asked to bring water and light bills so that in training sessions they could interpret the consumption graphs. Finally, both strategies were used when trainers asked for the bills and explained that it was important to demonstrate the competence (type C). In groups A and B trainers used type C strategy to recognize adults' competences, even though the life events, exposed in worksheets, seemed to be unconnected to adults' professional or personal background. Although these

two processes were developed at participants' workplace, and not in the CNO, trainers did not get to know participants' work and work situations did not seem to be used as a support for training and for the recognition of competences.

Consequently, validation procedures were varied though all trainers identified the same goal to this phase - the comparison between the competences shown by each adult during recognition and the competences required in the referential. Regarding the example of ML, some trainers only validated competences shown exclusively by the autonomous domain of scientific mathematical skills (type D) while others did it by the demonstration of the competence rooted in life events (type E). There were also trainers who accepted the demonstration of competences by examples of life events, in spite of having to return to those competences and associate them to the corresponding scientific concepts (type F).

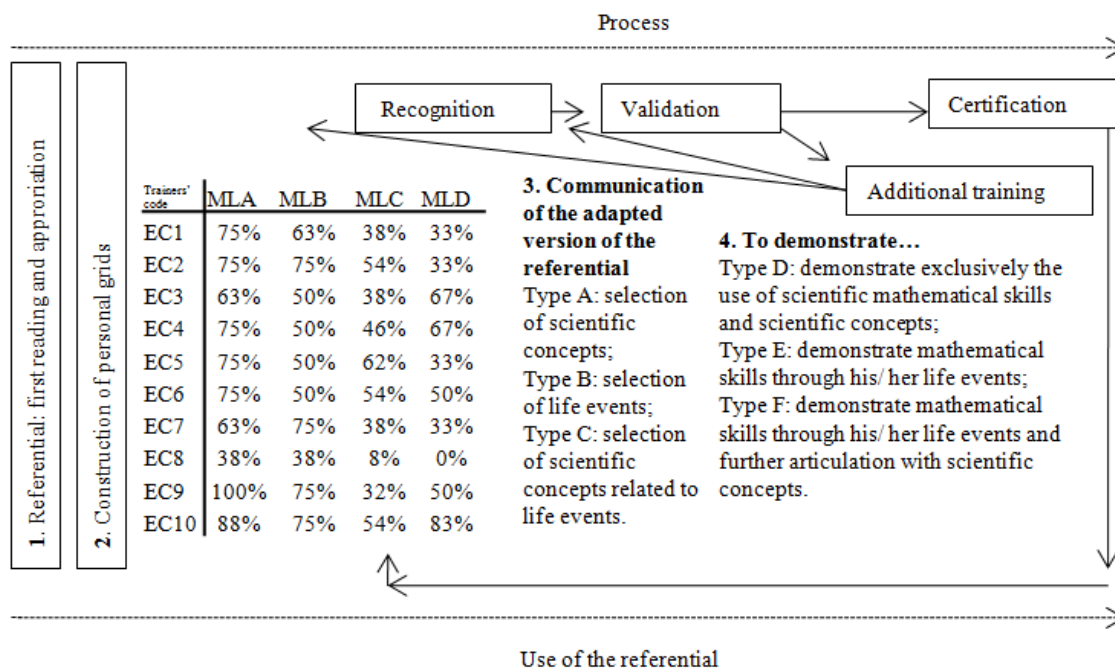


Figure 2 - The usages of the referential

4.3. The use of the referential and its stability

The development of the process and the use of the referential, and its reconceptualized types (as indicated in Figure 2) showed clear variability. Trainers referred that they needed to create their own instruments because they considered the referential incomprehensible to the adults. Trainers felt the need to

create their own grids as they believed that the referential lacked objectivity and they needed instruments to help them in their activity. The personal grids were created to guide their activity and to search for objectivity. Trainers had total autonomy to create these instruments, although referred the absence of collective validation and support.

5. Discussion

5.1. *The referential as an instrument of activity*

Two of the research questions that oriented this study were – “What is the role of a referential in RVCC processes?” and “How do trainers use this referential?”. The referential was used as a guide to identify competences, although trainers did not use it in the original version. This instrument is used during the whole process: in the recognition stage to define the competences which must be demonstrated; in the validation stage because trainers must compare the competences shown by the adults to the ones required by the referential; in additional training as it guides the competences which must be developed or improved; and, finally, in certification phase the referential is used to guarantee that all the competences were demonstrated. Reinforcing the conclusion of another study, the interplay between life paths and the referential seemed to be established by activities [4]. Furthermore, the connection between competence and context also seemed to be disregarded. Although the two processes were developed at trainee’s workplace, trainers did not analyze or got to know their work. Trainers used the same activities and worksheets in different contexts and, consequently, in different groups.

The referential, as an instrument of activity, seemed also to be a constraint because it defined and limited the competences that trainers must consider. Trainers needed to create new instruments, to reduce the subjectivity of the process and the vagueness caused by the absence of orientation in the development of their work. That is, also, why trainers demonstrated ambivalence towards the autonomy that they have in their work activity.

5.2. *Professional reconstruction of the trainers' role*

The current study emphasized the need for a reconstruction of the trainers’ role. From a trainer in an RVCC process it is expected that he/she is able to identify adults’ competences which were developed in varied contexts and situations, more than communicate or teach a sum of contents. Trainers seemed to have difficulty in identifying the acquired competences from in adults’ life paths, maybe because the methodologies that support the process are not consolidate. Many trainers, as verified in this study, are teachers who were prepared to explain contents and then evaluate them. Trainers in RVCC processes had

to reformulate their way of being teachers, in order to become trainers and to be able to: validate adults’ competences in RVCC processes; develop additional training and identify life events which promote the recognition of adults’ competences. Even the trainers who have worked in professional training, need to adapt and develop their skills because: the principles are different (they have to recognize what trainees already know); they need to use other methodologies (life story, portfolio, balance of competences); they have to work in a different structures and belong to a different collective of work. Trainers also have to obey the predicted duration of the process, so that the centre can achieve its targets. However, trainers cannot control this duration because it depends on the development of the process by each adult.

6. Conclusion

Although further work is required to gain a more complete understanding of how trainers use this referential, the findings contributed to describe and understand the use of referentials as instruments of trainers’ activity. RVCC process is organized in three axis (recognition, validation and certification), which are differently developed by the trainers. Contrarily to what was predicted, some trainers started the process with additional training and, then, began recognition. The way recognition was developed showed clear variability among the different trainers. The findings seem to indicate that the referential mediate trainers’ activity, functioning as a guide to identify competences.

The current study provides further information about the use of referentials in RVCC processes. The referential, which is the most important trainers’ instrument, seems to consist in an amount of academic concepts, which both adults and trainers seem to have difficulty in articulating with their professional, personal and social trajectories. The use of it by each trainer evolves along with the experience. After an initial appropriation, trainers reconceptualize it by creating their own grids with the criteria which they considered, as the most important to the validation of an area. The need to readapt and built new instruments to guide activity is caused by trainers’ need to reduce the vagueness of the process and increase objectivity in recognition. Trainers create new instruments because they seem to feel disorientation and look for accuracy. This referential seems also to

be a constraint because it defines what trainers must consider and recognize.

This research emphasized that trainers have an important leeway in the use of the referential, which seems to correspond to the need of giving attention to the singularities of the participants in these processes. Nevertheless, sometimes trainers do not feel comfortable with this flexibility as they do not know and do not have contact with other trainers' options and procedures.

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