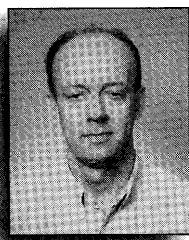




**Jens
Björnavald**

*European
Commission
Directorate-General
for Education
and Culture*



Making learning visible: identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning

During the last few years, most Member States of the EU have emphasised the crucial role of learning that takes place outside of and in addition to, formal education and training. This emphasis has led to an increasing number of political and practical initiatives, gradually shifting the issue from the stage of pure experimentation to that of early implementation.

Introduction

This article¹ treats the question of how to make learning, which takes place outside formal education and training institutions, more visible. While learning in the formal education and training system is a distinct feature of modern societies, non-formal learning is far more difficult to detect and appreciate.² This invisibility is increasingly perceived as a problem affecting competence development at all levels from the individual to society as a whole.

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Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning has to be based on simple and inexpensive methodologies and a clear notion of how institutional and political responsibilities are to be shared. But first and foremost, these methodologies have to be able to deliver what they promise, with the quality of 'measurement' being a crucial aspect. This article makes an effort to clarify, through an initial theoretical discussion, the requirements for reaching successful practical solutions in this field.

The Character of learning

When approaching the questions of how to identify and assess non-formal learning it is crucial to keep in mind that learning is contextual in its Character. When taking place in social and material settings, knowledge and competences are very much the result of participation in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning cannot be reduced to passive reception of 'pieces' of knowledge. This perspective implies a focus not only on the relational side (the role of the individual within a social group) but also on the negotiable, concerned and engaging nature of learning (the communicative Character of learning). The individual learner acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in an ongoing process of learning. Learning is thus not only reproduction, but also reformulation and renewal of knowledge and competences (Engeström 1987, 1991 and 1994).

The results of learning processes, what we call competences, are partly tacit (Polanyi 1967) in their Character. This means that it is difficult to verbalise and delimit the single steps or rules intrinsic to a certain competence. In some cases, people are not even aware of being in possession of a competence. This is highly relevant to the task of assessing non-formal learning and has to be reflected by the methodologies. Much of the know-how we possess was acquired through practice and painful experience. An ex-

1) This article is an extract of the executive summary of "Making learning visible" by Jens Björnavald, Cedefop Reference publication, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.

2) The term non-formal learning encompasses informal learning which can be described as unplanned learning in work situations and elsewhere, but also includes planned and explicit approaches to learning introduced in work organisations and elsewhere, not recognised within the formal education and training system.

perienced carpenter knows how to use a tool in ways that escapes verbalisation. Normally, this know-how is taken so much for granted and the extent to which it pervades our activities unappreciated.

Assessment in formal education and training: main lessons

The important issue is whether it is possible to develop methodologies able to Capture the (contextually specific and partly tacit) competences in question? While specialised methodologies for assessment of non-formal learning still have a long way to go, testing and assessment within formal education and training can refer back to a long history of practice, research and theory (Black 1998). The ongoing expansion of assessment into work and leisure time is inevitably linked to this tradition. It may be assumed that new approaches rely heavily on the methodologies developed within the more structured learning areas presented by formal schooling. At least it may be assumed that some of the same challenges and problems are shared between the two learning domains.

Assessment in formal education and training can be said to serve two main purposes. The formative purpose is to aid the learning process. No system can function properly without frequent information on the actual working of the process. This is important in classrooms as well as in enterprises: the more variable and unpredictable the context, the more important the feedback. Ideally, assessment should provide short-term feedback so that learning deficits can be identified and tackled immediately. The summative purpose is to provide proof of an accomplished learning sequence. Although these proofs may take many forms (certificates, diplomas, reviews, etc.) the purpose is to facilitate transfer between different levels and contexts (from one class to another, from one school to another, from school to work). This role can also be formulated as one of selection and a way of guarding the entrance to levels, functions and Profession

The confidence attributed to a specific assessment approach is generally linked

to the criteria of reliability and validity. The reliability of an assessment depends on whether results can be reproduced in a new test occasion and by new assessors conducting the test. Validity can, in many respects, be looked upon as a more complex concept and concern than reliability. A starting point might be to consider whether an assessment measures what it was originally intended to measure by those preparing it. Authenticity is a primary concern; high reliability is of little value if the result of the assessment presents a distorted picture of the domain and candidate in question.

Reliability and validity are meaningless concepts, however, if not linked to reference points, criteria for judgement and/or Standards of achievement, etc. We can identify two main principles used when setting these reference points and/or criteria. In formal education and training, norm referencing (according to the setting of a group) is commonly used. The second way of establishing a reference point is to relate a given Performance to a given criterion. Criterion-referenced testing implies identifying a domain of knowledge and skills, then trying to develop general criteria on the basis of the performance observed within this specific domain (Popham 1973).

The lessons from testing in the formal system can be used to raise a number of questions and topics relevant to the domain of non-formal learning:

- a) Which functions, formative or summative, are to be fulfilled by the new methodologies (and institutional Systems) for identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning?
- b) The diversity of learning processes and learning contexts raises the question of whether the same kind of reliability can be achieved in this area as in formal education and training.
- c) The contextual and (partly) tacit character of learning complicates the quest for validity and the question is whether methodologies are properly designed and constructed in order to deal with this issue.
- d) The matter of reference points ('standards') is a key issue which needs to be

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"It is an open question whether assessments of non-formal learning implies the introduction of new tools and instruments or whether we speak of old approaches to new challenges. There is reason to believe that to a certain degree we at least face a transfer of traditional testing and assessment methodologies into this new domain."

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addressed. The question is whether domain boundaries (including 'size' and content of competences) are defined in a proper way?

