

Recognition and Validation of Experiential Learning. An educational problem

ANA LUISA DE OLIVEIRA PIRES

Professor at Escola Superior de Educação, Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal

Member of the Unidade de Investigação Educação e Desenvolvimento [Unit of investigation, Education and Development],

Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia da Universidade Nova de Lisboa

alop@fct.unl.pt

ABSTRACT:

This text focuses on the issue of Recognition and Validation of the Experiential Learning of Adults from an educational perspective. These new practices fit into an Lifelong Learning paradigm, in which value is given to the formal and non-formal learning of adults throughout their personal, social and professional lives. Drawing from the theoretical and conceptual support found in learning approaches and adult education, these emerging practices are, nonetheless, a site for tension and contradiction and, furthermore, from an educational point of view, are under-researched. In this text, a brief analysis of the main concepts, assumptions and underlying principles are presented — what is recognised and validated, how recognition and validation are carried out, what logics are found —, with a final reflection on the training of the professionals of the recognition and validation processes — teachers, trainers, advisers, supervisors — and on the need for a (new) reflection in view of the new educational reference frameworks.

Keywords:

Adult Education, Experiential Learning, Non-formal and Informal Learning, Recognition and Validation of Learning.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In view of the fact that the implementation and diffusion of recognition and validation systems has become a relevant tendency as regards European educational systems, an educational approach to this issue is presented in this text. Indeed, such systems have been part of the political agenda (namely, conveyed in the reports of the European Commission (2001, 2004), in the Declarations of Bologna and Copenhagen, etc), and these practices have been recently introduced in the national empirical field, through the Centres of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences. It is in a paradigmatic framework of Lifelong Learning that the value of experiential learning, acquired outside the formal educational/training systems, becomes a new field of educational practice and the object of scientific study, particularly in the domain of Education.

This theme was studied in depth during research for a PhD in Educational Sciences. The specific subject of recognition and validation, developed within the framework of higher education, was the object of research of the post doctoral research.

This theme is particularly relevant to higher education, mainly for the following reasons:

On the one hand, if we take the European evolutionary tendencies into account, we may verify that the recognition and validation of experiential learning has gradually become a new field of educational practices in its own right, placing particular emphasis on the need for conceiving and developing recognition and

validation systems on different qualification levels. Concomitantly, it highlights the importance of developing the training of teachers/trainers /supervisors/monitors who participate in this process — a fundamental mission of the institutes of higher education.

On the other hand, the diffusion of these practices within higher education leads us to anticipate that, in a relatively formal way, depending on the different national contexts, over a short term period the Portuguese national institutions of higher education might eventually create support structures for the development of these new practices, looking upon them as an integral part of their offer, so as to broaden the access and participation of new public types in higher education, and to offer new lifelong learning opportunities.

Furthermore, from a scientific perspective, the confirmation of a lack of research in this field leads us to stress the need for continued analysis and reflection on the emerging issues of this new educational subject. Given that research plays a structuring role in higher education, it is of utmost importance to stimulate the production of scientific knowledge on this emerging issue.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN A CONTEXT OF CHANGE

The Knowledge Society and the Lifelong Learning Society
Contemporary society may be characterised by the interdependence of phenomena and evolutionary ten-

dencies. It is a changing society, supported by Knowledge and Information— which have a strong impact on Economy and Development-, and which turns the work and organizational spheres into learning contexts in which new knowledge and new competences are constructed. It is a society where there are currently emerging new ways of viewing educational phenomena: we have witnessed the appearance of a Lifelong Learning paradigm^a, which goes beyond traditional borders and marks out the formal time and space of learning — and which appeals to new educational and training theoretical frameworks.

At present, we are witnessing a convergence of concerns, which are common to a considerable number of countries in Europe and the world and present in political, economic, social and educational discourse. They focus on the development of initiatives with a view to recognizing and validating learning acquired throughout life in its different contexts. Owing to profound changes brought about by the globalization of economies, the evolution of the labour world and organizations and the emergence of the Knowledge Society and Lifelong Learning Society, this issue is of particular relevance.

Recognition and validation are part of a Lifelong Learning paradigm, in other words, a context of thought that gives importance to the learning accomplished by people throughout their personal, social and professional lives, exceeding traditional time and space boundaries which are institutionally marked out by educational systems. In a context where the boundaries among education, training, work and leisure are attenuated, the recognition of experiential learning, particularly those of adults, is an unavoidable challenge for the educational/training systems of the present day and age.

According to Nóvoa (2001), the current restructuring of educational systems is not restricted to an “organizational” change in that it has a profound impact on the historical project of the school; the term “education/training”, accompanied by “lifelong”, translates a set of concerns that are felt on an international scale. As far as the author is concerned, there are knowledge types that function as “reference models”, going beyond the traditional boundaries, constructed through networks, articulations and branches and which, on being appropriated by the actors, are transformed into local practices.

There are multiple motives that underlie the emergence of recognition and validation: knowledge acquired outside the formal educational/training systems has an undeniable personal, formative, professional, social and economic value. It has been attributed more and more importance as rapid social, scientific, technological and economic changes, that characterize contemporary society and present a variety of new challenges to the necessary level of knowledge, have become more accentuated. The aim of this acknowledgement is not simply to deal with the undergoing changes, but also to critically participate in the changing processes.

This equally local and global knowledge is constructed and spread through new learning forms. New, innovative knowledge, produced in organizations on the basis of new technology use and new ways of organizing work, frequently escape the classical disciplinary knowledge terms of reference, due to the experience-based action of the actors involved. The production and spread of knowledge and, subsequently, learning processes, cease to be a monopoly of the educational systems since they extend beyond the formal space and time traditionally marked out by the educational authorities.

