

17

Writing and Reconstructing Identity Through Professional Transitions

Marie-Hélène Jacques

ESPE DE L'ACADÉMIE DE POITIERS, FRANCE

Professional development can be studied from the angle of transitions, which may include reflexive written productions (such as a cover letter or the rewriting of a CV). This is the case of the Vocational Skills Validation (French VAE), a French law which allows individuals to obtain all or part of a diploma or a professional title on the basis of personal or work experience. The candidates who take the initiative to use a VAE have to write a file of proofs of his (her) experience in order to demonstrate if their experiences meet the requirements for a diploma. We offer the hypothesis that this writing, conceived as a second chance plan, highlights social and school inequalities. In this chapter, we present the analysis of two corpuses related to the vocational skills validation (VAE): interviews guided around writing the “notebook of validation,” for women who begin a VAE to obtain the qualification of nursing auxiliary, and interviews guided around writing the “experiences file” for candidates seeking to obtain university degrees. These two corpuses show that writing about one’s own experience to obtain a diploma constitutes a process of reorganization of the statutory, narrative, and reflexive identities, which is unequally appropriated by the candidates: these differences come from differences in writing abilities, the availability of feedback, and the applicant’s ability to provide particular kinds of evidence related to their experiences.

Les évolutions professionnelles rapides peuvent être étudiées sous l’angle des transitions. Elles sollicitent souvent des productions écrites réflexives (récit d’expériences, réécriture du CV . . .). C’est le cas de la Validation d’Acquis de l’Expérience, dispositif français qui permet d’obtenir tout ou partie d’un diplôme sur la base des expériences professionnelles ou personnelles. Les candidats qui se lancent dans cette procédure

ont à produire un dossier de preuves de leur expérience pour répondre au référentiel du diplôme visé. Nous émettons l'hypothèse que cette production scripturale, destinée à offrir une « seconde chance » aux candidats, réactive en fait des inégalités socio-scolaires. Nous analysons deux corpus, autour de la validation d'acquis de l'expérience : des entretiens guidés autour de l'écriture du livret de validation, avec des femmes non diplômées qui entreprennent une VAE pour obtenir le CAP d'aide à domicile ; des entretiens guidés autour de la rédaction du « dossier d'expériences » avec des candidats à la VAE pour des diplômes universitaires. Ces deux corpus montrent qu'écrire son expérience pour obtenir un diplôme constitue un processus de remaniement de l'identité statutaire, réflexive et narrative inégalement approprié par les candidats : ces différences relèvent des aptitudes scripturales et de la capacité à effectuer un retour sur trajectoire, notamment à récupérer les preuves de son expérience, selon la plus ou moins grande linéarité du parcours antérieur.

1. General Research Framework

The following results belong to a broader research project focusing on moments of transition in the life of an individual. This project seeks to analyze moments that arise over the course of education, training, and employment from a sociological perspective.

Transitions may be defined as “major changes in the life environment” which meet three criteria: these changes “have long-term effects; occur in a relatively short space of time; and decisively affect how the individual represents the world” (Parkes 1971, 101). Guichard and Huteau (2006) highlight the role played by *identity readjustments* and *expectations for the future* in these life events. These liminal definitions encourage further study of transition's effects on the subject's *representations* of the future. Oriented toward representations of the future, transition provides an especially appropriate lens through which to investigate rapid changes in professional development, such as those stemming from an examination, internal mobility, or professional certification.

The present chapter discusses the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (Accreditation of Acquired Experience), concentrating on its requirements for reflective written material, in order to analyze how one such event in the subject's professional life influences her identity.

2. The Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience and Writing

Instituted in France as part of the Social Modernization Act of 2002, the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE) allows an individual to obtain credit toward a diploma or professional certificate on the basis of professional or personal experiences. Full or partial credit is awarded by a jury made up of teachers and professionals active in the desired credential's field; the jury determines whether the candidate's professional skills, gained from practical experience, match the skills required for certification (Jacques, Marchan & Neyrat, 2007).

Recognizing the problem of unequal access to basic as well as continuing training justified creation of the VAE program. The VAE was presented as a way to compensate for an initial failure in schooling, on the model of a "second chance" (Jacques, 2009). The mechanisms through which this correction is supposed to occur are studied here, and in particular, the written requirements of the VAE.

