EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: LISBON CITY COUNCIL QUALIFICA CENTRE

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ABSTRACT

Lisbon City Council's Department of Development and Training created its Qualifica Centre in 2002 to promote the Lisbon City Council as a lifelong learning organization. The Centre constitutes a citywide effort to close the opportunity gap by transforming the way adults access and experience learning and the paths they can follow to turn life achievements into empowerment and success. It is open to refugees and people with a migrant background and it has served thousands of participants from both native and migrant communities. It's main activity is the recognition of prior learning process (RVCC), which is part of the Portuguese National Qualifications System. This article focus on exploring the methodological approach and its contribution to the empowerment of candidates, through the use of trigger questions, life history (Histoire de Vie), critical thinking workshop sessions and the Competences Portfolio.

Key words: Migrants, Recognition of Prior Learning, Qualification, Methodology, Competence, Portfolio, Empowerment, Refugees, Lisbon.

LISBON SOCIAL CHALLENGES

The Lisbon region faces major social and economic challenges, particularly regarding the education and training of young people and adults. According to the 2011 national population census, about 60% of the residents of the Lisbon region have not completed the compulsory education of 12 years of schooling (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012).

LISBON QUALIFICA CENTRE

In 2002, Lisbon City Council's Department of Development and Training created the Qualifica Centre (Lisbon Qualifica Centre) which aims to promote the Lisbon City Council as a lifelong learning organisation, committed to the qualification and the empowerment of its workers and of all citizens living, studying or working in the city. The Centre is open to refugees and people with a migrant background and since 2002, the Qualifica Team has served thousands of participants, from both native and migrant communities, including hundreds whose country of origin is not Portugal.

The Centre is coordinated with the city's refugee network and has active partnerships with dozens of organisations such as *Conselho Europeu para os Refugiados*.

The Centre's 'Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences' process (RVCC) is an ongoing city-wide endeavour effort to close the opportunity gap by transforming how adults access and experience learning and the paths they can follow to turn life achievements into empowerment and success.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM

The RVCC process is part of a wider lifelong learning and Vocational Education and Training (VET) national ecosystem, the National Qualifications System (NQS) that includes the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) established by Decree-Law no. 396/2007 as a governing structure for its operation. The NQF was established in compliance with the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and aims to raise the qualification of adults through education and professional development.

THE RVCC PROCESS

Lisbon City Council's Qualifica Centre invests in the RVCC process as a means to foster consolidated, transformative change for adults who are locked out of traditional paths to success and to ensure that everyone can develop their full potential in life and work.

Despite the significant educational divide in the Lisbon region, evidence clearly suggests that learning also takes place outside school through non-formal and informal education, and that non-formal and informal education are as valuable as the formal learning taking place in school (Cavaco, 2007).

The RVCC process allows for the identification, recognition, validation and certification of previously acquired competences by adults, throughout life in formal, informal and non-formal contexts with the use of methodological tools such as the competences audit and the autobiographical approach - life history (*Histoire de Vie*).

It involves the use of a set of assessment tools and activities resulting in the candidate's Competences Portfolio (portfolio). The portfolio contains evidence and proof of the competences that the candidate possesses.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Through the implementation of Paulo Freire's 'Problematizing Pedagogy' and Marie Christine Josso's 'Histoire de Vie', in which learning becomes a critical understanding of the world (Freire, 2014), the team set the methodological principle of challenging the participants to explore several dimensions of their life. Through critical thinking and confidence-building collaboration, candidates' personal interests, supportive relationships and diverse learning opportunities are leveraged, embraced and self-recognised as important and empowering. The adoption of Marie-Christine Josso's 'Histoire de Vie' as a methodological approach towards the acknowledgement of the importance of life choices and experiences (Josso, 2002) is a paramount principle adopted in the RVCC process and evidenced in the candidates' portfolio, where achievements are shared and skills are showcased (Pires, 2005).

Trigger questions

Inspired by Freire's and Josso's work, the Centre's RVCC Process is based on 15 trigger questions deployed through multiple-sessions workshops by a cohesive and diverse team of professionals. Questions put the focus on the candidates and aim to instigate the identification and characterisation of their competences by involving the candidates in the analysis and reflection of their own life history, allowing them to take charge of their own skills and knowledge, but most importantly, their strengths and empowering opportunities.

The trigger questions are:

1. What are my expectations?
2. What do I get out of the RVCC Process?
3. What does it mean to recognise and validate my competences?
4. What are competences?
5. How does one learn?
6. Why is my life experience important?
7. How do I identify the competences/skills that I have acquired in my life?
8. How can I document my skills in a portfolio?
9. What is the Key Competences Charter?
10. How can I relate this Charter to my life?
11. What are my plans after finishing the RVCC Process?
12. Where should I focus my attention, where should I invest my energy?
13. What are the steps towards my goal?
14. Am I ready to validate and certificate my competences?
15. Are my Portfolio and my Life History concluded?

The trigger questions are drawn upon the following key principles:

i) *Interdependent* - all questions overlap and are reinforced by each other. Although sessions are planned beforehand, all trigger questions are interchangeable and may be omitted.
ii) *Nuclear* - questions are core to the validation process and oriented towards showcasing certification and achievement.
iii) *Flexible* - questions are not binding nor are they forced. Participants are free to explore or skip trigger questions according to their own interests and sensibility.
iv) *Customisable* – questions are open and thought provoking; they can be addresses partially or separately. Questions can be modified and must be adapted to participants' goals, expectations and workflow, allowing for individual pathways to validation.
v) *Empowering* - questions are purposefully set in a progressive manner in order to help participants solidify their own tools to uncover and evidence their skills. Trigger questions ask participants to look into themselves from new and different perspectives, supporting their own (re)signification.