This experience-based knowledge is developed in a multiplicity of situations and life contexts and follows a line of construction and diffusion that differs from that which has been the dominant logic (disciplinary, transmissive) and which may be translated into the educational context by certain pedagogical models and practices^b. Traditional ways of testing knowledge in society (conveyed through both school and professional diplomas and certificates) have always attributed a privileged status to scientific and technological knowledge over experience-based knowledge, in accordance with the dominant conception inherited from rationalism^c. In epistemological terms, the importance attributed to the latter in the core of traditional educational/training systems represents a significant paradigmatic shift, in which the “knowledge gained from experience” acquires a new status in relation to “scientific knowledge”.

This rupture, on an epistemological level, seems to be accompanied, in theoretical and methodological terms, by a set of significant changes, which provide us with a more understanding framework for

interpreting educational and social phenomena. As far as Pineau (1997) is concerned, recognition and validation make up a “complex multidimensional problem”, integrating different technical, professional, economic and socio-cultural dimensions, which implies the renegotiation of a set of rules for giving value to actions and human actors.

Emergence of new educational practices

The value of adult experience-based knowledge depends, primarily, on clarification and formalization since, by nature, experience-based knowledge is tacit and implicit. The aim of these new, emerging practices is precisely to identify this knowledge, to give it a name, visibility and legitimacy on personal, professional and social levels.

The recognition and validation of experiential learning may be verified in the overlapping of a variety of spheres: the world of education/training, work, organizations and society in general. According to Farzad and Paivandi (2000, p. 6), “the subject of experiential learning are at the core of articulation between the practice of a professional activity, training and the different social and personal activities that are part of each individual’s experience. It belongs to an emerging social demand which is manifested through new realities regarding society, as far as training, the enterprise and the individual are concerned”.

From an educational and formative perspective, a movement that highlights the importance of learning based on life experience (in a broad sense, including the professional, personal and social sphere), through experiential learning processes may be witnessed. Life is acknowledged as a context for learning and for the development of competences and, furthermore, knowledge acquired outside traditional systems is gaining more and more value. Experience is viewed as a legitimate source of knowledge which may (and should) be formalized and validated.

As regards the constantly evolving world of employment and organizations, new forms of production and work organization, new organizational practices and new ways of managing human resources have emerged. The potential, created by work situations, to provide training in the con-

struction of new knowledge and competences, has been acknowledged and the characteristics that promote the learning of individuals and organizations (“learning organizations”) have been identified.

Simultaneously, employment has grown steadily more precarious, coupled with an economic and social crisis it has increased, there is greater professional and social penalization, mainly among more fragile groups and/or those in risk of exclusion (the unemployed, those at risk of unemployment, the less qualified, those with low levels of schooling,...). On this level, the recognition and validation of experiential learning may provide a relevant solution for social exclusion, making the school/training/professional (re)insertion of less favoured groups easier.

There is a convergence of discourse types and specific initiatives that are geared towards promoting coherent and appropriate recognition and validation strategies, with particular emphasis on the importance of implicit, unformalized knowledge, but which are charged with a high personal, professional, social and economic value. Public power has started to encourage the development of these innovative practices, aware of the benefits they may bring about.

Recognition and validation within the framework of European educational policy

The evolution of social and educational policies, that have accompanied the European construction and its repositioning in terms of globalization challenges, has made a decisive contribution to the transformation of educational systems by presenting them with new challenges, making current issues more complex and triggering reflection and the search for innovative responses to emerging questions.

The recognition and validation of experiential learning — frequently referred to as non-formal and informal— has gained visibility in the European educational environment, and is particularly noticeable in the documents and initiatives developed by the European Commission. From a political point of view, this issue has come to occupy current agendas and to significantly influence the educational debate within Europe.

According to Feutrie (2005), these European concerns are articulated with a set of intentions, the most striking of which seek to:

- offer a second opportunity to acquire a qualification, especially to those who do not have one, or who were not successful in their initial education/training;

- sustain economic changes and face the needs of higher levels of competences;

- promote personal and professional life-long developmental processes;

- facilitate and support internal and external entrepreneurial mobility and European mobility;

- facilitate the link between the employment market and educational institutions, providing an improved response to the needs of the employment market.

The Copenhagen Declaration (2002), — which counted on the participation of 31 European education ministers, social partners and the European Commission — requests the development of “common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning, with the aim of assuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels” (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2005, p. 133).

Continuing the work of the European Commission, the European Education Council agreed on the establishment of a set of principles in this field (May 2004), which should be taken into consideration in the definition of validation policies and practices, and which should be guided by the following aspects:

- Individual entitlements

The validation of non-formal and informal learning should be a voluntary process, based on individual initiative and which should respect the equality of access and treatment. Privacy and individual rights should be respected.

- Obligations of the stakeholders

They should define their responsibilities and competences, the systems and approaches of the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, with the guarantee of adequate quality control mechanisms. They should provide guidance, counselling and information to individuals about the systems and approaches.

- Trust

The processes, procedures and criteria should be fair and transparent and supported by quality control mechanisms.

- Credibility and legitimacy

The systems and approaches should respect legitimate interests and guarantee the balanced participation of the various structures involved.

The validation process should be impartial and establish mechanisms which guarantee there are no conflicts based on interest present.

Those who participate in the process should be professionally competent (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2005).

WHAT IS RECOGNIZED AND VALIDATED? HOW IS RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION PERFORMED?

