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French approaches to accreditation of prior learning : practices and research

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This book is dedicated to Vincent Merle (1950–2013) who played a central role in the French government's approach to vocational education and, most noticeably, introduced and guided the implementation of the Validation of Acquired Experience. He was a man much respected and admired by colleagues in vocational education and government.

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Chapter 15

French Approaches to Accreditation of Prior Learning: Practices and Research

Vanessa Rémy and Vincent Merle

The French experience of validating the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through informal and non-formal learning is unique in the world. In 2002, the French Parliament passed a law recognising the right of all working individuals to earn a diploma or professional qualification through the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). This means that since the law was passed, all vocational certifications¹ are potentially accessible through traditional schooling, continuing education or APL.

¹In France, the term certification is used to refer to all documents that attest to the acquisition of knowledge, skills or competences, from a qualification to operate construction site equipment to certifications established by the social partners within a professional sector or university diplomas. The term diploma traditionally refers to the certifications issued by the Ministry of National Education and other educational institutions like business schools. Some ministries, excluding National Education, customarily refer to their certifications as 'titres' (e.g. the Ministry of Labour). But the word 'titre' also sometimes refers to certain categories of diplomas, as, for example, the diplomas issued by some engineering schools (selected by a special committee), which grant the 'title of engineer'. The law specifies that all certifications are eligible for accreditation of prior learning once they are recorded in the National Registry of Vocational Certifications (NRVC), as will be discussed later in this text. The only certifications that are excluded are those that attest to the learning of certain job-required skills but that does not constitute preparation for a job or a job function exercised in the private or public sector. Examples would be certifications that are part of a quality approach or that are obtained to comply with safety regulations. For convenience, we denote all the certifications available through APL by the words 'diplomas' or 'certifications' in the rest of this article.

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knowledge, skills and competences acquired in the school system, the prestige of the diploma is very important for students, their families and future employers. As Dubet (2010) observed, only one type of competition matters in France: academic, after which everything else is pretty much determined. The obvious downside of this system is that the stronger the belief that school alone defines the professional worth and effectiveness of individuals, the more likely we are to believe it is fair to let a diploma determine professional status.

It seems fairly evident that such a system is not likely to develop programmes to encourage the recognition and validation of informally acquired learning experience. Informal and non-formal learning would have little value when measured against formal learning in such a system, and APL might even appear to be a threat to the very principles of an academic meritocracy. This suggests an intriguing question: How did France end up with a vibrant APL movement? Several factors entered into France's decision to pursue this route.

Toward the end of the 1990s, a general awareness of the limits of the republican elitism system reached a critical point. Two phenomena particularly contributed to this change: a persistent high rate of school dropouts (from 10 to 14 % of any given student generation, depending on the report) and the disenfranchisement of underemployed youth who, despite years of university study, found themselves locked out of worthwhile employment and careers because they lacked the 'right' prestigious diplomas. In addition, the stalled careers of many adults whose professional skills could not compensate for the lack of the 'right' diploma obtained at the 'right' time became more marked. Yet, more generally, the principle of equal opportunity, which supposedly legitimated the system, conflicted with a persistent social reproduction in the schools. As Dubet (2009) notes, when diplomas establish social position and income in the name of meritocracy, the reproduction of social inequalities is high. In France, where diplomas continue to have a powerful influence, 40 % of a child's future income is determined by the parents' current income, whereas in Sweden the percentage is 20 % because diplomas have a less decisive role in determining one's future.

The ongoing debates about job security also helped to create a climate conducive to developing procedures to validate knowledge acquired outside of educational programmes. Precarious employment, disruptions in career paths due to layoffs or retrenchments, the growing number of workers called on to change jobs or job skills in order to adapt to technological and organisational changes – all these factors encouraged employees to insist that their skills be recognised. A diploma or vocational certificate granted during the course of job performance came to be seen as a 'passport' to a more secure future.

