

ESREA Network on Migration, Transnationalism and Racisms

'Building Solidarities for Anti-Racist Adult Education'
13th – 15th June 2018, Edinburgh, UK

Conference Proceedings

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Co-producing a Toolkit for the Initial Assessment of Migrants' Prior Non-formal and Informal Learning and Skills

Abstract

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a very diverse arena of practice, operating across the public, private and non-profit sectors. Informal RPL processes addressing formal, non-formal and informal learning and skills are seldom planned and performed. When the persons involved are migrants, their specific knowledge and experience is recognised to an even lesser extent.

This paper reports on an empirical experience, the work of the Synergies Project co-financed by the Erasmus + EU program. The project aimed to link the competences and validation-related needs of disadvantaged learners with the European and National Qualifications Frameworks. Civil servants, professionals and volunteers co-produced, in the form of meeting-based training activities followed by workshops, a Toolkit designed to train adult education professionals and volunteers.

Keywords: adult education, adult training, non-formal and informal education, RPL, migration.

Introduction

The validation and recognition of prior learning has become a widespread phenomenon since the European Union made requests to Member States to this effect in the 1990s. Public and private organisations have become interested in validation as a means of promoting equality and inclusion in education and training, creating a more flexible labour market and promoting integration and social cohesion. Several projects and pilots have been run at local and regional level, but they have not been stable enough to become widespread and recognised at a wider level. Furthermore, the slow pace of recognition of formal competences has overshadowed the process of recognition of non-formal, and above all informal, learning and skills. As a consequence, research has been focused on the practices and effects of validation of formal prior learning for individuals, groups, organizations and countries, and only a few studies have examined the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning and skills addressing migrants in particular (Bencivenga, 2018; Diedrich, 2013; Diedrich, Walter, & Czarniawska, 2011).

It is not uncommon for professionals and volunteers without formal qualifications to be involved in the first two phases of the process by which a competent

authority recognises learning outcomes based on set standards: identification (interviewing the person concerned to find out about their experiences) and documentation (making the individual's experiences visible, for example through Europass, which was created for this purpose). These two phases provide a formal assessment of experiences, leading to a validation and later to a certification resulting in a partial or complete qualification.

When the persons involved are migrants, RPL processes addressing prior formal learning seldom address non-formal and informal learning and skills as well. Migrants' specific knowledge and experience are recognised to an even lesser extent by professionals and volunteers working in the numerous organisations informally evaluating their competences and learning. This lack of attention is a matter of concern for the EU, for policy-makers and for organisational managers, as well as for the practitioners and volunteers themselves, who recognise the need to give value to non-formal and informal skills and knowledge to help migrants' integration paths. Training courses could address these issues in order to help practitioners and volunteers acquire competences for identifying and documenting prior non-formal and informal learning and skills.

This paper reports on an empirical experience, the Synergies Project, co-financed by the Erasmus + EU program. The project aimed to link the competences and validation-related needs of disadvantaged learners with the European and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). One of the activities performed in the project was to create and test four localised versions of a Toolkit to train professionals and volunteers on how to validate disadvantaged learners' competences and skills acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. This paper focuses on Italy, one of the four countries involved in the project, where the local Partner, the Alpha Association, chose to focus on migrants. In the following pages, I begin by outlining some of the existing research on RPL and migrants. I then describe the approach adopted in the Synergies project and describe the development of the Toolkit's first draft, as well as issues observed when co-producing and pre-testing it in training sessions in preparation for a formal test. Finally, I reflect on some of the issues stemming from co-production practices, in particular how a bottom-up approach may shape organisations' assessments of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills.

RPL and Migrants

European regionalisation is considered to have encouraged more common approaches to migration policies (Joppke, 2007; Joppke & Morawska, 2003). Optimising migrants' entire skillset, including non-formal and informal education and training, increases their awareness of their competences and helps guide them in their choices and employability. Some countries have other mechanisms beyond NQFs which influence RPL, such as national immigration policies, that

may differ according to national or regional immigration infrastructures and laws. In Italy immigration policies refer to the conditions and rights accorded to migrants (Hammar, 1985), therefore qualifications and competences are recognised once migrants are already in the country. Recently, RPL acquired in non-formal and informal contexts has been analysed at European level; some countries, including Italy, have shown a constant evolution in which regional sub-systems and the involvement of different stakeholders favour on-going changes to the approach (Zanfrini, 2015).