Non-formal and informal learning concepts, experiential learning

Recognition and validation practices aim to identify and give visibility to knowledge, competences and skills acquired in non-formal and informal educational/training contexts.

Formal, non-formal and informal learning concepts have broadly covered present-day literature and are currently understood in the following way (C.E, 2000):

- Formal learning — is acquired in teaching and training institutions, leading to an acquisition of diplomas and qualifications;

- Non-formal learning — stems from actions developed outside the formal systems such as at work, in the community, in social life, etc., and which do not necessarily result in certification;

- Informal learning — results from the broader situations of life and is frequently not recognized (individually and socially).

Context and intention have been viewed as the most determinant dimensions in the categorization of different learning types (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2005):

- Formal learning — when learning takes place in a structured, learning context, in which the activities are planned and geared towards this aim and learning is intentional. Eg., formal educational system;

- Non-formal learning — learning takes place in a structured context, with planned activities (not necessarily specifically for learning), and it is intentional. Eg., work context;

- Informal learning — learning takes place in non-structured situations and is not intentional. Eg., family, social context, etc.

Therefore, we consider that non-formal and informal learning occurs times and in places that are neither specifically nor formally structured by education/training, in situations of work, leisure and daily life, and there is frequently no learning intention (informal learning).

From a theoretical point of view, the issue of learning in non-formal and informal contexts demands the adoption of a broad, globalizing and educational perspective. This type of learning is understood in light of a theoretical reference framework, including the following concept of experiential learning^d.

Experiential learning differs from a conception of formal learning that is structured and developed in formal educational contexts, from an action organized explicitly with the purpose of providing the acquisition of specific systematized and formalized knowledge; its content is open, organized in accordance with the events of daily life and the surrounding atmosphere; learning may, however, occur in formal contexts, in a residual, implicit and non-controlled manner. These learning processes occur in a multiplicity of contexts and situations concerning the lives of people, and the contexts represent a site for interaction between the individual and life in general.

Experiential learning is related to a dynamic process of acquiring knowledge and competences (multiple and diversified both by nature as well as in content type), which does not follow a cumulative and additional logic but rather one based on recomposition — new knowledge is constructed and includes the knowledge people already have. The experiential learning process is developed throughout one's life, based on a multiplicity of contexts — family, social, professional, associative, etc. Experience is a key element in the learning process^e, forming the basis for reflection, problematization and concept formation and contributing to the transformation of the individual, in terms of identity and on a personal level, thus, promoting his/her emancipation.

The main principles supporting recognition and validation practices are coherent with the experien-

tial learning perspective. This may be seen in the importance and legitimacy attributed to the learning that derives from a diversity of contexts and situations. The value given to experience-based knowledge represents an epistemological rupture with a positivistic, dichotomous conception of knowledge; practical knowledge is not a mere application of theoretical knowledge.

On the other hand, experiential learning is also in accordance with a holistic perspective, which takes into account the individual's developmental process in its entirety and his/her relationship with the environment, with and him/herself.

Nevertheless, experience and learning are not synonyms; the experiences are not recognized and validated, but rather the learning outcomes (knowledge, skill and competences), which are the results; as we have seen, experience is the basis and condition for learning and, in order for it to be a formative process, it has to be well-thought, reconstructed and conscious. The result of this process is the elaboration of new knowledge and new representations, thus, contributing to the identity transformation of the individual and his/her relationship with the world. Knowledge results from the confrontation and transformation of experience.

This assumption underlies the recognition and validation principles: personal experience is at the root of knowledge construction (of a diversified nature), and subject to being specified, recognized and validated.

All contexts of life are possible sites for the learning process and the development of competences. A reflective process is instigated by direct confrontation with situations and experiences which gives rise to the acquisition of new knowledge.

The reflective dimension in experiential learning is considered to be a key aspect of the process, however, the ability to reflect is not the same for everyone. It can be stimulated and improved, both individually and collectively, but always on the basis of the individual's involvement and intention. The reflective process demands a response concerning experience, its re-elaboration, re-evaluation and projection in reality (present or future).

These principles, stemming from educational thought, are present in the assumptions that determine recognition and validation practices. On weigh-

ing up his/her learning experiences, the individual enters a retrospective process, taking part in a reflective task with a view to identifying the knowledge and competences that result from it. On the other hand, the re-elaboration of experience is carried out in the light of a given projection — the project, the purpose of the weighing up process. Therefore, the weighing up of learning experiences is part of a retrospective and prospective dimension. This specification task (from implicit to explicit, invisible to visible), mediated by language, is often only accomplished with the aid and support of specialized professionals, by means of an inter-subjective confrontation. Hence, the educational process of these actors is considered indispensable for the guarantee of the necessary conditions to accomplish recognition and validation.

As personal identity is a process in permanent construction (in the confrontation of individual and social aspects), based on meaningful experiences and learning processes that are integrated by the individual, the importance or depreciation of the knowledge and competences of the adult may also be translated in his/her appreciation or depreciation of him/herself as an individual. This assumption has relevant implications in the field of recognition and validation of experiential learning.