With guidance from Lisbon Qualifica Centre's team, trigger questions help the candidates to uncover their own skills and competences, by documenting their life, identifying strengths and areas for improvement and ultimately changing their outlook and aspirations.

The following principles guide the methodology:

i) *Nobody wants to learn (again) what they already know.*
   Identifying and mapping learners' expectations and interests is paramount to creating engaging and customised learning experiences. Sessions are constantly redesigned in order to adapt to the selected goals. All activities deployed in the RVCC process must facilitate and promote collaboration and allow self-assessment.
ii) *Learning happens everywhere. Not only in the classroom.*
   Following Paulo Freire's work, critical thinking and collaboration are encouraged as means to fully exercise citizenship (Freire, 2014).
iii) *In the digital age, learning is connected, social and lifelong.*
   The connected learning paradigm combines personal interests, supportive relationships and opportunities. It is a type of learning that takes advantage of abundant access to information and social connection rather than isolating it, and embraces the diverse backgrounds and interests of candidates. Furthermore, all planned activities are interest-based and a collaborative friendly environment is maintained during RVCC group sessions.

iv) *The learner is the focus and the centre of the learning process.*
Non-formal education theory drives the instructional design of every session, ensuring that all learners have an opportunity to succeed. RVCC sessions are always focused on participants' interests, expectations and needs.

Following the Centre's decades of experience in the field of RPL and the empowerment oriented methodology it uses, an intention was declared to contribute to the advancement of RPL and to benefit from the knowledge that academia provides. University researchers and students became regular collaborators, broadening the possibility to share experiences, to promote study circles and support the team's opportunity to continuously question the methodology and update it through thought-provoking inputs.

Candidates have also contributed by granting researchers access to their portfolio for the purpose of scientific and academic research and by directly collaborating with investigators.

In 2014, part of the team attended an advanced training programme for a semester at the University, including classes in Non-Formal Education and were taught by leading researcher Carmen Cavaco. The training was particularly effective towards deschooling our RVCC approach. Finally, the Centre team is involved in the City Council's Human Rights Education Programme and Training of Trainers Programme, providing it with an updated Non-formal Education toolbox and networking opportunities with local lifelong learning organisations.

RVCC GROUP SESSIONS AND INDIVIDUAL WORK

The RVCC process is currently comprised of 90 hours of group workshop sessions and as many hours as necessary of individual guidance.

Building a safe learning environment is essential to allow candidates to share experiences others can relate to. Sharing experiences is a gradual but vital aspect of the RVCC workshop sessions and the understanding of each participant's context is essential for a purposeful self-identification of learning achievements and competences. Group discussions and group work provokes opportunity, autonomy and accountability which are fundamental for the individual work the portfolio requires and are followed by mandatory individual work. Writing, documenting and building the portfolio, although guided, constitutes a profoundly solitary task, filled with individual choices as well as empowering opportunities.

The portfolio documents the candidate's lifelong acquired competencies, including evidence of skills and the RVCC activities. Submission of the candidate's final portfolio enables access to the Certification stage of the RVCC process.

VALIDATION AND CERTIFICATION

Full academic accreditation of basic education (4, 6 or 9 years of schooling) or upper-secondary education (12 years of schooling) is issued upon successful assessment of the candidate's Portfolio by an appointed Jury within the scope of the Basic Level or Upper Secondary Key Competence Frameworks that are part of the National Qualifications Catalogue.

In the case of a partial certification, a Personal Qualification Plan is issued with information on education and training opportunities and suggestions of pathways for the acquisition of the competences still required.

MIGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT

The most significant aspect for migrant candidates is the assignment of an advisor who accompanies the candidate throughout the entire RVCC process. The advisor (Técnico ORVC) acts as a mediator between the candidate and the RVCC process team.

Another important aspect is the methodological focus on empowerment. Trigger questions, life history (Histoire de Vie), critical thinking workshop sessions and the Competences Portfolio, are all oriented towards mapping cultural heritage and lifelong experiences which, in turn, helps to more effectively value one's identity.

The RVCC Process is also a channel for the emergence of new competences and skills, such as digital literacy, maths and literature, as well as the capacity of speaking out and the exercise of full citizenship, as the RVCC Process is highly participatory.

Creativity is boosted and the capacity for decision making is improved, as candidates are constantly asked to make choices, organise information, write, commit to a script and build up a narrative.

The Centre's methodology has been honed to ensure as much impact as possible for both migrant and native candidates:

Firstly, advice, guidance and co-planning of each participant's concrete next steps in terms of training, academic goals, personal goals and work goals are integral and mandatory in Lisbon Qualifica Centre's methodology. The empowerment that is achieved during the RVCC process is thus maximised and potentially transformed into impactful changes for the candidates.

Secondly, the Centre is part of a larger learning ecosystem. It is integrated into Lisbon's Lifelong learning Programme and it is part of the City Council's Department for training and development, ensuring candidate's access to several lifelong learning initiatives, including digital inclusion courses, literacy courses and alphabetisation for both, native and migrant communities. Most candidates take part, after or during the RVCC process, in training courses, VET or other lifelong learning initiatives promoted by the Lisbon City Council, partners or other organisations. Moreover, candidates are often informed depicted and/or invited to awareness initiatives ensuring continuous follow-up to interested candidates.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Lifelong Learning is paramount to bridge all the divides in Lisbon and to foster equality and success. It has been the goal, since the foundation of the Training and Development Department - more than thirty years ago - to develop skills, foster partnerships and accelerate adults' qualification, allowing workers and citizens to find new paths for professional and personal fulfilment.

Our results, our care for the methodological approach attest to our vision. To transform Lisbon into a city of learning by leveraging knowledge, developing skills, addressing the educational divide, the digital divide and the citizenship divide, and creating opportunities for the success of all its citizens.

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