

Valuing Learning

A study of Validation of Prior Learning and Personalised Learning

Ruud Duvekot

A 'learning society' is one where learning throughout life is important for everyone, whether individuals, organisations, schools or institutions. Linking education (or, to be more precise, learning) to the job market, and the changes in prevailing attitudes on learning, are important themes that allow us to understand the current transition in society, as well as changes to the dominant learning model. I characterise this transition as the *transition from diploma to portfolio*. In this, I emphasise that the importance of learning of, by and for the individual is paramount, while at the same time the distribution of roles and responsibilities between the learning system, social system and individual is changing. The *diploma* represents the more traditional, top-down hierarchical approach to learning, while the *portfolio* represents a more bottom-up approach, partly because the learning process is steered personally by the individual learner. This study into this transition or changeover focuses on two key phenomena: the system of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) and personalised learning.

VPL and personalised learning

VPL is a system which, independent of the type of learning programme, focuses on recognising, valuing, validating and developing the competences that someone has previously learned in any type of learning environment. Personalised learning is the dynamic learning concept focused on the individual learner, which can initiate (or help initiate) and establish tailored individual learning programmes in a learning culture based on self-driven, flexible, forward-looking lifelong learning.

While VPL identifies the potential value of a person's learning, personalised learning presupposes that VPL can support somebody's contribution to the dialogue with other actors on the meaning, form and content of learning. As a result, an important distinction between these two phenomena arises from the management of learning and the links which can be made between actors during learning:

- VPL mainly functions as a context-driven process, and is geared to connecting actors during learning (acquisition), and formulating the contributions of the actors involved in this process (participation). Acquisition in participation is key to VPL.
- Personalised learning can be better viewed as a process driven by an individual. It focuses on making a personal contribution to achieve development goals. Participating in acquisition is key to personalised learning.

VPL and personalised learning concern learning processes which allow citizens or individual learners to allocate themselves an active role within the 'learning society' when it comes to achieving personal, civil and/or social effects. Civil effect means achieving a learning outcome in the context of a particular qualification standard within the education system. Social effect is focused on results which are relevant to job profiles, targets, participation goals, or assignments. Personal impact may mean achieving empowerment, career and study orientation or personal development.

The phases of VPL

VPL is a system that strengthens the role of the individual in shaping her lifelong learning. It can demonstrate the outcomes of learning in terms of profit (status, money), efficiency (time, customisation), and enjoyment. The learning-programme-independent nature of the assessment enhances the effects that VPL can create for personal objectives in terms of qualifications, career development and personal meaning. In general, VPL consists of five phases:

1. *Engagement* focuses on being aware that someone has already acquired many formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences that might be valuable. A person can exploit these competences through

self-management. A wide range of aspirations may be achievable thanks to a person's experience, and can therefore be deployed to determine an individual learning objective. Such learning objectives range from activation in the person's private life, empowerment, personal development and career development in education and occupation to creating flexibility and mobility in order to access or move up the job market.

2. *Recognition and documentation* are focused on identifying and organising actual individual learning experience and translating these into personal competences. The description of these competences is then recorded in a portfolio. In addition to this description of the competences acquired through paid and voluntary work, qualifications, leisure activities, etc., the portfolio is supplemented with evidence backing this up, such as certificates, job reviews, references, documents, videos or pictures which substantiate the claim of possessing certain competences.
3. Under *assessment*, the contents of the portfolio are assessed and evaluated. Assessors compare the competences of an individual with a selected yardstick that is used as a reference for the intended learning objective. Depending on the yardstick used, this comparison is used to draw up an advisory opinion on possible validation at personal, organisational, sectoral or national level in the form of certification, career advice or personal valuation. The advice is based on the output or learning outcomes to be validated, and presented by the individual at the assessment. This output is used as a basis for drawing up advice on how somebody can cash in on her development, and subsequent steps.
4. The *benefits* from VPL are focused on validating the assessment advice in terms of cashing in (direct benefits), possibly in combination with designing specific learning packages and/or work packages (indirect benefits). In the context of 'learning', a benefit could be the formal acquisition of exemptions or an entire qualification. In the context of 'work', it might involve being allocated a particular job, a promotion or a horizontal (same job level) or vertical (another job level) move. Finally, the benefit may also be something more personal, such as creating a personal profile, self-empowerment, or a vision on personal development. Benefits may create direct or indirect effects. The difference can be described as a cashing-in effect or development-orientated effect.
5. The last phase of the VPL process is *anchoring*, or structural implementation, of VPL in all areas of the individual's life. The results of an VPL approach may have a structural effect on the personal and social organisation and orientation of all actors. At an individual level, the anchoring of VPL is strongly related to the relevant context. Anchoring is also possible at an organisational level, especially if the organisation wants to be able to use VPL structurally for specific purposes in the context of human resources and learning strategies.

