

Third-Year Class: Dialogical Validation in Dutch Teacher Training

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Abstract

Why and how did a validation of prior learning (VPL) system emerge and develop in the Netherlands since the 1990s? This question forms the basis for a case study into the ways of working of VPL in the Dutch education sector. This case provides answers to questions about the added value of VPL for Dutch learners, as well as demonstrates the set-up that VPL provides for personalized learning strategies in a new learning culture. The lessons learned are adaptable to any context where the need for lifelong learning arises; and that need goes for everyone on this globe, regardless of someone's social position.

Keywords

Validation of prior learning, portfolio, assessment, personalized learning, dialogical validation, lifelong learning.

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science realized that the education sector was on the brink of a major quantitative shortage of teachers (MOCW, 1998). The tension on the labor market for teachers would increase considerably if appropriate measures were not taken in view of the replacement and expansion demand expected for the education sector.

The education sector was the most aging sector of the Dutch economy. Many teachers were soon to leave the profession for (pre)retirement, while there was an insufficient inflow of new teachers in return. In addition, due to changes in policy, there was also a need to increase the number of teachers, for example, by reducing the number of students in classes. However, the available labor potential was and remains small (SCP, 2000; CNV Onderwijs, 2018). A complicating factor was that the replacement demand for other sectors was also high, which would make it even more difficult for the education sector to meet the demand for teachers adequately.

From 2000 onward, the Regulation "Lateral Entry into the Profession" was a measure to solve the impending shortage of teachers. The lateral-entry process enables candidates to follow a shortened training program while working as an "unqualified" teacher in primary or secondary education. Validating work experiences of competent, unqualified teachers is the Regulation's pillar. The process of validation of prior learning (VPL) connects informal and nonformal, personal learning experiences with the qualification system for teachers and the human resources (HR) system of employers in the education sector. In this way, VPL offers a personalized approach to managing validation of prior and composition of further learning. The Regulation is open for candidates aspiring to a teaching qualification in primary education or secondary education ("basis formation" or 2nd phase).¹

This article focuses on the question: How can VPL strengthen processes of personalized learning? This question is investigated through a case study on lateral-entry students in Dutch secondary education. "The Third-Year Class" refers to the lateral-entry scheme enabling students

assessor and candidate on the qualification standard. A performance assessment, for example, is a requirement: "I did like the assessors visiting a lesson, and afterward another discussion: I have seen certain skills sufficiently again and a number of things still need to be developed. That is what the measuring process is based on" (ZIB5). The interview is also a requirement: "The oral assessment, I prepared for that with people from inside and outside the school. That I would get questions about my portfolio. Things that weren't in it enough, that they were going to ask more in-depth questions about it" (ZIB5).

One respondent was proactive when interviewed: "I don't know exactly how we got to that issue, they didn't say much, so I jumped right on that thing" (ZIB2). Another respondent acted more reflectively: "I got into it. It was more of a deepening than an oral exam" (ZIB5).

In addition to the respondents' self-assessments, three forms of assessment were used in the intake-assessment dialogue: assessment *of*, *for*, and *as* learning. The self-confidence and self-insight of the respondents were striking in all forms.

In the assessment *of* learning, linking the portfolio and qualification standard was the main focus. The respondents were given plenty of room for the dialogue: "They asked a lot of open questions: '[H]ow do you see this, could you explain this?' It was steering, but it was that I was given all the space I needed" (ZIB5). One respondent, however, felt disadvantaged because: "It was unfortunate during the assessment that they really did not address that entire dossier. I did think it was a pity. I don't get any credits at all for the whole thing" (ZIB3).

Yet another respondent consciously opted for condensed, powerful evidence: "I hadn't done a number of things as evidence. I thought I'm allowed to keep a few things in reserve" (ZIB2). However, he was criticized for this because it had affected the preparation for the assessment.

The assessment *for* learning was about advising on form and content of the remaining qualifying process. Respondents weren't always enthusiastic about this: "I asked: 'How do you rate me on what I still miss?' Well, they couldn't really explain that" (ZIB4). Nevertheless, they acknowledged that it wasn't ideal but accepted: "What they do is they set a different program for each person. So, she just made a program for me" (ZIB3).