15.1.2 A Dissociation Between the Diploma and the Path Taken to Obtain It

In this context, the Secretary of State for Vocational Training made APL a central element in the continuing education reforms undertaken by Lionel Jospin's government (1997–2002). The White Paper on vocational training published in 1999 by Secretary

This chapter argues for the singularity of this experience in France. We first review the beginnings of APL movement, from the early experiments until its current modes of functioning. We show, in particular, how the implementation of APL introduced a significant break in the French educational model that attaches great importance to diplomas obtained within the school system. In this way, APL radically transformed the landscape of classic means of certification. It established a strong distinction between diplomas and pathways to gain certification, by recognising the formative dimension of work experience. The issue which then arises is not so much the recognition of knowledge, skills and competences that have been acquired at work, but the means by which the recognition can be operationalised. Indeed, APL requires intense preparation from candidates to match their acquired experience with the knowledge, skills and competences described in the diploma standards.

In this chapter, we focus, therefore, on the methodological resources provided to support candidates and to assist the complex process by which they are expected to put into words their work experience. To do so, we discuss recent research conducted in France in the field of psychology and educational sciences that investigate the counsellors' activities. This research, we argue, opens up interesting perspectives in terms of training and professionalisation in the field of APL.

15.1 The Beginnings of APL and Its Modes of Functioning

This first part of the chapter traces the history of APL and discusses its current modes of functioning. Characterised by an education system grounded on the model of 'republican elitism' (Merle 2007), the French context seems a priori reluctant space for considering alternative ways of gaining certification. Yet a change in attitudes occurred in the 1990s to respond to socioeconomic developments, which gives a way to new forms of certification (Sect. 15.1.1). The implementation of APL can be seen as a 'small revolution' in France. A distinction now exists between qualifications and pathways to obtain it, which caused important institutional changes (Sect. 15.1.2). Finally, after showing how the APL is an approach inspired by earlier programmes, we will draw up a balance sheet of the device after a decade of decline (Sect. 15.1.3).

15.1.1 A Weakness in the French Model of Equal Opportunity

The French APL movement is quite surprisingly strong, given the importance attributed to the diploma obtained at the end of traditional education with regard to a future career. The French educational system operates to a great extent on a model that can best be termed 'republican elitism'. Students are essentially evaluated on the basis of academic criteria and future job orientation at all levels as determined by academic results. This selectivity based on school performance (Verdier 2008) is particularly striking because, in addition, the possibility of returning to school later in life is quite low. The type of diploma and its prestige value have key roles in the entry-level position and, more generally, in the entire career trajectory. Far more than the

of State Nicole Péry was the starting point for a vast and concerted effort that led to the Social Modernisation Law of January 2002, which was unanimously approved by the Parliament.

Several options were presented as possible ways forward. For example, one such option was to create specific certifications for working adults. This type of system would have adapted certifications to an adult population, notably by developing standards focused on skills rather than formal knowledge. This proposal was first made in 1996 by Michel de Virville in a report to the Minister in charge of vocational training at that time. The report suggested that a 'National Registry of Vocational Certifications' be created in consultation with all social partners, parallel to the diplomas granted after traditional education. These certifications would be awarded by assessment centres. The second option was to facilitate access to the traditional diplomas through APL, and this option was chosen. In addition to the technical difficulties of creating an alternative system for vocational qualification, there was the risk that the standards for qualification would be lower than those for the traditional path. Given the weight accorded to diplomas in France, this risk was high. Yet, by granting diplomas through the Accreditation of Prior Learning, the implicit message was that different learning paths have the same value. Indeed, the law stipulated that a diploma obtained through APL would 'produce the same effects' as that obtained by following the traditional path (tests of knowledge at the end of the educational programme).

This second option implicitly recognised a diploma as primarily an indicator of knowledge, skills and competences matching a job description. Although the diploma continues to confer a certain distinction, this function has become secondary to the function of sending a 'signal' to the labour market. The law of 2002 was based on the assumption that the ultimate value of a diploma is independent of the path taken to obtain it. In a system that has given such importance to the prestige of academic study, this was nothing less than a 'small revolution'.

Once this option was chosen, the work of defining which diplomas could be conferred through APL was undertaken. The law introduced a new mechanism for regulating the vocational certification system through the creation of the National Registry of Vocational Certifications (NRVC) managed by a national commission (the National Commission on Vocational Certification, NCVC, composed of the representatives of the ministries awarding diplomas, various social partners, professional organisations and regional government councils). The diplomas awarded by ministries (e.g. National Education) are recorded by law in the NRVC as soon as they have been agreed upon by the social partners (advisory committees now found in almost all ministries). All others must first obtain the approval of the NRVC ('recorded on demand' procedure), which assesses their relevance with regard to current business needs (one of the criteria is the type of job held after obtaining the diploma). The NCVC can also register vocational certifications jointly established within certain professions (and more recently among several professional sectors). According to the 2002 law, all certifications registered with the NRVC are accessible by APL. Qualifications of a general nature (e.g. a degree in comparative literature or an MA in art history) might have been excluded from the registry, but it was finally

decided that all diplomas issued by the Ministry of National Education (with the exception of the general baccalauréat) would be recorded.

