Training & Employment

ASSESSING WORK EXPERIENCE
Between Certification Standards and Individual Career Paths

Certification is no longer considered solely as the outcome of a training programme; it also helps to bring out the different forms of knowledge acquired "on the job" through the work experience itself. This situation in turn raises the question of how evaluation criteria are developped. In order to be reliable, equitable and relevant, they must be at once general and adapted to the specific competences they assess. The paradox is clear: the use of general norms to assess informal knowledge arising from experiences that are necessarily individual.

The certification of vocational skills and competences occupies an increasing place in debates on labour-force training and management. The industrial restructurings of the 1970s brought out the role of the diploma as a catalyst in the retraining and subsequent mobility of employees. Today it is recognised that competences may be developed in a variety of ways, and it is admitted more easily than in the past that knowledge can be acquired outside of training programmes. It is thus reasonable to organise objective procedures to identify informally acquired experience outside of the context that has produced it. While certification was traditionally associated with diplomas as the outcome of a training programme, different forms of accrediting acquired experience are now being implemented or tested. These cover a fairly large spectrum, from the "accreditation" by computer of very specific knowledge (see Box page 2) to the obtaining of national diplomas, and in many cases, they require the creation of new forms of evaluation.

During an examination following a training course, the candidate is asked to utilise knowledge corresponding to what he or she has been taught. Unlike the knowledge received in the course of a formalised training programme, however, informally acquired experience, coming out of the work situation, is not developed in function of a programme or an educational curriculum; it is not expected to be structured and available in view of an evaluation. Candidates for an accreditation of past experience are thus required to take stock of their personal itineraries in order to reactivate or recast the elements that correspond to the qualification they seek

to obtain, and this process calls for considerable intellectual reorganisation. If we wish to guarantee the access of heterogeneous categories of publics to identical certifications, there is a need for creating assessment situations that take these differences into account while guaranteeing that the candidates are of an equivalent level. The preparation "of" the assessment is thus just as important as, but more complex than and different from the preparation "for" the assessment. Indeed, it varies according to what is to be assessed. And in all cases, the certifying body must guarantee that the assessment is reliable and valid and that what has been observed can be both generalised and reproduced in similar situations.

Where the verification of very specific know-how is concerned, candidates are generally given a practical test allowing them to demonstrate their technical know-how or ability. This mechanism corresponds to the practical test which, in mechanics for example, consists of fabricating a piece with precisely defined features within predetermined margins of tolerance. The result of the assessment thus depends on the quality of the object realised and the respect of the technical specifications. Where the verification of theoretical knowledge is involved, a wider variety of methods are used, ranging from a written or oral test to multiple-choice questions or a computer evaluation. But the quality of the performance and the reliability of its assessment still remain somewhat random. We are conscious of the limits of written and oral tests which, depending on the discipline, leave more or less room for subjectivity and chance. This raises the question of what the assessment

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actually brings out, what it attests to and what degree of prediction it authorises. Certain promoters of evaluation software attempt to get beyond these limits by developing mechanisms that record the processes used to resolve the problems posed. In the case of the certification of a vocational qualification combining different kinds of knowledge and know-how, the main difficulty lies in defining the criteria and forms of assessment that take this complex interaction into account.

FROM WORK ACTIVITY TO ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

In order to be valid, the assessment must be carried out in function of predetermined criteria that fulfill several functions: announcing and fixing the objectives to be attained, structuring the assessors' observations but also, in the case of the accreditation of informally acquired experience, guiding the candidates in presenting their own experience. The criteria are expressed in the form of standards that specify what is to be achieved and under what conditions. These standards are agreements involving different players: the body that elaborates the criteria and grants the certification, the assessor who implements the criteria, the candidate for assessment and, on the labour market, the users of the acquired experience thus certified.

Certification standards for vocational skills and competences refer back to work activities but attempt to remain independent of a given form of organisation. Developping occupational standards for assessment purposes thus consists of seeking common denominators between varied situations, an exercise that becomes even more difficult when the certifications concern several economic sectors. This phase of standards development is very important for the validity of the certification and the overall coherence of the system. The British, who neglected such a process at the time when the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were created, have found themselves confronted by a plethora of redundant certifications which they are now attempting to reduce in number. Implicit here is the tension between the search for common criteria enlarging the validity of the certification and the specific features of the competence being assessed. A certification standard is thus always the result of a consensus where an effort is made to reduce this tension between the general and the specific.

This link between the general and the specific is central to the assessment, both at the stage of defining criteria and at the time of their application. As consensual constructs involving several partners, the occupational standards for each diploma must be free from any reference to a particular context. They are sometimes criticised for this distance from the actual work situation, however, and for several years, certain large companies have undertaken analyses of work in order to elaborate skills directories or standards in the context of their human ressources management programmes. At the same time, a number of companies have drawn up work procedures specific to their activities in order to meet ISO quality

insurance norms.[1] As a result of these different initiatives, there are now increasing numbers of tools for identifying competences. While this abundance might suggest that setting up standards is easy, even where certification is concerned, it must be remembered that the descriptions specific to the companies are only valid for internal assessments, whereas the recourse to a certification process is in fact a response to the need to go beyond that context. Furthermore, each job analysis is not necessarily appropriate to the assessment situation.