At the local level, other factors may influence RPL. For example, while an "inclusive" view of RPL underlines its potential as a tool for social and labour market integration (Jackson, 2011; Lerner & Menahem, 2003), a view focused on deficits may result in the migrant's prior learning and competence being devalued (Guo, 2010; Guo & Andersson, 2006). This negative view may derive from misperceptions of an ontological and epistemological nature (Diedrich, 2013; Guo & Andersson, 2006). Aspin and Chapman (2000) have questioned the focus on rationality and considering knowledge as an entity with essential characteristics; the theory of situated knowledge has been proposed as a better way of '(a) examining how each of us moves back and forth between our own particular stories and the social production that is knowledge, and (b) challenging oppressive taxonomies of knowledge and the power relationships they enact' (Michelson, 1996, p. 194). A situated learning perspective has therefore begun to be used to examine the validation of prior learning in specific contexts (Andersson & Fejes, 2010), allowing the methodologies to be customised to suit migrants too.

Migrants from less developed countries have knowledge that is often considered inferior, and the racialisation and genderisation of knowledge are particularly evident. The result is that particular occupations and particular countries are favoured by some immigration regimes (Grand & Szulkin, 2002; Guo & Shan, 2013; Williams, 2007). According to Andersson and Guo (2009), when validation consists mainly of a technocratic exercise and a governing tool, it is based on the use of excluding, normalising and dividing practices to obtain the desired selection results. However, Souto-Otero and Villalba Garcia (2015) describe the emergence of a new process - selective inclusion of immigrants through validation, rather than merely exclusion or inclusion - based on the division of migrants into two mutually excluding classes: highly skilled and non-highly skilled. Thus the same country, or system, may enact inclusive and exclusive practices depending on local and/or temporal necessities.

Other research (Shan & Fejes, 2015) has considered migrants' skills and competencies as social and relational constructs capable of producing differences in their interactions with other social relations, but at the same time not challenging the power and practices of western countries. This perpetuates the hierarchical social order along axes of gender and race differences. The discriminatory effects of social inclusion practices have been analysed (Lodigiani

& Sarli, 2017), as has a vision of migrants as an instrumental workforce (Zanfrini, 2015), mainly when they lack formal learning or training.

Of particular interest when referring to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and skills is the notion of soft skills. Soft skills refer to the 'abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour' (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253), including the 'right' look and the 'right' sound (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005). Particularly important in the service economy, in which women are often overrepresented, the attention on soft skills favours the commodification of personal characteristics such as emotions, attitudes and even the way women dress and use make-up (Shan, 2015). Hierarchical social orders are thus perpetuated along axes of social differences, such as gender and race, by skills that are constructed by a dominant segment of the population. The essentialisation of women's work "seen as reflective of 'natural' talents or aptitudes" (Dunk, 1996, p. 105) is frequent; as a result jobs done primarily by women are considered less skilled than those done primarily by men (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010) and less attention may be placed on assessing these jobs, the skills for which are almost always acquired through informal training.

The Case Study

The Context

The Synergies project involved partners in Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy engaged in a process of consultative co-production between organisations which help disadvantaged people find a job or plan a training path in order to gain qualifications. This paper focuses on the Italian context and the information provided from now on will refer to this context only. The fourth intellectual output of the Synergies project led to the creation of a co-produced Toolkit for professionals and volunteers (although the Toolkit is aimed at volunteers and professionals, for political and strategic reasons, in Italy it is not yet possible for professionals to test or use it, at least not at official level). It can be modified and adapted for use in validating the competencies of disadvantaged learners, and consists of easy-to-use training material to help them identify prior formal, non-formal and informal learning.