The cornerstones of personalised learning

Personalised learning provides flexibility for personal learning experiences, expertise, responsibilities and autonomy, and provides the individual learner with enriching and durable management and support of her individual developing power in a situation of control or joint control and ownership in dialogue with other actors. Below, I distinguish five pillars on which personalised learning is based:

- 1 *Agency* is about the way people communicate and negotiate with each other when learning. *Agency* concerns the engagement of the learner in terms of awareness of 'personal power' and the motivation to learn. *Agency* covers the aspects of awareness and personal meaning of personalised learning within the given context.
- 2 *Affordance* means both affording or allowing learning processes of individuals by an organisation and/or school, as well as facilitating these processes. *Affordance* is focused on creating a stimulating learning environment, organising the partnership in learning, facilitating the individual learner by offering assistance and advice in the learning process, creating an innovative approach to learning within the organisation, and financing personalised learning. Through *affordance*, organisations can both recognise the importance of learning to their organisation, and facilitate the learning of 'their people'.
- 3 *Assessment*, in the context of personalised learning, deals with different forms of assessment which all focus on the personal assessment of a person's learning experiences, whether acquired informally, formally, or non-formally. In all forms of assessment, the personal norm of valuation is always leading, while the social norms of valuation from qualification systems and job systems may possibly be used as frames of reference. Such an *assessment* firstly includes all types of self-assessment, such as self-examination and self-valuation.

The next priority is linking what has been learned personally to the normative framework of an organisation or qualification, or a personally-set objective. Assessment then acquires the significance of assessment *of, for or as* learning: there is either a direct effect (cashing in on the outcome of the assessment) or a prospective effect, or continuity of learning through development and further development of a person in terms of set learning objectives.

- 4 *Ownership* refers to the autonomy of the individual learner and her personal sense of owning her learning process. This includes both the preparation and implementation of this learning process, as well as achieving milestones in this process: these might be summative (qualifications, partial qualifications, formal validation of informal work, etc.), formative (shaping learning and career opportunities, etc.) or reflective (empowerment, shaping identity and becoming aware of personal values).
- 5 *Co-design* is the theme that defines the true nature of personalised learning. Without an element of *co-design*, an individual can neither be a 'partner in learning', nor can there be any personalised learning. This is because unless the individual can participate in shaping and implementing the learning process, learning cannot be partially tailored to the input and learning needs of the individual learner concerned. In this sense, *co-design* is the activating agent in personalised learning. Moreover, where *ownership* principally focuses on creating a sense of ownership of personal values and learning experiences, *co-design* creates a 'learning action plan' from these values and learning experiences, allowing the overall design to be made in close consultation with the other partners involved in the selected learning process.

The concept of *Valuing Learning*

Valuing Learning is a dualistic concept, which concerns both valuing *Learning* and learning *Valuing*. It is based on *valuing* by people themselves and by organisations within the learning system, and the social system of all the *learning* that people have done independently of learning programmes. However, the converse is also true, namely *learning to value* these types of learning experiences from the belief that something can always be learned, irrespective of the time and place. The notion that everybody actually learns throughout their entire lifetimes, and that much of this learning can be made visible, is the link between the function of learning as seen from the perspective of the individual, organisation and 'school'. This is what the *Valuing Learning* concept expresses. The crux is to be able to add new learning outcomes to previously acquired outcomes. This *Valuing Learning*, with its focus on VPL and personalised learning, therefore implies that:

- the individual realises that he or she learns throughout life, and that learning is a continuous process. It is important to document and value personal learning experiences in order to use them for formulating and detailing learning needs for different learning objectives such as certification, changing jobs, upgrading, re-entering the job market, social activation or citizenship.
- All types of organisations in society can formulate the competences required for people to fulfil certain job groups or job levels, and how to keep these competences up to date.
- Schools and institutions in the education system can handle valuing learning experiences that enable people to access certain learning or development programmes, and can effectively facilitate personalised learning programmes.
- All actors can determine their own responsibilities and roles in the VPL process, this being partly dependent on the outcome of their dialogues on the meaning, form and content of learning. A prerequisite is that all actors recognise the importance of *Learning*, and *Valuing* all forms of learning.