The respondents regarded the intake-assessment also as an assessment *as* learning as a reflective learning experience in itself. It gave them input for further developing their vision and approach to education: "They asked questions like: '[Y]ou indicate you have worked with young people; [H]ow would you deal with pupils who are difficult and how would you apply that?' I answered these questions as I would and that went well" (ZIB5). Another respondent learned that she could have performed better in a specific teaching situation: "I had supplied a video, and I saw in that video that the position I had chosen in the classrooms wasn't the best. I had a group behind me, while I was focused on another group. So, I had written in my reflection, 'I reviewed it myself again and gosh, I have to do something with that, because that's not very handy'" (ZIB4).

Phase 4: Impact

The impact of VPL was both retrospective and direct as well as prospective. "Direct" meant that people were admitted and given a personalized learning program. It also had an impact on their work because learning at the workplace was integrated into their program. In a more prospective sense, the gain was visible in the respondents' growing awareness that their personal development process went beyond obtaining the teacher's qualification. It was about lifelong learning and employability.

Direct impact on learning became visible in the integration of one's own learning experiences in the remaining learning trajectory: "Based on what I put forward and what I had shown in my

portfolio, this resulted in a trajectory” (ZIB4). This trajectory focused strongly on generic competences, and less on specific, subject-related competences: “So I have half the number of hours, which is mainly filled with pedagogy and didactics. I have very little knowledge-related courses. I’m a bit worried now” (ZIB1). However, the usefulness of paying a lot of attention in the personal program to generic content was appreciated: “Didactics is a completely different story. In teaching German, your command of the language is linked to the didactics that support it, and you see that in the program” (ZIB2).

In terms of the **direct impact on work**, there was no influence on the creation of career perspectives in education since they were already working in education, although were unqualified. However, the content of their remaining learning trajectory did strengthen the transfer from new learning outcomes to their professional practice: “When I learn something new, I think ... ‘[T]hat’s fun, I’m going to try it out in class in the next four weeks.’ Nobody says to me: ‘[Y]ou can’t do that’” (ZIB2).

The **prospective impact in learning and work** was visible in the self-evaluation of their practical experience. This distinguished lateral entrants from regular students: “That may also be inherent [in] the fact that I am a lateral entrant with some baggage, which is very different from when you just graduated from high school” (ZIB2). They also got new ambitions, for example, “to help people graduate as well. I would like [to do] that very much” (ZIB1).

However, the general feeling prevailed that the intake-assessment could have contributed more to their careers in education: “I think things would have been more valuable to me if they had asked me about what I was missing or needed. But that’s not how it works, because VPL is just about coming up with evidence, and then they say this is what you have to do” (ZIB4).

Regarding the **prospective impact on a personal level**, the respondents realized that learning is more than graduation; it’s more about lifelong learning: “Learning doesn’t stop after graduation, of course. Then, in my opinion, it only begins. Education is fun, but when I look at myself, I thought I was quite something, but the real learning started after that” (ZIB1). And that was precisely the aim of setting up the lateral-entry scheme: that the teacher should be the linking pin of the learning process, working closely together with colleagues, and having a good eye on the continuously required renewal and upgrade of the process and content of the teacher profession.

Phase 5: Anchoring VPL

The final phase of the VPL process focused on anchoring the entire process in the respondents’ social domains of learning, working, and living, or in other words, in their respective qualification frameworks, HR systems, and their personal lives.

Anchoring of VPL in the respondent’s **learning** domain was reflected in their lifelong learning attitude and need for facilitating this. Although this attitude was already visible in the motivation of the respondents, it was reinforced during the VPL process. For example, one respondent expressed a concrete wish for an upgrade when he would obtain his qualification for basic formation: “I also want to do first a master’s degree in the subject and then a lateral-entry program for upper secondary education” (ZIB2). VPL also enhanced their self-esteem in the learning domain: “To be honest, I didn’t think that piece of paper made me a better teacher. But I have seen colleagues who have pieces of paper, and I think: ‘[H]ow did they get that piece of paper?’” (ZIB4).

In the **working** domain, the respondents aimed at sustainable employability: “I know where I want to go, to a different type of interaction, to adult education or training, or to lead again” (ZIB4). However, the portfolio they built up for the intake-assessment was not considered their career anchor: “You are offered courses at school, but it is not that I am keeping my

portfolio up to date" (ZIB5). Only when changing jobs did it seem worthwhile to update their portfolio: "If I was going to work for another employer, I would update it and then show it. That's a nice tool" (ZIB5). The role of the employer should be oriented on supporting the life-long learning of their teachers: "I believe in my job that my employer should give me time for development. And that I can indeed deepen and say '[H]ey, I'm not the best at linguistics. [Y]ou know what? I'm going to make contacts with colleagues in America'" (ZIB4). Another respondent even saw a supportive role for pupils, in the sense that they could also reflect on the teacher's performance: "Let the pupils join in the assessment. But then you really have to be open and create a safe haven that it doesn't blow your head off when you do something wrong" (ZIB4).