In 2008, Italy and other EU Member States embarked on the process of referencing their national qualifications (those issued by the State, Regions and Public Administration) to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). To date, Italy still lacks a NQF, and complexity remains both in terms of legislation and institutions: competences are split between national and regional level both for education and vocational training (Bencivenga, 2018, p. 8). The aim in Italy was to create a Toolkit for professionals and volunteers to help them recognise the prior learning of people with the status of "migrants". In the context of the Synergy project, the term "migrant" is based on the definition from the EMN-

European Migration Report Glossary on Asylum and Migration: “a person who leaves their country or region of origin to live in another”; this relates to “any type of movement, whatever its length, composition and causes”. Since the Synergies project is aimed at people whose qualifications and competencies acquired in non-formal and informal contexts are difficult to document, here the term “migrants” does not include highly-qualified migrants and may include those who have moved in an irregular manner. However, given the type of organisations observed during the proposal, and their activities in the field, all the migrants benefitting from their services must have a regular status (the minimum level is a residence permit). The initial assessment can be carried out by each organisation once the person involved has obtained at least a temporary regular status.

Firstly, the project aimed to provide opportunities for the diversity of practices to be embraced and incorporated into the co-production process, as migrants can follow a variety of paths and do not follow a rigid scheme. Some of them will refer only to NGOs, while others will move from informal NGO assessments to the more formal public and private organisations. Younger migrants following formal learning and training paths will most often use public and private services only. Thus, the concrete practices and rationales related to the co-production of the Toolkit respect the need for flexibility seen in different organisations offering similar but not identical services. Secondly, the absence of stable networks of organisations dealing with RPL results in a lack of coordination and data exchange among professionals and volunteers. The Toolkit should help create a context in which organisations can share their knowledge and approaches, building informal networks that offer better services to migrants and, hopefully, encourage the transition towards stable networks. In this sense, the co-production of the Synergies Toolkit contributes to the literature on small case studies on consultative co-production in practice (Galloway & Edwards, 2017; Godding, Kreft, & Read, 2008).

The Project

The Synergies project was conducted over the course of 2016–2018. Fundamental to the Toolkit’s development was the involvement of organisations which assess and recognise the formal learning and skills of disadvantaged people in the four partner countries at different levels. Each partner chose a specific disadvantaged group: the Italian partner, the ALPHA Association, selected organisations working with migrants. In particular, the project assumed that non-formal and informal skills and knowledge of disadvantaged groups are not yet fully analysed during the assessment, evaluation and, in some cases, recognition of prior learning and training.

Following a review of the literature, in the project’s first phase 24 stakeholders from 21 different organisations were interviewed: people working for organisations supporting migrants and other disadvantaged groups; people

working for public labour market offices; professionals working in VET; and representatives of public organisations (at municipal, regional and national level) involved in employment and professional training. Following these interviews, ethnographic observation made it possible to study interactions and interviews as well as informal conversations with professionals and volunteers, and to attend the organisations' internal meetings (Bencivenga, 2018). These activities made it possible to collect data, to understand the interactions among organisations and how they perform their assessments, and also to establish official contacts at local and regional levels. Preparatory meetings were held in order to co-construct the Toolkit, followed by sessions in which the Toolkit was tested.

The initial results revealed that almost all of the interviews carried out by public, private and NGO organisations took account of non-formal and informal learning, although neither the forms they used nor the advice they offered took a formal approach to these aspects. The pathway suggested by the project and confirmed in its initial phase therefore exposed the extent to which many professionals and volunteers were already dealing with non-formal and informal learning and skills; this pointed towards a formal training pathway (the Toolkit) which includes a formalisation of these aspects. The purpose of the second phase was to explore and start to build routes for recognising migrants' non-formal and informal skills and competences. This was done by creating a Toolkit incorporating existing, as yet unutilised, tools for recording non-formal and informal competencies, and tools developed after observing assessments conducted by public, private and non-profit organisations dealing with migrants.

Developing the Prototype

Deciding on the Toolkit's contents involved identifying what is currently being done by the organisations observed, including understanding their criticism of the existing recording tools for formal assessment schemes (i.e. the EUROPASS, ECVET systems). Once identified, the above mentioned aspects were compared to check similarities in how the organisations adopt, modify or create tools or approaches. The interviews with experts conducted in the previous phase helped identify competencies that were deemed important for the Toolkit. These included training professionals and volunteers on how to interact with migrants who do have not yet mastered the local language or addressing the topic of the soft skills acquired by people living in other cultures. In this sense, it was important to involve migrants who carry out assessment activities for NGOs, since they add an "external" perspective on the Italian cultural and social aspects related to training and working issues.

