

Coordination meetings as a means of fostering collective learning among jury members involved in the validation of prior learning (VPL)

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Abstract. Jury members involved in the validation of prior learning (VPL) are supposed to draw parallels between the skills the candidate has acquired and the criteria established in relation to the frame of reference. The recalibration of criteria is a form of collective work. During meetings, jury members face common obstacles together. They try to sidestep the prescribed work and then collectively take ownership of it. Collective meetings allow responsibilities to be shared. This contrast between the imposition of extremely narrow prescribed work and the possibility of modifying prescribed work during collective meetings, sets a dialogic process in motion. Such a process gives jury members the opportunity to evolve in their practices. This ensures that jury members are always in a position to reflect on their own methods of action.

Keywords: validation of prior learning, work-based analysis, prescribed work, actual work, dialogic tool, judgment

1. Introduction

Validation of prior learning (VPL) is a new path to obtaining a qualification in Switzerland, where the five main paths are general education, combined school/work-based vocational education and training (dual VET), higher education, professional education and training (PET), and continuing education and training (CET). The principle behind VPL is to provide candidates with an opportunity to obtain a formal qualification without having to complete formal education and training. This is achieved by submitting details of what one has learnt from one's professional experience to a jury (i.e. in the form of an assessment portfolio). The content of the candidate's assessment portfolio must relate to the qualification sought. This is a way of recognising that one learns not just at school, and that personal experience, particularly professional experience, is a means by which knowledge and skills are acquired and developed. In principle, the VPL procedure is based on the premise that there are two different types of knowledge, two different learning environments and two different means of learning. Beneath this premise lies the desire to give formal legitimacy to professional

learning, to practical skills and to knowledge acquired on the job. The VPL procedure therefore requires all of the participants to draw parallels between different types and sources of learning.

For our doctoral research (Cortessis, 2010), we examined the development of a VPL procedure following enactment of a new Federal Act in 2004, which formally introduced VPL in Switzerland for the very first time. The VPL procedure in question was intended to validate the competences of teachers who had at least five years of experience. Upon completion of the VPL procedure, successful candidates were to be awarded an Advanced Federal PET Diploma in Pedagogy. Since this VPL procedure did not exist prior to 2004, the VPL managers responsible for developing the VPL procedure had to think of ways to train their own teachers for the new tasks that they would have to carry out as VPL jury members. Since these new tasks were very different from the knowledge verification practices that teachers were used to, the VPL managers decided that the VPL procedure should include meetings that would enable collective analysis and discussion of how VPL jury members performed their assessment work. The VPL managers felt that these meetings would help

jury members to learn from their experiences with the VPL procedure. At the same time, their feedback could be used to subsequently adapt the VPL procedure as well as the content of training given to future VPL jury members.

The VPL procedure therefore gradually evolved over time to its current, more or less stable, state. One of the aims of the coordination meetings among VPL jury members was to identify the common intentions and values that could serve as the basis for standardisation of this new VPL procedure. The jury members felt that because the VPL procedure was not yet set in stone, “there was no common framework in place to guide and support their work” (Mayeux, Mayen, Savoyant, 2006). As a result, the jury members had to decide for themselves what methods should be used for VPL assessments. In 2004, therefore, for lack of training, know-how and a stable legislative framework, the VPL jury members had to contribute to the definition of tasks, objectives and limitations while taking part in a VPL procedure that was still gradually taking shape. The coordination meetings arranged after their work enabled VPL jury members to more objectively observe their new practices and review their experiences with VPL assessments.

2. Research context

The research field is a VPL procedure designed in Switzerland for VET teachers. The candidates must have at least five years of experience in VET teaching. They are asked to first compile an assessment portfolio in which they describe their experience, they are then observed by two VPL jury members while they teach a lesson in front of their students. The candidates are then invited to interviews to ex-

plain what they did during their lesson. VPL jury members have to draw parallels between the skills the candidate has acquired and a criteria grid comprised of twenty nine criteria. This grid was drawn up on the basis of a competency profile, which is the main frame of reference for the desired qualification. Within the VPL jury, subjective impressions are initially formed by each jury member. These impressions are first discussed in pairs (since jury members work in pairs) and then collectively (when all of the jury members gather for discussion) So, VPL jury members are asked to do the following tasks: first, to draw a parallel between the experience acquired by the candidates and the frame of reference (i.e. the competency profile); second, to establish a collective professional judgment; and finally, to make a public statement regarding the decision to grant or deny validation.