This choice has had far-reaching consequences. In particular, all diploma-granting institutions are required to define their framework in terms of the knowledge, skills and competences related to job descriptions. The NRVC is not interested in the curriculum, courses or programme content. It is focused on the 'learning outcomes', to borrow an expression in common use within the European Union. Most institutions, therefore, have had to rewrite their guidelines and standards for diplomas, which has not always been simple, especially in higher education. Procedures for accreditation have also had to be put into place, including how candidates should demonstrate acquired skill and knowledge, how they should be counselled and guided in building a solid candidature and how juries should be chosen. In practice, not all diplomas are accessible through APL, in part because many teachers continue to view the principle of APL with reluctance. However, of the 7,500 vocational certifications currently registered in the NRVC (when all certifications are recorded, the NRVC should include about 15,000 certifications, with most being Bachelor and Master's degrees), most have been gradually made accessible by APL. These include diplomas from engineering and business schools that recruit their students through an entrance examination.

It should be noted that with the 2002 law, the term 'certification' emerged to describe both diplomas – a term without a strict legal definition – and certificates of qualification established jointly in specific professional sectors. Other types of certification do not, strictly speaking, refer to job 'qualifications', as the term is commonly used in France. This is the case, for example, of certifications to operate certain machines or within the framework of a quality procedure. Since the law was passed, the NRVC has been used to distinguish those certifications that are registered from those that are not. For example, some public funding is reserved only for training that leads to NRVC certification. This decision breaks, in part, with French tradition. Historically, the diplomas awarded by the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Higher Education were the 'gold standard', with all other qualifications consigned to a supplementary role. In 1940, a law even granted the Ministry of National Education the monopoly for issuing diplomas. The change brought about by APL has, therefore, not always been well-received by those who remain strongly attached to the principle of academic merit. This change again demonstrates that adopting the principle of validating informal learning is in many ways inseparable from changing the certification system itself. The NRVC is not a mere appendix to the 2002 law; in the words of the current NRVC President, they are two sides of the same coin.

15.1.3 An Approach Inspired by the Past, Gradually Formalised and Developed

France did not undertake this ambitious project in a vacuum. The country had launched similar projects in the past, on a smaller scale but always inspired by the

same principle. In 1934, the so-called government-granted engineering diploma was created to allow engineers coming up through the ranks to reach the formal status of engineer based on their work experience. This occurred at a time when the state Engineering Commission (EC) was establishing regulations for engineering education with only those schools accredited by the EC can confer the title of engineer. Yet, the government-granted engineering diploma still exists and, every year, it allows about a hundred people to become engineers. Also, in 1985, legislation was passed to allow people with significant work experience to enter a higher education programme without possessing the diploma generally required for admission; one example is entering a Master programme without possessing the Bachelor degree. This programme, called 'Validation of Acquired Work Experience' (VAWE), was not abolished by the 2002 law on APL. It continues under the title 'VAWE 85' in admission procedures and is particularly useful for workers who want to return to full-time study.

Finally, in 1992, a law addressing VAWE stated that adults with work experience could be exempted from the exams leading to National Education diplomas (teaching in secondary and higher education). This was presented as an exemption from conforming to the standard diploma qualifications. Furthermore, the candidates had to present for at least one of the exams from the traditional diploma path. As we have seen, the law of 2002 is based on the assumption of separation between the actual diploma and the path that leads to it. A diploma granted through APL confers the same standing/prestige as a diploma acquired through the traditional path (at least on paper). The APL programme is much more developed than the VAWE programme, which, in any case, had attracted very few candidates (about 1,000 per year when the 2002 law was passed).

Specifically, the law laid down the general rules for obtaining certification through APL and left each organisation the choice on how to organise the process according to its own constraints.