Alongside the other activities, reflections were developed on the Index for inclusion (<http://www.csie.org.uk/resources/inclusion-index-explained.shtml>), a set of materials originally created to guide schools through a process of inclusive school development. The Index can be used to support the processes involved in developing learning and participation for all and reducing all exclusionary

pressures (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2017; Higham & Booth, 2018). The Index helps build supportive communities and foster high achievement for all staff and students and has been adapted and used as a basis for reflective activities within the Synergies project. The concept of inclusive education, initially focused on schools, has been extended to a variety of organisations, and the holistic approach of inclusion has been considered important to permeate the whole working experience of staff, migrants, their families and the community. The wider view of an inclusive approach to assessment and training activities must be ensured, according to the Index, by addressing the three major intertwined dimensions of the educational experience: organisation cultures, policies and practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). A preliminary exercise done by the Italian Partners' experts consisted of adapting sections of the Index to the specific contexts addressed in Synergies, and preparing a set of checklists to be used as a basis for self-evaluation and debate. The adaptation was checked and modified based on the advice of a stakeholders' subgroup interviewed in the first phase of the project.

Further meetings with the organisations working at local and regional level led to a consensus on what a professional or volunteer needs to know, understand and do to gather information on non-formal and informal learning acquired by people who come from different cultures to their own. Interviewing people from across all levels of the organisations (operators, supervisors, managers) revealed what training was feasible. For example, for political reasons, it is not currently possible to run structured training pathways involving those working in the public, private and non-profit sectors. While this created a limitation, since it was not possible to introduce a structured training pathway, it brought an advantage: only an organisation like ALPHA, which operates separately from associations working in the local area, could have attracted the interest and active participation of organisations who do not share a common working practice or common training pathways. The result was a list of ten practical activities associated with the practice of assessing non-formal and informal competences and knowledge, with a focus on migrants (Table.1).

Premises: The Index for inclusion: shaping the organisations	
Activity #1	Creating inclusive cultures
Activity #2	Promoting inclusive organisation policies
Activity #3	Developing inclusive organisation practices
First part: creating a common ground	
Activity #4	Legislative and conceptual background
Second part: strategies for implementation	
Activity #5, #6 and #7	Europass CV, ProfilPass, Youthpass
Activity #8	Techniques to help conversation with persons not fluent in the local language
Activity #9	How to test adults' practical competences (the case of caregivers, home workers)
Activity #10	Transversal competencies

Table 1. The Toolkit table of contents

Although it is not possible to detail each activity, it is important to say something about Activity n. 9. While all the other activities proposed in the Toolkit can be applied to any context with a minimum of adaptation, Activity #9 is specific for the target group chosen by the organisations involved in Italy, since women looking for a job in the care and homework sectors represent a significant group of clients. The next step was to create a draft for the Synergies Toolkit, including annexes and suggested reading. To do this, professionals and volunteers were asked to contribute their experience, while experts from the ALPHA association and other organisations assembled the contents and integrated the Toolkit with their competences.

The diversity of values, contexts and practices observed at the local level during the first phase was considered an important aspect not to be lost in the process. The Toolkit was therefore created with a bottom up-approach, while the experts and stakeholders involved in its creation also brought on board approaches and strategies officially recognised at international level. Two practical sessions enabled us to test the Toolkit in practice, trying out the activities and reflecting on them. The participants were given the draft Toolkit and supporting documents one week before the sessions. The sessions were attended by experts, stakeholders, professionals and volunteers who do not usually work together, as there is still no formal RPL network in the context analysed. As a result, the sessions enabled participants to utilise the materials under development, and to exchange different points of view; time for discussion was also included. At the end of the sessions, participants discussed a list of questions, and raised issues and problems that shaped the final Toolkit. Two authors and an expert from the ALPHA association both took on the dual role of tutor and researcher during the sessions.