The recognition process, which assumes the identification and specification of the individual's experiences and subsequent learning outcomes, reinforces self-esteem and self-image when it is viewed as a rewarding experience. Awareness — (re)cognition — by the individual of his/her processes of constructive transformation (in terms of personality, behaviour, knowledge and competences and of the circumstances that made this transformation possible) reinforces his/her autonomy and emancipation. It may, on the contrary, contribute to a fragility of identity if the process is not conducted and/or experienced in a positive way. The principle that underlies these practices is based on an appreciation of the acquired potential (of knowledge and competences, not clearly conveyed up to the moment) and not the deficiencies, thus, contributing to a reinforcement of personal and professional identity. As far as Feutrie (1997) is concerned, it is essential to have a “double dynamic interpretation” of personal experiences, by means of a *mise-en-scène* of the acquired compe-

tences, through the definition of paths and promising future abilities; also, by means of an establishment of correspondences, in terms of the clarification of potentialities (more than of judgment, in a logic of needs).

One of the main assumptions of recognition and validation sustains that the experiential learning the individual possesses (specified in terms of knowledge, competences, attitudes, etc) should be considered the basis for and in articulation with further learning experiences, from a recompositional perspective. The individual's reservoir of experiences is an indispensable resource for future learning, however, the adult's profound need for autonomy often clashes with the imposed learning strategies, which are characteristic of the traditional education model, by which the adult is seen as dependent and which does not take previous experiential learning into account.

Subsequently, the introduction of recognition and validation practices in educational contexts question the traditional conceptions and models which are not in harmony with the challenges that this issue stimulates.

The recognition and validation of competences

If we bear in mind that in some countries, within an educational framework, educational models based on competences have been introduced, acting as the reference for recognition and validation, then the subject of competence identification and evaluation takes on particular relevance.

As we have pointed out in several pieces of work (Pires, 2002, 2003, 2004b), the concept of competence may take on a number of different theoretical approaches. Awareness of theoretical and epistemological diversity is fundamental in the field of competences, since each focal point, on giving priority to certain aspects over others, conditions, in methodological terms, the choice of more appropriate strategies and instruments for the comprehension of its components and elements.

As we have pointed out in other pieces of work, a competence is a social construction and depends on the adopted conventions or viewpoints; competences are dependent on judgments made of them and have a device as their reference; the concepts and devices adopted are never neutral (Le Boterf, 2000).

WHAT ARE THE LOGICS OF RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION?

Recognition and validation systems may be developed according to two different, but complimentary, logics of self-assessment and validation /accreditation (Kalika, 1998):

— The individual logic of self-assessment is personal recognition, with formative purposes. The individual evaluates his/her learning experiences with a view to identifying his/her knowledge and competences and carrying out a project that will possibly culminate in complementary education. A system that contemplates this logic should be able to cover the levels and types of competences acquired, as well as the areas in which the individual can complete his/her learning.

— The formal recognition of competences is the social logic behind validation/accreditation (in accordance with predetermined and authorized terms of reference for the various fields) and is accomplished by means of an institution with authority for such a task. The social use of validation/accreditation depends strongly on the legitimacy of the system and its social recognition.

The recognition process related to the individual and personal dimension, may be considered the basis for the validation process (which leads to an official certification) and to the social and institutional dimension. As already identified, both the recognition and validation processes endeavour to focus on the knowledge and competences acquired by adults, regardless of the contexts in which they were developed — educational, professional, family, social, sporting, leisure, etc.

Personal recognition (“in itself” and/or “for oneself”) is part of a shaping logic based on self-assessment, awareness and personal appropriation of knowledge. This awareness may permit a person’s better positioning and progression, both in the educational and in the vocational training system and in the professional world, as well as in society. The clarification and identification of the individual’s potentialities and intentions open the way for an elaboration of projects (personal, educational, professional), and contribute to the (re)construction of identities — as we defend, the result of recognition

profoundly affects the adult’s dimension of identity. The developmental logic (of the process) aims to give value to the wealth of the individual’s potential, and to orientate it so as to progress, using the resources he/she already has as a basis. It may trigger off the personal dynamics of self-development, self-appreciation, self-confidence and the desire for permanent and constantly unfinished development/construction. The individual is recognized in him/herself, reinforcing his/her self-esteem and promoting his/her emancipation.

Since, at the outset, there are no external terms of reference with which the already existing resources can be compared and evaluated, the term of reference is constructed by the individual and based on the knowledge and competences he/she already has. The results of this recognition may be an important negotiable instrument (materialized in a summary or *portfolio*), which is managed by the individual, in both educational and professional contexts, and could become a greater investment in the management of his/her future.

Validation, on the other hand, attributes a formal and official status to the knowledge and competences already held by the individual; it leads to the obtainment of complete or partial diplomas/ certificates/ qualifications. It involves a stage prior to recognition, the identification of knowledge already held, for further comparison with a particular term of reference— an educational programme, course component, modules or subjects, references for professional activities, which is normal and generally standardized, thus, conferring a legal value to the learning acquired in a number of different contexts. There is an underlying summative logic to the validation/accreditation processes.

The learning that is valued by educational systems is based on a disciplinary and scientific logic, an organization of targeted and formalized knowledge. It is explained in such a way that it may be appropriated and accumulated by the individual, and is represented in accordance with assessment and sanction forms used by the system in question.

Although the conception that underlies recognition of experiential learning defends that experience is what produces knowledge (knowledge of action, implicit, tacit knowledge), it does not restrict

itself, solely, to the type of learning outcome that is valued by the formal systems (formal, theoretical, academic knowledge), on both school and professional levels. Experience-based knowledge, resulting from acquired experience, is not structured on the basis of a disciplinary logic. It follows a holistic and integrative logic, and is often invisible, but can be explained and identified by means of an enunciative process, and reveal all its wealth and complexity. This process is not only dependent on the individual's cognitive resources, but also on the support given by the "mediator" and the quality of the relationship established with him/her (trust, openness, authenticity).