Public vocational certifications are designed to bring out the specific features of a given production setup through the search for common denominators between different situations. In France, the advisory occupational commissions (*commissions professionnelles consultatives*, CPC), which include representatives of the State and the social partners, serve to establish a consensus on the standards, which thus acquire nationwide validity. In the absence of such a process, it becomes necessary to look for another frame of reference. When the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity decided to experiment with a new vocational skills certificate independent of any training courses (cf. box below), it attempted to draw on the Directory of Occupations and Jobs–ROME–used by the National Employment Agency to match jobs and unemployed persons. But it became clear that the concise nature of this directory of descriptions must be complemented with other analyses of the work involved. This experience raises both the question of the degree of precision needed in the assessment standards and that of

1. Cf. M. Campinos-Dubernet and C. Marquette, "Les normes d'assurance qualité ISO 9000. Prescription accrue ou opération de dévoilement des savoirs de l'entreprise ?" Céreq *Bref* no. 140 (March 1998).

ACCREDITATION OF EXPERIENCE

In the procedures for accrediting acquired experience, a "neutral" body gives a value to these experiences in function of previously defined norms. In France, the procedure most often used and documented is the "accreditation of prior experiential learning" (*validation des acquis professionnels*, VAP), used by the Ministry of Education, Research and Technology and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishing.

The VAP was instituted by the law of 20 July 1992, which permits anyone who has carried out a work activity for five years to draw upon his or her experience in order to be exempted from a portion of the examinations for a diploma. Exemptions are granted for both general and vocational exams but cannot cover the totality of those required for the diploma– at least one exam must be taken in the traditional way.

In their applications, which may be prepared with outside assistance, the candidates themselves present the work activities corresponding to the diploma they hope to obtain in terms going beyond simple factual descriptions. Each application is transmitted to the accreditation jury, which decides on the exemptions to be granted, sometimes after an interview with the candidate.

While the VAP depends entirely on what is declared by the candidate, the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity is presently experimenting with "professional competence certificates", where work experience is assessed in a real or reconstituted work situation. Other forms of accreditation are also coming to light in parallel to the public sector's procedure. The Chambers of Commerce and Industry are developing two kinds of methods. One of these, the "certificate of in-company competences" is based on the evaluation of skills portfolios compiled by the candidates. The other, corresponding to the approach encouraged by the European Commission, is related to the development of computer systems for "accreditation of competences".

the analysis of work on which they may be based. In the definition of the criteria, how much weight should be accorded to "doing" and how much to "knowing", given that the knowledge essential to the work activity cannot be reduced to either a subject matter or forms of knowledge developed and utilised in the training situation? This question is crucial for the validation mechanisms leading to qualifications accessible through school-based training and education.

The British have been faced with the question of precision in the standards through the NVQs, where the standards are very precisely detailed so that all assessors know what they should be looking for. But this also means that the evaluation becomes more complicated and cumbersome without necessarily being more reliable. Breaking down the actions listed in a standard into more elementary ones tends to lose sight of the overall meaning of the activity; at the same time, however, abandoning this breakdown should not obscure the concrete contents of the activity. In fact, the analysis of an activity cannot be reduced to a list of concrete actions but must also reveal their underlying principles of organisation. In the field of publishing, for example, the concept of page layout may be considered an organising principle for the use of word-processing commands.

In France at the present time, the standards for national qualifications are the only ones available for unrestricted consultation and use. They constitute a corpus which, notwithstanding its heterogeneity, is without equivalent. Thus, a private business which has developped a software programme for accrediting competences in the maintenance field acknowledges having used the standards for a corresponding higher technician certificate (*brevet de technicien supérieur*, BTS). Such a practice may be taken as recognition of the quality and legitimacy of the educational system's effort, but this should not overshadow the fact that the credit accorded to the national diploma standards also reflects the predominance of the school-based norm. Indeed, anyone who has been involved in setting up a vocational diploma can recognise that it is the student–rather than the apprentice or the adult in training–who is at the centre of the process. Furthermore, the official texts organising the accreditation of prior experiential learning (*validation des acquis professionnels*, VAP), which is supervised by the national education system, give pride of place to teachers on the accreditation juries (cf. Box). This confirms the fact that the diploma is firmly anchored in the academic domain.

The standards of performance defined to assess formal training experience are very present in the assessment of informally acquired experience. Given the fact that the accreditation of experience is recent, it might well be assumed that the elaboration of methodologies specific to this new procedure is only beginning and that during this initial period, existing tools, assumed to be reliable, have been used. This pragmatic choice is not necessarily the most relevant one, however. As Yves Clot, of the psychology laboratory at the National Conservatory for Arts and Engineering (CNAM), stresses, "The context of the accreditation of work experience draws upon the experience from the angle of its 'academic' accreditation

and this is not the same as drawing upon the experience for the work activity itself. The organisation of the competence will not be the same in the two cases". Such an argument also reduces the importance of the standards in the evaluation process relative to the individual's efforts and the assessor's reading of them.