The vision on the partnership in learning between lateral entrant, employer, and the university was also discussed. Respondents saw the added value of VPL for the employer mainly because they would be better deployable: "I have now become an expert on lateral entry within the organization" (ZIB5). However, a shared emphasis on the relevance of sustainable development still had to be built up, particularly by employers in education, because "in the business world, you are simply asked where you want to develop. But not here, not in education" (ZIB4).

Embedding the VPL process was thus strongly work related. Their identification with the teaching profession was already present; that did not change much during this process. The respondents, however, did think that you should really go for it. You had to be receptive to its approach concerning validating nonformal and informal learning, so to speak, because it wasn't simple: "You really have to want this and once you do, I can recommend it to you" (ZIB5).

The VPL process had less influence on the personal **life** of the respondents although it was a time-consuming process at the expense of their personal life: "In my private life I missed a lot, including friends and family who I see a lot less because of school" (ZIB5). But in general, it was a surmountable problem because of the maximum two-year duration of the VPL and learning process: "Two years can be overlooked. After three years they don't know who I am anymore, friends and family, but two years they can still say: '[W]e missed you, welcome back'" (ZIB5). Next to this reflection, new learning experiences sometimes penetrated one's private life: "Sometimes I find myself dealing with my children or my wife in a different way. Then I think: '[O]f course, that's something from school or something I learned'" (ZIB5); but there was no conscious or lasting synergy between public and private life in this sense.

The VPL experience confirmed the importance of extracurricular learning. They subsequently directed this awareness to certain target groups in the classroom: "I have guys who just blow themselves to pieces every day. And they come into school, but they just get irritated. Whereas if you are going to work for a bicycle mechanic for three days and two days a week you are going to school, then you are going to teach them something and that is useful for them" (ZIB3). This commitment was also a structural assignment for the teacher to look at the role of learning with an open mind: "So, try to make those students aware of what it is for. And pride" (ZIB4).

Conclusions

Using the respondents' reflections on the VPL process in their lateral-entry program, answers were sought to the main question: "*How can VPL strengthen processes of personalized learning?*" The answers found related to VPL as a process and VPL for personalized learning.

In this case, VPL proved to be a process integrated into the Regulation. The process was intended for nonqualified, competent teachers who did have a bachelor's degree from another program of study. For the respondents, VPL was a time-consuming and intensive process in which they had to be bold and persistent in order to deliver a portfolio that could pave the way for reaching out to a tailored, remaining learning trajectory. The complexity was exacerbated by the fact that both employers in education and teacher training faculties provided neither clear, unambiguous information nor guidance prior to and during the phase of portfolio formation.

The yardstick against which the lateral entrants had to measure themselves was transparent, however, in the sense that the standard was subdivided into concrete competences and learning outcomes to which they could relate their learning experiences. However, the assessment did not do sufficient justice to the richness of their portfolio. For example, there was little time to discuss the portfolio with the assessors, little feedback was given, and the relationship between the content of the portfolio and the remaining learning process was insufficiently clear.

For **the VPL process**, it can be said that:

- The *commitment* to VPL was and even had to be person-driven. There was little dialogue at this stage of the process. The respondents had to go to a lot of trouble to get proper information and formulate their learning needs. Their employers and university were not really inviting them to the lateral-entry program. Even more, as already noted in this analysis, getting access to the program depended largely on the respondents and on their chance of meeting a willing teacher, trainer, or manager who recognized the value of people's informal and nonformal learning experiences.
- The *documentation* was filled in without serious guidance. The standard to which they had to refer to was transparent, but still, filling in the portfolio remained a complex, lonely, and time-consuming task.
- Although the *assessment* was personal and development oriented, it also was highly dependent on the extent to which assessors expressed their confidence in the documented learning experiences. Furthermore, the assessment reports raised questions about which developmental steps the respondents still had to take. In general, however, the three assessment forms — assessment of/for/as learning — did sufficient justice to their learning history.
- The *impact* of VPL was in all cases a two-year learning process in which the necessity or relevance of certain modules was not clarified to the respondents.
- The *anchoring* of VPL was realized especially among the respondents, mainly in the sense of displaying a lifelong learning attitude.