The formative logic, implicit in recognition practices may, in theoretical terms, lead to an understanding of this wealth and diversity, since the processes focus on the identification of acquired knowledge and competences and the revelation of the potential each person has within.

As validation is always based on an external, stabilized and specific term of reference, it only gives visibility to learning that is considered pertinent within the framework of the educational system. The diploma, title and certificate (or the units/modules that are part of them) attest the knowledge and competences that underlie them. Hence, the validation process only covers a part of the experiential lifelong learning processes, in accordance with the purpose and specificity of each system or device.

Depending on the nature of the term of reference in question (educational system, work and employment) certain fields and knowledge contents, which are always more restricted than those the individual has acquired in the various contexts of life, are given priority. Therefore, the scope of validation is limited by great or restricted openness and great or little flexibility of its supporting referential terms.

Both logics (formative and summative) may be seen from a complementary perspective, in that it is necessary, first, to recognize in order to formally attest, and generally, they are articulated in the identified systems (Pires, 2002, 2005) but have different levels of articulation.

Seemingly, the tension between the different logics may lead to less appreciation of the formative function (recognition), within systems where the aim is primarily summative (validation); neverthe-

less, as we have already pointed out, it is not possible to validate without prior recognition of the acquired knowledge and competences. On this basis, we question the extent to which it is possible to avoid the risk of a "slip" of the formative function or, in other words, the extent to which the depreciation of the formative function (of the process) can be avoided to benefit the summative (product) and excessive attention given to the final product (diploma, certificate, credit).

From the perspective of adult learning theoretical approaches, we defend that the validation process should always be supported by a process of guidance and individual accompaniment, before, during and after validation. The quality of the support and guidance given to the individual during the process of clarification and identification of previous knowledge (usually during the elaboration of the *portfolio*) and its scope, on accomplishing the overall evaluation of his/her learning processes and competences, or simply identifying the ones that the system officially recognizes (terms of reference or *standards*) — may be decisive in the future implication of the adult involved in a formative process. As far as lifelong learning processes are concerned, the formative dimension of these systems and devices should be reinforced. In our opinion, the very complex educational dimension of the process of recognizing experiential learning should not be reduced to an inventory or a comparison with predefined lists of competences.

HOW IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING RECOGNIZED AND VALIDATED?

The value given to experiential learning constructed in professional and broader life situations, beyond the formal educational contexts, implies the use of new assessment practices, other than the traditional ones, so as to contemplate the multiplicity and complexity of such an acquisition.

As we stated in the study performed on an international level (Pires, 2002, 2005), the majority of implemented systems use a diversity of approaches and methodologies, according to the nature of the process in question, the system or the institutions involved; there is a wide variety of supporting in-

struments, and it does not seem possible to identify a unique methodology or procedure.

As for the principles that guide the recognition and validation practices — a focus on the person and his/her singularity — it would be more appropriate to use methodologies that imply more personalized processes (such as the *portfolio*, Biographical Approaches, Life Histories) that are not particularly compatible with mass procedures (tests, exams, etc.). Nevertheless, we have identified systems that use the application of tests, exams and other traditional evaluation instruments.

The choice of approach depends on the nature of the request, the individual's motivation and the result to be obtained. In principle, the decision should always be negotiated between the person in question and the adviser, since the person is the “author” of his/her own history and formative development. On this basis, he/she should be given a central role in the choice of means and form of clarification of his/her learning.

As far as the systems and devices are concerned, where the ultimate aim is validation, we have identified the elaboration of personal *dossiers/portfolios* of competences and interviews among the most important methodologies; tests (based on skills, knowledge, etc.), written or oral exams, simulations, practical exercises and even evaluation within a work context (mainly in the cases where the terms of reference are constructed on the basis of professional competences) may also be used.

The personal *dossier/portfolio* includes a description of the experiences and activities that have been developed, of the acquired learning and competences and, also, receipts and documents from employment and educational entities; it may also be accompanied by the projects, layouts, products accomplished, etc.

The involvement of the individual and the support of specialized professionals are fundamental for the development of reflection/clarification/formalization. The interviews (both structured and non-structured), along with the *portfolios*, are also part of the “compulsory” techniques used. Subsequently, the dialogue seems to be part of the recognition methodologies in most of the countries involved in the study. According to Bjornavold, “the balanced dialogue and use of self-assessment (and

self-knowledge), with a view to improving the quality of the evaluation process, are of crucial importance in these approaches. Furthermore, both these aspects allow for a recognition of the individual and contextually specific nature of the knowledge that is to be evaluated. The candidate is unique, to a certain degree, and, so being, the methodologies should reflect this principle” (1997, p. 59).

We have identified the combined and flexible use of a variety of techniques, in order to achieve the fullest and most rewarding exploration possible, to the detriment of standardized procedures. However, the knowledge tests — the traditional evaluation instrument — are used fairly regularly when the aim is to identify the knowledge level of the individuals in certain disciplinary areas and specific fields; resorting to the use of instruments of a quantitative nature, as a source of “strict, objective comprehension” of the individual's knowledge, could be a methodological illusion. If we consider that the classical evaluation mainly tests the return of knowledge (Aubret & Gilbert, 1994), then the traditional instruments do not seem to be the most appropriate for the identification of experiential knowledge, which are not structured according to a disciplinary and academic logic.