- To obtain a diploma through APL, candidates must first demonstrate that they have worked in a relevant paid or volunteer setting for at least 3 years (or longer, if required by the organisation issuing the certification).
- After this first phase of 'admissibility', candidates must then provide evidence to a jury that they have acquired the knowledge, skills and competences described in the diploma standards. This evidence usually takes the form of a written personal and professional history showing evidence of all opportunities to develop the required knowledge, skills and competences. In some cases (e.g. for certifications issued by the Ministry of Labour), the jury may observe the candidate in real or simulated work situations.
- The jury members are appointed by the organisation issuing the certification (e.g. as represented by the President of the University). The jury systematically includes teachers and professionals (professor-researchers must make up the majority for higher education diplomas).
- The jury examines the applications and may interview candidates to obtain more information (in higher education, the interview is systematic).

- The jury may grant all or part of the certification. In case of partial delivery, candidates can complete their training or re-elaborate their application and present again before the jury within the 3 years that follow.
- Candidates may take a 24-h leave of absence to prepare the APL candidature. The law does not require that salary be paid in this case, but it is usually covered by public funding set aside for vocational training.

The law does not require that candidates be assisted through formal counselling sessions. Most organisations delivering certification, however, provide paid advice and guidance. Again, this expense is often covered by funding set aside for vocational training.

With a decade of hindsight, we can now assess the effects of the 2002 law (Merle 2008). Since its enactment, APL has attracted considerable interest from employees, employers and continuing education professionals. This enthusiasm has never wavered, although the number of candidates has declined slightly over the past 1 or 2 years. In 2010, 66,000 candidatures were admissible, 53,000 candidates appeared before juries and 30,000 candidates obtained full certification. This was 7% less than in 2009 but 3% more than in 2008 and 2007. These figures include only those diplomas and certificates issued by ministries. Half of all candidates seek to validate a level V certificate² and 87% present for certification at a level equal to or below the baccalaureate. About 800 of diplomas that were applied for through APL do not concern higher education. Moreover, almost half of these focus on a dozen certifications, mainly in the health and social services (home-health aid, childcare, etc.). Three quarters of the candidates are women, and seven out of ten applicants are employed.

In addition to these quantitative factors, a significant movement has emerged among businesses to make APL an effective tool for recognising skills and encouraging career progression. In the companies involved in this movement, the number of employees who actually commit to APL with their employer's support is relatively low. Moreover, this is often confined to a particular sector, like the employees in a distribution company who validate their skills and abilities to become assistant store managers or department managers or hospital workers who receive certification as nurse's aides. Yet, the effects are usually judged to be very positive, with reports of gains in self-confidence, greater company loyalty, the desire to obtain more advanced certification, pride in one's job, the discovery of unsuspected skills and so on. The fears sometimes expressed about APL in a collective context have proved to be unfounded; in most cases, there have been few requests for automatic salary increases or departures to other companies. In contrast, most people have seen their careers rebound after this step, which essentially has required them to take distance from their own experience in order to analyse it and put into words the knowledge that has been gained. In a country of 'glass ceilings', separating one qualification level from another, APL holds out hope of breaking through for many of these

²In France, this refers to the National Education diplomas called 'Certificat d'Aptitudes Générales' (CAP) or 'Brevet d'Études Professionnelles' (BEP), which are granted in secondary school.

employees. The gradual adoption of APL may also help businesses to develop a different perspective on the formative nature of work situations and the diversity of professional excellence. In a country that has long emphasised formal and academic knowledge above all, APL is a significant step in acknowledging the validity of other ways to learn and develop.

Such positive effects, for both employers and employees, would not be possible without the intense work of the candidates to match their acquired experience with the knowledge, skills and competences described in the certification standards. Often, they need help in doing this. The provision of advice and guidance has also been a focus for some very interesting thinking about each step in the APL process, the system of actors who support the candidates in their commitment to it and the process of actually formalising prior learning.

15.2 The Practices of Advising and Guiding APL Candidates

The second part of our contribution is more focused on support provided to candidates. We discuss the existing forms of support according to the stages of APL (Sect. 15.2.1). These forms of support, which are afforded to candidates during the application procedure, require participation from various actors and institutions working together to inform and guide candidates in the preparation of their applications. The APL programme is based on a formal assessment of the candidate's experience, objectified and made public through a booklet. The production of this booklet makes it possible for skills, knowledge and competences to be organised, represented and assessed. In this booklet, candidates have to describe and analyse experienced work situations in order to link up with formal knowledge described in the diploma standards. In this section, we identify how the formalisation of prior experience can be seen as a nodal element of the procedure (Sect. 15.2.2). Finally, we provide a brief overview of the main research streams in France which have focused on coaching practices in APL and have investigated their contribution to professional and personal development (Sect. 15.2.3).