ASSESSMENT: FROM CRITERIA TO CONTEXT

In France, the accreditation of prior experiencial learning is carried out either in the work situation (actual or reconstituted) or on the basis of an application in which the candidates describe the activities that have allowed them to acquire the competences they wish to have accredited. The preparation of such an application requires considerable effort insofar as the candidate's description of the work activities must be able to be compared to the assessment norms, while these cannot refer to a specific work activity.

The standards for national diplomas are the most complicated forms of assessment norms. The vast scope of the vocational field concerned makes the development of these standards all the more delicate and their formulations all the more general and functional. Standards for diplomas that are common to several branches, such as the vocational aptitude certificate (CAP) in Industrial Installations Operations or the vocational *baccalauréat* in Automated Systems Operations, for example, must be placed in the context of training and assessment, which means reformulating them in terms that refer to a specific occupational field. The assessment necessarily takes place in specific conditions that should be representative of the competences certified by the diploma. This in turn raises the question of the validity of the assessment, an issue that is very sensitive in the case of multi-application diplomas, where the competences of individuals holding the same diploma may be as different as the sectors in which they have first been developped (the automobile and textile industries in the case of the CAP mentioned above) and not easily transferable despite the general label of the qualification. Those responsible for the accreditation mechanisms must thus demonstrate considerable technical know-how and great vigilance in order, for one thing, to situate the standards within the occupational field where the candidate has acquired his or her experience and, for another, to guarantee that the competences demonstrated by the candidate correspond to the more general ones required by the diploma.

The description of the work activities constitutes a fruitful methodological exercise for each candidate because he or she is ultimately responsible for making the connection between 'knowing' and 'doing'. In this respect, Clot emphasises that, "The knowledge called upon in the work situation, which consists of everyday concepts full of the meaning of the work experience, are not the same as the knowledge acquired during training, which consists of scientific concepts. Establishing continuity between these two spheres of knowledge raises a challenge for which the candidate's activity turns out to be decisive". It might be added that the establishment of this

relationship only becomes possible through the combined effort of the candidate and the person helping him or her to prepare the application. This joint analysis of the candidate's work activities, followed by the interview with the jury, serves to determine whether, in spite of the sporadic nature of the assessment, the competences observed are transferable to other situations.

When the accreditation is based on an assessment in the work situation, the process of prior elaboration represented by the preparation of the application does not exist. The choice of the assessment situation should thus offer the candidate the best opportunity to demonstrate his or her competence, but this is not automatic when real work situations are involved. Observation does not allow the candidate's theoretical knowledge to be easily identified because knowledge cannot always be directly perceived in action. It may be necessary to ask the candidate to describe his or her "chains of reasoning". Whether the accreditation is carried out on the basis of an application or the observation of performance, the candidate's presentation of his or her activity is an important component of the assessment. According to Pierre Pastré, a researcher specialised in vocational teaching methods, when a competence is explicitly described, "a process of reflexive analysis on the individual's part, and thus of conceptualisation, leads to a decontextualisation of know-how, which makes the competence adaptable and transferable to other situations".

The functioning of procedures for the accreditation of prior experiencial learning mainly depends on those who implement them, whether these are the individuals who assist the candidate or the members of the accreditation jury. However, every good professional does not necessarily have the competences of an assessor. To overcome this difficulty, those involved in the accreditation process receive specific training; in addition, as the jury members accumulate a common experience, their different points of view become more harmonious, thus avoiding the risks of domination by any one category. In this respect, Catherine Bernard, a training professional in the transportation field, notes that, "Paradoxically, the math professor is not the best placed to appreciate the mathematical knowledge of a bus driver candidate: indeed, the working professional is much more aware of the real conditions for carrying out the occupation and which competences this activity draws on, including the mathematical ones".

An in-depth analysis of assessment situations leads to the hypothesis that assessing acquired experience or occupational competences does not mean strictly applying the criteria. This is not to say that criteria are useless. On the contrary, the assessment standards constitute a contract with the candidate; they structure exchanges between those who are responsible for the assessment and, in this sense, help to make the process more objective. But other factors come into play, generating an alchemy that makes a neutral application of the norm impossible. For Bernard, "We can't judge the capacities of adults who carry out or have carried out a work activity for several years without taking into account the density of their life experience. . . . In any case, this situation brutally poses the problem of the relationship between the competences required to obtain the diploma and the ones that are indispensable to the exercise of the occupation for which this diploma is required". The jury, which guarantees the validity and reliability of the assessment procedures, must also guarantee that their application will be equitable for the candidates. Standards in the strict sense do not allow the reality of the individual's professional activity to be fully grasped. The resolution of what appears to be the antithesis between the general nature of the assessment criteria and the singularity of each individual's experience most likely lies in the necessity of interpreting the rules.

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