The tendency found in the various systems is one based on diversity and the complementarity of approaches and methodologies. It is geared towards a closer study and reflection on the most appropriate instruments and techniques for the practices in question.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We have tried to demonstrate how the recognition and validation processes are based, from a theoretical perspective, on concepts stemming from adult learning (Pires, 2002, 2005), namely:

- learning is a process of personal construction which dynamically integrates different dimensions: relational-affective, cognitive, socio-cultural, sensorial-motor and experiential;
- learning and experience are interdependent; experience takes on a central role in adult learning; experience (“raw material”), when accompanied by a process of critical reflection and formalization,

may be converted (“trans-formed”) into knowledge and competences;

- the learning process and development of adults do not occur only in institutionalized, formal, educational spaces and time periods; adults learn, construct their knowledge and develop competences in a number of situations and contexts (formal, non-formal and informal) which are part of their life experiences;

- from an epistemological perspective, the knowledge that results from an experiential process has not been sufficiently valued by the formal, educational systems that give priority to conceptual and universal knowledge;

- traditional knowledge testing methods are in harmony with a knowledge construction and diffusion model, based on a disciplinary and cumulative logic;

- knowledge and competences constructed by means of experience and in other contexts other than formal have personal, social and professional (and concomitantly economic) value. However, in order to accomplish this, they need to acquire visibility — they are generally tacit, implicit, “invisible”.

From an Educational perspective, particularly in the field of adult learning, on promoting visibility and the legibility of “occult” learning, recognition and validation act as an important instigator of new, formative dynamics, since they (Pires, 2002, 2005):

- contribute towards the elaboration of personal, professional and social projects, articulating existing knowledge with the individual’s motivations and aspirations;

- open the way for new educational opportunities, not from a logic based on deficiency but rather an experience-based one^{2f} —, facilitating integration, formative mobility and promoting lifelong learning;

- develop self-esteem, self-image and autonomy, raising motivation to the level of adult involvement in the learning processes;

- contribute to the reinforcement and construction of personal, social and professional identities.

Nevertheless, the introduction of these new edu-

cational practices demands a profound change in the educational systems, since, from the perspective of a paradigm of lifelong learning, the recognition and validation processes can not be restricted to the application of a set of procedures and methodologies^g, from a technical and technocratic educational perspective. For both actors and structures, a change of representations and educational practices is implied: the evolution of the representations and learning practices, the evolution of the traditional educational models so that the principles and assumptions that underlie recognition and validation may be integrated.

Therefore, the emergence of these practices confronts the educational systems with a complexity of issues that convey a paradigmatic change as far as the representations and practices are concerned, namely, in terms of structure, curricular organization, teaching/learning methodologies, assessment methodologies, educational standards and referentials, institutional relations between the system and society and among its subsystems, the representations of the institutional actors — political decision-makers, managers, conceivers, teachers, trainers, technicians, among others.

On the other hand, it is possible to identify a diversity of tensions and conflicts the most relevant of which we will go on to point out.

Tensions and conflicts in recognition and validation

According to Liétard (1997), the issue regarding recognition and validation is part of an influence game and a power relationship that are not always favourable to the person. The need for the presentation of valid learning proof, which is the entire responsibility of the candidate, often without solid support of the process on the part of the institutions (implying high human investment costs), the verification that experiential learning is frequently compared with the established formative contents, without a univocal description of their abilities, are aspects that highlight the complexity of this issue’s emerging challenges and paradoxes. According to the author, the validation systems forward a set of “badly managed”, collective responsibilities to individual responsibility, such as exclusion and unemployment, in a more precarious and insecure context. “Isn’t the focus on individual responsibility in

the management of his/her “competence capital” a camouflage (...) that dilutes the place of social, economic and organizational determinisms into success or failure?” (op.cit., p. 73).

These issues are relevant and reinforce the need for understanding recognition and validation from another perspective and not as a “quick, efficient” answer to some of the current social and economic problems, among which we point out the search for the “key-qualifications”, supposedly capable of making people apt to deal with the rapid technological and organizational change, and to survive in the global market of competitiveness.

Current debates on the issue of validation indicate a need to find innovative and appropriate answers, but developments are particularly complex.

For Merle (1997) it is not possible to find a “standard solution, applicable to all countries”, since the validation systems are the result of a social construction, articulated with the historical specificity of each society. On the other hand, this author draws attention to the fact that the options are not merely technical but far broader: “it would be illusory to consider that a new certification system, no matter how well conceived, could refrain from re-equating relations between initial education and continuous education, from re-valuing the place occupied by professional and technological dimensions in initial education and contributing to the evolution of qualification management in enterprises.” (Merle, 1997, pp. 38-9).

Any solution that is found in the field of recognition and validation is never simple from a technical point of view, nor neutral in political terms.

Recognition and validation should be put into perspective as a “full-time” educational function, a “backbone of an educational project”, the construction of the personal and social identities of citizens, an environment of personal development, allowing access to social qualification (Liétard, 1997). However, for the author, the future of these practices is still uncertain: they may become the root of a new educational order, a permanent reformer of educational projects, or they may be the premises of new forms of social management, at the service of the market economy.

The training of teachers/trainers/advisers/supervisors

There do not seem to be stabilized answers that guarantee the quality and reliability of the processes in question yet. Besides the validity of the procedures, the fact that these procedures are mediated by people must also be taken into account, which directly implies the question of the appropriate preparation of the professionals involved.

In this way, the training of those involved — trainers, teachers, advisers, supervisors, tutors, etc. — is crucial for the guarantee of the quality of the processes in question. Among the professionals who intervene in the recognition and validation processes, the counsellors, supervisors and teachers/trainers have a fundamental role in terms of the value given to the acquired knowledge of each person, the increase in self-esteem and self-image, the support for the awareness and clarification of his/her learning and identity construction and, on occasions, the reconciliation of the person with the path he/she has followed in life.