Indeed, all VAE candidates must put together a written record of their experience [*dossier de preuves*] in order to apply and provide evidence of qualification, no matter what the level of desired certification. That is, for each skill listed in the standards of the credential, the candidate must describe or narrate concrete acts drawn from her career to illustrate her competence. The jury then evaluates the dossier, which also serves as a reference during the interview portion of the application process.

Yet it would be a mistake to consider this record a simple compilation. In fact, a codification of experiences must guide the writing of the dossier if it is to best meet the standards of the certification in question. The candidate must explain her actions in writing according to the credential's norms and, as much as possible, use its current terminology to express her personal experiences.

3. Field Work Site and Materials

Our principal hypothesis rests on the gap that separates the VAE program's goals of "social justice" and letting individuals "catch up" from its real results. If the VAE certainly has its successes, there are also disillusionments: failure to complete the application, denial of credit, differing outcomes for comparable candidates, etc. We began with the idea that these gaps between the program's ideals and its realities emerge from the social conditions of its implementation; the VAE upholds pre-existing socio-educational differences and so does not help to reduce inequalities (Jacques, 2007). As a secondary

hypothesis, we supposed that if candidates encountered difficulties with the VAE accreditation at the university level, then those difficulties would be all the more challenging at levels below the Baccalaureate. In particular, candidates for these Level 4 and 5 certifications are more or less able to “write their experience,” a skill that the VAE program heavily emphasizes.

We tested these hypotheses using two bodies of sociological material:

- 32 interviews with VAE candidates for university diplomas: these retrospective interviews were structured around their writing process for the “experience report” [*mémoire d’expériences*].
- 20 interviews with non-certified women who began a VAE to obtain a state caregiver certification and stabilize their employment: these retrospective interviews were structured around how they approached completing the accreditation booklet [*livret de validation*], which also served as concrete support for the interviews (Amewoui, 2011). This booklet is a standardized document; each section must be filled out with a narrative that illustrates the candidate’s experiences.

We have based our results on content analysis of these qualitative materials, and will now turn to presenting two scenarios, which represent successful and “unhappy” VAEs.

4. First Family of Results. The University-Level VAE: Turning Points and Stumbling Blocks in Writing the Record of Experience

4.1. Finding the Trail of Experience

Claude was a certified technician in computer graphics, with twenty years of experience in the field, and a VAE candidate for a professional degree in logistics. He describes himself as a recorder of his own experience—and this quality took on decisive importance as he pursued the VAE. “Since I’m someone who files a lot, who archives . . . I always have an old planner with me . . . If you like, at the end of the day I always took twenty minutes to write down the details of what I’d done. So . . . I had things written down, I had, you know, notes. But not all of it was so detailed, like the forklift broke at this or that time—it wasn’t that—but during the day, I always tried to summarize what had happened . . . I had those kinds of documents.” Claude benefitted from personalized support that not only drew on this “spontaneous” recording, but which also helped put it to good use in the application. Producing the dossier affirmed Claude’s writing skills, and transferred his informal written material into a standardized form both more general and more academic. This trail

of experience and the writing process factor into the full credit that Claude received.

Patrick offers a contrasting example. Patrick received his Baccalaureate and has worked in a number of different fields, including jobs as driver, administrative agent, and call-center employee. Self-taught in computer science, Patrick was inspired to apply for a bachelor's in information technology and communication. "I did so many things. And then of course you have fixed-term contract jobs in the meantime, and then you present a, your CV, you're going to sum everything up but there are things missing, what did you do? No . . . it's not easy, in the way that it means having to remember. Okay, so for one thing, I already don't really have a great memory. If you were to ask me . . . 'So you worked for this business, but you did what exactly?' I can say, uh, overall, but I can't tell you . . . uh, 'so I worked with that software, I did it this way.'" Dissuaded by the difficulty of putting together his dossier, Patrick quickly abandoned the plan to apply for the VAE. Because the different tasks he had accomplished throughout his career were not clearly identified, they were hard to translate into the program's standardized framework. But above all, because no recording existed of his career trajectory, reconstructing its trail was that much more challenging. Patrick did not finish writing his record of experience and gave up on pursuing the VAE diploma.