The central question

The assumptions underlying this study are that (1) VPL can be pivotal in integrating the concept of *Valuing Learning* in people's daily lives (2) VPL puts people into a position where they can realise that they already possess valuable learning experiences, which they can exploit to shape personalised learning, (3) learning usually takes place in a variety of contexts, but is ultimately carried out by the people involved themselves, in consciously or unconsciously created learning situations (4) there is more to learning than just education, which implies, among other things, that schools should be better prepared to accept individuals' extracurricular learning experiences. This means there is a step before learning starts, namely individual awareness of the value of what has already been learned and what is about to be learned. This awareness is based on the acquisition of learning and participation in learning. Ideally, awareness, acquisition and participation are the successive stages that a person should go through in order to undergo personalised learning.

Personalised learning takes place in the 'learning triangle'. This triangle is composed of 'the learner' as *competence bearer*, 'the organisation' as *competence requester* and 'the school' as *competence enricher*. The last two actors can also fulfil each other's roles as 'requester' and 'enricher'. The connection between these actors creates a dialogue or dialogues on both the organisation and detailing of the VPL process, as well as the mutual interests, objectives and possibilities of VPL. The concept of Valuing Learning articulates the possibilities which, in principle, exist between the actors in this 'learning triangle'. This basically means that individuals may be valued based on all the prior learning they have done independently of learning programmes, the organisation or context in which they find themselves is receptive for their learning experiences, and that the 'school' can support the individual learning process through customised learning.

However, we note that all these aspects of VPL have so far only been partially realised. The different responsibilities, perspectives and individually-tailored approaches in the VPL process have been specified and indicated, but in practice have only been realised to a limited extent or not at all. The same applies to the phenomenon of personalised learning. It has been the subject of plenty of analysis and policy initiatives, but only implemented in practice to a limited extent.

It is against this background that the central question of this study arises: *how and to what extent does VPL contribute to personalised learning?*

The sub-questions related to this central question are as follows:

- I. What is VPL and what is personalised learning?
- II. What is the policy-framework of VPL?
- III. What is the practice of VPL and personalised learning?

The main question and the sub-questions are approached from a theoretical perspective using literature, and from a development perspective using exploratory research into case studies.

Theory and policy

The literature research first focused on the central concepts and models present in VPL and personalised learning. This led, in answering the first question, to a process diagram for researching VPL and personalised learning in qualitative research. The diagram is based on five aspects that are relevant to both phenomena:

- a. competences are building blocks required for learning and obtained from learning.
- b. The portfolio strengthens the focus on *human learning*.
- c. The dialogue between the actors in the 'learning triangle' reinforces the initiation and organisation of learning.
- d. Assessment connects learning opportunities, learning objectives and learning plans.
- e. VPL and personalised learning operate in the dynamic space between the dimensions of the teaching system and learning process.

Then the emergence of VPL was investigated as part of the transition from the knowledge economy to the 'learning society'. The use of VPL showed a variety of objectives and effects that people could realise using it. This resulted in a typology of the main strategies for lifelong learning, distinguished by learning objective and learning effect achieved: qualification-orientated, social-orientated, work-orientated or personally rich in perspectives.

Finally, the policy analysis yielded four characteristics on policy developments in relation to lifelong learning and VPL since the 1970s:

- a. the focus on '*broad*' learning and the focus on *learning outcomes*, in the implementation of lifelong learning.
- b. The necessary *engagement* of the 'partners in learning' and the primacy of the learning requirement in the contextualisation of learning.
- c. The *dialogue* and the shared ownership of lifelong learning in the personalisation of learning.
- d. The *flexibility* and *binding power* of the VPL system, thanks to VPL's adaptability.

Case studies

The exploratory research was based on four qualitative case studies. These four cases were clearly distinguishable from each other in terms of objective, context, target group and method. However, they did all use the VPL approach, and made it possible to centre research on the individual learner.

In the 'Rockwool' organisation case study, it became clear that VPL is highly efficient when used in a work-orientated approach to learning that, in terms of the design and content of job profiles within the company, is linked to vocational education qualification profiles. This put two of the positions in the learning triangle in a clear context, and also answered the question 'why VPL?' VPL was consciously used as one of the methods to be able to maximise, or continue to maximise, the links between employee and job within the career policy of the company. With the help of VPL, employees (or at least those selected, an area where the company dragged its heels) could exploit the experiences which they had acquired both inside and outside the company and inside and outside of school. This allowed them to grow in terms of civil effect (obtaining a qualification) and employability (meeting a job standard with or without an immediate career opportunity). Regarding the awareness of the value and depth of their personal learning experience and development opportunities, there was reference to an *employee who rocks*. However, the under-utilization of this potential offered to employee and company by VPL was a result of the company not implementing VPL on a larger scale, and that, in the VPL process, the employee concentrated only slightly on autonomous personal growth (empowerment, broad career awareness), but strongly on personal development within Rockwool.