The sessions were announced when the organisations involved were first contacted (a year and a half earlier), and recruitment took place through voluntary participation in the sessions and related activities. In this sense, the co-construction of the Toolkit began with the initial contact with the organisations and individuals, and the interviews and ethnographic observations were explained and justified by the intent to create a Toolkit. Fourteen volunteers from five organisations across the private and voluntary sectors participated in the activities. Each session lasted for five hours, with a two-hour plenary meeting afterwards to encourage discussion. During the sessions data were collected in a variety of forms, gathering written observations made by the participants, and recording comments and notes which were discussed with the participants at the end of the sessions. Evaluation forms were provided afterwards, and participants were asked to send them back one week later. The evaluation forms were a significant source: some insights emerged after the participants made a global reflection on the experience and were able to observe their daily activities through different lenses, provided by the exchanges with others during the session. Participants commented and critiqued the materials, and this consultative co-production fed directly into the further development of

the Synergies Toolkit. Two formal workshops are currently being planned, during which the Toolkit will be formally tested with professionals and volunteers not previously involved in the Project.

Analysis and conclusion

Diedrich (2013) has observed how little attention has been paid to how the validation of prior learning is enacted in practice. When validation is not yet formally organised, as in the case of the case study observed, a bottom-up approach engaging local practitioners means that the sample is always small and not necessarily representative of the relevant community at a wider level. When networks are not structured, the initial assessment may vary according to the type of organisation (public or private, profit or non-profit), its mission and vision and the level of formality it is bound to. It has been shown (Bencivenga, 2018) that volunteers often base their activities on job shadowing and personal beliefs; as a consequence, achieving representativity is a real challenge. The Alpha Association's approach was to allow an exchange of competences among organisations working in different contexts and with different aims, all of them assessing migrants. A two-way transfer was activated, attempting to incorporate professionals' and volunteers' understandings of assessing non-formal and informal learning and training into the existing tools available at national and international level (such as the Europass tools). At the same time, attempts were made to formalise training on less formal but relevant aspects, such as the difficulties in interacting with migrants who are not fluent in the country's language or in assessing practical competencies.

This was an attempt to respect the variety of approaches, also influenced by each organisation's mission and vision, but at the same time to add more structured tools. This very small project cannot offer general conclusions and recommendations on how migrants' non-formal and informal learning and training can be identified and assessed by public and private organisations and NGOs. However, what emerged from the experience of creating the Toolkit was that the macro level (the tools suggested by the EU, and the recommendations provided at international level) is not deemed relevant by the professionals and volunteers working in direct contact with migrants. They feel that migrants' urgent needs cannot be addressed by tools which are too abstract, and too far from local realities and real training and job opportunities. The choice to use locally developed tools has negative consequences, as this hinders the possibility of creating a consistent information path that will "follow" migrants in their search for better living and working conditions. Moreover, the lack of a local network creates numerous "first assessments" that shape migrants' interests and availability, and even their perception of their knowledge and competences (Bencivenga, 2018).

Once professionals and volunteers discover the possibility of using formal tools to record migrants' non-formal and informal learning, they also become aware of their potential in facilitating assessments in other languages and creating a record that will even follow the individual to other countries. The co-construction of the Toolkit allowed the transfer of more practical competences, for example interacting with people who have not mastered the local language and to strategies for assessing their competences as homeworkers or caregivers. In this case the competences were transferred from NGOs to personnel working for public and private organisations, more focused on the bureaucratic aspects of the assessment.

Many European initiatives aimed at migrants' RPL are currently based on projects. While consolidated networks are seldom produced (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), the systems are often rapidly disconnected after the project ends (Diedrich, 2013). This has raised questions on post-project sustainability, particularly the lack of links to the education system (e.g. following up validation with further training) (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). The path followed in the Synergies project is subject to a number of local variables, and this is an obvious limitation, but it promotes a bottom-up approach, respectful of the work done by organisations in a specific area, which do not yet collaborate at formal level. The co-construction of a Toolkit that integrates local organisations' assessment techniques has the potential (subject to additional testing) to offer migrants a more comprehensive observation of their prior informal and non-formal learning and skills in view of further training, assessment, and potential recognition.

Funding

This research was partially supported by the EU ERASMUS Programme, Project Synergies [grant number 2015-1-AT01-KA204].

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, and all the people I met during the research activities and the Project Synergies partnership.

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