4.2. Norms of Certification, Norms of Writing

For more than two decades, Florence has been the director of a retirement home (EHPAD); she was the regional president of her professional association and held a Master's degree in law. She was also a VAE candidate for a Master's in healthcare management. "Actually, the units for the Master's degree are completely connected to the work of an EHPAD director," she said. In articulating this connection, Florence indicates the subtle link between having, on the one hand, extensive experience normalized and validated within higher education, and on the other, a command of how to relate one's own activity clearly to the VAE standards of the desired diploma. Prior success at a post-secondary level shaped the candidate's ability to write about her usual practices, in her own words and in accordance the requirements of the degree: "I was able to follow, since the beginning, the whole pricing reform via texts, and then, I was able to do the judicial analysis, things like that, I was on the whole negotiation procedure over the specifications for the ministry agreement about relationships with the state—these are experiences that are very worthwhile and very interesting, after all, and that can be put pretty directly into a VAE dossier." Boosted by

this legitimacy as a writer and professional, Florence received a full Master's degree. Over the next year, she became a presenter within the healthcare management curriculum.

Conversely, some candidates produce written material that diverges far from the standards of the diploma. Unable to master either the content or the vocabulary necessary to the degree, these candidates cannot satisfy the norms of writing. For example, Martine was a dormitory monitor in a private institution, and anxious to advance her career. She first learned about the VAE in a women's magazine. To begin applying, Martine referred to a degree whose name seemed to fit her. "I thought that the degree "Educational sciences" was supposed to be for educators." She submitted a thin dossier to the jury; instead of an organized, written account of her experiences, Martine presented a three-page "table," which she called a "padded-out résumé." She included a simple chronological list of professional activities accomplished while working for educational institutions and services, such as summer camps. "It was a bit of a mess," she said, "because the papers arrived, the dossier arrived for me to fill out. So somebody called me, explained quickly that I was supposed to give a picture [*faire un tableau*] of my skills . . . , you know, of my professional experience and then that was it, right? So, nice and sure, I made my table [*j'ai fait mon tableau*], that I sent to them." From this angle, Martine placed too much emphasis on the roles of dormitory monitor and catechism instructor within her overall career. Lacking outside support and familiarity with the workings of the university system, Martine did not understand the written requirements she was supposed to satisfy. Although she was "confident" upon arriving at the interview, Martine failed to receive credit for a single unit within the degree curriculum; she left the defense feeling that she "had been made to feel small." Above all, she took away the idea that her own professional activity, which she considered more valuable than the written and conceptual work demanded by the VAE, had not been recognized. "Oh, well, my experience, what mattered to them, and especially the youngest one, was to know what I read in the evenings. Sure, but that shouldn't be called gaining experience. Experience means, at least for me anyway, it means professional experience, it's something that you did. It's being on the job! After that you need a different word."

4.3. Linear Trajectories and Written Coherence

The VAE program offers a second chance at a professional credential, presented as the possibility to rebuild one's original disorganized or incomplete

education. But to write a report in accordance with the standards of a given credential presupposes a certain uniformity of experience, or even linearity; the candidate must be able to translate positions held, tasks accomplished and skills utilized into a coherent whole. Beyond establishing her career chronologically, the candidate must find common denominators across different experiences, and then reshape those experiences as a skill for each category required for the degree. Murielle, a certified technician in sales, had worked for eighteen years as an employee [*cadre*] in mass retail. Murielle wanted to obtain a management degree through the VAE program in order to pursue becoming a teacher in a vocational high school. She provides an example of the ability to satisfy degree standards thanks to a coherent career: “I called an old colleague, so that he could gather all of my job descriptions [*fiches de poste*] and what I’d done, my sales, my career progress . . . I was comfortable filling out the VAE dossier . . . because teaching high-school students about business with concrete examples, no problem, that’s what I’d done for twenty years.”

The sample of candidates studied here rarely attests to such a successful shift. Significantly, among the ten candidates seeking a Bachelor’s degree [*licence*], four ended the VAE application process before submitting their dossiers. These four candidates tended to evoke the poor fit between their own practical experience and the content of the desired degrees, which they often described as too theoretical; they emphasized the difficulty of reconstituting their career trajectories in the form of a written record. This was the case with Brice, who held a high-school diploma [general Baccalaureate] and had become an employee [*cadre*] in computer maintenance at France Telecom. Hoping to strike out on his own, Brice intended to apply for a professional Bachelor’s degree. But after initial inquiries, he decided not to put together a dossier:

“For me it’s the program—it just doesn’t take into account the fact that we’re in the business world, not the National Education! So the fact that the VAE requires exactly the same skills as the standard curriculum, that alone doesn’t take reality into account, because we’re not there to take classes! We’re there to get things done, to get our career plans in action. Otherwise, then there are more problems—I realized very quickly that preparing the dossier would be difficult because gathering up all the records is practically impossible. At work we changed teams pretty often and we’re in a field where there aren’t many documents, a lot of things are virtual.”