15.2.1 Types of Guidance According to the Step in the Process

The implementation of VAVE then APL created a new job function and brought new members into the adult education field, i.e. advisers to assist candidates. Assistance to APL candidates has nevertheless not been mandated by legislation, and certifying organisations have been given the responsibility for defining the form of this guidance. From the many experiments in the field by the advisers themselves since VAVE was first launched in the mid-1980s, stable and effective practices have gradually emerged. We can now distinguish several types of assistance for the various steps in the process. Although assistance is officially set by legislation at

the end of the step of 'admissibility', types of assistance have developed upstream of admissibility and for the outcome of the jury decision in cases of partial validation or rejection. Each type of assistance has its own characteristics, which we will describe briefly.

Before admissibility, certifying organisations increasingly offer assistance through a public service of information and advice. This service is not a mandatory step for APL candidates but it does give them direction for the upcoming steps. The assistance is offered in group meetings and/or individual interviews. The services are similar to those made by the Information/Counsel Points (ICP). Under the responsibility of the Regional Councils, these services are offered within the framework of France's many employment-oriented agencies, such as local employment or career development agencies. The assistants provide information on APL and help potential candidates to analyse the relevance of their experiences. In doing so, they can also reorient individuals toward other services, such as skills assessment. This type of assistance also allows potential candidates to situate themselves with regard to the range of certifications, to find the appropriate certifying organisation for the diploma they are seeking and to explore the private or public funding opportunities. At the end of this step, those wishing to pursue APL obtain an application package from the certifying organisation. The package contains 'booklet 1', which guides candidates, further ensuring that they meet all the conditions for requesting APL.

Once admissible, candidates then move on to the next step: preparing 'booklet 2', which is the documentation of the informal prior learning that will be presented to the jury for accreditation. Guidance at this point is officially recognised in the legislation on APL. Counsellors provide methodological help to the candidates as they match their experience to the diploma-qualifying standards and help in the actual writing of the booklet. They help the candidates to clearly put into words their work experience so that they can then identify the relevant work situations described and analysed in the booklet as proof of prior learning. Most of the assistants from certifying organisations use the same basic outline in accomplishing this work.

Step 1: Potential candidates become familiar with the standards for the diploma they are seeking through APL.

Step 2: Candidates explore and analyse their work history and their informally acquired knowledge and skills.

Step 3: Candidates select the most relevant work experiences related to the chosen diploma.

Step 4: Candidates are advised and guided in preparing a descriptive analysis of their work activities.

Step 5: Candidates formalise the application, with assistance in preparing the final document. Counsellors verify the inclusion of key skills needed for the diploma. They also intervene, if need be, by requesting that candidates supply more detail, for example.

Step 6: Candidates prepare to for the assessment by the jury through simulated interviews.

Candidates may apply for funding if they wish to have their supervision sponsored. Vocational funds usually cover this cost, and the length of the assistance varies with the status of the applicants. Between 8 and 24 h of assistance is usually given over a 6- to 9-month period. The objective is to help the candidates to validate their case by clearly identifying and describing their work activities and matching their skills to those required for certification, all with a clear understanding of the criteria for evaluation. This assistance is highly recommended because, statistically, it has been demonstrated to be a successful approach to APL. The assistance at this stage is most often offered by the APL counsellors of the certifying organisations, although private providers are now also offering these services. In fact, the APL counselling market now has so many types of guidance on offer that candidates sometimes find it difficult to identify the most relevant form of assistance.

Following the jury's decision, the certifying organisation ensures the follow-up assistance, with the primary goal of preventing abandonment after partial validation. This may take the form of an interview to guide the next step or help in finding an internship or training programme. The assistance depends on the jury's recommendations, ranging from a single interview to a regular follow-up until the candidate returns to the jury.

15.2.2 Formalising Prior Learning: The Nodal Point of the Approach

As we have seen, the APL procedure has several steps: candidates must choose the diploma best suited to their work experience and skills, make a formal request for accreditation from the appropriate certifying organisation ('booklet 1') and build a solid record of evidence ('booklet 2'). This written document must argue convincingly, through the description and analysis of work situations that the knowledge acquired during these work experiences is closely linked to the formalised knowledge required for the diploma. This document is the foundation on which the jury members will base their decision.