In the 'fire service' organisation case study, the job structure was also linked to qualification levels. The employees had more freedom in determining their career plan. They had a fairly free choice of development projects, and even access to the organisation's unallocated development budget. The workers interviewed had all chosen a development path at a college which first facilitated VPL prior to the courses, then later integrated it into the course itself. In this sense, there was already a certain extent of fire service employee participation in the learning triangle, and the issue of whether VPL allowed the 'the voice of the learner' to be heard was already largely answered by the college. For the fire service, it boiled down to a matter of necessity to have a career policy which gave employees freedom and flexibility within their own careers, partly because of the age-related retirement policy.

Although the firefighter in this case study was quite free to determine the objective and direction of learning within the learning triangle, including the manner in which previously acquired personal learning could play a role, the organisation itself was rather less generous in embracing learning experiences acquired outside the fire service; even subjects in formal learning programmes such as senior secondary vocational education (MBO) and higher professional education (HBO) were barely recognised in the job structure.

The third case concerned lateral entry into the teaching profession. VPL also showed its uniqueness here. The question 'why VPL?' was clearly answered: a publicly-funded system for lateral entry into the teaching profession was established, where the aptitude test could be rightly described as a VPL approach. All the respondents confirmed that this aptitude test had a strong impact on a personal level, in particular in compiling the portfolio. However, the degree to which they were given space to use this awareness of the value of their prior learning experiences to create their own personal learning programmes within the learning triangle went too far. Neither trainer nor employer were able to cope with the personalised learning programme; the trainer could barely offer any customised learning, and employers were generally more interested in how they could meet the requirement to work with 'responsible' teachers as efficiently as possible. The lateral entrants themselves matched the profile of 'the dream teacher for the learning society' in many ways: the teacher as a creative and dynamic innovator of learning and inspiration of learning at school. Nevertheless, the school organisation and teacher training either do not yet permit this role at all, or only marginally.

In the case study of a target group of immigrant women at the International Women's Centre (IVC) in Den Helder, VPL was used as tool for self-reflection with the aim of compiling a broad, personal portfolio. The women then used this portfolio to design their own personal action plan which would give them the most appropriate opportunities for social participation. Combining self-reflection and a broad portfolio, and using the result to determine objectives and direction for achieving personal results, turned out to have positive results for the majority of respondents. Self-assessment and group assessment of their own value and values put them in a position to connect with work and training. The women concerned followed the training course

to compile their own portfolios and action plans. It made them increasingly aware of their own value, and they also came to the conclusion that compiling a personal portfolio was a meaningful activity.

Cross-case analysis

The cross-case analysis yielded more detailed information on policymaking, the theoretical framework, and using VPL and personalised learning in practice. In summary, this analysis showed:

- in every situation, VPL resulted in a particular perspective of lifelong learning.
- In the three organisation case studies, under-utilisation of individual potential occurred due to the failure to fully implement the VPL process, or allow it to be personalised.
- The target group case study showed that individual learners who took time to reflect on their own learning experiences strengthened their position in the dialogue. In this case study, the dialogue, in accordance with Paolo Freire's humanising vision, operated as a 'gap-closer' between the trainees themselves and between the trainees and trainer; in this way they managed to build a bridge to a personalised follow-up programme in one or more areas of life.
- The characteristics of policy development not only showed the slowness of implementation of policies in practice, but also that open dialogue in particular is conducive to the activation of the individual learner.
- Competences fill and colour the dialogue in the learning triangle for all actors.
- The portfolio is the carrier of the entire VPL process, especially if the *portfolio loop* can be established: the entire process of validation begins and ends with the portfolio since new learning results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for new development steps and the start a new VPL process. I refer to such a situation as the *portfolio loop*.
- The dialogue between learner, organisation and school' is essential for both VPL and personalised learning. This is particularly true for an open dialogue, but less applicable to a more limited dialogue.
- Assessment helps to connect the actors in the learning triangle. This effect occurs in all the three forms of assessment that are analysed in this study: *by*, *for* and *as* learning, particularly in the formative and reflective assessment in the highest degree.
- There is a real dynamic space between the system and the process, but depending on the intended learning objective, results are always obtained for different actors. If the system is in control, due to an *inside-out approach*, it is mainly the organisation and 'the school' who benefit from it; in the case of the process being prioritised in an *outside-in approach*, then the individual learner benefits.