5. Second Family of Results. Multiple Writing Processes for the Diplôme d'Etat d'Aide Soignante (DEAS)

The Diplôme d'Etat d'Aide Soignante (State Caregiver Certification) is a Level 5 vocational credential, whose written component for the VAE is structured around the “Standards of Competence” document. The eight skills listed there organize the VAE accreditation booklet’s prompts for candidates to describe their experience and professional abilities. For each skill, the candidate is asked to answer three main questions. First, she must provide an account of her work activities related to this skill; then she must describe two situations in which she utilized that skill; finally, she must discuss and explain her actions in those situations. Because each main question is broken down into a series of smaller ones, the form creates the impression that the candidate must follow a ready-made path in order to write her experiences.

5.1. Showcasing / Downplaying the Profession’s Least Valued Tasks

The structure of the accreditation booklet’s questions guides VAE candidates to list and describe the minute detail of their day-to-day work—work made up of tasks that are usually neither seen nor valued in society (Arborio, 2001; Cours-Salies and Le Lay, 2006). The VAE offers a space in which to relate these otherwise unmentionable activities, and so offers them an official status. To receive credit, the candidate must engage in a writing process that recounts the mundane gestures and practices of caregiving in technical terms. By accepting this writing process, the candidate puts the lack of privacy implied in the trade’s “dirty work” at a distance. Excerpts of descriptions from the booklets that we studied display usage of specific technical language:

I give Monsieur A. his bath in bed, because he can no longer stand on his legs following a thrombosis . . . I begin with his face and hands. Then I wash his torso, I dry him, rub on his cologne and put deodorant on his underarms. Next I remove his urine bag and check the color of his urine. I help him to turn over and move on to washing his back; I dry him then put on his t-shirt to cover him. Then I begin genital and anal cleaning. Monsieur A.; having become incontinent, I start by removing part of his stool, with protection . . . Then I wash his intimate areas. (Valérie)

I perform the daily maintenance of a hyperbaric chamber. I clean this room after all the other rooms and I make sure

that all of the waste and contaminated linens are removed beforehand. I leave the cart outside and check that nothing is missing before I enter the room. I wash my hands and put on my PVC protective gloves. I put descaling product in the toilets and leave it to work. (Marianne)

5.2 Secundarization: transposition and transformation in the writing process

The concept of “secundarization” (Astier, 2008) provides a framework within which to explain the differences observed among VAE dossiers. Many caregiving activities, as noted above, are generally absent from social discourse; when such activities structure the candidates’ writing, it hews closely to their concrete lived experiences, rather than creating a remove that would allow for professional detachment. Several of the dossiers examined here represent a type of writing corresponding to “transposition”: like fill-in-the-blank exercises, the candidate’s responses consist of sentences that reproduce the questions but add a word or two. The sentences are either short or entirely replaced by bullet-pointed lists. Having observed candidates struggling with writing, we saw during field work that outside support correlated with completing the VAE booklets among those in difficulty. Thanks to this support, candidates were able to give an exhaustive, but strictly factual, account of their experiences. Answering the booklet’s questions, candidates wrote in an essentially pragmatic register connected to their ordinary experience. Audrey, currently on her third attempt at earning a VAE credential, offers a good example of “transposition” writing:

“I write down the names of residents who have outside tests

“I lift residents

“I give full or partial sponge baths

“I prepare residents for breakfast

“I help them take meals

“I make note of the breakfasts on monitoring sheets”

These candidates are forced to repeat the VAE application process, because they receive only partial credit each time.

For credit, a type of presentation is expected that requires the candidate to formalize her experiences. Secundarization focuses on the abstract experience

at the core of the learning process, rather than the details of an individual's unique experience. VAE dossiers that make a secondarized use of experience through writing better align with "transformation" than transposition. These professionals seek not just stable employment, but also envision career development, which motivates them to write more than basic responses; they take advantage of the writing requirement in order to further examine their own knowledge and expertise. The transposition category of writing discussed above makes a striking contrast with the way that Monique fills out her list of tasks:

"If I work in the morning, I start the day by looking at the charts to see if the residents had a good night or if there are any little concerns.