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Institutional and political requirements

The future role of systems for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning cannot be limited to a question of methodological quality. While being important, reliable and valid methodologies are not sufficient to make individuals, enterprises and/or educational institutions trust and accept assessments. This is particularly the case if assessments are given a summative role, providing a competence proof to individuals competing for positions in the labour market and in educational institutions. A number of political and institutional preconditions have to be met to attribute some actual value to the assessments in question. This can be done partly through political decisions securing the legal basis for initiatives but should be supplemented by a process where questions of 'ownership' and 'control' as well as 'usefulness' must be clarified. As we move from pure experimentation to actual implementation of permanent systems, it becomes clear that the questions of participation and information becomes increasingly important (Eriksen 1995). Formulated in another way; are all relevant participants involved, governments as well as social Partners?

In this way, assessments of non-formal learning can not only be judged according to technical and instrumental criteria (reliability and validity), but have to include a series of normative criteria (legality and legitimacy) as well. Furthermore, the acceptance of assessments of non-formal learning is not only a matter of their legal status but also of their legitimacy.

The European Situation is presented herein through the examples of five country clusters as well as activities at EU level. Although countries within each cluster may differ somewhat in their methodological and institutional approaches and choices, geographical nearness as well as institutional closeness seem to motivate mutual learning and to a certain degree common solutions.

Germany and Austria; the dual system approach

The German and Austrian approaches to the question of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning are very similar (Cedefop, Collingro et.al., 1997, Cedefop, Mayer et.al., 1999). It is interesting to note that the two countries where work-based learning has been most systematically integrated into education and training (through the dual system) have so far been reluctant to embrace this new trend. On the one hand, this reflects success; the dual system is generally viewed as successful both in terms of pedagogy (the combination of formal and experiential learning) and capacity (high proportions of the age groups covered). On the other hand, and reflecting the strong emphasis on initial training, the existing system seems only partly able to extend its functions to continuing vocational training and to the more diverse training requirements of adults. But, in spite of this, we can observe a substantial amount of project-based experimentation and the attention towards these questions is increasing. The discussion on recognition of non-formal learning in Germany and Austria is closely linked to the discussion on modularisation of education and training.

Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal; the Mediterranean approach

The general attitude to the introduction of methodologies and systems for non-formal learning in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal is positive (Cedefop, Turner, 2000, Cedefop, Di Fransesco, 1999, Cedefop, Castillo et.al., 2000). Both in the public and private realms, the usefulness of such practices is clearly expressed. The huge reservoir of non-formal learning which creates the basis for important parts of the economies in these countries



needs to be made visible. It is not only a question of making it easier to utilise existing competences, but also a question of how to improve the quality of these. Methodologies for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning can be viewed as tools for quality improvement, encompassing not only single workers and enterprises but whole sections of the economy. These countries also illustrate that the step from intention to implementation is a long one. Legal and political moves have been made through educational reforms of varying scope but the actual introduction of assessment and recognition practices has not progressed very far. The coming years will show whether the positive intentions almost unanimously expressed in the four countries will be translated into practices which actually affect and serve individuals and enterprises.

Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark; the Nordic approach

It is not possible to speak of a 'Nordic model' at least not in any strict sense (Cedefop, Haltia et.al., 2000, Cedefop, Pape, 1999, Cedefop, Nielsen, 1999). Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden have chosen different approaches and are working according to somewhat different schedules. These differences do not change the fact that all four countries have taken practical steps through legislation and institutional initiatives, towards strengthening the link between formal education and training and learning taking place outside schools. Despite the fact that some elements of this strategy have existed for some time, the most important initiatives have taken place in recent years, mostly since 1994-95. The mutual learning between these countries is strong and has become even stronger over the past two to three years. The influence of Finnish and Norwegian approaches on recent Swedish documents illustrates this effect. Finland and Norway are clearly opening up for the institutional integration of non-formal learning as part of a general lifelong learning strategy. The plans presented in Sweden and Denmark indicate that these two countries are moving in the same direction and that the issue of non-formal learning will become more focused in the coming years.

UK, Ireland and the Netherlands; the national vocational qualification (NVQ) approach

In the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands (Cedefop, SQA, 1998, Cedefop, Klarus et.al., 2000, Cedefop, Lambkin et.al., 1998) we can observe strong acceptance of an output-oriented, Performance-based model of education and training. The general acceptance of learning outside formal education and training institutions as a valid and important pathway to competences is a basic feature in these countries. What is questioned, however, is how such a system should be realised. The UK and Dutch experiences illustrate some of the institutional, methodological and practical problems associated with establishing a system able to integrate non-formal learning within its framework. The challenge of developing an acceptable qualification standard seems to represent the first and perhaps most serious obstacle (Wolf, 1995). As long as assessments are supposed to be criterion-referenced, the quality of the standard is crucial. The UK experiences identify some of these difficulties balancing between too general and too specific descriptions and definitions of competences. The second important challenge illustrated in the UK and Dutch cases, but not reflected in our material on the Irish experience, is related to the classical assessment challenges of reliability and validity. In our material the problems have been clearly demonstrated but the answers, if they exist, are not so clearly defined. All three countries base their vocational education and training on modularised systems, a factor which seems to support the rapid and large scale introduction of methodologies and institutions in the field.

France and Belgium; 'opening up' diplomas and certificates

In several respects, France can be characterised as one of the most advanced European countries in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. Belgium has been less active, but a number of initiatives have been taken during recent years, partly influenced by the French experiences (Cedefop, Vanheerswyngheles, 1999, Cedefop, Feutrie, 1998). The first French initiatives were taken as early as 1985

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