Looking at both phenomena from every perspective, it can be seen that the VPL process really comes into its own and helps enabling personalised learning if there is an open dialogue and individual ownership of learning is permitted. In the cases, a situation of this type was best created at the IVC; in the other cases, the organisations and schools concerned were only capable or prepared to create it to a limited extent.

Outcomes

The case studies showed that VPL for personalised learning can be valuable for all actors as long as they can, and indeed want to, switch between each other's objectives, approach and identity. Bray and McClaskey (2015) see such personalised learning as the next development in the changing learning model based on the engaged, self-managing, learning individual operating in a supportive network, all within the modern, learning society. In the analysis of their model, I have already indicated that VPL's function therein is to allow learners to design or co-design and manage their own learning programmes if they have a broad understanding of their learning experiences and are able to reflect upon them in help their further learning. Previously acquired learning experiences can be recorded in a portfolio. The portfolio and the resulting reflexive valuation and self-evaluation are the control mechanisms available to the learner.

This brings me to a number of conclusions regarding the use of VPL for personalised learning in the case studies in this study. These conclusions relate to all components of both processes, and answer the question of how and to what extent VPL contributes to personalised learning:

1. Awareness and support

The awareness of the value of a VPL approach focussed on the learner depends on the consensus among all actors in 'the learning triangle'. Such consensus can be initiated by any of the actors. The stakeholders can support awareness and consensus. In some cases, they can also initiate legislation and regulations (including financial regulations) by supplying information.

2. Breadth of competences

Competences and learning, terms which can best be interpreted in the 'broadest' sense, promote accessibility and innovation in learning and labour systems.

3. Equivalence of competences

The equivalences of personal formal, non-formal 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.

4. 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 their own responsibilities.

5. Portfolio as a carrier of the process

The portfolio is the carrier of both the VPL process itself and of VPL for personalised learning.

6. Assessment (as learning)

There are four main types of assessment: self-assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. The first form, in particular, can be exploited by the learning individual; the other three forms can be integrated into the policy of the organisation and 'school', and enrich the creation of a valuable link between the actors in the 'learning triangle'.

7. Customised learning

In terms of customised learning after the assessment, not only the content but also the form in which learning will take place is important. This includes (1) blended learning for the form and (2) flexible, individualised learning programmes for the content. Form and content are based on learning outcomes.

8. The portfolio loop integrates both VPL and learning

Linking learning objectives, learning requirements and learning opportunities is based on the validation of personal learning outcomes, and using this as the starting point for organising a learning cycle based on the portfolio loop.

9. Ownership of learning

If an individual learner owns their own learning experiences, it means that this learner has opportunities for participation or even co-design of their own learning and development process.

10. Professionalism

The expertise of portfolio guides, advisors and assessors is very important in achieving maximum awareness of the value of personal learning, and creating motivation and ambition for VPL and personalised learning.

11. Quality assurance

Quality assurance of the VPL system is more a matter of trust than of control.

12. Anchoring VPL

VPL can be anchored in the learning process, human resource management and self-management of competences.

13. Research

Further research into the approach, methodology and effects of VPL and personalised learning is necessary in order to be able to use them, both in combination and as separate processes, in the context of lifelong learning strategies.

Final comments

More visibility and insight into the use of VPL for personalised learning could enhance and widen dialogue within the learning triangle, because it is in any case clear that VPL offers challenges and opportunities for all stakeholders and actors. The promise of VPL in personalised learning is principally based on experiences in practice. After all, as Paolo Freire 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.' (1972, p. 57) It is this knowledge on which the acceptance and practical application of VPL for personalised learning rests. It is the human being who learns, not the organisation, 'school', or system, driven by the concept of Valuing Learning.

Building on Freire, we can state that the promise of VPL for personalised learning is interchangeable if we can redesign the learning system and social system into *outside-in* orientated systems that really are capable of hearing and understanding 'the voice of the learner'. It is then up to the learner herself to decide, in dialogue, on the extent to which her voice should be heard, and the degree of ownership or co-design which suits her lifelong learning strategy. Learning then moves from the realm of 'learning as a banking-concept' (ibidem) into a collective concept of personalised learning. The 'bank' is then no longer required, only a portfolio. That is exactly what VPL is meant for, and why personalised learning suits VPL.

Referenties

Bray, B. & McClaskey, K. (2015). *Make learning personal: the what, who, wow, where, and why*. Thousand Oaks, Corwin.
Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogie van de onderdrukten*. Baarn, Anthos.