"Next the whole team starts to prepare the breakfasts and we get the residents settled in their beds and help them to eat breakfast as well as to take the medicine that the nurse has handed out.

"Next I start to give full or partial sponge baths, alone or with the help of a caregiver for heavier dependent persons, or according to the residents I give them a shower or bath, I dress them and put them into their chairs, and then I move on to cleaning the area and remaking the bed."

5.3 Reflexivity: Emotional value and the register of a skill

By asking for a reflection on the candidate's career trajectory in her application's written record of experience, the VAE program asks for "work on oneself." This term can be defined "as an activity, a transformative development, performed by an individual on her personal spaces (subjectivity, behavior, interpersonal skills); work that draws on internal and external resources" (De Backer et al., 2007).

The accreditation booklet includes a question that is very revealing in regard to the reflexivity required by the application. "From across the different situations that you have described, which difficulties did you face?" The question continues, "What were the positive moments? What did you learn?" The candidates who struggled the most—whose sole priority was keeping their unstable jobs—took recourse to a moral and emotional register to answer this question. Laure gave the following answer:

"The difficulties were to see those sad people, and to see that

they suffered realizing that they have forgotten how to do everyday things. When I feel helpless facing his [*sic*] sufferings in the moment. I learned to give my help, and not to do things for them.”

On the other hand, Marie establishes a more objective logic, distancing herself from her work:

In both cases, since the handicap wasn't the same, my challenge was finding different ways to adapt. In the first case, Monsieur R. doesn't talk much so I adapted to urge him to express himself verbally and non-verbally. In the second case, it was not possible to use equipment (patient lift) in the room. I knew which tricks to use to move and dress him without hurting him. In both cases, my actions allowed each improved autonomy, at his own pace and according to their potential. I developed my sense of observation even more, as well as listening and patience.

In this respect, Marie's response can be described as a “polyphonic text,” which Bakhtin (cited by Bautier, 2002) defines as a text constructed from multiple references (completed actions, patient's point of view, overall evaluation . . .).

6. Summary: Writing Processes for the Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience and Reconstructing Identity

The present analysis shows two very different situations for writing of the record of experience [*dossier de preuves*] with the intention of receiving credit for a certification. Writing requirements for university degrees are very open-ended, and each candidate can take his own approach; for the DEAS certificate, writing requirements are very structured, thanks to precise instructions and an accompanying writing guide. However, our analysis identifies similar obstacles and similar criteria for success in the results of both.

Using the three axes of social identity outlined by Dubar (2002), we conclude that the writing of a VAE application for any level of certification resembles an identity transition:

- A narrative identity is sought. The candidate brings her own biography into line with her personal VAE project. She relates a story told through work, defining herself by what she does, by problem-solving,

by animating lived situations with anecdotes and characters. To succeed and receive the certification, the candidate must at times put the invisible on display (skills that she becomes conscious of while writing, unseen tasks that she makes appear); amplify the anecdotal (make the smallest task or event stand out, so as to fulfill the credential's requirements); and minimize the obvious (de-emphasize the most conspicuous tasks of her trade in order to focus attention on exceptional acts). The more lively the candidate makes this narration, the better it will pay off; she should show how she is the main character.

- Experiential learning—the development of hands-on knowledge—is not sufficient proof of experience. The candidate must put this learning through processes of verbalization and formalization, which implies generalizing from personal experience, appropriately employing concrete examples, and justifying ordinary practices. All of these elements mobilize the candidate's reflexive identity as a subjective meaning given to professional activity, creating a distance from her own role.
- Finally, if the stakes of the VAE process predominantly concern the statutory identity conferred by state-issued certifications, our other research (Jacques, 2011; Jacques and Neyrat, 2011) has indicated that the gains are small. Although the self-representations prompted by writing the application open up perspectives with transformative potential, in practice the candidates' reconstructing of their identity proves limited. When reconstructions do occur, they affect different candidates differently. Candidates who hope either to confirm their existing position, or to move forward on a pre-ordained path, benefit more from reconstructing their identity through writing for the VAE than candidates who hope to change positions entirely (finding a job, changing careers, achieving a professional dream). For the latter group of candidates, this work on identity has rare or at least hard to perceive effects—and in the event of failure, can even have damaging results for their careers.

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