Although APL gives people access to a diploma on the basis of prior experiential learning acquired while working, it is not necessarily the professional skills that candidates have developed and mobilised in their work that are validated. The APL process puts a great emphasis on candidates' written and oral skills: the jury will assess their ability to analyse these activities from their written or oral productions. As Barbier (2006) pointed out, in this type of programme, *skills in managing actions and skills in communicating about actions* are evaluated, rather than *actual skills in carrying out actions*.

In the general field of certification, it is relatively rare to evaluate applications on the candidates' ability to analyse and communicate about their acquired experience. APL is thus distinguished from 'traditional' diploma paths by the very nature of the

knowledge that is communicated and then assessed. Whereas diploma candidates following traditional paths are still mainly oriented toward learning and reproducing the contents of legitimised knowledge, APL candidates undertake a process that requires greater commitment. APL is not based on the communication of knowledge taught in an education and training space or without reference to learners' experiences. Instead, APL is based on candidates' production of knowledge about their own experiences. It must be underlined here that to produce knowledge about one's experience in a context of assessment, and to do so in a well-structured and well-argued manner, is a complex activity.

Although at first glance, the instructions suggest that the preparations for an APL application are a simple administrative formality, they nevertheless embark candidates on a far-reaching analysis of work situations. During sessions with the counsellor, all the work situations that the candidate will report are discussed and reflected upon. These sessions are, therefore, key moments when candidates can express themselves on their prior learning and refine their arguments. They provide the opportunity for candidates to learn how to convincingly demonstrate the links between work activities, the knowledge acquired during these activities and the theoretical knowledge detailed in the standards for the diploma.

This approach, therefore, amounts to a project of analysis and writing that goes well beyond an account of a job history. The expected narrative requires a high capacity for reflexivity and subjectivity by the candidates, who must structure their career paths retrospectively, evaluate them to identify the significant experiences and finally show the knowledge that has been acquired. This exercise means that candidates must be able to put into words the meaning that past work activities have had for them. Work experience as a practice is thus taken as an object of reflection, analysis and learning (Magnier 2001). It is precisely this work that enables candidates to construct their experience with another meaning: the meaning attributed a posteriori to an experience as practice. Indeed, experience is both a practice and the knowledge that can be built from it (Astier 2001). Experience as knowledge is the memory of lessons one has learned from events (Vincens 2001). It is a conscious acquisition; it is not the obligatory result of the work, and, therefore, it is not a joint product of the activity, or is so only in part (p. 22). We can see here the extent to which confusion persists for candidates applying for APL between experience as an *activity* and experience as the *product of a constructed meaning of the activity*, even though APL is focused on the latter (Mayen 2008).

The work needed to formalise prior learning is not straightforward. The assistance and guidance offered in APL is mainly methodological and helps candidates to identify their assets. That is, to assist them in constructing the meaning of their experience of the activities they describe, as well as to help them verbalise and write this constructed meaning in a well-organised narrative. It is this expression of meaning – first constructed and then rendered socially accessible through interactions with the assistant – that provides the key information on the nature of prior experience. Acquired knowledge, thus, is revealed in the co-analysis of experience by the candidate and the counsellor.

15.2.3 A Field of Research in Full Expansion

We identified three main research streams focused on the practices of counselling and guidance in APL. The life history approach to adult education or lifelong learning was the first to focus on the formative effects of work experience. These studies provided a methodological framework for many APL counsellors by offering a structure and tools. Next, studies conducted with the clinic of activity approach in work psychology³ and professional didactics in the educational sciences⁴ sought to analyse the activity of assisting rather than to produce models of action. Although theoretically distinct, these two lines of research both used methodologies for analysing work activity and focused on the processes of personal and activity development in the course of APL.