These professionals have to be capable of turning a personal discourse into a social and professional one. This role is not reducible to the mere application of techniques and evaluation instruments. The actors of this process play a mediating, formative and mobilizing role of autonomy and new learning dynamics. The human qualities of hearing, of giving value to one’s neighbour are as, or more, important than the techniques needed in terms of knowledge and use of support instruments, scientific fields, etc. In our opinion, the training of professional teams, a role that is primarily the responsibility of the institutions of higher education, seems to be of utmost importance for any implementation strategy of the recognition and validation systems of experience-based learning.

Furthermore, from a broader perspective, if we consider that “the sustainability of a long-term educational system implies putting teachers and educators in the front line of the new educational paradigms” (Carneiro, 2001), the training of these actors, in this context, acquires particular relevance.

Therefore, the training of teachers and trainers should be (re)thought, in the light of the new educational reference tables, within the framework of the new paradigm of lifelong learning. From the ana-

lyzed courses of educational change which influence the representations and practices of teachers, trainers, students and, indeed all those involved in the educational process, we have focused on those in articulation with the process of knowledge construction, with the knowledge itself, learning and processes and contexts where they are developed. In this way, the training of teachers/trainers, from a perspective of lifelong learning, should be enriched by the contributions of these reference tables and, as far as we are concerned, bear in mind the dimensions on which we have tried to reflect, but which still do not exhaust the complexity of the phenomena involved.

The necessary changes in educational organizations, particularly as regards their structure and organizational forms, terms of reference, strategies and pedagogical models, have come to introduce new reference tables that confront the educational actors in terms of their representations and iden-

tity issues. The change in educational thought, the rethinking of knowledge and the necessary competences in a changing society, the value given to knowledge acquired experientially, the increasing attenuation of the boundaries between general and professional education, initial and continuous assessment and formal and informal education are aspects that should be considered and reflected in the process of training teachers and trainers. The training of these professionals should contribute to a culture of lifelong learning, respond to the needs of the current ones and simultaneously allow an anticipation of future needs, from a pro-active perspective. In this framework, the institutions of higher education take on a double responsibility: as institutions responsible for the training of teachers and trainers, and as privileged contexts of knowledge construction, permanent questioning and the production of new ways of understanding reality.

ENDNOTES

1. Lifelong and Life wide in accordance with the “Memorando da Aprendizagem ao Longo da Vida” (Comissão Europeia, 2000).

2. According to Canário (1999), the functioning of school organization is characterised by the standardised compartmentation of time, space and knowledge, which articulates with a cumulative conception of knowledge and learning. The author identifies the convergences between this kind of organization and the Taylorist conception of the production processes, geared towards the production and consumption of masses.

3. According to Dominicé (1989), school courses and didactic tradition are based on this conception, which is reflected both in universities and in continuous training. Canário (1999, p. 100) also points out that the functioning of school organization, from the perspective of its relationship with knowledge, “underestimates and gives little importance to the acquisitions, interests and experiences of the pupils, as well as the sociocultural characteristics of its context.”

4. The concept of experiential learning presents conceptual proximity informal education (Pain, 1991), experiential education (Gelpi, 1989). This concept has been enriched by the contributions of Kolb, Landry, Theil, Barkatoolah, Roelens, Pineau, Enriotti, Finger, McGill e Weil. See Pires (2002, 2005) on this subject.

5. Displayed in the works of Dewey, Rogers, Knowles, Kolb, Mezirow and Freire, among others. See Pires (2002, 2005).

6. According to Correia (1997), the conceptions of “technical and adaptive rationality” and “expressive and emancipatory rationality” are converted into different forms of defining and responding to problems; the critical perspective that defends “intervention models concerned with deepening the emancipatory validity of education”, is geared towards the “rehabilitation of experiences, including them in a process whose relevance is no longer defined by its appropriateness in relation to formal knowledge that is subject to being transmitted, but rather, to the meaning attributed to them by individuals and groups in the process of learning (...) As well as being concerned with the recognition of this knowledge, the educational task endeavours to induce situations in which

the individuals recognize themselves in their knowledge and are capable of incorporating the actual knowledge produced by experience and education into their experiential patrimony” (op.cit., p. 37). According to the author, it is the “re-appropriation of the formativeness” that is at stake.

Canário (1999) also points to the importance of developing the dominant logic of “needs” (negative view of the subject, that gives visibility to the deficiencies and gaps) to the logic of “acquired” (understood as potentialities), viewing the adult as the “main resource of his/her own learning experience”.

7. A “magic potion”, according to Bjornavold (2000). Also, in the opinion of Rodrigues e Nóvoa “The issue (of recognition) is not resolved with the multiplication of “centres” where analysis, validation and the certification of lifelong ‘documents’ are carried out. What is most important is that certain educational practices are included in the day-to-day life of people and institutions”, becoming a part of the culture of the educational structures in which they are inserted. (in Canário & Cabrito, 2005, p. 12).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- AUBRET, Jacques & GILBERT, Patrick (1994). *Reconnaissance et validation des acquis*. Paris: PUF.
- AUBRET, J. & GILBERT, P. (2003). *Valorisation et validation de l'expérience professionnelle*. Paris: Dunod.
- BJORNAVOLD, Jens (1997). *Identification et validation des acquis antérieurs et/ou non-formels; Expériences, innovations et problèmes*. Rev. Panorama. Thessalonique: CEDEFOP.
- BJORNAVOLD, Jens (2000). *Making learning visible—identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Europe*. Luxembourg: Pub. CEDEFOP.
- CANÁRIO, Rui (1999). *Educação de Adultos: um campo e uma problemática*. Lisboa: Educa.
- CANÁRIO, R. & CABRITO, B. (orgs.) (2005). *Educação e Formação de Adultos. Mutações e Convergências*. Lisboa: Educa.
- CARNEIRO, Roberto (2001). Nota introdutória. *Novo Conhecimento, Nova Aprendizagem*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, pp. 11-15.
- COLARDYN, D. & BJORNAVOLD, J. (2005). *The learning continuity: European Inventory on validating non-formal learning. National Policies and practices*