In order to develop the assessment competences of jury members, the VPL managers decided that jury members should meet not only during the collective assessment meeting but also after each and every step in the assessment process. In other words, jury members met after having examined the candidates' assessment portfolios, again after observing the lesson taught by the candidates, again after the interview with the candidate and finally for the final assessment to grant or deny validation. During coordination meetings, the VPL managers asked VPL jury members to explain in detail how they went about assessing each of the candidates. This gave the VPL jury members the opportunity to collectively analyse and judge their assessment practices. Jury members were able to discuss the difficulties they encountered trying to fill in the criteria grid. These meetings were a means of regulating, imparting and creating knowledge while working.

3. Theoretical bases and methodology

The research pursues the following aims: first, to examine the manner in which jury members establish their individual judgment of candidates as well as the arguments they put forward in support of these judgments; second, to determine the extent to which VPL juries use the established frame of reference (i.e. the competency profile) when establishing their assessments; finally, to observe how the meetings created by the VPL managers help jury members to learn how to perform their new tasks, to become comfortable with them as well as to adjust and develop their activities.

The research is based on the clinical method espoused by Y. Clot (2001, 2008), Lhuillier (2006), Cifali (2006) and the work-based analysis (Leplat & Hoc, 1983) with its famous distinction between prescribed work and actual work. Prescribed work is what the person is supposed to do according to instructions and requirements. Actual work is what the person does in reality. Job analysis has largely demonstrated that there is a gap between prescribed work and actual work. Because worker always interprets and adapts the general rules in accordance with the individual and concrete situation.

According to the prescribed work for the VPL procedure, jury members meet in specified times and places for the purpose of analysing and regulating their practices. Basing ourselves on research in the area of ergonomics, we wanted to know how jury members would deal with the formidable gap between the official frame of reference (criteria grid comprised of twenty-nine criteria) and the individual characteristics of each candidate to be assessed. We therefore observed how jury members tried to reach a common understanding of the criteria and their use. We were interested in the strategies that jury members used to enter their judgement in the various categories established in the criteria grid. Our area of investigation and our material are comprised of audio recordings and transcriptions of the collective coordination meetings. These meetings were attended by the twelve VPL jury members and the VPL managers.

4. Results

Our analysis of verbal interactions between jury members during scheduled coordination meetings enabled us to examine the manner in which jury members analyse their own activities. While one might have expected the procedure to be a purely technical and inert exercise of judging candidates on the basis of established criteria, the VPL procedure turned out to be quite active and interactive, with meetings that often created strong tensions. As a result, it was impossible for jury members to mechanically fill in the criteria grid. We therefore attempted to identify typical processes, key points and critical transitions.

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4.1. Extract of the criteria grid

1	Updating one's knowledge and know-how in the teaching field
2	Adapting one's actions to suit the established objectives
3	Designing assessment methods
4	Working in a group
5	Becoming aware of different learning strategies

This grid was drawn up on the basis of the competency profile, which is the main frame of reference for the desired qualification. This criteria grid imposes a form of argumentation. In fact, its structure is intended to prevent jury members from forming a general impression. In reality, the exact opposite occurs: the jury members form an initial general impression very quickly and then try to rationalise and justify their impressions retrospectively by pointing out the strong and weak points.

The coordination meetings enable jury members to mention such difficulties as we see in the following

extract: “After reading it, we all had the same reaction: the portfolio looks very good. But each time we tried to use the criteria grid, we thought: it isn’t proven. We were looking for points because we instinctively thought that the candidate had adopted the right approach but afterwards we couldn’t manage to match the candidate’s performance with the criteria listed in the grid. I still find that there is a discrepancy between the outcome determined by the criteria grid and our feeling.” (Jury member during the coordination meeting)

This extract shows that initially, a first impression is felt on the spot, Dejours (2003) calls this a “judgment of beauty” made by the professional. Afterwards, the objective is to translate that first impression and the results provided by the criteria grid. The jury then feel the need to convey their general impression through the grid.

Jury member: “Yet, once again I wonder if I should penalise the anticipation. Should I penalise? And if so, what penalty and how often? And the anticipation, was it serious enough for me to touch 1 or 4 criteria and remove one point each time or should it be mentioned in the criteria because it is something that really needs to be corrected? (coordination meeting)

In this new extract VPL jury members fear that adhering to a criteria grid, where each criterion is judged separately without forming a general impression, could “penalise” candidates. Jury members therefore attempt to prevent any negatively marked criteria from influencing other criteria. A negative point or positive point must not have a disproportionate influence upon the general impression that jury members have regarding the candidate. So there is a dichotomy between the general and spontaneous impression that jury members have at the outset and the judgment that would be established on the basis of individual criteria. As a result, the jury members initial general impression becomes the main but unofficial, frame of the reference of the judgment. The criteria grid serves just as a tool to justify and rationalise the initial and general judgement.