15.2.3.1 Life Histories in Lifelong Learning

The life histories approach (Orfanamma et al. 2000) produced the first studies on the practices of guidance in APL. This research stream began very early on to explore the issues and problems of recognising workplace acquired knowledge. The first experiments in APL and skills assessment in the mid-1980s were notably inspired by the tools developed from the French-Canadian work on skills portfolios. Lainé (1998), whose research was rooted in the life history approach to lifelong learning, formalised a method for assisting candidates that he also implemented on behalf of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. His book 'When Experience Makes Itself Known: Assisting in the Validation of Informally Acquired Knowledge' (2005) served as an essential guide for APL assistants. In it, he described the journey of candidates from the initial information about the regulations to the jury's decision and showed how this approach is a process of self-directed learning during which candidates change the way they look at their own experience. In addition to giving numerous examples of assistance, Lainé himself deployed his method. In this regard, he noted how methods for analysing work activity like the 'explicitation interview' (Vermersch 1994) contribute to 'making experience speak', which prompted many to train in this technique to better assist candidates in describing their work activities.

³The clinic of activity is a French research stream that developed in the 1990s based on the work of Clot ('Le Travail sans l'homme? Pour une psychologie des milieux de travail et de vie', Paris, La Découverte, 1995). Clot's work dealt with the development of the power to act in one's work activity and the tasks and missions assigned in the context of work organisation. It also analysed the conditions for the processes of development using specific methodologies for intervention.

⁴Professional didactics is a French research stream that developed in the 1990s based on the works of Pastré ('La didactique professionnelle. Approche anthropologique du développement chez les adultes', Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011). The objective is to analyse work activity with a view to training for professional skills development. It is situated at the confluence of fields of practices, adult education and three theoretical perspectives: developmental psychology, cognitive ergonomics and the didactics of school disciplines.

15.2.3.2 Professional Didactics

In the field of professional didactics, Mayen and his team (1999) undertook a series of studies on the work and training of workers involved in APL. Their objective was to better understand APL work to professionalise and create training programmes for it. They, thus, focused on the work of jurists, assistants, counsellors at information points and candidates. As an extension of their earlier work on mentoring in the workplace, they sought to determine the conditions where a work situation becomes a circumstance in which and by which an individual can learn. Theoretically, they tried to articulate the models from the cultural-historical perspective of Vygotzky and Bruner with those of professional didactics (Mayen 1999, 2002) using a methodology for analysing mentor/apprentice interactions. The APL field gradually became a research focus because of the similarities between situations of counselling and situations of workplace mentoring (Mayen 2004). APL guidance was considered to be a form of joint activity carried out in and through the interactions between counsellors and candidates, and the APL sessions were notably analysed as the assistants' *mediation* of the candidates' conceptualisations of their work activity. The *processes of pragmatic development* proposed by Vergnaud⁵ in the didactics of mathematics – and widely taken up in professional didactics – make up a relevant category for analysing transformations in the meaning of work activity, which occur during the APL process as candidates seek to match the knowledge acquired in work with the formalised knowledge for the diploma standards. Nevertheless, the studies conducted within this category have given no attention to the assistants' contributions to this process of transformation. The theories of Vygotzky and Bruner, and, particularly, the notion of scaffolding (Chakroun and Mayen 2009), have yielded interesting analyses on the role of language interactions in the processes of conceptualising and elaborating experience, and studies from this perspective have shown under what conditions a situation of assistance can become a *potential situation for development*.

15.2.3.3 The Clinic of Activity

About 15 years ago, several studies using the clinic of activity approach were conducted for the Ministry of National Education on the Accreditation of Prior Learning (Clot and Prot 2003). These studies also focused on naturally occurring practices in the validation process: by candidates, assistants and jury members. From the unique clinical and developmental perspective of this approach, researchers analysed activities of assisting candidates and assessing their applications using an approach based on 'crossed self-confrontation interviews', which was helpful for individuals working together to develop the meanings and practices of their profession. These studies also analysed the development of knowledge in action, its formalisation and its relation to the formalised knowledge required for diplomas

⁵Vergnaud, G. (1990). La théorie des champs conceptuels. *Recherches en didactique des mathématiques*, vol. 10, n° 2-3, p. 133-170.

granted through the traditional path. Contrary to the approach taken in professional didactics, the work situations in APL were conceptualised using Vygotsky's distinction between *everyday concepts* and *scientific concepts* in the framework of a theory on the relationship between thought and language (1934/1997). In particular, the exchanges between candidates and validation juries were analysed (Kosulski and Prot 2004) to show how language and interactional activities could be used to develop a *potential concept* articulating scientific concepts and everyday concepts (Prot 2003). This perspective combined the clinic of activity and speech analysis to show the transformation in thinking that occurred in the conversational chaining and sequencing in sessions for the joint analysis of work activities. Language and interactional activities were assumed to be spaces for the realisation of thought – its construction and development – in order to articulate the development of both language and psychological processes. Within the APL framework, language interactions reveal an *activity genre* that is in itself a tool for development (Kosulski and Clot 2007).