Using VPL within **the concept of personalized learning** meant:

- Especially the *agency* of the respondents turned out to be the driver of the process. They acted self-confident, self-directed, and motivated in desiring a teaching qualification. Without this attitude, they would not have gone through the complex VPL process successfully.
- *Affordance* in achieving the learning goals of the respondents was poor. Employers in education and teacher training faculties would have been better off by listening to the voice of the respondents and supporting them in all process steps than emphasizing their respective stakeholdership and corresponding responsibilities.
- The *assessment* manifested itself on a personal level. The linkage to the portfolio-qualification standard was clear. The assessment had meaning in a summative, formative, and reflective sense and the assessment was even instructive in itself.
- The respondents' *ownership* was highly personalized, from information provision to achieving the qualification. It strongly expressed itself in their awareness of the value of their learning experiences and the articulation of a personal focus on lifelong learning.
- The *co-design* was limited in the direct sense because little personal input from respondents was possible in their program, simply because it was not offered by the university. Indirectly, however, their co-design created a conscious, lifelong learning attitude in which they wanted to position themselves actively.

In terms of **collaboration in VPL**, the summative impact was acceptable to the respondents, mainly due to the clarity at the outset of their trajectory promising two or fewer years of "study." However, they were dissatisfied with the content of the remaining trajectory — the formative part. There was too little substantiation of the need for certain generic and little attention to subject-related competencies. The university's inability to offer a truly personalized learning pathway was a widely shared grievance among the respondents. This aspect, in

addition to the little or even nonexistent supervision during the transfer of what had been learned in their learning program to their working context, made the respondents dissatisfied with the lateral-entry programming in the formative sense. This did not so much concern the VPL process, but more the collaboration between the stakeholders (employer, trainer, learner) within the learning triangle.

Increased cooperation between the system parties could have supported the VPL process better. However, there lacked a vision of VPL as a process or an engine for personalized learning at the workplace and the university. This lack of collaboration in the VPL partnership manifested itself particularly in:

- The lack of good information about lateral entry from the university to the candidates.
- The lack of agreements between employers and the university on guiding lateral entrants during their learning processes.
- Not solving the confusion within the programs about the status of the lateral entrant, being different from regular, mainstream students.

As a **connector** of the learning an individual acquired through their working and learning environments, VPL had a positive effect. All respondents went through the VPL process successfully and started their learning process in a semipersonalized learning arrangement. During the learning trajectory, they themselves translated their new learning experiences into their domains of “learning,” “working,” and “living.” In the learning domain, VPL strengthened the connection between the self-aware articulation of valuing their prior learning experiences with the ambition of the teaching occupation and self-steered lifelong learning. In the working context, their strong agency made them act as empowered teachers who dared and wanted to operate enrichingly for themselves, their pupils, and school. In their personal lives, it touched on their responsibility for preparing the young ones for society and the strengthening of the social function of education. For the respondents, VPL was thus a process that strengthened their lifelong learning attitude, their identification with the education sector, and their appreciation of personal learning experiences — acquired anywhere.

From the start in 2000, employers and universities struggled with affording proper supervision of lateral-entry students, and adequate linkage of candidate’s portfolios and the tailored offering of teacher training programs. This was evident from the respondents’ reflections in this case. However, what the respondents did demonstrate and what the system evaluations did not pay much attention to was that the Regulation had a positive impact on lateral entrants themselves: They could actually continue to work competently via a shortened program, and the intake-assessment strengthened their awareness and certainty with regard to their “competence,” as well helped them reach out to a formal teaching qualification.

Lessons Learned

The key critical success factors for implementing VPL in a nonflexible, supply-driven and top-down orchestrated learning system provide the lessons learned from this case study:

- *Awareness and support.* The awareness of the value of a VPL approach focused on the learner depends on the consensus among all actors involved. Such consensus can be initiated by any of the actors. Authorities can support awareness and consensus. In this case, they also initiated legislation and regulations (including financial regulations) by supplying information.
- *Breadth and equivalence of competences/learning outcomes.* Competences or learning outcomes, captured in personal learning experiences, are terms that can best be interpreted in the broadest sense. They promote accessibility and innovation in learning and labor systems. The equivalence of personal formal, nonformal, and informal learning (the personal standard) can be established in comparison with formal standards and normative frameworks in learning and working if all standards are expressed in terms of competences or learning outcomes.