Thanks to the collective discussions in the coordination meetings, jury members became aware of certain implicit criteria such as: the fact that they would tend to “forgive” candidates who failed to perform well during the practical scenarios but who recognise their mistakes and professional weaknesses. They would tend to favour the candidates able to use a reflective approach, using coherent argumentation, and the jury members’ vocabulary. Instead of the candidate’s actual skills, it’s the image that candidates pro-

jected (self-presentation), the manner in which the candidate-orator presents and positions himself, the eloquence of the orator that jury remember most. The jury even discovers thanks to the discussions that the candidate’s level of education and training who should normally have no impact in a VPL procedure was indeed take into account. The jury members realised that they felt more reassured when a candidate has already undergone previous education and training (the candidates who were the most successful had trained as psychologists, physicians or teachers. Those who were the least successful had a more basic qualification. Finally, the jury discovered that they would compare candidates with one another very frequently.

The candidates who were the most successful were also the ones who were able to use a reflective approach, using coherent argumentation and adopt the jury members’ vocabulary. Instead of the candidate’s actual skills, it was the image that candidates projected that jury remembered most!

5. Discussion

5.1. Type area

In the examined VPL procedure, the manner in which work was organised made it easier for jury members to analyse their own work. The ability to analyse one’s work is therefore considered to be a means of developing the competences of jury members. Along the same line, forming a judgement within the framework of a VPL procedure is a true working activity. Jury members took advantage of their coordination meetings to share the complex reasoning that they had to go through to relieve the tension between two forms of judgement. They admitted that they had to improvise to reconcile overall judgements and more specific ones.

Rationalising and justifying one’s own decision retrospectively during the coordination meetings on the basis of the criteria grid requires a great deal of energy from the VPL jury. However, such meetings and the collective work on the criteria grid is interesting precisely because it is a “dialogic tool” that allows the jury members to gain an overview of the situation. For this to work, jury members need to have a “dialogue” with the grid and break free from the grid and its rigidity. Although VPL managers have imposed a grid of 29 criteria, they have left a certain margin of manoeuvre to jury members. Dur-

ing coordination meetings, they let the jury members “recalibrate” the grid on the basis of shared views, for example” Do VPL criteria grids penalise candidates or do they enable recognition of their strengths”.

This dual circumstance of imposing extremely narrow prescribed work and giving jury members the opportunity to modify the prescribed work during collective meetings, sets a dialogic process in motion. Such a process offers the potential of enabling jury members to evolve in their practices. This ensures that jury members are always in a position to reflect on their own methods of action.

The recalibration of criteria is a form of collective resistance. During coordination meetings, jury members face common obstacles together. They try to sidestep the prescribed work and then collectively take ownership of it. Collective meetings allow responsibilities to be shared. During coordination meetings, the group gives each jury member the strength to uphold their values and take responsibility for their decisions. The decision is felt to be objectively motivated because it expresses a standard, a value that is collectively internalised. The objective of this collective coordination is to approach new VPL tasks as an active and collective re-elaboration of what VPL should be.

From the moment they seek to implement the VPL procedure, VPL jury members already modified the prescribed work. Although the wording of the grid criteria remains the same, the meaning ascribed to the criteria gradually shifts until the criteria no longer mean what they did initially. VPL criteria are subjected to endless interpretations. Even if the same criterion is used, the many possible interpretations of this criterion end up changing the original meaning. And yet, and the jury members are perfectly aware of this, interpretations cannot be made in isolation. For reasons of equity, all recipients of the validation decision must be informed of the inexplicit interpretations given to each criterion. Otherwise, those candidates who are able to decipher the unwritten rules of VPL as well as jury member expectations will be at an advantage during the VPL procedure.

To conclude, our research shows that the collective story of the jury is not only one of adherence to the official criteria grid and frame of reference. First and foremost, it is a story of how jury members worked together to produce a parallel frame of reference through the collective analysis of their own activities. In fact, our research shows how jury members “discussed their values” and “re-standardised their activities” (Schwartz & Durrive, 2009). The prescribed work for the observed VPL procedure led to collec-

tive discussions on the differences between the judgement of jury members and the judgement determined exclusively on the basis of the criteria set forth in the criteria grid. Thanks to the structure of the VPL procedure, unconscious, tacit criteria and values of professionals could be mentioned, accepted and imparted to future VPL jury members.

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