The presentation of these works on APL from the perspectives of professional didactics and the clinic of activity shows how language and interactional activities in counselling and guidance situations underlie developmental processes. These works demonstrate that the assistance session is characterised by cooperation in the sense that prior experiential learning emerges from a joint discursive construction and is formalised during a process of scaffolding. The elaboration of work experience, thus, presents as a process of co-construction that is collectively carried out and negotiated in the assistant/candidate dialogue. Acquired experience can be expressed and reconfigured through the interposition of language and interactional work between the assistant and the candidate, which opens up new insights and opportunities for action. We recently investigated this process and showed how the assistance given to APL candidates is an opportunity for development (Rémy 2012, 2013a, b, in press). Our analyses, which focused on the discursive and interactional dimensions of scaffolding, revealed a broad diversity in the forms of assistance given, as well. Sometimes, for example, assistants played the role of evaluators to prepare the candidates to argue their positions before the jury. This approach created certain tensions and provoked negotiations about identity during the sessions. Sometimes, these assistants took a supportive role by sharing their own interpretations of candidates' work activities. This sharing was often the case when assistants had once worked or were currently working in the same job as the candidate, in addition to their role of assistant. More particularly, we showed how these shared interpretations contributed to the transmission of an interpretative culture of work activities, which added to the professionalisation of the candidates.

15.3 Conclusions

Our contribution aimed at showing how the introduction of APL in France can be seen as a singular experience. France may well be unique in its decision to make nearly all diplomas and certifications accessible through the accreditation of prior

learning. Yet, despite the political consensus regarding APL, it nevertheless remains somewhat incongruous in the French social landscape. French APL emerged from the same concerns expressed in many countries on how to recognise and accredit informal and non-formal knowledge, but France chose an ambitious response that has deeply shaken conceptions long rooted in its collective representations. Today, although APL is gradually finding its place in career development and is no longer perceived as an 'inferior' route to certification, it nevertheless continues to raise questions for those working in the field, albeit those in regional governments, professional sectors, companies or the certifying organisations in charge of organising assistance and juries.

Our contribution aimed at exploring how to operationalise the principles of recognition of knowledge and skills within the programme itself. We focused our discussion on the guidance practices aiming to help candidates to formalise their prior experience. Progress remains to be made, particularly in helping businesses to develop policies for job security and in implementing APL more broadly with an emphasis on further professionalising the juries and assistants of the certifying organisations. Research in recent years that we have reviewed above provides insight into the APL practices that have been progressively constructed by the actors in the field. The findings also open up interesting prospects for training and professionalising the actors based on the analysis of their work activity, although certainly more research is required.

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Chapter 16 Recognising and Certifying Workers' Knowledge: Policies, Frameworks and Practices in Prospect: Perspectives from Two Countries

Stephen Billett, Helen Bound, and Magdalene Lin

16.1 The Recognition of Learning Outside of Educational Programmes

This chapter seeks to consider how factors and processes associated with the recognition and certification of learning outside of educational institutions are and should be enacted in particular national contexts and how the practicalities, barriers, imperatives and sensitivities associated with recognising and certifying workers' knowledge might be confronted and redressed.

The need for recognising learning outside of educational institutions arises from a requirement for workers of all kinds to demonstrate their workplace competence against regulated occupational requirements. Hence, before individuals are allowed to take up employment in a particular work situation, they are required to demonstrate the ability to work safely and within ways regulated for that occupation. In many instances, workers have learnt these capacities in their working lives and outside of educational programmes and the certification they offer. There is also a growing demand for the recognition of learning for equity purposes. There are solid justifications here as the acquisition of qualifications as well as their level and standing is strongly and positively correlated to levels of remuneration (Groot et al. 1994; Grubb 1996; Lengerman 1999; O'Connell 1999), associated with occupational identity (Noon and Blyton 1997; Pusey 2003), the standing of the work individuals are permitted to engage in (Darrab 1996) and increasingly now as a means of demonstrating current competency.

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