- in validation of non-formal and informal learning*. CEDEFOP Panorama Series, 117. Luxembourg: Publications of the European Communities.
- CORREIA, José Alberto (1997). Formação e Trabalho: contributos para uma transformação dos modos de os pensar na sua articulação. In R. CANÁRIO (org.), *Formação e Situações de Trabalho*. Porto: Porto Editora, pp. 13-41.
- COMISSÃO EUROPEIA (1995). *Livro Branco sobre a Educação/Formação. Ensinar e Aprender, rumo à Sociedade Cognitiva*. Bruxelas.
- COMISSÃO EUROPEIA (2000). *Memorando sobre Aprendizagem ao Longo da Vida*. Bruxelas.
- COMISSÃO EUROPEIA (2001). *Making a European area of Lifelong Learning a reality*. Brussels.
- COMISSÃO EUROPEIA (2002). *Commission's action plan for skills and mobility*. Brussels.
- COMISSÃO EUROPEIA (2004). *Common European principles for validation of informal and non formal learning*. Brussels.
- DOMINICE, Pierre (1989). Expérience et apprentissage: faire de la nécessité vertu. *Education Permanente*, 100,101, pp. 57-65.
- FARZAD, M. & PAIVANDI, S. (2000). *Reconnaissance et Validation des Acquis en Formation*. Paris: Ed Anthropos.
- FEUTRIE, Michel (1997). *Identification, validation et accréditation de l'apprentissage antérieur et informel — France*. Thessalonique: CEDEFOP Panorama.
- FEUTRIE, Michel (2005). Comunicação apresentada na *EUCEN Bergen Conference*, 28-30 April 2005, “Workshop Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning” (documento policopiado).
- GELPI, Ettore (1989). Quelques propos politiques sur l'éducation expérientielle. *Education Permanente*, 100, 101, pp. 67-78.
- KALIKA, Michel (1998). Quelles conditions les systèmes d'accréditation doivent-ils remplir? In *L'Accréditation des Compétences dans la Société Cognitive — Actes de la Conférence organisé à Marseille les 2 et 3 Février 1998*. France: Éditions de L'Aube, pp. 117-129.
- LEBOTERF, Guy (2000). *Construire les compétences individuelles et collectives*. Paris: Ed. d'Organisation.
- LIÉTARD, Bernard (1997). Se reconnaître dans le maquis des acquis. *Education Permanente*, 133. Paris, pp. 65-74.
- MERLE, Vincent (1997). L'évolution des systèmes de validation et de certification — quels modèles possibles et quels enjeux pour la France? *Formation Professionnelle*, 12, pp. 37-49.
- NÓVOA, António (2001). États des lieux de l'Éducation comparée, paradigmes, avancées et impasses. In R. SIROTA (dir.), *Autour du comparatisme en Éducation*. Paris: PUF, pp. 41-68.
- PAIN, Abraham (1991). Education Informelle: les mots...et la chose (réponses à un praticien). In B. COURTOIS B. & G. PINEAU, *La Formation Expérientielle des Adultes*. Paris: La Documentation Française, pp. 59-65.
- PINEAU, Gaston et al. (coords.) (1991/1997). *Reconnaître les Acquis — Démarches d'Exploration Personnalisée*. Paris: La Mesonance.
- PIRES, Ana (2003). L'Éducation/Formation tout au Long de la Vie et la formation des enseignants et formateurs: nouveaux défis, nouvelles questions? *Colloque International de l'AFIRSE/ UNESCO*, 29 a 31 Maio 2003. Paris.
- PIRES, Ana Luisa (2004a). O reconhecimento e a validação das aprendizagens dos adultos: contributos para a reflexão educativa. *Revista Trajectos*, 4. Lisboa: ISCTE.
- PIRES, Ana Luisa (2004b). Educação/Formação e Trabalho: uma abordagem educativa sobre a problemática das competências. In *Actas do XIII Colóquio da Afirse/AIPELF*, Regulação da Educação e Economia — Organização, Financiamento e Gestão. Universidade de Lisboa, 20/22 Novembro 2003.
- PIRES, Ana Luisa (2005). *Educação e Formação ao Longo da Vida: análise crítica dos sistemas e dispositivos de reconhecimento e validação de aprendizagens e de competências*. Tese de Doutoramento (2005, 2002) FCT/UNL. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.
- PIRES, Ana Luisa (2006). O Reconhecimento e a Validação da Experiência e a Investigação. In G. FIGARI et al. (orgs.), *Avaliação das Competências e Aprendizagens Experienciais. Saberes, modelos e métodos*. Lisboa: Educa, pp. 437-450.
- RODRIGUES, Cristina & NÓVOA, António (2005). Prefácio. In R. CANÁRIO & B. CABRITO (orgs.), *Educação e Formação de Adultos. Mutações e convergências*. Lisboa: Educa, pp. 7-14.

Translated by Tânia Lopes da Silva