- *Open dialogue.* Listening to each other in the dialogue between actors is essential in creating an effective balance between learning objectives, learning requirements, and learning opportunities. It means having the time and space to be able to determine the personal contribution to the VPL process. Personal contribution is both retrospective and forward-looking: “Where did I come from and where am I going?” In such an open dialogue, each actor bears his or her own responsibilities.
- *Portfolio* as a carrier of the process. The portfolio is the carrier of both the VPL process itself and VPL for personalized learning.
- *Assessment (as learning).* There are four main types of assessment: self-assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. In particular, the first form can be exploited by the learning individual; the other three forms can be integrated into the policy of both school and university and enrich the creation of a valuable link between these main actors in dialogical validation.
- *Ownership of learning.* If an individual learner owns his or her own learning experiences, it means that this learner has opportunities for participation or even co-design of his or her own learning and development process.
- *Anchoring VPL.* VPL can be anchored in the learning process, human resource management, and people’s self-management of competences.

These lessons learned are available for anyone who wants to set up a VPL process that is anchored in a personalized learning pathway. The difficulty lies not in the lessons themselves nor the instrumentation, but much more in the way in which the responsibilities of the actors can be aligned in an open and value-free development process in which ownership of the process is shared.

Final Words

In accordance with the aims of the Dutch Committee on the Future of Teaching [*Commissie Toekomst Leraarschap*], which prepared the Regulation in the 1990s, the respondents developed themselves from not just being competent and motivated but also qualified as teachers who “present themselves to the outside world with fresh, new ideas, who dare to experiment with new forms of teaching, who introduce new subjects or merge others” (CTL, 1993, p. 50). Although both school and university did not respond (yet) sufficiently to this “freshness” in order to take full advantage of it, these partners in VPL from work and learning perspectives demonstrated enough open-mindedness and “embracing” gestures for future learners to trust their acceptance of the VPL reality in modern learning.

For the learners — the primary partner in VPL processes — the question of how and to what extent VPL presented itself as a reliable and trustworthy process can be answered positively for the respondents in question. VPL proved to be capable of: (1) supporting individual ownership and co-responsibility for the pursuit of personal success in learning, working and personal life, and (2) strengthening the process of personalized learning, without individuals losing their grip on their career. After all, VPL is neither a selfish nor an anarchistic phenomenon. It is much more a democratic, connective, bottom-up, and steered process for valuing learning in society. Learners are learning to raise their voice, and the systems of learning and working are learning to listen to this voice. It’s a matter of time before the learning culture adapts to individual co-ownership of learning. VPL surely speeds up this adaptation and helps define the contours of a new learning culture centered on “dialogical validation.”

The promise of VPL in personalized learning is principally based on personal learning experiences wherever they are acquired. After all, Paulo Freire (1970) wrote: “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 53). It is this knowledge on which the acceptance and practical application of VPL for personalized learning rests. It is the human being who learns, not the organization, the school nor the system.

Dialogical validation links them all in a bottom-up steered developmental process.

Epilogue

When it comes to following-up and expanding the utilization of VPL, a pioneering initiative of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science aimed at realizing lifelong learning in higher education started in 2016 with pilots on making part-time bachelor's degree programs more flexible (Adviescie. FHOW, 2014). In the year 2020, the anchoring of VPL in higher education next to lateral-entry programs began to take serious shape when it comes to realizing personalized learning trajectories with a focus on preventing unnecessary education. However, next to this successful piloting, flanking research into the value of nonformal or informal learning experiences is still in its infancy within the scientific establishment (Duvekot & Doorlag, 2020). So, fully acknowledging the rise of a new, personalized learning paradigm still must be achieved, but practice is surely showing the potential of integrating VPL into higher education programs for the sake of personalizing learning and therewith putting the learner in the center.

Notes

- 1 "Basic formation" covers pre-vocational levels (four years), or general education (first three years). "2nd phase" covers the final two to three years of general education.
- 2 This article is based on my thesis (Duvekot, 2016).
- 3 The National EVC Knowledge Center website is <https://www.nationaal-kenniscentrum-etc.nl/>.
- 4 Information on the NLQF can be found at <https://www.nlqf.nl/english>.
- 5 Quotes are marked ZIB1, ZIB2, etc. for respondents and ZIB6 for the teacher-trainer (informant).

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